

Deterring and Containing Iran: A Near-Inevitable Task

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The United States will almost certainly have to deter and contain Iran for the foreseeable future – almost like a Cold War on a small scale. Perhaps a diplomatic breakthrough can be achieved, but if so deterrence and containment will almost certainly have played a role in making that possible. Perhaps the United States will decide that at the end of the day it must live with a nuclear-ready Iran, in which case deterrence and containment of the threat will be essential. Perhaps preemption of Iran's nuclear program will be necessary, but in that case, deterrence and containment will be needed to limit Iranian reactions after the preemption. Because almost any policy option will entail deterrence and containment as an element, the United States should increase its actions to deter and contain Iran without waiting for further diplomatic developments. Please permit me to share some thoughts based on the excellent papers in the volume about how to contain Iran I edited with Henry Sokolski, *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, published in 2005 by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College.

Inducements Are Not Likely to be Enough

Russia and China have been urging that the international community concentrate on offering Iran inducements to stop nuclear enrichment and reprocessing. One could be cynical about their motivations, but that can be overstated. For instance, neither has particularly important commercial reasons to conciliate Iran. High oil prices have given Russia an excellent economic situation and world isolation of Iran would only drive those prices higher. The much-cited multi-billion dollar natural gas investment project by Chinese firms has gone nowhere; similar deals with India and Japan are floundering because Iran is insisting on extracting every last penny from its foreign partners. While economically Iran is quite marginal for Russia and China, each of those countries would face serious strategic threats if nuclear proliferation became the norm. China would not want to see East Asia nuclearized. Russia would face an even more immediate security threat: two hundred years ago, Chechnya was part of Iran, and a nuclear Iran might feel it could with impunity support radical Islamists there, or for that matter elsewhere in Russia and its periphery. In short, the cynics may be wrong, and Russia and China may indeed be sincere in their view that Iran has to be induced to freeze its nuclear program.

Unfortunately, it will be hard to induce Iran's leaders to change their nuclear program because they are remarkably self-confident. They see Iran as benefiting from a conjunction of favorable circumstances: an end of threats to Iran from Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States being tied down in Iraq, victories by pro-Iranian forces in elections in Iraq and the Palestinian Authority, high oil prices, and several years of strong economic growth. Furthermore, there is the grave risk that any inducements offered Iran will be seen by hardliners there as proof that their tough stance is working and so should be continued. That said, it is worthwhile to offer Iran inducements, if for no other reason than that the offer may persuade many around the world –

and here in America – that every reasonable effort has been made to get Iran to freeze its nuclear program.

Economic inducements look suspiciously like bribes paid for bad behavior. Besides being odious, such bribes give the impression that bad behavior is more profitable than good behavior. Pro-Western reformers were unable to secure a trade agreement with Europe or substantial U.S. relaxation of its economic sanctions despite their obvious interest in improving relations, but now it appears that anti-Western hardliners may achieve those objectives – which suggests that Iran would be well advised to be obnoxious rather than cooperative. No matter how creatively one designs or packages economic inducements, they will inevitably look like reward for bad behavior.

A much more appropriate form of inducement would be security inducements compatible with a policy of containing and deterring Iran. Such security inducements should be designed to counter the argument that Iran needs nuclear weapons for its defense, while at the same time locking Iran into the status quo – that is, checking Iran’s ambitions to dominate the region. There are many confidence-and security-building measures (CSBMs) and arms control measures that would provide gains for the West while addressing legitimate Iranian security concerns (as distinct from its unacceptable ambitions). An analogy would be to the CSBMs which reduced tensions between the old Warsaw Pact and NATO during the Cold War. One example would be an agreement to reduce the risk of incidents at sea between the U.S. and Iranian navies. Another example would be an agreement to exchange observers during military exercises in the region. It would be even be appropriate to propose discussions about a treaty similar to the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, limiting the deployment of heavy weapons such as tanks near the Iran-Iraq and Iran-Afghanistan borders. Perhaps Iran would not be impressed by such proposed security inducements, but at the very least, the offer would show to Europe, Russia, and China that the United States is prepared to walk the extra mile in the effort to accommodate Iran’s legitimate security concerns. If Washington makes such efforts but Tehran refuses to suspend its nuclear enrichment and reprocessing, then world opinion is more likely to blame Iran for the impasse.

A further security inducement which the United States could offer would be to address the reported concern that the Bush administration’s real goal is regime change in Iran and that the Bush administration will use force to that end. It would be inappropriate for the U.S. government to offer any security guarantees to the Iranian or any other government; what government is in power in another country is up to the people of that country to decide. But what Washington could offer Tehran would be a “conditional security assurance” – jargon for the simple proposition, **“We will not attack you if you do not attack us.”** To clarify what that means, the U.S. government should spell out:

- * “Just as you criticize us for our liberal democracy, we will remain free to criticize you for your undemocratic violations of human rights.
- * “Just as you spend tens of millions on radio and television broadcasting to our country to propagate your views, so we will remain free to support broadcasts to Iran.
- * “Just as you tightly restrict trade with America, we will remain free to restrict trade with Iran.”
- * “Just as you support terrorist groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Palestine, we reserve the right to fight those groups.”

Pressing Iran Means More than Sanctions

While I would argue that the United States, the EU, Russia, and China are in broad agreement that the advancement of a military nuclear program in Iran is unacceptable, they have not yet reached a consensus on how to stop Iran. If inducements do not work, then hopefully there will be international consensus on the need to press Iran – though it is disturbing to see that the United States was not able to pin down an agreement on the need for “bigger sticks” before Washington recently agreed to offer the “bigger carrot” of direct U.S.-Iranian talks.

There are good prospects that pressure on Iran would persuade its leaders to freeze their overt nuclear program. That might seem likely a surprising statement given the heated rhetoric of President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. But real power in Iran is held by revolutionary leaders, especially the Supreme Leader (who is exactly what the title suggests), Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran’s president has not been a particularly powerful figure in foreign or security affairs, as the outside world discovered when its high hopes about Mohammed Khatami’s 1997-2005 efforts at political reform came to naught or when his predecessor Ali Akbar Rafsanjani’s 1989-1997 efforts at economic reform also foundered. It is quite possible that current president Ahmadinezhad will suffer the same fate as his predecessors: after an initial big splash, he will sink below the waves. Iran’s system has more checks and balances than even the U.S. system: it is almost impervious to change. And for the last eighteen years, Khamenei has been very comfortable with his preferred foreign policy stance, which is low-level confrontation with the West – just enough to keep the revolutionary spirit alive, but not enough to risk open hostilities. For now, Khamenei seems to think that the West for all its rhetoric will do nothing to stop Ahmadinezhad, so why not let him push ahead.

The task now is to persuade Khamenei that Ahmadinezhad’s confrontational stance is too costly for Iran. That is the reason for applying pressure of various sorts on Iran. Some of this pressure can be exercised through a broad international coalition, preferably through the United Nations Security Council. But getting that coalition to do anything about the Iranian program is a time-consuming process which may in the end fail. In the meantime, many things can be done on our own or with our best friends. While awaiting a UN decision on formal international sanctions, America and its friends can apply “de facto sanctions.” For instance, strict U.S. Treasury application of existing rules to prevent transfer of funds to terrorists led the two largest Swiss banks to decide recently that Iran was just not an attractive place to do business, so they closed up shop there. There is more to be done to apply rules strictly in such a way as to press Iran. In particular, there are charities in the United States, especially the Alavi Foundation with its many millions of dollars in assets, which work closely with Iranian hardliners. The head of the Islamic Center in Potomac, Maryland is widely said to be appointed by Supreme Leader Khamenei and to have close links with the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

That said, economic instruments alone are unlikely to be sufficient to persuade Iran to freeze its nuclear program. The principal levers of power in Iran are in the hands of revolutionaries who are not motivated primarily by economic concerns, while those who care about the state of the economy do not have sufficient influence on their own to persuade the real power-holders to change policies.

Success at influencing Iranian policy is much more likely if action on the economic front is combined with action on other fronts. In particular, the security apparatus – especially the Revolutionary Guards – are a vital power center in Iran. They need to be convinced that the current nuclear policies are threatening Iran’s security, because Iran’s neighbors and the great

powers will react in ways that will hurt Iran. If Iran makes the Gulf a more dangerous place, then the United States and other powers will need to deploy more powerful military assets to the region, if for no other reason to protect shipping from Iranian threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. And Iran's nuclear program could start an arms race, which the Gulf Arab monarchies and Turkey would win, since compared to Iran they are both richer and have better ties with the world's principal arms suppliers.

To press Iran on the security front, the United States should step up its already considerable efforts to deter and contain Iran. The U.S. government has been actively supporting ballistic missile defenses aimed at the Iranian program in Israel, and it is promoting missile defenses in Europe for the same purpose. More likely to grab Tehran's attention would be two steps. First would be to reinforce NATO's commitment to the defense of Turkey from threats to the east, which was in some doubt after the disagreements about NATO deployments to Turkey in the buildup to the Iraq war. After all, a nuclear-armed Iran could decide that it could with impunity return to sponsoring the PKK Kurdish terrorists as it did in the 1990s, or that it could support armed Islamists opposing the Turkish secular state. NATO military planners are not necessarily overly burdened right now; it would be useful if they were tasked to prepare more detailed plans for the defense of Turkey. It would be helpful if European Union members actively promoted such NATO plans; after all, if the accession talks with Turkey succeed, the EU will have a 300 mile border with Iran. Strengthening trans-Atlantic cooperation about the Iranian threat would be a good way to point out to Iran how their nuclear activities are driving the United States and Europe together to oppose Iranian dreams of being the regional superpower over the objections of their neighbors.

A second area for more active steps now would be in the defense of shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and the southern Persian Gulf. There is ample recent precedent for assembling a coalition to defend Gulf waters. A January 2004 Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) exercise, Sea Saber, tracked a dummy proliferation shipment from the Northern Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz in to the North Arabian Sea; participants included the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Spain, Italy, Netherlands, Japan, and Australia, with observers from Denmark, Germany, Poland, Turkey, and Portugal. Also, starting in October 2001, Task Force 151 patrolled the Gulf and Arabian Seas querying over 1,000 ships a month and boarding more than 25 a month, with ships from the United States, Great Britain, Canada, France, Italy, Greece, and New Zealand. Were a similar force to be assembled – or even just an exercise announced – to protect Gulf shipping from mine and missile threats, the point would be made to Iran that their bellicose statements are cementing a coalition against them.

Preemption Would Require Follow-Up

At the end of the day, diplomacy may not be enough. The best explanation about why force has to remain an option on the table comes from Nobel-Peace-Prize-winning Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Mohammed El Baradei, who recently said about Iran, "Diplomacy has to be backed up by pressure and, in extreme case, by force. We have rules. We have to do everything possible to uphold the rules through conviction. If not, then you impose them. Of course, this has to be the last resort, but sometimes you have to do it."

If pre-emption of an Iranian nuclear capability becomes necessary, then it would be prudent to assume that Iran will respond – meaning that the United States should have in place capabilities to deter and contain any Iranian response. Much has been written about potential

Iranian non-conventional retaliation in Iraq, in the Lebanese/Palestinian theater, or with radical Islamist terrorist groups worldwide. Permit me to note a more conventional threat. For several years, the directors of the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) have told Congress that Iran poses a serious threat to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz. For instance, in March 2005, DIA Director Vice Admiral Lowell E. Jacoby told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "We judge Iran can briefly close the Strait of Hormuz, relying on a layered strategy using predominantly naval, air, and some ground forces." If in fact, if Iran were to close the Strait even briefly, that could be a very exciting time to be in the oil trading business. The resulting spike in oil prices could unsettle financial markets and hurt economic confidence. In such a crisis atmosphere, there could be recriminations about how this could have happened, especially when the DIA warned that it could occur.

Iran's leaders regularly threaten to disrupt oil shipments from the Gulf. On June 4, Supreme Leader Khamenei added his authority to these threats, warning, "If the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely face danger, and the Americans would not be able to protect energy supply in the region." The Iranians seem to have persuaded themselves that they have this capability. Ali-Ashgar Kazemi, a retired Iranian admiral now a political science professor at Tehran University, recently said, "Iranians are preparing for guerilla war at sea...In an enclosed, narrow and rather shallow region such as the Persian Gulf, this tactic can be very decisive against large units and can deny the enemy from effective deployment, sea lines of communication and power projection." As Riad Khawaji warned in the May 8, 2006 *Defense News* ("Iran Plans for Attrition War in the Gulf"), "Iran could sortie nearly 400 small, high-speed craft armed with rocket launchers, torpedoes and mines."

Under these circumstances, it would be particularly appropriate for the United States to emphasize, through public statements and display, its commitment to the defense of the Strait of Hormuz, such as its plans to deploy there the new Littoral Combat Ships (LCS), the first of which is due to enter service soon with advanced mine counter measure capabilities, including unmanned underwater vehicles. It would also be useful for the United States to urge other maritime powers and the Gulf states to demonstrate, in deeds as well as words, their commitment to the defense of this vital sea lane of communication. Iran needs to be told in no uncertain terms that threats to the Strait of Hormuz would be met by a massive and broad international effort.

Iran's threats to the Strait of Hormuz illustrate its essential ambitions: it wants to be a regional power whose wishes are accommodated by its neighbors. Iran is not a status quo power worried about its defense; it wants to expand its influence through military means. These Iranian objectives are a large part of what makes its nuclear program a dire threat to this security of this region which is so important to the world economy.

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