

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

NEGOTIATING THE GORDIAN KNOT: A REVISED STRATEGY ON IRAN

by

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin P. Stoddard
United States Army

Dr. Larry P. Goodson
Project Adviser

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ABSTRACT

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The current U.S. strategy for Iran seeks to achieve U.S. goals through indirect diplomacy, isolation, punitive sanctions, and threats of military force. However, Iran's Islamic Republic has shown only contempt for the United States while forming lucrative trade agreements with other large industrial nations, such as China, Russia, and India. The strategy has also not deterred Tehran's nuclear ambitions, nor its support for terror. Rather, it is achieving the opposite effect – Iran's nuclear program is less transparent and may produce a bomb in the next six years. Iran is also supporting Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite fighters and destabilizing Middle East efforts. This SRP proposes a revised strategy to reverse the current trend by creating open dialogue and building international consensus for negotiating directly with Iran on more salient issues. Accounting for Iranian domestic challenges, the revised strategy will cut the Gordian Knot using a balanced approach considering Iran's political, demographics, and economic issues. The strategic goals are to normalize relations through cooperation, to establish stability over democracy, and to allow Iran to develop its commercial nuclear capability while preventing military nuclear proliferation.

NEGOTIATING THE GORDIAN KNOT: A REVISED STRATEGY ON IRAN

Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

—John Fitzgerald Kennedy

In response to the terror attacks on 11 September 2001, the U.S. national strategy for the Middle East quickly expanded beyond the goal of merely preventing additional attacks; it also sought a more permanent solution aimed at defeating the radical regimes that sponsor terrorists and replacing them with more Western-oriented democratic governments. Initially targeting only Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States soon turned its attention to Iran and claimed it a terrorist state and a member of the "Axis of Evil." America's fixation on Iran is rooted in the belief that Iran seeks to acquire nuclear weapons for military dominance and expand its fundamental Islamic influence over the Middle East region and likely beyond. Touting a national security strategy that promotes democracy as the great stabilizer, the United States has called for an end to the Ayatollah-led government, which came to power in 1979 after overthrowing the American-backed Pahlavi Dynasty. Adding to Iran's concern about American intervention, the current U.S. National Security Strategy specifically cites Iran as a nation led by a tyrannical regime and a threat to the region and instability abroad.¹ The current U.S. strategy on Iran is to isolate and apply economic sanctions to create Iranian dissatisfaction with their theocratic regime. It envisions an overthrow of the regime and its radical Islamic policies, then the new Iran will initiate positive social reforms and move towards a democratic government. This strategy is heavily military-dependent and reliant on punitive economic measures; it does not include direct diplomacy or positive economic incentives. It does not include engagement on a wide range of common topics that might go far in convincing Iran's leaders to alter their behavior. Aside from the important goals of promoting democracy and regime change, the George W. Bush Administration's policy uses the same ways and means used since Iran's 1979 revolution. This approach is likely to prompt more of the same political rhetoric that fuels radical Islamic ideology and contributes to regional instability. In turn, the Islamic Republic is likely to continue its elusive nuclear development program and turn to other industrialized nations, such as China and Russia, for economic support and protection. It is also conceivable that the current hard-line approach may escalate tensions and disagreement between the United States and these other industrialized nations, as well as the traditional U.S. allies. This on-going antagonism will likely weaken international resolve and allow more time for Iran to gain better strategic position eventually drawing the United States and Iran into a military confrontation.

The current U.S. strategy for Iran is a poorly designed policy; it is not achieving the desired end-states of democracy, imposing regional stability, and eliminating of terrorism and nuclear proliferation. It is reasonable to assume that amending U.S.-Iranian relations is a long-term endeavor considering the decades of hostile relations between the nations. The United States should develop a revised strategy with an initial phase that seeks to reverse the current course by gaining consensus among key interested international parties and then fostering direct multilateral dialogue with Iran on a variety of common concerns and interests.

U.S. Security Strategy

Since 1979, the United States has had no formal diplomatic relationship with Iran. Inclined to use the various elements of national power, each U.S. Presidential administration has applied a combination of unilateral and multilateral sanctions to alienate and exclude Iran from the world economy. These continuing policies have produced an adversarial climate deeply-rooted in punitive sanctions, focused exclusively on Iran's troublesome behaviors. This adversarial approach has failed to acknowledge even the most obvious of Iran's positive reforms. Yevgeni Satanovsky claimed "experts forecast a blow at Iran in the fall or, in any case, before the term of the incumbent American president [George W. Bush] expires."² Whether accurate or not, this exemplifies at a minimum the perception of the growing hostilities between the U.S. and Iranian.

In the 1995 National Security Strategy (NSS), President William Clinton's policy on Iran was aimed at "changing the behavior of the Iranian government in several key areas, including efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and missiles, its dismal human rights record, and its support of terrorism."³ The strategy, The National Security Strategy for Engagement and Enlargement, relied more on the diplomatic and economic elements over the military options, but U.S. officials never sat down with Iranian leaders in an "authoritative dialogue" to discuss their differences. The Clinton administration policy bolstered economic engagement for those countries that promoted regional stability, but sought to deter, isolate, and, "if necessary, fighting and defeating...the hostile regional powers, such as North Korea, Iran or Iraq,"⁴ who may choose to threaten the region. Within this policy's framework, the administration adopted a "dual containment" strategy designed "to prevent the potential resurgence of Iraq and to prolong the policy of isolating and coercing Iran."⁵ The center of gravity of the Clinton Middle East policy was the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, Iran was left with an understanding that they were isolated from the U.S. political and economic plans, sanctions would continue, and the Clinton administration had no real desire to

use military force unless Iran demonstrated outward aggression towards U.S. interests in the region. The United States, watching from the outside, waited for Tehran to make the necessary concessions and demonstrate a positive change in its behavior before the U.S. would take a step towards rapprochement.

In keeping with America's tactic for Iran to first embrace U.S. interests, Clinton's Ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke declared, "if the Iranian government responds positively...on issues...of terrorism...solving regional problems and sources of instability... then the road will be open for a major development in the relationship."⁶ The United States continued this tactic in the aftermath of Iran's 1997 election of President Muhammad Khatami, a reformist who sought to democratize its government. President Khatami advocated a responsible foreign policy predicated on cooperation, conceding the sovereignty of its neighbors, and admitting the need for direct dialogue.⁷ The Clinton team either chose not to pursue or missed the signs of his rapprochement, despite calling for "authoritative dialogue." The Clinton administration ignored Khatami's positive responses to the very goals that the dual containment strategy aimed to achieve.

President George W. Bush continued the strategy of enlargement and engagement until he released his 2002 NSS shortly after the event of 11 September. In this document, the first NSS from his administration, the national security team steered a course around the traditional large-nation threats and focused U.S. national attention on the challenges presented by nation states with ties to terror groups. Shaped by 11 September, the policy stated, "New deadly challenges have emerged from rogue states and terrorists. However, the nature and motivations of these new adversaries, their determination to obtain destructive powers hitherto available only to the world's strongest states, provides the greater likelihood that they will use weapons of mass destruction against us."⁸ The United States, the dominant world power, was acknowledging that an inferior state actor could preemptively rise to compete with a traditional superpower through the use of a catastrophic and paralyzing event.

Leaving out all references to Iran, the administration's 2002 NSS appeared less direct and threatening than the 1995 NSS. However, in reality, the Bush administration remained actively concerned about Iran's potential for acquiring nuclear weapons and support for terror groups that were capable of inflicting the kind of harm witnessed in September 2001. During the following year's State of the Union Address, President Bush, ensuring that Tehran stayed in the U.S. crosshairs, proclaimed "Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom...States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."⁹

Condoleezza Rice, then the National Security Advisor, pressed the U.S. position that “Iran's behavior continues to be a major problem in international politics. And we watch the developments with great interest, but Iranian behavior puts it squarely in the axis of evil -- whether it is weapons of mass destruction or terrorism or any of those things.”¹⁰ Today, the administration is making a more specific case against Iran. In a significant move, the President's 2006 NSS has increased the pressure on Tehran by specifically accusing it of acquiring the means to build nuclear weapons, of refusing to negotiate in good faith, of failing to comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and of aggressively making statements about the destruction of Israel. The President has thus put us on a path leading towards either reconciliation or conflict by claiming “the United States has joined with our European Union partners and Russia to pressure Iran to...guarantee that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. This diplomatic effort must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided.”¹¹

American policy-makers need to ask some rational questions as tensions are likely to increase and as Iran moves to the forefront of America's agenda: What constitutes a successful policy? Does success mean the achievement of the stated objectives? If so, how well has this punitive strategy served to achieve its strategic objectives? Over the past decade, have U.S. administrations successfully persuaded Iran to promote regional stability or renounce its policy on WMDs, missiles, and support to terror organizations? Has the strategy enabled U.S. policy makers to recognize and respond accordingly to the changes in the geopolitical situation? The reasons for the current strategy's failure to meet its objectives may be revealed through greater understanding of Iran's enduring history and culture. Further, our policy-makers should carefully consider the fact that today's Islamic Republic has not remained in the shadow of its 1979 revolution, nor does it intend to remain economically isolated and defenseless while waiting for American aggression.

This year marks the twenty-eighth year of the Islamic Republic; it thus marks twenty-eight years since the U.S. withdrew formal relations, closed its embassy, and began viewing Iran from a distance that inevitably created uncertainty, promoted speculation, and forced every American administration to rely heavily on assumptions, rather than facts, on which to base its decisions, timing, and actions. Out of the anarchy of the Iranian revolution, the Iranian people have eventually given legitimacy and electoral responsibility to its elected government. Internally, the state has demonstrated its ability manage its affairs by constructively addressing such important issues as education reform, population management, and stable political elections. The Islamic Republic is creating infrastructures, laws, and rational security policies. In forging a foreign

policy, they are developing credible political and economic relationships across the region and around the world, thereby becoming less vulnerable to U.S. sanctions. Standing before the U.N., their diplomats have voiced objections to important American foreign policies concerning Iraq, Israel, and North Korea. Iran has taken the world stage to proclaim their right to nuclear energy, international trade, and regional self-determination. Consequently, the U.S. and its allies may now face grave challenges for failing to understand what motivates and shapes Iran's policies, concerns, and national goals. The answers to these challenges are grounded in the next and most fundamental question the U.S. must answer in measuring the worth of any policy on Iran.

Who are the Iranians?

In answering this question, first we will discuss Iran's largely Persian society and examine how their society, with its link to largely Shi'a Islam, has produced such a complex political system. Although it is an intricate system, it does provide opportunity for direct dialogue once we better understand Iran's current political configuration, sources of power, and relationships among these sources. We will then explore Iran's demographics, economics, and religion to determine how these factors have influenced Iran's governmental policies and interests. These factors also reveal important considerations for U.S. negotiators as they devise a revised engagement strategy.

First, Iranians embody both the imperial Persian "traditions that predate Islam and the distinctive Shi'a faith that has for almost five centuries set Iran off from its neighbors."¹² The Iranian people are subject to a combination of these two dynamic and entangled forces that tend to pull the nation in opposing directions. But when confronted by outside influences, these forces, one the great Persian Society and the other Shiite Islam, combine to provide national strength and unity. Looking through their Persian eyes, Iranians "perceive Iran as the epicenter of the region, a country that by the dint of history and civilization was ordained to lead the Arab states."¹³ From Cyrus to Darius to Shah Abbas I to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the greatness of Persia has lain at the feet of the Iranian people as a reminder of their traditions, conquests, perseverance, and unity in the face of foreign rule. The empire's security and survival was manifest in the absolute need to unite the loose unions between Iran's social groups who were in many ways natural rivals.¹⁴ Over the span of three millennia, it was from this need for unity that Persians would place their faith in the "authoritarian" ruler who exhibited strength and charismatic powers rising to face challenges and bring about security, justice, and glory. In their

Shi'a tradition, the faith also "required the presence of an authoritative figure possessing the wisdom and knowledge to interpret divine will to the faith."¹⁵

In establishing the Islamic Republic in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini did not lose sight of these important aspects of Iranian tradition. His "message of spreading the revolution and establishing the Islamic Republic's predominance fit the pattern of Persian expansionism and proved appealing to a significant segment of the public."¹⁶ Khomeini consistently "tailored his message to conform to Iran's core values and grandiose self-perception."¹⁷ He aimed to draw together the religious and political, the conservatives and moderates who were themselves "loose unions" and natural rivals. Intertwining Islam and politics, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent denigrations of the "Great Satan" and "American imperialism" drew from Khomeini's revolutionary Islamic preaching in order to consolidate all Iranians against the potential invaders. Foreigners often view the relationship between Shi'a Islam and the secular state as a struggle between two powers vying for authority. We need to look further and through Persian-Islamic eyes to more fully comprehend this two-fold relationship: 1) Shi'a Islam claims authority to stand watch over the potential corruptness of the state. 2) Iran's complex institution of state enables the Islamic Republic to forge strong domestic and international unions by providing the flexibility to approach any issue from either a religious or a secular perspective or by using a religious rationale to support a secular decision, or vice versa.

Under the Islamic Republic, the emphasis on Shi'a Islam has certainly not made the business and management of the state easy for the elected government. In Iran's velayat-e-faqih system, the true ruling power remains in the hands of the non-elected Ayatollah and clerical elite. Today, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is Iran's Supreme Leader; Article 113 of the Iranian Constitution provides him the absolute power over all foreign and domestic matters, including supreme command of the military and authority over the elected and non-elected state institutions. Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader, established a supervisory system of "non-elected institutions such as the Guardian Council that has the power to review and veto parliamentary legislation and presidential determination to ensure the decisions of the elected branches of government would not affect the essential demarcation of power."¹⁸ The Islamic Republic, guided by its active clerics and strict interpretation of Shiite Islam,¹⁹ has given rise to many actors who officially and unofficially influence daily Iranian policies. Refining their roles over decades, this non-elected elite has extended their influences beyond strictly religious matters and are firmly entrenched in all political, economic, and social aspects of official government doctrine. Figure 1 illustrates Iran's theocratic structure, showing how the selection-and-approval process flows from the non-elected to the elected institutions. However Iran's

reliance on these two seemingly different groups (elected & non-elected) should not generate a U.S. strategy that seeks to divide. Rather, the U.S. policy should balance the interests and values of both governmental bodies in Iran, acknowledging – rather than belittling and perhaps fearing – the clerics dominance of the system.

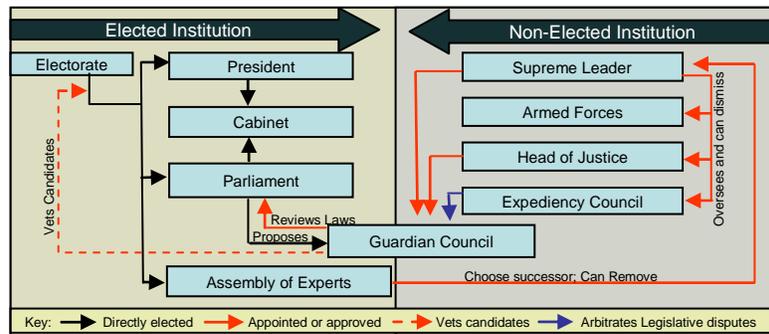


Figure 1²⁰

Fortunately, a strong secular pragmatic political movement has grown out of Khomeini's theocratic system. This group may enable the U.S. to diplomatically navigate the intricacies of the Islamic Republic's political structure in order to influence their decisions and better shape their behavior. A logical diplomatic road goes through Iran's pragmatic leaders who reside in both the political and religious sectors. These pragmatic thinkers insist that Tehran's "integration into the international order and global economy mandates accepting certain restrictions on its nuclear program"²¹ and view U.S.-Iranian cooperation and trade as essential to Iranian economic independence. Arguably, the most attractive incentive for Tehran would be the prospect for a more normalized relationship with the United States that reduces the threat, addresses economic concerns, and enhances communication.²²

In 1989, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, a pragmatic conservative who supported some reformist initiatives, began moving the country away from the radical Shi'i ideology towards a more moderate center dedicated to achieving positive reconstruction of Iran's national infrastructures, social policies, and international trade. The powerful faqih (experts on Islamic law) "had begun to wither and political participation and pluralism had begun to blossom."²³ Rafsanjani, who has held many important political positions in post-revolutionary Iran, believed the "legitimacy of the state and the prolongation of Islamic rule were contingent on its economic performance."²⁴ Although his economic goals fell short of expectations, Rafsanjani ushered in a fundamental reform enabling Iranians to accept a governmental responsibility to provide for the welfare of its citizens and to be accountable for its obligations. Today, Rafsanjani is the Chairman of the Expediency Council, so he has direct ties to the Supreme Leader and the powerful Guardian Council. But notably he and many others believe in the importance of a

good economy, seeing it as critical to the survival of the Islamic Republic. Perhaps the most salient fact for the U.S. is that, as chairman, he was selected by the Supreme Leader and will continue in the position regardless of the disposition of the Guardian Council or the elected officials. Scott Peterson quoted a European diplomat as saying “the only person who matters is the supreme leader, but the only person who can influence the supreme leader is Rafsanjani. In the end it will boil down to a historic fight for power, for the concept of the supreme leader - that's the reason all the clerics hate [Rafsanjani].”²⁵ Regional experts have also speculated that Rafsanjani is a likely choice to succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the next Supreme leader. Rafsanjani and those who share his beliefs form a feasible in-road into the decisive non-elected segment that may prove beneficial to a U.S. rapprochement.

Since Rafsanjani’s presidency, the Iranian people have cast their votes in two follow-on elections that continue to demonstrate the complexity and volatility of the Iranian temperament. Candidates in these elections ran the gambit between the political extremes of Mohammad Khatami, a moderate reformer, first elected in 1997, to today’s ultra-conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in 2005. Every day the Iranian coffee shops and other meeting places are filled with conversation of politics and debate. The culture welcomes this discourse, but more importantly the debates are fundamental to the daily lives of the average Iranian citizen. Certainly the revolution applied controls to free expression, especially in the early revolutionary period. But since the election of Khatami, “the Iranians have begun to converse fiercely and courageously in different forums in public.”²⁶

Supported by Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami came to power on a platform of civil liberties, economic growth, and Islamic democracy, which appealed to a vast majority of Iranians. His declarations to Iranians and the world were equally lofty as he acknowledged the sovereign rights of other nations and called for serious international dialogue. Unfortunately, these reformist goals failed for several reasons, particularly because Khatami was unable to successfully implement his grand ideas and stand strong against the religious overseers. The U.S. contributed to bringing about this failure and to instigating the clerical wrath. Khatami was in power for three years before the U.S. administration finally responded to these positive reforms.²⁷ In 2000, Madeleine Albright praised Iran for its new position and acknowledged areas of shortsightedness within the U.S. policy towards Iran. But she also alienated the theocratic regime by declaring “despite the trend towards democracy, control over the military, judiciary, courts, and police remain in unelected hands, and the elements of its foreign policy, about which we are most concerned, have not improved.”²⁸ Over time, other U.S. leaders would unwisely follow suit with similar rhetoric about the Islamic Republic’s theocratic structure. The

hard-line Iranian conservatives quickly capitalized on these American missteps, turning the powerful clerics - particularly Ayatollah Ali Khamenei - against the reform movement, undermining any further positive political changes. Without the advantage of an embassy or direct dialogue, the American leaders were forced to assess Iran's changing political dynamics from an outside disadvantaged position. This disconnect probably helped foster the U.S. miscalculation and delayed reaction.

Today's Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a young conservative who came to power under the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. These historical events, along with the U.S. support of the Pahlavi Dynasty, are very significant causes for the poor U.S.-Iranian relations. They provide a good backdrop for understanding Ahmadinejad's demonizing of the U.S., which unifies Iranians and forms common ground with other foreign nations. To solidify his position, he argues in support of the growing international disapproval over the U.S.'s mishandling of Iraq and Afghanistan reconstruction and security, and the Israeli-Lebanese July War in which over 1,200 people, most of whom were Lebanese, were killed, noting that it severely damaged Lebanese infrastructure and displaced nearly 975,000 Lebanese.²⁹ Again, the current U.S. strategy arguably does little to neutralize Ahmadinejad's ability to capitalize on these issues. Ahmadinejad's political platform continues to emphasize economics and foreign investment while calling for national security and a return to the "roots of the revolution." His platform plays well with the cleric elite and many Iranians; it appeals to their history and responds to threatening U.S. rhetoric and on-going military operations along their borders. Although Ahmadinejad aggressively searches out foreign alliances, he and fellow conservatives are "suspicious of the international community (which had tolerated Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran), and ...are unyielding in their ideological commitments."³⁰

In contrast, his older political opponent, Rafsanjani, regards America as the "solution to the theocracy's mounting dilemmas."³¹ In the 2005 election, Rafsanjani's platform publicized cultural freedoms and political reforms - the same political "fireballs" that propelled Khatami into office eight years earlier. Unfortunately, Khatami's administration failed to deliver the "fireballs," so the conservatives vigorously attacked Rafsanjani and highlighted the reformist failures along with the on-going antagonistic U.S. foreign policy. The conservatives were able to turn voters in favor of Ahmadinejad's call for a return to the ideas of the revolution and security from the Western aggressors. Ahmadinejad's overwhelming victory also gives pause to the U.S. assumption that Iranians are ready to revolt against the Islamic Republic. The conservatives' appeal for the value of the revolution "reflects a society whose essential political identity is still conditioned by the legacy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini."³²

Second, Iran's demographics, especially in view of its troubled economy, are significant to understanding its national strengths, as well as its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. The youth and high literacy of the population provides a tremendous potential for social and economic growth, while the failure of the state to grow the economy and provide jobs to satisfy the demands could eventually lead to a hostile society turning against the Islamic Republic.

Iran's 68.8 million population is one of the largest within the region in comparison to Iraq's 26.7 million, Afghanistan's 31.1 million, Egypt's 78.9 million, and Turkey's 70 million.³³ Although Iran's population is large, it is not as ethnically homogenous as other regional populations. Its ethnic diversity creates an internal challenge of uniting "the loose unions" within its citizenry. The Iraq Study Group cited Iran's population as slightly more than 50% Persian, but it has 24% Azeri minority,³⁴ who are affiliated with the Shiites of Azerbaijan, as well as Kurdish and Arab minorities with ties to their western neighbors. Because of its minority populations, it is in Iran's national interest to ensure Iraq's sectarian violence does not flow over the border to exacerbate security issues, stirring unrest among its groups, and precipitate a troublesome refugee crisis.³⁵

Iran also faces a difficult situation because nearly half of its population is under 25 years of age, with 26.1% under 14 years.³⁶ Iran's population growth soared from 1976-1986 at a 3.8 percent annual rate that compared to an average worldwide growth rate of 1.7 percent for the same period.³⁷ During that time, Iran experienced one of the largest population explosions in the world. Today, the rate is 2.3%.³⁸ This impressive decline is one indicator of the government's ability to regain control and manage its citizenry. Under former President Rafsanjani, the government initiated some basic social programs designed to lower the population by educating married couples on contraceptives and limiting benefits to families with more than three children.

The Islamic Republic has aggressively created a remarkably successful education program under the Ministry of Education. The Ministry is divided into two areas: Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, and Ministry of Health and Medical Education. Iran's national literacy rate is 79.4%, with a national goal to achieve 92.1% by 2015.³⁹ This far exceeds that of its border neighbors and the oil-rich Arab countries. Jordan and Israel are the only countries in the Middle East region that exceed Iran's literacy. Iran's education programs are not limited to the large cities, but the government is ensuring that educational centers are available in rural villages. Young students are taught mathematics, science, physical education, and a variety of languages: Persian, English, Arabic, and French. The expanding literacy rate, along with its social significance, shines a light on Tehran's impressive ability to meet its governing obligations while increasing the nation's competitiveness and economic well-being.

Iran's national tongue is Persian, also known as Farsi. The Farsi dialect is also spoken by subgroups in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but Farsi is primarily a language of Iran. Language typically identifies and distinguishes a people; this certainly holds true for the Iranians. But Iran's education program also emphasizes learning and teaching other languages. However, foreigners should also realize that Iranians remain strongly bonded to the Persian culture and official Persian Language. But this identity comes at a cost. On one hand, it promotes unity among the Iranians, but on the other, their language difference, along with their Shi'a affiliation, creates differences with some of their Arab, Turk, and Azeri neighbors, contributing to Iran's national insecurities.

Third, the Persian Gulf opens an economic gateway to the world and from the world to Iran. In trying to revitalize its economy, Iran focuses outward to develop cooperative trade agreements, particularly in oil and natural gas trade, with regional partners such as Syria and Libya, and with partners further afield, such as India, South Africa, Russia, North Korea, Italy, Germany, and China. Commercial ventures are thus important elements of Iranian foreign policy: Russia is a primary partner in Iran's commercial nuclear program, while China has signed lucrative gas and oil trade contracts along with oil exploration agreements worth almost \$200 billion. In contrast, Japan has recently decreased its oil trade and refinery imports as a show of solidarity with U.S. trade sanctions. After living under the difficult sanctions, Iran has abandoned its confrontational tactics in favor of expanded international trade, attracting foreign investment, and coordinating oil policy to prevent an oil price collapse.⁴⁰ Internally, the "conservatives and hard-liners, who are committed to the preservation of the Islamic Republic, remain firmly in control of all institutions and instruments of power in Iran."⁴¹ Foreign trade is vital to an economy that is structurally weak. For Iran, foreign trade is especially crucial since its people rely on massive subsidies. In deed, the Iranian economy is hampered by endemic corruption, a disproportionately large public sector, and dependency on oil rents.⁴²

Over the past 27 years, the United States, working with the wealthy regions of Europe and Asia, imposed unilateral and multilateral economic and financial sanctions on Iran in order to alter its objectionable behavior. Under the dual containment strategy, the sanctions were intended to weaken Iran's economy and to undermine its nuclear development programs. Signed in 1996, the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act prohibited U.S. companies and their subsidiaries from investing in Iranian oil and gas and from importing Iranian goods. The United States could penalize international companies that traded with Iran. The Act was aimed primarily at Iran's energy sector. According to a 2001 Congressional Research Service report:

Oil revenues accounted for about 20% of Iran's GDP, although it is now about 9% and approximately 11% of the world's reserve. Iran's onshore oil fields, as well as its oil industry infrastructure, were old and needed substantial modernization and investment. Its large natural gas resources (believed second largest in the world, after Russia) were not developed at all. Iranian officials were predicting that, without substantial new investment, Iran might become a net importer of oil by 2010.⁴³

With Iran's growing coalition of trading partners, the economic sanctions are starting to create international tensions, and may become less harmful to Iran over time. Last year, the U.S. State Department punished "nine foreign companies (six of them Chinese) for selling missile and chemical technologies to Iran. The U.S. will not provide export licenses to the firms involved and has banned all trading with them."⁴⁴ The U.S. is now finding itself between the difficult decision of punishing these large international companies or foregoing the penalties in order to sustain the international coalition against Iran. Recognizing the predicament, Iran has pitted the international players against one another; it is relying on their unquenchable demand for its oil and gas exports to play a considerable role in spoiling the U.S. attempts to apply meaningful sanctions and disrupt current Iranian alliances with the international community. It is a promising strategy, since China's and India's emerging economies desperately need energy and Russia's cash-strapped defense and nuclear industries are willing to sell off surplus assets and expertise. Iran was recently cited as being in non-compliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1696, which requires Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment. Russia and China resisted the U.S. and the European Union (EU) demand for broad economic, financial, and transportation sanctions. Russia and China opted for sanctions only on materiel, financial accounts, and personnel linked to Iran's nuclear program; they did not authorize the military option to enforce the resolution. The proposal also eliminated any sanctions against Iran's nuclear power plant at Bushehr, which is being built by Russia. The sanctions did include "imposing an international ban on purchases or investment in Iran's energy sector, the most punitive measure. Unfortunately, the Security Council would only consider applying this measure if the other sanctions are imposed but fail."⁴⁵

Even with its large oil and natural gas sector, Iran's economy remains in trouble and thus provides the U.S. with a key opportunity to incentivize Tehran by lifting sanctions on international trade and offering loans for recapitalization of its aging energy infrastructure. Iran's economy is basically a single-product economy heavily reliant on exporting energy products. Although current high oil prices are generating positive cash flow, the sanctions have caused havoc for modernizing and repairing their infrastructures, which is reflected in Iran's 30% annual gross domestic product investment,⁴⁶ one of the highest in the world. Through the first half of

2006, the U.S. Energy Information Administration placed Iran's crude oil production at 3.75 million barrels-per-day (bpd) compared to its pre-revolution production of 6 million bpd in 1974, an approximate 37% decline in capacity. Current production is also averaging 8% below OPEC production quotes.⁴⁷ Tehran could increase its oil production and has plans to increase to 8 million bpd by 2015, but this expansion would require significant foreign capital for infrastructure investment as well as more trading partners to create the demand.⁴⁸ U.S. sanctions have imposed significant disruption on both Iran's oil production and its acquisition of trading partners.

Iran's government provides enormous financial assistance to the Iranian people; the government controls most of the economy, while private ownership is centered in the farming and small company service sectors. Iran's economy is suffering a 40% poverty rate and an 11% unemployment rate; to complicate matters further, a large well-educated work force is coming of age.⁴⁹ According to Iran Daily News, the "government has to create more than a million new jobs annually. But only about 300,000 new jobs are generated each year, leaving the country's youth frustrated and disillusioned."⁵⁰ With one of the highest urban growth rates in the world, Iran's greatest challenge to create more jobs may continue well into the future unless dramatic steps are taken to meet the demand. Over the past fifty years, Iranians have experienced a 65% urban population growth, and "a UN report predicts that by 2030, that percentage will shoot up to nearly 80%."⁵¹ The result of this population shift will continue to create vast slum areas, high unemployment, poor public services, and a depressed economy.⁵²

Finally, Islam links Iran to its Arab neighbors, but its majority Shi'a sect and Persian traditions reveal a very important difference which directly accounts for Iran's unique alliances and national insecurity. Shi'a Muslims and Sunni Muslims make up 89% and 10% of Iran's population, respectively. The remaining one percent is shared among Jews, Christians, and Baha'i.⁵³ Encircling Iran's Shiites, the Sunni sect dominates the Arab and North African countries, as well as Iran's Northern and Eastern neighbors. With its Shi'a ideology, Iran does have limited, but influential, ties across international borders to groups like Hezbollah, Azerbaijan, Iraq's Shi'ite-led government, and Shiites in Afghanistan's Herat and Hazarajat regions. Hezbollah "receives substantial amounts of finances, training, weapons, explosives, political, and diplomatic and organizational aid from Iran...Iran probably provides financial assistance and military assistance worth about \$25-50 million per year."⁵⁴ Ray Takeyh believes "Tehran's promotion of its Shiite allies is a way of ensuring that a future Iraqi government features voices who are willing to engage with Iran"⁵⁵ and provide suitable security. Robert Gates, now U.S. Defense Secretary, admitted, "that his greatest worry was that if we mishandle

the next year or two and leave Iraq in chaos...a variety of regional powers will become involved in Iraq, and we will have a regional conflict on our hands."⁵⁶ On the other hand, regional conflict along religious lines may erupt if the U.S. and Iraqi leaders cannot contain the violence within Iraq's borders. The Sunnis have dominated the Middle East region for centuries; recent events may now favor the Shi'ite factions.

Iran's Nuclear Interest

As spelled out in the 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terror, the single greatest U.S. national security concern is the transfer of WMD into "the hands of terrorists. Preventing their acquisition and dire consequences ...is a key priority of this strategy."⁵⁷ The administration further specifically accuses Iran as having the intent to develop WMD and the potential for transferring the capability to terrorists. Iran shows no signs of matching the U.S. militarily. Although Iran's conventional forces remain a threat to the region, their conventional military capabilities and doctrines, except for their ballistic missile programs, remain relatively limited, particularly in terms of force projection and sustainment. The conventional forces "do not pose a ground threat to any of its neighbors, due to the small size and poor condition of its ground forces."⁵⁸ The Iranian Navy has a limited, but real, potential to interrupt the global economy by disrupting shipping within the Straits of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf, the most strategic waterway in the world. Western navies could quickly render the conventional Iranian Navy ineffective, but Iran would likely shift tactics to conduct "guerrilla" hit-and-run attacks against allied warships and lay minefields in the straits and Gulf. However, Iran is highly dependent on its oil export and blocking the Straits would have an adverse effect on their 2.4 million barrel-a-day export⁵⁹ and their already fragile economy. Iran's conventional forces simply do not provide much deterrence from a major superpower like the United States, nor do they elevate Tehran to the international level and prestige it desires.

Why does the U.S. believe Iran is possibly moving towards proliferation of nuclear weapons? The short answer is that we cannot point to any single definitive fact that links Iran to a military nuclear program. The administration, with its grave concern for nuclear weapons technology falling into the wrong hands, has cited several circumstantial indicators. The most significant of these indicators are Iran's need to deter an attack, its failure to fully disclose its nuclear facilities developments and comply with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) requests to suspend plutonium and uranium enrichment, its development and acquisition of ballistic missiles, and the nuclear weapons potential role in becoming part of Iran's national identity. Naturally, the lack of conclusive evidence and transparency are particularly

problematic for U.S. efforts to secure international legitimacy to support the use of force, increase meaningful sanctions, or otherwise completely halt the Iranian program.

First, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons could reduce the U.S. and international community's options and bargaining power. Iran would not necessarily benefit offensively; but, once acquired, a weapon provides a formidable deterrent to a direct attack. A nuclear weapon may enable Iran to gain international prestige and the space to grow its economy by weakening U.S. trade and reducing other pressures. Adversaries to new nuclear powers have historically altered their aggressive postures and implemented diplomacy to a greater extent, even under the most unfavorable conditions. The January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review claimed nuclear weapons "provide credible military options to deter a wide range of threats, including WMD and large-scale conventional military force."⁶⁰ Iran is fraught with insecurity based on a history of violent invasions and threats from all corners of the region that resulted in centuries of repressive foreign rule. In view of the aggressive U.S. rhetoric, positioning of U.S. forces, and U.S. policies promoting regime change, it is reasonable to conclude that a nuclear option may ultimately provide Iran the sense of security that they have longed to acquire.⁶¹

Second, on 24 September 2005, the IAEA, the primary agency monitoring Iran's nuclear program, found Tehran to be in non-compliance with the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The IAEA determined that in the past Iran failed to declare nuclear activities and facilities, especially as they related to Iran's centrifuge program.⁶² Its report concludes "although the quantities of nuclear material involved have not been large, and the material would need further processing before being suitable for use as the fissile material component of a nuclear explosive device, the number of failures by Iran to report the material, facilities and activities in question in a timely manner as it is obliged to do pursuant to its Safeguards Agreement is a matter of concern."⁶³ The international community is alarmed that the Arak heavy water reactor is a uranium-enrichment plant that could potentially yield weapons-grade plutonium. In August 2006, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad inaugurated the facility, which the IAEA report speculates will be completed by the end of the decade. This came one day prior to a United Nations Security Council deadline for Iran to cease its enrichment of uranium. The Security Council cited concern that the IAEA "was still unable to provide assurances about Iran's undeclared nuclear material and activities after more than three years, and demanded that Iran suspend all enrichment-related activities...or face the possibility of economic and diplomatic sanctions."⁶⁴

Third, Iran's missile program has again raised more concerns about the regional security and the U.S. ability to enforce sanctions. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has

documented Iran's vigorous acquisition of medium-range missiles. Tehran has deployed an 800 miles-range Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile; it will allow Iran to reach Israel and most of Saudi Arabia and Turkey.⁶⁵ Technical challenges certainly exist in converting the conventional Shahab-3 warhead into a nuclear weapon, but a successful conversion will give Iran a projection platform that increases its influence throughout the international community. In terms of sanctions enforcement, China and Russia have side-stepped the US Iran-Libya Sanctions Act to become Iran's primary oil and gas export markets and also primary suppliers for the missile ventures. In light of the Shahab-3 potential, U.S. and regional officials are increasingly concerned about Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. In November 2005, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani declared "Iran had acquired the capability to mass produce its medium range Shahab-3 missiles."⁶⁶ The U.S. was again forced to decide between building coalitions or sanctions; it responded by applying sanctions on four Chinese and one North Korean company for supplying the cruise and ballistic missile technologies and equipment.⁶⁷

Fourth, Iranian nationalism and culture may also play a significant role in motivating their nuclear ambitions. Sandra Mackey believes that "Iranian culture has held within itself a deep-rooted authoritarian tradition in which society demands submission to the will of those who hold position, higher than oneself."⁶⁸ Today, the nuclear issue is debated in public and dominates Iranian news with the frequent mention of "notions of sovereign independence, great-power hypocrisy, and the need for viable deterrence posture against enemies."⁶⁹ Ray Takeyh warns, "Even if the original strategic calculus that provoked the search for nuclear weapons alters, the program may actually continue as it has become part of Iran's national identity."⁷⁰ Given Iranian pride and their need for security, Tehran will surely find it difficult to forego their nuclear ambition as they survey "inferior" countries such as North Korea and Pakistan who have antiquated conventional forces and poor economies. Yet by acquiring the strategic weapons, they have substantially discouraged any invasion.

In contemplating a revised strategy on Iran, the international community, and particularly the U.S., is faced with the fundamental question: Although Iran is not fully compliant with its obligations under the NPT, does it have the intent or the capacity to build the bomb? In calculating the urgency of the situation, experts are currently finding it difficult to determine how long it would take for Iran to deliver a nuclear weapon. Most estimates are in the 6-10 years range.^{71 72} These estimates take several factors into account, including Iran's ability to operate under the watchful eye of the IAEA, the availability of materials and expertise, and their success in building the needed facilities. Iran's political environment is also influenced by their reaching the "point of no return – a point in which Iran has the expertise for a nuclear weapon – a point

that could be reached within a year by some estimates.”⁷³ As discussed, nuclear weapons have provided deterrence for many countries; however this deterrence is “unlikely to remain valid if nuclear weapons continue to proliferate into countries with different attitudes towards human life or unfamiliar with their catastrophic impacts.”⁷⁴ Thus it is increasingly risky for Washington to remain on the sideline and work through the United Nations and IAEA especially since Tehran has chosen to dismiss the Security Council’s deadline and continues to build facilities and enrich uranium while remaining highly non-transparent. These, along with other indicators, make it clear that Iran’s “nuclear program is aggressively moving forward...on its path towards creating a sophisticated nuclear network.”⁷⁵

A Revised Strategy – Plan Iran

With Iran approaching its nuclear “point of no return,” “it is time for a paradigm shift where the U.S. and Iran can move toward a model of competition and cooperation at the same time.”⁷⁶ Plan Iran, my designation for the new approach, seeks to cut the Gordian Knot by adopting a balanced strategy that addresses Iran’s political, demographic, economic, and religious characteristics. The plan’s primary objective is to initiate the process of engagement and thus reverse the current U.S.-Iranian political situation. This new strategy will respond to the most pressing U.S. concerns: nuclear proliferation, terror, and regional instability. The plan cannot be successful without also attaching a priority to Iran’s imperatives - security, diplomacy, and economic requirements. The plan is only an initial step in a long-term grand strategy that may in subsequent dialogue ultimately achieve greater goals, such as reestablishing formal diplomatic relations if that remains in the U.S. interest. Plan Iran will incorporate four major adjustments to the current strategy;

1) It will aim for regional stability, rather than promote Western-oriented democracy or regime change. It will thus provide the Islamic Republic and clerical elite assurance and facilitate cooperation on the nuclear and terror issues.

2) It will create a unified international mediation team under U.S. leadership to negotiate directly with Tehran on a broad range of common interests.

3) It will apply a balanced approach by adding incentives to promote Iran’s interests and ultimately compel Tehran to forgo its nuclear weapons ambition.

4) On the nuclear issue, it will identify Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon as the only “red line;” therefore, U.S. security assurances are contingent on Iran’s cooperation on this major issue. All other party interests are negotiable, including development of commercial Iranian nuclear power and limited enrichment.

The U.S. and Iran's continued failure to engage in direct dialogue has created the greatest obstacle to resolving their many differences, as well as their ability to build a meaningful and sustained forum that could lead to bilateral communication, economic cooperation, and deliberation of Iran's many social and regional issues. Using a policy of engagement, the U.S. can better navigate Iran's complex political and social structure without reliance on third party entities, such as the media and U.N. The inherent flexibility through bargaining provides a useful tool for adapting to the Islamic Republic's tendency towards long drawn-out internal debate and suspicion of western intentions. Direct interaction will also help the U.S. apply its incentives or punitive measures in a more timely way to specific Iranian behaviors, which in turn are likely then to produce tangible results. As discussed, the past several decades have revealed specific moments during which, if given open and direct diplomatic channels, a savvy diplomat could have seized the opportunity and overcome years of political, economic, and social barriers, thereby putting the two nations on a more constructive footing. In the matter of countering Iran's nationalism, Robert J. Einhorn stated most experts believe that the Bush administration's policy for not talking to Tehran actually unites "the Iranian public behind the regime and its nuclear policies, while engagement will magnify the fissures that have begun to appear within the Iranian leadership and perhaps produce significant changes in policy, including on the nuclear issue."⁷⁷

Reacting to 9/11, the U.S. has transcended its policy of isolation and added to it the strategic aims of democracy and regime change. Naturally, the U.S. national interests are directly linked to its values and belief system, so certainly promoting democracy is at the forefront of America's interests. Henry Kissinger stated that the U.S. must also translate its strategic answers, the need for a nuclear-free Iran, democracy, and regime change - into some hard questions. He asked, "What, to be true to ourselves, must we try to accomplish no matter how small the attainable international consensus, and, if necessary, entirely on our own? What goals are simply beyond our capacities?"⁷⁸ These questions enable us to look beyond our moral beliefs and start to address the importance of achieving the particular objective, the availability of national resources to achieve this objective, our legitimate rights, and the ways our actions will affect our global standing and long-term security. Are the Iranian Islamic Republic and its theocratic structure so hostile to our values and beliefs that we cannot accept its existence? Does the theocratic structure pose a present danger to the vital interests of the U.S.? A more enlightened U.S. policy would reject designating Iran as part of an "axis of evil." The United States should not advocate regime change in Iran. Instead to a strategy to radically change Iranian behavior, U.S. strategy should reflect a greater understanding of that behavior.

A review of America's Cold War strategies reveals the U.S. has established formal long-term relations with many countries whose politics and social differences have varied considerably from the U.S.'s beliefs and values. U.S.-Chinese relations are a prominent example that differing political ideologies that have not over time prevented the formation of regional alliances and economic agreements. Today, China is a lead member and our key partner in the Six-Party Talks with North Korea – another nuclear proliferation challenge. Undoubtedly, the Chinese-Iranian trade agreements would most likely require the U.S. to incorporate China initially in the middle of any multilateral negotiation concerning Iran. So Plan Iran would avoid a policy that seeks democracy and regime change for five reasons: 1) That policy alienates the true decision makers (the clerical elite), thus empowering the conservatives and fueling hostility towards continued U.S. domination. 2) That policy is disruptive and greatly risks failure to resolve the most vital U.S. interest - nuclear proliferation. 3) That policy is based on a false assumption – that Iran's people will turn against the current regime. 4) That policy is unpopular among the coalition partners whose support is critical to resolve the most vital issue - nuclear proliferation. 5) Finally, that policy's aggressive tactics would inevitably lead to a war with catastrophic global economic and political repercussions.

Plan Iran would establish a policy that eliminates the aggressive rhetoric, which tends to push Iran away from the bargaining table, exacerbating their national insecurity and encouraging weapons proliferation. U.S. phrases and slogans proclaiming democracy and claiming "diplomatic effort must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided" sound paradoxically like a call for preventive attack and a somewhat hollow threat at the same time. As Iranians witness the American military's lengthy involvement and recent surge of 21,000 additional troops hopefully required to gain control over insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, they hear only the hollow threat of a U.S. troop invasion. The Baker-Hamilton's Iraq Study Group report and other similar reports raise the issues of maintaining the rate of current U.S. troop deployments. On the other hand, the application of strategic air power is certainly an option, but notwithstanding questionable justification for pre-emptive actions, a limited strike could be counterproductive and precipitate international condemnation. Kenneth Katzman also stated that a "U.S. strike would cause the Iranian public to rally around Iran's regime, setting back U.S. efforts to promote change in Iran."⁷⁹ Iran would probably retaliate by withdrawing from the NPT, disrupting shipping in the Persian Gulf, and sponsoring more violence in Iraq, Lebanon, and other areas of the world, thus creating widespread instability and escalation of tensions, if not out right conflict. The circumstantial evidence surrounding the status and locations of the

nuclear weapons material and Russia's civilian involvement also complicates the use of U.S. military power.

In response to Kissinger's questions, the U.S. means of using a credible military force and the U.S. goal of establish democracy through regime change are simply at this time beyond the capability of a rational U.S. strategy. A prudent strategy begins with bringing Iranian leadership to the negotiating table. The current environment actually reveals that direct engagement is in the U.S. interest for first a way to try first to resolve the Iranian crisis peacefully and second a way to build the necessary international legitimacy to strike Iran if America's vital interests indeed become threatened.

Plan Iran would also eliminate any preconditions for the parties to enter into direct negotiations. Both countries have virtually destroyed their ability to formally come together by attaching contentious preconditions to the start of direct diplomatic talks. For example, the U.S. administration refuses to join in discussions until Iran complies with its obligations under the NPT and ceases its enrichment activities. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has asked, "What is to be gained if Iran is not prepared to show that it is ready to accede to the demands of the international community?"⁸⁰ This is without doubt a difficult starting point, given Tehran's belief that only by acquiring a nuclear weapon can they deter military aggression and/or achieve greater international standing. The current situation is a contest of each nation's will to make the other compromise first. It is an ineffective strategy of bargaining on positions rather than interests. At best, these preconditions seem designed only to demonstrate strength and/or save face. In either situation, the tactic does not move the parties positively towards their primary interest⁸¹ in the issues of deterring WMDs, promoting regional stability, and strengthening national defense. Simply, "dialogue between the U.S. and Iran need not await absolute harmony between the two governments."⁸²

In contrast to previous U.S. policies, Plan Iran would in fact push in a more positive direction by establishing a strategic theme at the onset of the negotiations; by announcing the conditions are based on the alliance's intent to resolve many difficult challenges in a fair, responsible, and reasonable manner. By setting realistic conditions, the parties should acknowledge the likelihood that some issues will require extensive compromise and extended timelines. Advocating this direct approach, the 2006 Iraq Study Group recommended the U.S. lead an international "support group to actively engage Iran and Syria in its diplomatic dialogue, without preconditions."⁸³

Today's Six-Party Talks with North Korea are an excellent model for forming a similar coalition to negotiate with Iran. As with U.N. Resolution 1719 on North Korea, UN

Resolution 1696 provides a coalition partnership with the authority and legitimacy to impose stiff sanctions on Iran if required. It may not be in the U.S. interest to initially disregard China or Russia concerning Iran because it may disrupt cooperation on the North Korea problem. It may as well further fuel Tehran's mistrust of U.S. intentions. China relies heavily on Iranian fuels and would economically suffer from disruption or destruction of Iran energy exports if the United States and its allies attacked Iran. Japan is a strong economic partner with the United States that has expressed interest in trading with Iran, but is reluctant to do so because of the sanctions. The Iran negotiations should also include China, Russia, United States, and Japan.⁸⁴ In a broader perspective, the U.S. also shares similar interest with the European nations for resolving issues with both North Korea and Iran. So any U.S.-Iranian bilateral talks "could take place within the framework of a multilateral process that also included Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China – analogous to the Six-Party Talks that have provided an acceptable context for bilateral meetings between the U.S. and North Korea during the last year or so."⁸⁵

In undertaking direct talks, the United States does assume some risks regarding the world's perception of America's international strength and foreign policy. The transition from decades of containment to the new policy of rapprochement will be difficult and risky to the U.S. reputation, especially if it is unable to form and hold together the alliance or if the talks fail to achieve any meaningful progress. The good news is that many nations, including the United Nations, have requested the U.S. administration to pursue formal discussions with Iran. Thus, the U.S. is likely guaranteed positive reaction to any call for direct talks. Further by forming a negotiating coalition, it will increase pressure for an Iranian official response and place a burden on them to engage. In its arbitration role, the United States must prevent any party from gaining significant benefit if the other party realizes no reciprocal gains. Assuming this greater burden, the U.S. is further compelled to lead the international party in order to ensure better oversight of the process.

Washington's enforcement of sanctions and punitive policies towards Iran also obligate the U.S. to assume a decisive lead role. Unlike with China and Russia, the U.S. trade sanctions have discouraged EU and the wealthy Asian countries, such as Japan, from trading with Iran. The U.S. continues to successfully block Iran's membership into the multilateral World Trade Organization, in which Iran could enjoy guaranteed and important international trading rights. Active U.S. imposition of economic sanctions has denied billions of dollars in free and open trade to international communities. Although they voted in support of continued sanctions, Japan and other important financial partners have recently expressed reluctance and are realizing greater financial burdens by continuing to support the sanctions. Arguably, it is the

combined powers of the U.S., EU and Japan that can provide a genuine incentive required to guarantee Iran long-term security and a sound economy. The U.S. must take the lead to preserve the unity of this financial coalition and maintain control over the strong economic incentive that Iran's failing economy desperately needs. The on-going Six-Party Talks with North Korea may increase Japan's continued interest in supporting U.S. policy on Iran, but Japanese interest may wane as North Korea becomes less formidable.

A coalition, to be successful, must have unity of effort, a common sense of its basic purpose, and a clear understanding of each party's roles and responsibilities. Unlike the U.N., which operates more as an oversight and judicial body, an alliance or coalition, such as NATO and the Six Party Negotiations with North Korea, is brought together in order to achieve common objectives supported by defined goals. As with the Six-Party Talks, the objectives are normally oriented on specific end states that serve to focus the group's efforts. The alliance must establish a united vision for success before engaging Iran. Iran's primary objective is regional stability; its goals focus on the NPT and Iranian national security and economy concerns. Prior to engaging Iran, the international alliance will also account for and try to resolve their political and economic differences in order to further develop a consensus and act as a unified delegation. Basically, this U.S.-International alliance must avoid showing signs of differences, especially on the nuclear issue or Iran's security interest. In reconciling the partnership, the U.S. must answer Kissinger's question by determining how far the other nations are willing to go on the most important points and by eliminating issues that the coalition cannot agree on.

Along with addressing Iran's security concerns, its poor economic conditions, deteriorating energy infrastructure, and disproportionate youth population may provide the best opportunities to shape its behavior. As noted, China and Russia will have considerable influence based on their trade, so they must play a significant role in the multilateral negotiations. But their current trade agreements also make them less likely to lead well or press the difficult issues unless it is within their interest. These two nations have already backed down from endorsing tougher sanctions against Iran during deliberation on U.N. Resolution 1696. At this point, neither China nor Russia represents the interests of the Arab regional actors, Israel, or the EU. To help offset these problems, the U.S. should seek options that reduce China and Russia's reliance on Iranian energy. Russia's earlier proposal to enrich Iran's uranium remains on the table and provide a way to control proliferation, along with an economic incentive for Russia. Other options could include opening trade agreements to balance Saudi Arabia's potential increase in oil production and Iraq's production as it comes online. Saudi Arabia, which is already a key

supplier of oil and gas to China, “plans to expand crude production capacity to 12.5 million bpd by 2009 from 9 million barrels now, and if market conditions demand, the country has identified additional projects to further boost capacity after 2009.”⁸⁶ Regarding Iranian nuclear potential, the United States should solicit the Arab states, including Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, to officially support an alternate energy policy to pressure Iran if they remain indifferent. This may help move China’s and Russia’s interests closer to the United States in order to gain an advantage over Iran. The United States must remain attentive to the age-old problem that the other nations, while courting their own interests, play the U.S. against the Iranian Republic.⁸⁷

Plan Iran will use a multi-team structure to separate the unrelated issues among various negotiation teams. Teams will be formed to solidify members’ interests and their knowledge of the issue. Building effective teams increases probability for success by focusing on a set of specific topics and goals. Even if goals are not achieved, the teams increase probability of achieving progress where possible, rather than collapsing all issue into one grand negotiation that may well get bogged down in dispute over the more controversial and complicated matters. Any negotiated progress will likely help the pragmatics and moderates within Iran to convince the clerical elite and hard-liners to stay the course of engagement. The negotiated issues range from the important international nuclear and terror issues that require the participation of key players like Russia and China to regional issues as sectarian violence that are better served by a small U.S.-led regional negotiation team. Requiring only some coordination with the multilateral members, the bilateral discussions can further address Iran’s security concerns, lifting U.S. imposed sanctions, Iran’s support of Hezbollah support, and stabilizing Iraq. The bilateral talks could start by parties agreeing to eliminate the intimidating rhetoric, which often threatens Israeli and Iranian sovereignty. This may then lead to progress towards a more cooperative environment for all other negotiations. Again, Plan Iran’s initial goal is to simply open communication in order to build consensus and trust on the more general and less contentious challenges.

These teams could adopt a common interest-based strategy following the principles used during the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement. Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, was the architect and catalyst behind this momentous international negotiation. Holbrooke’s mediation strategy, while often incorporating heavy-handed tactics, demonstrated the value of a crafty and effective policy; he was goal-oriented, interest-based, focused on specific topics. He built a unified international team structure. He emphasized the importance of recognizing cultural differences and manipulated those culture characteristics to his advantage. Serbia, like Iran, has a long history of foreign occupation; they feel betrayed by

Western Europeans and are surrounded by potential adversaries. Realizing the Serbs' insecurities, Holbrooke used a "carrot and stick approach." With the stick, he formed the Croat-Muslim Federation as well as a unified international alliance with a willingness to support military attacks against the Serbs. The Serbs, particularly Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, realized the likelihood that continued attacks would further weaken their military balance within the region. Thus the Serbs' interest was channeled away from aggression and towards security-building efforts by means of a major cease-fire, buffer zone, and cooperative security agreement by all parties - the negotiating carrots.

Plan Iran, as at Dayton, will combine diplomacy and coercive force; diplomacy, along with economic measures, should address a vast majority of interests of both parties short of the nuclear issue. In adherence to the NSS, the U.S. should establish only one non-negotiable position during these talks: Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapons capability. The U.S. must remain steadfast on its policy of preemptive military strike, the stick, in order to maintain a significant coercion over Iran. We should "always proceed deliberately, weighing the consequences of our actions. The reason for our actions will be clear, the force measured, and the cause just."⁸⁸ Preventing Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon is the likely answer to Henry Kissinger's question of what we must try to accomplish, if necessary, entirely on our own. The Islamic Republic's complex government structure, with multiple religious actors influencing decisions, with its historic insecurity and differences with its neighbors, and with its recent call for Israel's destruction make it essential for the United States not to negotiate nuclear weapons proliferation. Finally, Plan Iran seeks to create a balanced stability in the region, especially militarily. Iran's acquisition of the bomb may greatly threaten Israel, Turkey, the Arab states, and other Asian nations, likely resulting in more years of instability and possibly more proliferation.

In the lead role, the United States is better positioned to impress directly and forcibly on Tehran and the international community that a nuclear weapon is intolerable and crosses the only significant "red line." The United States should keep the military option on the table until Iran becomes transparent. Supported by a willing coalition, Plan Iran will follow a balanced "stick and carrot" design that will no longer wastes precious time on Iran's position on claims of sovereignty and threat to resign from the NPT. Rather Plan Iran attempts to negotiate to resolve Iran's interests: its national security and economic concerns. The U.S.-led delegation should adhere to the position that Iran's continued development of the bomb is the single issue that will bring a swift military response, with crippling sanctions designed to jeopardize the security of the regime. Short of this, all else is negotiable. This direct approach gives Iran the

option to choose between assured cooperative security and greater world-wide economic opportunity or hardening sanctions, between promoting Arab interests and suffering a measured military attack directed specifically at the Ayatollah and regime leadership.

Conclusion

In the end, we should return to the original question: Does the U.S. need to adopt a strategy that balances the elements of national power and engages Iran in open dialogue that recognizes and seeks to resolve the interests of both parties? The current strategy is flawed by self-imposed diplomatic barriers and its sole reliance on punitive measures. It fails to create an environment to address or resolve either party's interest. This is evident in its failures to fully disclose the intent of Iran's nuclear program or settle other critical interests, such as defeating terror and achieving Middle East stability. The political motives of Iran's leaders continue to remain behind their borders as they stall for time and stifle international resolve to address their issues. Without direct contact, Tehran is left to speculate about U.S. intentions while growing increasingly insecure and almost certainly moving towards nuclear weapons production within the next five years,⁸⁹ or possibly to a "point of no return" with a year or two.⁹⁰

It is time for the U.S. leaders to craft a wise strategy that seeks to reduce instability by engaging Iran in formal international dialogue. The U.S. has an opportunity to make significant progress by focusing on Iran's geopolitical challenges and recognizing its demographics, poor economy, and desire for international trade and recognition. A revised strategy that includes direct U.S. participation and is less threatening to the survival of the Islamic Republic will incorporate what no other strategy has: the U.S. as a guarantor of the terms within the agreement and the potential for better diplomatic relations. These two points might perhaps provide Tehran the greatest incentive of all for entering into meaningful talks. Through direct talks, the parties have an opportunity to settle on a course towards peace and cooperation.

Endnotes

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⁷⁹ The U.S. administration has not justified the case for preemption to either the international community or the American people. The miscalculation regarding Iraq's nuclear program in 2003, the impetus for much of today's concern for accurate intelligence and the flaws of preemption, will likely prompt a demand to exhaust all reasonable diplomatic means before approving multilateral aggression. Additionally, the task of acquiring international legitimacy and coalitional support for military aggression is becoming more difficult to achieve, especially in view of the growing international reliance on Iranian energy. It will prove difficult, if not impossible, to convince the U.N. members that aggression and regime change are justified irrefutable evidence linking Iran to a nuclear weapons program. Therefore, determining the facts and resolving the nuclear questions must be a fundamental priority for the Bush administration. Kenneth Katzman, 33.

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⁸³ Direct talks with Iran are plausible. But given the complexity of this issue and the competing political systems, the United States should not expect the discussions to move quickly or along one single track. James A. Baker, III, and Lee H. Hamilton, 36.

⁸⁴ The U.S. has joined multilateral talks with China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program. This approach has increased the likelihood of success by identifying a specific common goal of denuclearization and combining the powerful states of China, Russia, and the U.S. with the regional actors of Japan and South Korea.

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