



Why Selective Engagement? Iranian and Western Interests Are Closer Than You Think

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Recommendations

- Containment strategies have failed in the past and will continue to have huge geopolitical costs. It is important to remind all those who dismiss the idea of selective engagement with Iran as unrealistic or impracticable of precisely what the other “practicable and workable” options are and their possible outcomes. Such negotiations are crucial to the stability of the region where both countries’ strategic priorities are involved and Iran is crucial to stabilizing a wider “arc of crisis.”
- Washington should understand that isolating Iran looks increasingly like a losing game. In 2007 Iran strengthened its ties with most of its regional neighbors, notwithstanding the Bush administration’s attempts to prevent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from visiting US-allied states, or the United Nations’ sanctions imposed on Iran over the nuclear crisis. Even Gulf Arab kingdoms seem to be considering the containment of Iran as an unrealistic solution and appear to be thinking of some form of accommodation.
- The United States and Iran have more pragmatic interests and converging strategic needs in common than are generally perceived, such as avoiding Iraqi and Afghan fragmentation; coordinating antidrug smuggling; and working on new, more sustainable security arrangements in the Gulf area, just to mention the most important ones. Without denying the importance and danger of nuclear confrontation, the international community should be ready to work on different agendas and to “reenlarge the zoom” of its relations with Iran as soon as possible. In sum: *Iran is not Ahmadinejad, and Iranian goals and aspirations cannot be confined to the nuclear file*—as important as it might be.
- The international community needs to exploit all possibilities that may facilitate Iran’s desecuritization of its foreign policy agenda. The so-called securitization of Iranian foreign policy, rather than weakening the ultraconservatives, has created huge difficulties for Iranian reformists and pragmatic conservatives and has worked to the favor of the more intransigent Iranian ultraradicals, domestically as well as internationally. Multilateral approaches with an active participation of Middle Eastern states may mitigate Iranian insecurity externally, thus allowing more pragmatic political strains to take root internally.
- The West should be ready to make an acceptable, detailed offer and have detailed, reciprocal, step-by-step timing—unlike the European Union’s (EU) offers during its negotiations with Tehran that fostered Iranian resentment. The EU’s proposals asked for a halt to all enrichment-related activities without a detailed timing of the political and economic “compensations” to be paid to Iran (technology transfer, economic and commercial new agreements, acknowledgment of Iran’s role in the region) and without framing a reciprocal, step-by-step roadmap for defusing the crisis. In Tehran, the general perception (rightly or wrongly) has been that the EU’s offers contained few guarantees for Iran.

- Depicting the Iranian political regime as monolithic and evil in nature is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Historically, this stance has helped the most radical, intolerant, and aggressive factions. In actuality, the Iranian regime is fragmented and divided. Many of its leaders are pragmatic and ready to compromise.
- Post-9/11 events in the Middle East strengthened Iran's geopolitical and strategic role. This is a fact that should be recognized, and successful future policies will need to take this into account.
- The so-called Shia revival should not be overestimated, even though it is challenging the current Sunni-dominated power elites of the region and those regimes' regional conceptions of political identity and authority. Persian Iran, if not the Islamic Republic of Iran, will benefit from this. Multilateral arrangements and initiatives in the region represent a useful mid- to longer-term tool in order to reduce the negative consequences in the Arab/Sunni perception of this Iranian/Shia rising.

Recognizing Iran's Regional Role, Regardless of Regime Type

After decades of mistrust and recrimination, it is not easy (from a political perspective or even a psychological one) to accept the idea of negotiations between the United States and Iran. Speaking with Iranians is not easy—sometimes not even pleasant. Given this environment, there is growing difficulty in discussing how to “engage” Iran without either looking unrealistic or giving the impression of surrendering to Tehran's bold policy (it is the trap of the false dichotomy: capitulate or escalate).

This is due to a plurality of reasons. First, negotiations with Tehran have been progressively seized by the nuclear crises and by the growing confrontation between the international community and Iran. President Ahmadinejad seems to be a “bad guy” from a James Bond movie; his repulsive statements on Israel and denials of the Holocaust, in addition to his radical stance, have only isolated Iran. Therefore, analyzing such a country as a “normal” nation in terms of foreign policy decision making is extremely problematic. However, as one analyst notes, we should admit that “the demonisation of Iran by successive US administrations and the media has been so

successful that any attempt at offering a more balanced view of Iran is almost certain to be construed as an apology for a ‘backlash,’ ‘rogue’ and an ‘outlaw’ state, words used by US officials to describe Iran.”¹

Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is crucial to remember that Iran is more complex and diverse than the image that Ahmadinejad portrays and that Iranian goals and aspirations cannot be confined to the nuclear file, as important as it might be. Iran is at the center of a wide arc of instability, and its role has been accentuated by the events of the last years, in particular by the difficulties in Afghanistan and by the tragic postwar situation in Iraq.

Under these circumstances, it is essential to try to ensure Iranian collaboration in dealing with the growing instability of the region, as suggested in the Baker-Hamilton report on Iraq, and as Washington has timorously tried in Baghdad with Ambassador Crocker's meetings. A better, more balanced, and less ideologically driven approach toward Iranian interests can suggest possible ideas for constructive and credible engagement.²

Obviously, the adoption of a more pragmatic policy with Iran on regional issues neither means denying the importance and prominence of the nuclear issues, nor does it mean “surrendering” to Iranian hard-liners. Simply, the international community has to recognize that Iran is at the center of the most crucial geostrategic region and that *the nuclear crisis—whatever the outcome might be—does not diminish its role and presence in that region*. A pragmatic selective engagement on specific issues—with the aim both to address common problems and to increase mutual confidence—might avoid the isolation of the country and offer the pragmatic factions in Tehran some domestic arguments in favor of a more moderate and less defiant foreign policy.

Understanding Iran's Domestic Scenario

Ever-Present Structural and Cultural Factors

Complexity is the main characteristic of Iran as a country, a political system, and a culture. In approaching Iran we should always bear in mind the following intricacies.

Iran's constitutional complexity derives from the convolution of the Constitution of the Islamic

Republic, where different and competing organs and institutions coexist and struggle for power. Here, nonelected institutions (such as the Supreme Leader, the *Rahbar*, and the Council of the Guardians [CG]) limit the effective power of elected institutions, such as the president and the parliament (the *Majles*). After Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, when Ali Khamenei became *Rahbar*, this constitutional rivalry increased, culminating with the rise of the reformist movement during Mohammad Khatami's presidencies (1997-2005); this political confrontation added further confusion to the intricate constitutional framework.

There is also a political complexity: the Islamic postrevolutionary political elite is deeply fragmented and divided. In Iran there are now different political factions with very different perspectives and ideals. In the West these factions are labeled as reformists (the groups around Khatami), traditional conservatives (Khamenei's followers), technoconservatives (or pragmatic conservatives, organized around Hashemi Rafsanjani and Hassan Rowhani), and ultraradicals (Ahmadinejad and the *Pasdarans*). These simplifications might help Western readers to decipher Iran, but they represent a far cry from its real political complexity. As an Iranian analyst stated in a private conversation, "These simple representations are very useful for helping persons in the West in *not* understanding Iran, assuming wrong ideas and making wrong decisions."

As a matter of fact, political factionalism involves personal rivalries and patron-client linkages, with an extreme tacticism and an intricate web of personal relations that cut across political alignments, religious affiliations, and electoral alliances. Moreover, as is true for other parts of the Middle East, inclusion and co-optation represent common political answers to personal antagonism or political confrontation. For those accustomed to a bipolar political system, the Iranian political scenario appears almost incomprehensible (unless you live in Italy, like this author, where the "bipolar system" has no fewer than 87 political parties jumping from one side to the other or simply "sitting" in the middle).

It has often been said that, in Iran, power goes where it is seen to lie. In other words, it is often the nomination of a politician of particular note that transforms the real role of a constitutional

body and its true importance in Tehran's power game. The clearest example of this is the Expediency Council, a body that played only a minor role until it was directed by the powerful former President Rafsanjani. During the reformist period, he transformed the council into an effective and important political actor, to the benefit of the technoconservatives, by exploiting the role theoretically entrusted to him by the constitution—that of mediating differences between the CG and Parliament.

Finally, there is a cultural complexity. Iranians are proud of their sophisticated culture and elaborate posture (the famous "speaking *Ta'rouf*"—the elaborate, formal, polite language). Concealment and dissimulation should not be considered as negative behaviors, but as a form of self-defense and respect for social relations. These postures are deeply rooted in Iran's history and culture. These behavioral patterns do not help in international negotiations, especially since Iranian politicians are also obsessed with the idea of external plots and conspiracies against the Islamic Republic. Victimization and past grievances are further aggravated by the Iranians' notion (unfortunately, often correct) that foreigners neither understand the beauty of Persian culture nor appreciate the historical importance of Iran in the past, and therefore do not understand Iranian ambitions in the region today. In any case, Iran is today a country with a highly unpopular political regime that is considered by the majority of Iranians as an illiberal, corrupt, and ineffective government—unable to meet its citizens' political, social, economic, and cultural demands. This is a regime that is splintered and divided with growing differences in perception about how to guarantee the existence of the Islamic Republic and how to deal with the domestic and external challenges it must face.

New Factors: Competition Between Ahmadinejad's Radical Populism and Traditional Revolutionary Centers of Power

The rise of Ahmadinejad and the ultraradicals supporting him dealt another blow to the uncertain balance among competing factions, client networks, power groups, and single politicians—provoking a change in the traditional postrevolutionary system of power. *Pasdarans*, *Bassijis*, members of the security forces, and followers of ultraconservative religious schools (generally following Ayatollah Mesbah-Yasdi's thought)

filled as many administrative and political positions as possible—often with unknown, inexperienced representatives. Ahmadinejad tried to enhance the Iranian president’s limited powers with an aggressive and populist policy. He departed from the traditional policy of mediation and political accommodation with straight attacks and postures even in relation to some major representatives of the Iranian establishment, such as Rafsanjani—or, for example, with the dismissal in the fall of 2007 of the nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, a man imposed on Ahmadinejad by the Supreme Leader himself.

It is clear, therefore, that ultraradicals are attempting to transform the Islamic Republic into an even more totalitarian and cohesive system. The groups backing the president, and especially the armed forces and the paramilitary, know that they will have difficulty increasing their consensus, based as it is on the support of the masses and tied to the regime’s complex system of favoritism and assistance.

Furthermore, many Shia clerics appear to be worried by the idea of a transformation of this nature. Khamenei himself has sent signals to the president to indicate the need for a more pragmatic policy and, above all, to establish clear “limits” for Ahmadinejad beyond which lie the religious and theological spheres where the president must not go and with which the president, who is not a cleric, must not interfere.

It is also clear to the *Rahbar*, in fact, that the rise to power of the ultraradicals might be dangerous for his power, since “this centralization of decision-making along with the greater prominence of fundamentalist actors is bound to reduce policymaking compromises.”³ The populism and political agenda of the forces close to the president—apart from his unusual style of wielding power that favors confrontation and challenge both at home and abroad—push toward a transformation of the power system created by the Shia religious structures, a change that leads to a more blatant form of totalitarianism and that runs counter to the current constitutional framework and to the traditional management of power in the Islamic Republic.

This radicalization of the Iranian political scenario is witnessed also in the intensified repression of journalists and reformist intellec-

tuals with the announcement in the summer of 2006 of the reintroduction of severe checks on university teaching and also on comments made by university professors outside the lecture halls. At the same time, attacks made on the state television aimed at individual intellectuals and journalists, hated by the ultraradical exponents of the regime, have become more frequent. This ever gloomier atmosphere has induced many Iranians to adopt a form of preventive self-censorship.

In a manner of speaking, however, this repression is “selective”—aimed at individuals and groups held to be dangerous, but at the same time not reaching the point where it makes daily life unbearable for Iranian youth. As expected, there has also been a return to the darkest years of Khomeini’s period (1979-1989), when the religious police arrested young men and women because of the way they were dressed and regularly burst into private homes to break up parties and hunt for forbidden music and alcohol.

Ultraradicals represent a clear minority of Iranians due also to the failure of their populist and ill-conceived economic policies. Their stance on both the domestic and international level is perceived as very dangerous by numerous members of the postrevolutionary power elite.

It is therefore clear that there is widespread Iranian popular discontent, and the current regime is able neither to represent the majority of its population nor to reflect the genuine demands of Iranians. Yet Ahmadinejad’s attempts to transform the traditional power mechanisms of the Islamic Republic are dangerous since they could transform it into a complete totalitarian state, which Iran is not at the moment. His populist and radical stances on foreign policy and on the nuclear negotiations might also deteriorate Iran’s position.

However, as always in Iran, these differences and rivalries do not have clear-cut political consequences. As we have already noted, Iranian politics are always more complicated than the way they are perceived by the West and tend to move toward inclusion and co-option.

The ongoing verbal US attacks on Iran—coupled with sanctions and the US presence in neighboring Iraq, the Gulf, and Afghanistan—have only served to strengthen President Ahmadinejad and his ultraradical allies. Iranians feel they are

under siege, and in such an environment it is easier for the ultraradicals to strengthen their rule. Paradoxically, Washington is involuntarily Ahmadinejad's best ally and offers a good scapegoat for all of his failures.

Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy

As we have seen, understanding domestic political evolutions in Iran is notoriously difficult, due both to the Iranian political fragmentation and to the extraordinary complexity of the Islamic Republic's constitutional framework. Dealing with Iranian foreign policy is sometimes even more puzzling since one has to add the dichotomy between the regime's official rhetoric and the more pragmatic *realpolitik* policy adopted by Tehran. It is important to appreciate who the different constitutional bodies are, as well as the different centers of power, all of whom are competing among themselves. Moreover, due to the importance of foreign policy issues in the postrevolutionary ideology, foreign policy has become a perfect playground for domestic confrontation and for delegitimizing opposing political factions.

Factional politics is the first element in an initial structural matrix that is important if Iranian foreign policy is to be understood: "a matrix with three competing elements—Islamic ideology, national interests, and factional politics—all constantly at battle."⁴ The result has been a foreign policy characterized by degrees of contradiction and inconsistency, as well as by oscillations between pan-Islamist and hypernationalist stances.

But this first matrix is not enough. In order to understand Iran's foreign policy, it is also important to remember a second matrix that is not only related to the ideological contradictions of the Islamic Republic but also connected with the idea of national interest, which is more deeply rooted in the history of Persia/Iran. This matrix is based on some constants of Iranian relations with external powers:

1. Iran's geopolitical situation.
2. Iran's strategic regional loneliness and dichotomist approach toward neighboring Arab countries (especially after the 1979 revolution).
3. Iran's attraction to Western culture vis-à-vis Iran's nationalism and obsessive wish for independence.

Enduring Geopolitical Realities and Elite Perceptions

Iran has 15 neighbors and is part of one of the most unstable, but strategically crucial, regions in the world. Several of its neighbors are weak or internally divided. During the last few centuries, several of them have displayed hostile or antagonistic behavior toward Iran (from Iraq to the Ottoman Empire, from Afghanistan to the Czarist Empire/USSR). This behavior has provoked feelings of isolation and strategic loneliness that have been emphasized either by the reciprocal perception of Iran's peculiarity (Persian and Shia culture) or by the containment policy adopted against the Islamic Republic.

This strategic loneliness is perceived as a serious threat and is used by the conservative and radical factions of the ruling elite to exaggerate the dangers and threats facing the country. The fact that Iran is not a member of any security pact, along with the lack of confidence in the regional balance, has been seen by the Iranian power structures as "a huge conspiracy directed at the Islamic Republic."⁵ For them, the conspiracy justifies a domestic crackdown and intellectual repression that incurs huge national security costs.

Closely related to this sense of isolation is the second constant: Iran's deep attachment to national sovereignty and independence, which is firmly intertwined with the desire of Iranians to guarantee their religious and cultural uniqueness. Iran has a proud sense of a peculiar historic identity (going back to the idea of Achaemenid *Eranshahr*) that tends to be confrontational in the field of international relations, thereby sowing mistrust and suspicion among regional and international actors. Indeed, "Iran...is both grandiose in its self-perception yet intensely insecure."⁶ In particular, one of the most common mistakes in analyzing Iran's foreign policy is reading its pan-Shia postures as the demonstration of a radical pan-Islamist orientation, while it is in fact an ideologically acceptable way (for the revolutionary elite) of expressing nationalistic stances to domestic audiences.

Relations toward Persian Gulf Arab kingdoms reflect that dichotomy: the Khomeinist revolutionary ideology exacerbates Arab traditional suspicions regarding Iran. For years now, however, Tehran has adopted a policy of pragmatism, based on strategic national interests more

than on its ideology. A major contradiction is the fact that Tehran wants to be considered a pillar of the regional security system while at the same time mutual deep-rooted diffidence suggests that regional governments adopt tactical politics rather than move toward real, long-term, and inclusive security systems. At present the current unstable security arrangements are based on a confrontational pattern and rely on the “zero-sum” approach that tends to exclude Iran rather than include it in a shared security framework.⁷

A last “structural element” to be considered is Iranian attention to and cultural preference for the West, notwithstanding the regime’s rhetoric. For those who are unfamiliar with Iran, one of the most amazing notions is that Iran is one of the very few countries of the enlarged Middle East that does not have anti-Western feelings, and the anti-Western rhetoric of its postrevolutionary elite (Ahmadinejad’s radical posture against the United States and the EU in particular) is not shared by the majority of the population. The attention to Western history and culture is widespread, as testified to by the thousands of translations of all kinds of Western books. The fact that the country historically perceives itself as isolated, with no structural allies, drives Iran to look for extraregional ties. However, throughout history, Iran departed from the West whenever it has felt endangered or manipulated.⁸ The result is a schizophrenic attitude: “Iran is both antagonistic toward the West and philosophically intimate with it.”⁹

Thus several elements have favored an active Iranian policy. One is the existence of prevalent perceptions and attitudes by elites that Iran is naturally at the center of an enlarged Middle East, and as such, constitutes a “pillar” of macroregional stability. Another element—somewhat contradictory with the first—is the country’s enduring worry and concern about its political and economic isolation.

Specific Geopolitical Issues

The main geopolitical axis is the one toward the South (Iraq and the Gulf Arab States). This area has always been Iran’s leading strategic priority, and the events following 2003, together with the so-called Shia revival—which is challenging not only the current Sunni-dominated power elites but also their regional conception of political identity and authority—have simply enhanced this importance. It is in this area that the Iranian

presence is perceived as having strongly increased. This trend is making it easier for Iran to forge ties as a regional pivotal power in the Middle East.

However, there are other constant axes of Iranian foreign policy:

Levant. Tehran is influencing the peace process and political events in Lebanon. Israel and the Palestinians represent a mix of “strategic assets” for the Islamic Republic (ideological rhetoric, confrontation with the West, and exploiting anti-Israeli and anti-US sentiments of the Arab street), as well as of tactical postures (or useful cards) to play in the confrontation with Washington. The high price that Tehran is paying in terms of isolation for its anti-Israeli position is still considered by the radicals and the traditional conservatives as a reasonable price for maintaining one of the ideological pillars of the regime, and for granting Iran an extra theatre of confrontation (South Lebanon and Hezbollah militias). However, Ahmadinejad’s appeals for Israel to be wiped off the map, as well as Iran’s increased support to militant groups in the region calling for the destruction of the state of Israel (most notably, Islamic Jihad and Hamas), are worrying many Iranian politicians—even many in the traditional conservative camp.

The East. Iran has been cultivating stronger relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan and now also with India and China. After years of confrontation and tensions with Islamabad and with the Taliban-dominated Afghanistan, Iran has adopted a pragmatic policy of “good neighbor.” Its main goals are those of favoring commercial relations, avoiding isolation, and being accepted as a member of regional *fora*, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Economic Cooperation Organization. More recently, Iran has tried to benefit from the huge potential of the East Asian energy market and China’s and India’s energy thirst in order to decrease Iran’s vulnerability in case of biting sanctions from the United States and European Union

The North (Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus). Tehran has been one of the most active countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991. Economic development and political stability have been the main aims. With Russia, Tehran

has developed close relations, notwithstanding a structural rivalry in the Caspian Sea and in the energy field, specifically over the international natural gas market and pipelines projects toward Europe and the international energy market. For years several Iranian political analysts close to the *Rahbar* (Supreme Leader Khamenei) have believed that a strong, secure relationship with Russia and a network of stable relations with the medium-power states in the East could balance US hostility and EU ambiguity. According to this view, Russian friendship and support is a strategic goal for reducing Iran's dangerous "strategic loneliness." However, the green light Russia gave to the series of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions in 2006-2007 and the Russian delays in completing the nuclear plant at Bushehr have shaken this view, and in Tehran there is now growing perplexity over the sincerity of the Russian partnership.

The West. There is a crucial dilemma for the postrevolutionary political elite. For the reformists and technoconservatives (both of whom want to embrace at least the economic aspects of globalization and perhaps also more of its social and cultural aspects), relations with the West should be increased, and the country should open toward it. For the traditional conservatives and for the ultraradicals, the West is more a danger than an opportunity. Most politicians of the latter group have naive ideas about this issue, since they are not clearly able to differentiate political positions and to understand cultural-social differences within the West. Mutual lack of knowledge and mistrust undermine the creation of confidence and a climate that is conducive to negotiations. These shortcomings were evident during the EU-3/EU nuclear negotiations with Iran (2003-2006), when the language reciprocally spoken by the negotiating teams gave room for misunderstanding and resentment.¹⁰ Even the EU's proposals for political and economic incentives in exchange for the suspension of all enrichment-related activities were frustrated by this problem, such as the EU's proposal in August 2005 and the P-5+1 package presented by the EU representative, Javier Solana, in June 2006. The stalemate that led to failure of the EU-3/EU negotiations concerned not only the contents but also "the procedure and the language."

In conclusion, Iran has traditionally been active on a plurality of regional scenarios. These are the

same scenarios/areas where Washington is also active and where US troops are deployed. Dismissing Iranian activism in this region as the proof that Iran is meddling in the Middle East "crisis fault" may be useful for rhetorical statements, but it does not add to the understanding of Iranian policies or exploit possible tools of pragmatic cooperation and engagement. The best example is Iran's cooperation during Enduring Freedom in late 2001 and Tehran's support during the early stages of the interim Afghan government of Hamid Karzai following the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. Iranians felt "betrayed" by President Bush's 2002 declaration concerning the "Axis of Evil" and reduced their cooperation without, however, assuming an openly hostile attitude against Karzai's government.

The Securitization of Iranian Foreign Policy

One prominent factor in Iranian domestic politics—which has been exacerbated by Western policies of coercion and isolation—is the "securitization" of Iranian foreign policy thinking and actions. Iran policymaking processes have become the hostages of security and military forces that subordinate all foreign decisions to a radical, distorted interpretation of the "security needs" of the country. Since 2002 several trends have exacerbated the radical turn in Iranian domestic policies: the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by a limited coalition led by the United States; the growing pressures on Iran for its nuclear program, particularly in terms of calling for zero enrichment as a condition for talks; Washington's symbolic actions toward regime change; and finally, the threat of a preventive military strike have had the unfortunate combined effect of domestically isolating the Iranian reformists and pragmatists still further. For instance, the Khatami government was, in effect, removed from its position of conducting negotiations with the EU and the International Atomic Energy Agency over the question of Iran's nuclear program (2003-2005). As said in the previous sections, this process of securitization has provoked very negative domestic and international consequences. At home, it has provided a powerful excuse for cracking down on reformist and moderate voices; it has reinforced the regime's paranoia about "fifth columns" (i.e., enemies of the Islamic Republic working inside the country but coordinated by the United States); it has made it very risky to speak in favor of pragmatic friendly policies toward the West; it has

exacerbated the threat perception of “existential risk” for the Islamic Republic; and lastly, it has provided a perfect excuse for the failures of Ahmadinejad’s government.

When Washington speaks of a possible strike or of regime change (the latter goal looking very unlikely), it hits hardest the reformist and pragmatic groups in Tehran and gives ammunition to *Pasdarans*, security forces’ representatives and fanatics of the confrontation with the West. The same happened during Khatami’s presidencies. The dual-containment policy and pressures toward Tehran in the 1990s and early years of the new century *de facto* helped the antireformist and ultraconservative groups, who could depict reformists as “fifth columns” that were weakening the Islamic Republic in the face of an aggressive enemy. In other words, when the Iranian conservatives were on the defensive—with strong reformist elements, including students, emerging during Khatami’s time—it was the US position that “came to their rescue.”

Today it is important to prevent the nuclear confrontation from dictating all Western relations with Iran and from influencing all Western moves, although it is clear that Iranian enrichment programs represent a risk that should be addressed and a challenge that can undermine nonproliferation strategy in the region. Since the country is facing a serious economic crisis and since popular support of the ultraradicals seems to be decreasing, the West should not aggravate the securitization syndrome but rather try to do the opposite. Sanctions generally hurt the wrong people and have a tendency to lead to yet heavier sanctions, and ultimately to the isolation of the targeted country. To be effective, the “sanctions regime” should always offer a face-saving “way out” for a country and one that allows for constructive reengagement. Again, it is important for the West to break out of the current “capitulate or escalate” approach to the problem.

A Common Major Power Approach to Iran: Is It Finally Time to “Speak With the Devil”?

It has been reported that US Vice President Dick Cheney dismissed some time ago any direct negotiation with Tehran, saying, “We do not speak with the devil.” More generally, the US objective has traditionally been to maintain pressure in

order to force these regimes to change and to keep them from doing much damage in the meantime, since the fundamental idea is that such countries—and Iran in particular—cannot be constructive actors for stabilizing critical regions.

At the same time it is important to note that it is in a time of rhetorical and ideological posturing that diplomacy and negotiations are most useful. This is precisely the time to speak with “the opponent.” Negotiations—diplomats like to underline—are less necessary with friends than with adversaries. As noted by so many analysts, the reintegration of the country into global policy and the global economy “will provide more fertile ground for political reform” and dilute the control of “hardliners,” who thrive in isolation. For this reason, a “small but powerful clique” with entrenched economic and political interests in the status quo will do everything in their power to torpedo “attempts at reconciliation.” By eschewing dialogue, Washington makes this group’s job of clinging to the status quo that much easier.¹¹

Therefore, should the West begin “speaking with the devil”? Definitely, yes. But the key questions to be answered are *what* topics should be discussed and with *whom*. When there is no confidence or mutual trust, it is important to define a realistic minimal agenda, leaving room for this to be enlarged once some sort of positive links have been established. In addition, choosing trusted and skilled intermediaries and “talking to the right people”¹² have the same importance. The ultimate goal is to try to reach the inner circles of power of the political elite. In the current scenario, *only engagement of the Supreme Leader’s closest representatives and advisers* offers a chance of talking with “persons who can deliver and escape the ultra-radicals’ reactions.”

It is clear that the United States, NATO, and the whole international community desperately need Iran’s support and good behavior in a plurality of areas—in *primis*, obviously in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, Iran is accused of meddling in Iraqi and Afghan affairs—and indeed there is evidence of hostile activities by Iranian security agencies in these countries.

However, it is important to note that Tehran neither wants the disintegration of those countries nor the weakening of their central governments.

Afghan and/or Iraqi disintegration as state entities has always raised Iranian fears of a possible domino effect in the region and inside Iran. Since Iran is a multiethnic country, Tehran has looked with suspicion upon radical federal or confederal state formulas. Small and weak substates as political entities at its borders would also increase the complexity of the security scenario around Iran and might favor groups and movements perceived as a threat (radical anti-Shia Sunni movements, pan-Kurdish independent organizations, etc.). Obviously, it does not mean either that Tehran is not looking to enhance its role inside those countries or that Tehran does not favor a weakening of the US forces and its political will by cynically exploiting the current instability.

On some topics there is a clear convergence of interests between Iran and the West that, rather than being neglected, can be useful to engage and to ease the feelings of mistrust and confrontation:

- The Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) Kurdish radical movement poses a problem for Iraq, for Turkey, and for Iran. Iranian agents are already facing the PKK in both Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan, and these operations can be coordinated with Turkish and Iraqi actions.
- Baghdad meetings between the US and Iranian ambassadors in Iraq are a precious step toward direct talks, the first since April 1980. Due to the mixed and sometimes deluding results of Track 2 diplomatic US-Iran initiatives, the ambassadorial level meetings should be reinforced. Although it may seem odd considering the level of mistrust and enmity between Tehran and Washington, “the process is good for itself,” and coming to the table and having an ongoing dialogue is of extreme importance.
- For decades Iran has had to deal with huge numbers of refugees from Afghanistan (Iran sheltered millions of Afghans after 1979) and from Iraq (several hundreds of thousands during Saddam’s regime; after 2004 others arrived looking for temporary relief from Iraqi violence). It might be useful to offer stronger support to international aid programs and even to nationally run Iranian initiatives on this issue.
- Given the relevance of US citizens traveling to and within Iran, it might be worthwhile to consider better ways of protecting these travel-

ers’ interests than using foreign embassies as a go-between. Even if opening formal diplomatic relations with Iran is unrealistic, why not offer to establish a simple consular office as suggested by US Senator Chuck Hagel? As previously noted, Iranian society is to a large extent a pro-Western, pro-American culture. Therefore, it is the Iranian hard-liners who should fear greater contact, not Washington.

- Iran is fighting a dramatic, bloody antismuggling and antinarcotic war. In the region, it is the country fighting drug smuggling from Central Asia with the greatest determination. Why does Washington not offer some limited support such as satellite imagery to help spot drug convoys, or equipment? It is useful to remember that London reengaged with Iran, after years of hostilities, by offering limited collaboration in support of Iranian antinarcotic efforts. This reengagement began in 1999 with London giving life jackets to Iranian soldiers. The United Kingdom reestablished full diplomatic relations shortly thereafter.
- Regime change instigated from abroad is unrealistic in the current situation in Iran. Moreover, some US attempts look terribly amateur and even laughable—for example, granting \$70 million to antiregime Iranian groups. If Washington had the ability to change the regime, it would probably have already done so. Nowadays this does not seem like a credible option. As a very high-ranking Iranian officer of the conservative camp asked me during a private conversation in Iran, “What does Washington really want? If they want nonproliferation or support in Iraq/Afghanistan, let’s sit down at the table. If they want regime change, then what are we speaking for? Do they want us to commit suicide?” Overall, US interests and policy toward Iran should be clarified.
- The West should favor Iranian integration in regional *fora*. This is not against US interests; on the contrary, viewed from an historical and a geopolitical perspective, it is the isolation of the regime that provoked its radicalization and the marginalization of the moderate and pragmatic political lines. Attempts to prevent the Iranian regime from organizing high-level official visits is simply useless and gives the impression of an impotent, weak US administration—such as with the ill-fated attempts to stop Ahmadinejad’s

meetings with Karzai and al-Maliki, his participation at the GCC meeting in Doha in 2007, and US irritation over the high-level participation of other countries in Tehran's second meeting of the Caspian countries in November 2007.

- Washington should use regional US allies and “allied/friendly countries” to send pragmatic signals to Tehran, both at the economic/commercial level and the geostrategic level. For example, in order to reduce the radical Iranian syndrome of being under siege, it would be helpful to dispel rumors that US forces may use regional military bases in case of confrontation with Iran and to stress that US military bases around Iran do not represent a menace, or even to send a positive signal, such as withdrawing from a sensitive base like the one in Herat on the border between Afghanistan and Iran. At the least, the United States should explore how to use this facility in a way that does not heighten Iranian suspicions.
- In the Gulf subregion, there is a growing trend to accommodate Iran, especially after the November 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate. For the first time, last December Ahmadinejad addressed a gathering of the GCC. Soon afterward, Saudi Arabia invited him to perform the *hajj*, the traditional religious pilgrimage to Mecca. In the fall of 2007, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faysal proposed a solution in an effort to defuse the Iranian standoff with the United Nations and the West over its enrichment program, a solution based on the idea of a “consortium for all users of enriched uranium in the Middle East.”¹³ Oman even looks with favor on the idea of inviting Iran regularly to the GCC meetings. The United States should recognize this trend and refuse the dangerous false dichotomy of “capitulate or escalate.”
- Gulf security is being held hostage to a “zero-sum competition” approach. Instead of reinvigorating Arab fears, Washington should encourage Arab states, and in particular Saudi Arabia, to move toward an inclusive regional security system, starting with small but significant decisions. For example, invite Iran to a regional committee to debate common security problems, encourage maritime patrol coordination (Oman already has some form of cooperation with Iran in that field), and facilitate immigration checks. In

other words, make Iran feel “at home” in the Gulf to ease its feeling of isolation and decrease its security concerns.

- The EU position on the nuclear file reflects French, British, and (partially) German resentment over the failure of their earlier negotiations. The EU is right in adopting a firm stance and supporting UNSC sanctions. However, the idea of new unilateral EU sanctions will burn all of the remaining bridges without hurting the Iranian economy to the point that forces Tehran to give up its enrichment program. It is important for the EU to remember that it has the possibility of reengaging Iran by looking to a broader agenda of EU interests and that it could “find a delicate balance between an American position of imposing too many sanctions, thereby rendering them ineffective, and a Russian-Chinese position of applying minimal sanctions.”¹⁴ This approach should be seen as a means for giving Iran a graceful “way out” of the current situation, and not as “dividing the West.” On the contrary, the international community should work for a single, coherent, though flexible international approach toward that problem.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the best way of helping a radical, even truculent, anti-Western regime in Tehran is to give the ultraradicals ammunition to attack reformists and moderates and allow them to benefit from Iranian feelings of isolation and paranoia of “being under siege.” Containment of Iran presents huge costs and looks doomed to failure. Instead, the international community should favor a process of desecuritization of the Iranian foreign policy and of selective engagement—pursuing a policy that pragmatically exploits the convergence of interests on specific topics between Iran and the West for creating confidence and avoiding Tehran's isolation, thereby reducing the Iranian perceptions of insecurity that favor the ultraradicals.

At present, even speaking of a new security framework for the region seems unrealistic, and certainly it would be more than optimistic to imagine any serious attempt in this direction in the short to middle term. However, the fact that such a security structure appears such a far cry from reality does not diminish its value or make it less desirable. Some steps in that direction

might give a clear indication to Tehran that the international community is open to a real inclusion of the Islamic Republic of Iran within a new security framework and that positive steps taken by its political elite will also be positively rewarded.

Yet this will also take some time, given recent experiences.¹⁵ A crucial element that would encourage Tehran to adopt a more moderate policy and that would favor Iranian reformists and pragmatists is to eliminate, over the longer term, the root causes of its present behavior—regional insecurity and threats to regime survival. After all, “despite often projecting an uncompromising stance, regime survival, not ideology, is paramount for the country’s theocratic elite.”¹⁶

Obviously, it is important to stress that expectations should not be exaggerated. This “new” approach will not immediately solve all of the problems. However, it might immediately favor a more sober Iranian posture and—in a possible future post-ultraradical government (i.e., after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections)—it may also foster a change in the Iranian foreign policy.¹⁷

Endnotes

¹ Adam Tarock, “US-Iran Relations: Heading for Confrontation?” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1996, p. 149.

² See, for instance, the recent article by Dennis Ross on the need for America genuinely to direct negotiations with Iran without preconditions, but without acquiescence. Cf. Dennis Ross, “How to Talk to Iran,” *New Republic Online*, March 13, 2008.

³ Elliott Hen-Tov, “Understanding Iran’s New Authoritarianism,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter 2006-2007, p. 166.

⁴ Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*, (New York: Times Books, 2006), p. 4.

⁵ Shahram Chubin, “Iran’s Strategic Predicament,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Winter 2000, pp. 13-14. See also Jalil Roshandel, “Iran’s Foreign and Security Policies: How the Decision Making Process Evolved,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2000.

⁶ Takeyh, p. 63. Cf. also Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Autumn 2003, pp. 69-82.

⁷ In this regard, see the recent Stanley Foundation’s policy briefs and reports, www.stanleyfoundation.org.

⁸ Some historical events are deeply impressed in the history of Iran. Just to mention the most relevant ones: the British and Russian interferences during the late colonial period that led to the so-called “Constitutional Revolution” of 1905, the US-UK inspired coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, Reza Shah’s perceived “weakness” toward Washington.

⁹ A. M. Ansari, “Continuous Regime Change From Within,” and “Understanding Iran: Getting Past Stereotypes and Mythology,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Autumn 2003, p. 57.

¹⁰ Cf. Maurizio Martellini and Riccardo Redaelli, “A Strategy for Defeat? The Iranian Nuclear Program and the EU-3/EU Deal,” in E. Greco, G. Gasparini, and R. Alcaro (eds.), *Nuclear Non-Proliferation: The Transatlantic Debate*, (Rome, 2006), pp. 69-78.

¹¹ Karim Sadjadpour, “Guidelines for Approaching Iran,” *CEIP Policy Outlook*, June 2007.

¹² Cf. John W. Limbert, “Negotiating With the Islamic Republic of Iran,” USIP Special Report No.199, January 2008.

¹³ “Gulf Arabs Offer to Provide Uranium to Iran: Report,” *Iran Focus*, November 1, 2007.

¹⁴ Walter Posch, “The European Union and Iran: What Next?” *The International Spectator*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2007.

¹⁵ Iranians saw what happened in 2001-2002, when the Bush administration “rewarded” Iranian pragmatic cooperation with Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and the political process started by the Bonn Conference with the inclusion in the Axis of Evil.

¹⁶ Karim Sadjadpour, “How Relevant Is the Iranian Street?” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter 2006-2007, p. 160.

¹⁷ Cf. Mark F. Brzezinski and Ray Takeyh, “Forging Ties With Iran,” *The Boston Globe*, January 11, 2008.

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