

DEALING WITH THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE

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SUMMARY

Although Iran's mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle presents an inherent option for creating a bomb, the Tehran regime has no urgent incentive to build nuclear weapons. Current U.S. policy, which emphasizes coercive sanctions and diplomatic isolation to compel Iran to comply with its obligations under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), would fall squarely under the rubric of containment, even as the term has been eschewed and delegitimized in the U.S. policy debate. As long as Iran does not overtly cross the U.S. "red line" of weaponization, U.S. policy will likely remain containment in form, if not in name.

The nuclear challenge with Iran that President Barack Obama inherited is now at a critical juncture. The president has called Iran (as well as North Korea) an "outlier," a state that flouts international norms by defying its obligations under the NPT. When Obama first used the term, in an April 2010 interview with the *New York Times*, senior White House aides confirmed that it was a calculated departure from the George W. Bush-era moniker of "rogue state."¹ Whereas *rogue* had connoted states whose ruling regimes were essentially irredeemable, the *outlier* rubric was intended to suggest that a path was open for Iran to rejoin the "community of nations" if the Tehran regime complied with its NPT obligations.

Integration or isolation was the stark choice given to the outlier. And therein lies the di-

lemma. Iran perceives the process of integration into an international community whose dominant power is the United States as an insidious threat to regime survival. Integration might yield regime-sustaining economic benefits, but it also carries the risk of regime-terminating political contagion. The nuclear issue is a proxy for that more fundamental foreign policy debate within Iran over what type of relationship the Islamic Republic is prepared to have with the United States and the rest of the world.

FROM ROGUE TO OUTLIER

The George W. Bush administration launched a preventive war of choice against Iraq in March 2003 to replace the regime because it viewed the threat posed by Saddam Hussein through the prism of 9/11. Eight months after the fall of

Baghdad, in December 2003, came the surprise announcement that Muammar Qaddafi had acceded to verifiable weapons of mass destruction (WMD) disarmament. Although Bush administration officials claimed Libya as “a dividend” of the Iraq war, the crux of the deal with Libya was a tacit but clear security assurance to the Qaddafi regime that if it gave up its unconventional arsenal, Washington would eschew the objective of regime change.

In dealing with the nuclear defiance in Iran and North Korea, the Bush administration was caught between the precedents set in Iraq and Libya. The administration could not replicate the Iraq precedent of direct military intervention, and it was unwilling to offer Tehran and Pyongyang the security assurance that had sealed the Libya deal. It failed to make clear whether the goal of U.S. policy was to replace regimes or to change their conduct. As a consequence, the administration missed opportunities to test Iranian and North Korean intentions.

Senator Barack Obama campaigned for the presidency on a controversial platform of negotiating with rogue states. The shift was evident in his January 2009 inaugural address, when he offered to “extend a hand [to adversaries] if you are willing to unclench your fist.”² The Obama administration jettisoned regime change rhetoric and reframed the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea in terms of their noncompliance with established international norms. It offered adversarial governments a structured choice: abide by international norms and gain the economic benefits of greater integration with the international community, or remain in noncompliance

and face international isolation and punitive consequences.

But the outliers rebuffed the extended hand. Tehran seized on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s 2011 intervention in Libya as proof that Qaddafi had been duped by the West when he dismantled his nuclear program. For Iran, the rationale that the Libyan military operation was undertaken as a humanitarian intervention rather than an attempt to achieve nonproliferation ends is an analytical distinction without a political difference. By taking down regimes in Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), Washington has essentially priced itself out of the security assurance market in Tehran.

The nuclear crisis with Iran is playing out against the backdrop of potentially significant societal developments in the country. The problem for the United States is that the nuclear crisis is immediate, whereas the prospects for regime change or evolution in Iran are uncertain. The time lines for nuclear weapons acquisition and societal change are simply not in sync.

ALL OPTIONS ARE ON THE TABLE

All options for dealing with the Iranian nuclear challenge may remain on the table, but none is good. Military action? In Iran, bombing would, at best, set back but not end the nuclear program. Moreover, the case for a military strike on Iran’s nuclear program rests on an assessment that the theocratic regime is undeterrable and apocalyptic. But that depiction of Iran as an irrational state runs contrary to National Intelligence Estimates, which have characterized the clerical regime’s

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decision making as being “guided by a cost-benefit approach.”³ When asked whether the Iranian regime was messianic or rational, Obama said that Iranian decision making over the past three decades indicates that the clerics “care about the regime’s survival.”⁴

Iran’s ability to enrich uranium gives it an inherent hedge option for a nuclear weapon, but U.S. intelligence analysts maintain that Iran has not yet decided to cross the threshold from a potential capability to an actual weapon. Going so far but no further, at least not yet, might well serve Iranian interests. Obama has observed that the Tehran regime, under the pressure of crushing sanctions, has an opportunity to make a “strategic calculation” to defer a decision to weaponize. Critics of the administration respond that allowing Iran to retain even a latent capability to acquire nuclear weapons constitutes an unacceptable threat.

The hard reality is that the window in which a full rollback of Iran’s nuclear capabilities was possible has closed. So Washington must remain pragmatically open to diplomacy (backed by the coercive pressure of sanctions) to establish limits on Iran’s nuclear programs. Bounding Iran’s programs would primarily entail curbing their acquisition of additional fissile material. “I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon,” Obama declared in a speech to the American

Israel Public Affairs Committee in March 2012.⁵ By drawing this red line of preventing weaponization, the president appeared to signal that the United States would not launch a preventive war to deny Iran the option of hedging its nuclear bets. His disavowal of containment, though, is a reflection of the meaning the term has taken on in the contemporary debate: acquiescing to Iran’s development of nuclear weapons and then deterring their use through the retaliatory threat of U.S. nuclear weapons. That connotation is an unfortunate departure from George Kennan’s post-World War II concept of containment: keeping regimes in check until they collapse of their own internal weakness.

So Iran faces a profound dilemma. This outlier sees integration into the international community as a threat to regime survival, but Tehran’s posturing revisionism does not offer a viable long-term alternative. The nuclear question remains a proxy for the persisting debate about its relationship with the outside world. And that, in turn, presents Washington with a dilemma, one that may be managed but not resolved. Between the poles of induced integration and coerced regime change lies a third option, containment—an updated, retooled version of Kennan’s strategy that would decouple the nuclear issue from regime change and rely on internal forces as agents of societal change in Iran.

CONCLUSION

In Iran, the nuclear issue remains a proxy for the unresolved debate over that country's relationship with the United States and the outside world. Maintaining a hedge option for a nuclear weapon (absent some perceived security imperative for acquisition) is Iran's strategic sweet spot.

The term *containment* has been eschewed and delegitimized in U.S. policy debate. Yet it is an accurate description of current U.S. policy toward Iran and is likely to persist as long as the Tehran regime does not cross Washington's red line of weaponization.

ENDNOTES

- 1 David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, "Obama's Nuclear Strategy Intended as a Message," *New York Times*, April 6, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/07/world/07arms.html?scp=9&q=David+E.+Sanger&st=nyt>.
- 2 "Transcript: Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," *New York Times*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all>.
- 3 Quoted in Jeffrey Lewis, "Clapper on Iran NIE," *Arms Control Wonk*, March 19, 2011, <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/3703/clapper-on-iran-nie>.
- 4 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" *Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.
- 5 "Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference," Washington, DC, March 4, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>.

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