

CHAPTER 7

STRATEGY FOR A NUCLEAR IRAN

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The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to speed toward acquiring nuclear weapons—a reality that has provoked a “do something” moment across Washington. Conventional wisdom among the mandarins of America’s foreign policy establishment is that the Bush administration should pursue some kind of “bargain” with Tehran. A recent report by the Council on Foreign Relations, for instance, calls for the United States to offer the regime incentives for disarmament while dropping the “rhetoric of regime change.”

Such a “balance-of-power” approach, which attempts to divorce U.S. concerns about Iran’s nuclear ambitions from any broader regional or global strategic framework, is an intellectual relic of an earlier era. It ignores new geopolitical realities of the post-September 11, 2001 (9/11), era, most profoundly the Bush Doctrine’s commitment to a “forward strategy of freedom” that seeks to transform the politics of the greater Middle East while containing China’s rising geostrategic power. Iran stands directly athwart this project, as a sponsor of Islamist terrorism and an increasingly important patron of Beijing. A nuclear-armed Iran is doubly threatening to U.S. interests not only because of the possibility it might employ its weapons or pass them to terrorist groups, but also because of the constraining effect it will impose on U.S. behavior in the region.

Any overt bargain with Iran surely will be read as a retreat from the Bush administration’s proclaimed project of democratization and regional transformation. However, direct military confrontation is equally problematic, particularly given that a single, surgical strike is unlikely to be fully successful or have a lasting effect. Rather, the most attractive long-term strategy for Iran is traditional containment, which would emphasize breaking Iran’s ties to China while pressing for reform and transformation in the greater Middle East. The real isolation of Iran will come when it is drowned in a larger sea of liberal, accountable governments in the region.

The Islamic Republic in Iran continues to speed toward acquiring nuclear weapons, with every week, it seems, bringing further evidence of its progress. In late September 2004, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, announced his country had begun enriching a "test amount" of uranium—enough, that is, for several nuclear weapons. Soon, there will be no insurmountable hurdles left; it is simply a matter of engineering, time, and Tehran's choice. This is a reality that the next U.S. administration will have to confront—and a very unpleasant reality it will be. As Max Boot recently observed:

[Iran] is also working on missiles with the range to strike targets in Europe and North America, though the likeliest vehicles for delivering an Iranian nuke would be its terrorist networks. Hassan Abasi, a senior member of the Revolutionary Guards, recently boasted that Iran had "a strategy drawn up for the destruction of Anglo-Saxon civilization."¹

The anxiety raised by the prospect of nuclear-armed Iran is creating a "do something!" moment across Washington and within parts of the Bush administration. Boot, a strong supporter of the Bush administration's strategy for the greater Middle East, allows that, "On Iran, as in so many other areas, the administration seems to be paralyzed by disagreements between Defense Department hawks and State Department doves."² During the 2004 election season, the Democrats, by contrast, made a point of advocating a "grand bargain" with the mullahs that would allow them to keep their nuclear power plants in exchange for a promise to give up the kind of nuclear fuel used to make bombs. To some degree, this was a recycling of Clinton-era Iran policy with a sprinkling of the ideas that underlay the 1994 "Agreed Framework" with North Korea, a widely celebrated bit of arms control that did nothing to prevent Kim Jong Il from acquiring his current arsenal. Undeterred by that failure, Senators Kerry and Edwards made a point of advancing a "nonconfrontational" approach to Iran that emphasized areas of "mutual interest."

Divining mutual interests between the United States and Iran has been an addiction of many American diplomats since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Even at the height of the Iran-Iraq war of the

1980s, the Reagan administration proved itself open to dealing with Ayatollah Khomeini; witness the infamous “Iran-contra” affair. The first Bush administration came to office, sending the Iranians the message, in the President’s words, that “Goodwill begets goodwill.”³ After Khomeini’s death in 1989, the rise of Hashemi Rafsanjani appeared as a moment of renewed dialogue and moderation, but in the end, Iran remained implacably hostile to the United States, ever more so after the first Gulf War. As Kenneth Pollack has observed, the period of 1991-92 marked a newly aggressive period in Iranian foreign policy and, significantly, a correlating strategic emphasis on nuclear weapons:

The [former] shah had an interest in nuclear weapons, but it was actually rather restrained, given his approach to other aspects of military power. He did have a nuclear weapons program, but it had not progressed beyond basic research and was not lavishly funded The end of [the Iran-Iraq] war did not diminish Iran’s desire for nuclear weapons. Instead, it actually began to pump additional resources into its program. . . . Iran’s logic for accelerating its nuclear weapons program was very straightforward: if you want to pursue a policy that runs contrary to the vital interest of the United States, you must be able to deter an American invasion, and the only sure way to do that is to have a nuclear arsenal. . . . Deterring the United States was not the only motive Iran had for acquiring nuclear weapons (deterring Israel, building prestige, and dealing with a revived threat from Iraq were also considerations), but it was its most important incentive.⁴

Indeed, after the disaster of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran began to coordinate its nuclear program more closely with its overall strategy. The United States responded in exactly the inverse fashion, by separating its nuclear concerns from its larger strategic framework. As in the Cold War, questions of nuclear proliferation were considered quite apart from their proper policy context; in fact, proliferation was often believed to be the primary concern.

In the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and at the National Security Council, Pollack had a front-row seat for Clinton administration policymaking toward Iran. Despite a supposedly nuanced policy of “dual containment” that was to weigh more heavily on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq than Rafsanjani’s Iran, American hopes for moderation were frustrated constantly. The new pan-European

engagement with Iran, dubbed “Critical Dialogue,” only made matters worse; what was meant to be a carrot-and-stick approach left Tehran free to snack on European carrots while dodging American sticks. Yet, when Rafsanjani stepped down as president and was replaced by Mohammed Khatami in 1997, the chimera of Iranian “reformists” beckoned again to the administration.

From 1997 to 1999, U.S.-Iranian diplomacy resulted in a series of public displays of affection. As Pollack tells it, the Clinton administration had all but talked itself into the belief that a big breakthrough was at hand. All that was required was one final grand gesture on the part of the United States.⁵ And so, on April 12, 1999, at a state dinner, President Clinton admitted in “unprompted” remarks that “Iran . . . has been the subject of quite a lot of abuse from various Western nations. And I think sometimes it’s quite important to tell people, look, you have a right to be angry at something my country or my culture or others that are generally allied with us today did to you 50 or 60 or 100 or 150 years ago.”⁶ The President’s feel-Iran’s-pain impulse soon became formal administration rhetoric. On March 17, 2000, at Washington’s Omni Shoreham hotel, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged and apologized for past American policy toward Iran:

In 1953, the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran’s popular Prime Minister, Mohammed Mosaddeq. The Eisenhower administration believed its actions were justified for strategic reasons; but the coup was clearly a setback for Iran’s political development. And it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs. Moreover, during the next quarter century, the United States and the West gave sustained backing to the Shah’s regime. Although it did much to develop the country economically, the Shah’s government also brutally repressed political dissent. As President Clinton has said, the United States must bear its full share of responsibility for the problems that have arisen in U.S.-Iranian relations. Even in more recent years, aspects of U.S. policy towards Iraq during its conflict with Iran appear now to have been regrettably short-sighted, especially in light of our subsequent experiences with Saddam Hussein.⁷

Yet even as Albright was speaking, the Iranian government had begun to crack down on internal dissent and resume a hard-line,

anti-American stance abroad. Pollack's verdict on Clinton's opening to Tehran is remarkably blunt and worth recounting at length:

I felt [at the time] that we had come very close to making a major breakthrough with Iran and that if only we had done a few things differently . . . we might have been able to make it happen. Over the years, however, I have come to the conclusion that I was wrong in this assessment. Any rapprochement that could be nixed by two words in a speech was a rapprochement that was doomed to failure anyway. That is the fundamental lesson of the Clinton initiative with Iran. The Iranians were not ready Iran was ruled by a regime in which the lion's share of power—and everything that truly mattered—was in the hands of people who were not ready or interested in improving ties with the United States.⁸

But it is rare when a member of the U.S. foreign policy establishment comes to such a moment of clarity about Iran. Prior to September 11, even Bush administration principals were prone to speak hopefully about the future of relations between Washington and Tehran. Vice President Richard Cheney, while at Haliburton, had described U.S. sanctions on Iran as “self-defeating.” At his confirmation hearings, former Secretary of State Colin Powell observed changing conditions in Iran and stressed that “Iranians are not our enemies . . . to the extent that we can nuance our policy in that regard, I think it serves our interests and the interests of the region.”⁹

Even in a post-9/11, post-Iraq world, the siren call of an American-Iranian bargain remains attractive to many in the establishment. The latest call—for a “modest bargain” alternative—is encapsulated in the recent report, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).¹⁰ As is so often the case, this “task force” of foreign policy mandarins calling for a new approach is really just rehashing old ideas. Thus, the CFR report finds:

[Tehran] could play a potentially significant role in promoting a stable, pluralistic government in Baghdad. It might be induced to be a constructive actor toward both Iraq and Afghanistan, but it retains the capacity to create significant difficulties for these regimes if it is alienated from the new post-conflict governments in those two countries.¹¹

Thus, inevitably, it is the council's recommendation that the United States “engage selectively with Iran to promote regional stability.”

This, in the task force's eyes, constitutes a "revised strategic approach to Iran."

At least the CFR task force acknowledges that the "grand bargain" notion "that would settle comprehensively the outstanding conflicts between Iran and the United States is not a realistic goal, and pursuing such an outcome would be unlikely to produce near-term progress on Washington's central interests."¹² However, the depth of the differences between the United States and Iran is no excuse for restricting "engagement," in the report's view, and in particular the use of "incentives," including expanded trade relations: "Given the increasingly important role of economic interests in shaping Iran's policy options at home and abroad, the prospect of commercial relations with the United States could be a powerful tool in Washington's arsenal."¹³ Even more saliently, the task force believes that, while the United States is right to advocate democracy, America should abandon the "rhetoric of regime change, as it would be likely to rouse nationalist sentiments in defense of the regime, even among those who currently oppose it."¹⁴ While willing to forgo the grandeur, the Council of Foreign Relations hates to pass up a bargain.

Indeed, to the extent that the CFR report proves anything, it is that the Cold War is not over: it lives on, and not just in time-warp regimes like Kim Jong Il's North Korea or Saparmurat Niyazov's Turkmenistan, but among the strategic smart set in the United States, for whom détente never dies. But in reality, new geopolitical facts obtain, and the United States has started to formulate new strategies based upon them. First among these new facts is that the United States is the global guarantor of international order, history's sole superpower, and wishes to remain so. The second fact is that the "greater Middle East" — the immense swath of the planet stretching from West Africa to Southeast Asia — is now the central strategic focus of American security policy. The notion of a bargain with Iran is the by-product of an earlier era when Europe was the strategic key and the Middle East a secondary theater. Thus, the third about-to-be fact — Iran's development of a nuclear arsenal — demands a genuinely strategic response, one consistent with our broader global and regional goals.

Remember the Bush Doctrine?

The central question for the second Bush administration is whether the “Bush Doctrine” – whose main purpose is to preserve the generally liberal, stable, and peaceful international order that has resulted from the collapse of the Soviet empire and that is predicated upon the U.S. role as global guarantor of international security – is really the foundation for a lasting security strategy or was simply a rhetorical exercise meant to justify invading Iraq. The Bush Doctrine represents not just a continuation of the de facto policies of the Clinton administration, but a reaffirmation of the most basic American strategic habits; it is consistent with what might be called American strategic culture. And, in a realpolitik sense, there is no quiet life for the world’s sole superpower.

At the same time, there is a strong yearning, even among the grandees of the Republican Party, to avoid further involvement in the greater Middle East and to try to preserve the status quo governments – and the status quo relationships – across the region. This is not just an expression of “Iraq fatigue,” but a more deep-seated skepticism about the prospects for democracy in the Islamic world, and Arabia in particular. At the same time, the pretense of a return to the status quo in the greater Middle East, of balancing one thuggish regime against another, and making strategy in partnership with Western European “powers” such as France and Germany, is impossible to take seriously in a post-9/11, post-Iraq world. Even if the United States could neatly withdraw from Iraq – itself an almost oxymoronic formulation – the “war on terrorism” would not end and would still include many other actors besides Osama bin Laden.

Thus there may be little alternative to the Bush Doctrine’s “forward strategy of freedom”; a purely defensive approach is impossible exactly because the pre-9/11 political order in the regime was the primary source of the nihilism and violence that led to those attacks. The Bush Doctrine’s fundamental set of premises may prove remarkably stable: the rollback of both Islamic terror organizations and the governments that support them; containing China’s military ambitions; and, key to it all, preventing any true “axis of evil” that marks a conjunction of Islamic radicalism with the rising great-power capabilities in Beijing.

This strategy is nothing if not ambitious. We are attempting to resolve a massive civil war within the Islamic world while simultaneously preventing a dissatisfied China – even more dependent for its economic growth on Middle Eastern oil than the United States – from interfering with our efforts. The Bush administration’s occasional confessions about the magnitude of the effort required, reflected in Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s forecast of a “long, hard slog” in Iraq and then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s profession of a “generational commitment” to the project of transforming the Middle East, only begin to hint at the task before the United States. The only good news is that, while our enemies are many, they are individually weak and not immediately disposed to unite against us.

U.S. strategy for a nuclear Iran must be made to fit this broader framework. The greatest danger is that Tehran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will distort and derail American strategy. Strategic realists will once again see the need to pursue a “balance of power” approach, undercutting the Bush “liberation strategy.” “Engagers” and Europhiles will see an opportunity to rush forward with a great new bunch of “carrots” to tempt Iranian moderates. Arms controllers will attempt to subordinate real strategy-making to the establishment of international agreements limiting weaponry. Perhaps most dangerous of all will be those policymakers who rightly propose a hard-line against the mullahs: their commendable willingness to pressure Tehran, even to the point of military action, has a tendency to obscure their strategic judgment. Indeed, hardliners may be most prone to the “do something!” fever. It may well be that the United States finds itself forced to do something militarily in the case of the Islamic Republic, but if so, it is more important to do the right something. And the “right” strategy for Iran is one that fits the Iran piece within the larger puzzle of political transformation for the Middle East.

Sources of Iranian Conduct.

To be sure, Iran stands directly athwart this project of regional transformation. Indeed, the regime in Tehran came to power by ousting Shah Reza Pahlavi in the tumultuous year of 1979, when

the old, autocratic order in the greater Middle East began to crumble. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established an unabashedly theocratic and revolutionary government, at the same time calling for a broader Muslim uprising and attacks upon the United States, the “Great Satan.” And despite international isolation, devastating defeat in war, and widespread internal unrest, the regime retains its ideological character, as well as a firm grip on power. As the Council on Foreign Relations notes, the Islamic Republic has achieved some “durability.”¹⁵

But if its political and strategic ends have been consistent, Tehran’s means have changed dramatically. One of the best studies of the Iran-Iraq War, done by the United States Marine Corps, observed that the casualties of that conflict were so great that it essentially bled the Iranian revolution to death.¹⁶ Khomeini and his fellow mullahs were more than willing to spread revolution by conventional military means, but a generation of young Pasdaran zealots broke itself in human wave attacks on Saddam Hussein’s army; what the U.S. military was able to do so decisively in 1991 and again in 2003—slice through the Iraqi field force—the Iranian army could not manage even at the cost of perhaps a million casualties over 8 years.

If Iran could not export its revolution by conventional military means, then unconventional means would have to suffice. Iran’s sponsorship of terrorists is well-known. As the U.S. State Department’s most recent report on global terrorism puts it, “Iran remained the most active state sponsor of terrorism in 2003. Its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Ministry of Intelligence and Security were involved in the planning of and support for terrorist acts and continued to exhort a variety of groups that use terrorism to pursue their goals.”¹⁷

From Beirut to Buenos Aires, international terrorism has been central to Iran’s foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. Tehran openly provides funding, training, and weapons to Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Iran also has a long relationship with al Qaeda. As early as late 1991, Sudan’s Islamist leader, Hassan al-Turabi, sponsored meetings designed to encourage Shia and Sunni fundamentalists to put aside their differences and work together

against the United States. “Not long afterward,” according to the 9/11 Commission report, “senior Al Qaeda operatives and trainers traveled to Iran to receive training in explosives.”¹⁸

Senior al Qaeda operatives captured by the United States have revealed that Tehran attempted to strengthen its ties to Osama bin Laden after the USS *Cole* attack in 2000, and that Iranian officials have facilitated the travel of al Qaeda members through their territory, failing to stamp their passports. It is also believed that 8 to 14 of the 9/11 hijackers took advantage of this arrangement to transit through Iran in 2000-01.¹⁹

After the fall of the Taliban, several senior al Qaeda operatives fled to Iran, where they have found a safe haven from which to plot further attacks—including the May 2003 terrorist bombing in Riyadh, in which 34 people were killed.²⁰ Although Iran claims to hold several al Qaeda members in custody, it refuses to disclose their identities publicly and has rebuffed attempts to arrange for their transfer.²¹

Yet for all the vehemence of its ideology and the violence of its anti-Americanism, the clerical regime in Tehran has found itself incapable of stemming the seeping U.S. presence in the Persian Gulf and in the broader region. While Iran essentially stood aside when Operation DESERT STORM drove the Iraqi army from Kuwait and contained Saddam Hussein’s regional ambitions, the war ushered in the policy of “dual containment,” targeted at Tehran as well as Baghdad; indeed, the first Bush administration left Saddam in power primarily to serve as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism. The “no-fly-zones” and other U.S. operations in the area throughout the 1990s attested to the fact that, even with no real regional partner—beyond the on-again, off-again support offered by the Saudis—the United States was more than capable of maintaining its military forces at Iran’s doorstep and had no intention of withdrawing.

And while the mullahs may have celebrated the attacks of 9/11, they have come to rue many of the subsequent events. Although there was little love lost between Tehran and the Taliban, the expanded American military presence along Iran’s eastern flank is far from welcome. The invasion of Iraq, though it removed Tehran’s longtime nemesis in Baghdad, completed the near-encirclement of

Iran by U.S. military forces. Iran's attempts to influence the direction of post-Saddam Iraq have yet to produce anything more substantive than its past efforts to undermine Saddam; Tehran's sponsorship of Moqtada al Sadr helped the "Mahdi army" make headlines, but the finality with which mainstream Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Ali al Sistani evicted Sadr's forces from the shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf reinforced the truth that the majority of Iraq's Shia still have little interest in taking orders from Iran.

Under such apparently bleak circumstances, Tehran's traditional hankering for nuclear weapons has sharpened significantly. Iran's conventional options are now restricted to attempts to limit American access to the region, such as by pointing missiles at the Straits of Hormuz and bolstering ground-based air defenses. Terrorism with a return address carries greater risks, too: it is interesting to speculate what the U.S. reaction would be now, in a post-9/11 world, to a Khobar Towers-type bombing. What the Iranians could safely sponsor in 1996 might not be so safe now. The surest deterrent to American action is a functioning nuclear arsenal.

What to Do?

To be sure, the prospect of a nuclear Iran is a nightmare. But it is less a nightmare because of the high likelihood that Tehran would employ its weapons or pass them on to terrorist groups – although that is not beyond the realm of possibility – and more because of the constraining effect it threatens to impose upon U.S. strategy for the greater Middle East. The danger is that Iran will "extend" its deterrence, either directly or de facto, to a variety of states and other actors throughout the region. This would be an ironic echo of the extended deterrence thought to apply to U.S. allies during the Cold War. But in the greater Middle East of the 21st century, we are the truly revolutionary force, and "revolutionary" Iran is more the status quo power.

The attitudes of the Council on Foreign Relations Iran task force reveal this dynamic with creepy perfection. Aware that the fundamental strategic choice on Iran is between policies of regime change and détente, the consensus among the task force members is

that the problem is the weapons, not the government building them. Indeed, the report makes it clear that the task force was divided about the state of Iran's nuclear program.

Although Task Force members voiced differing opinions on whether evidence is sufficient to determine that Iran has fully committed itself to developing nuclear weapons, the Task Force agreed that Iran is likely to continue its pattern of tactical cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), while attempting to conceal the scope of its nuclear program in order to keep its options open as long as possible.²² But if there were nuances about the state of Tehran's nukes, there seems to be consensus about American policy: forget the regime-change idea and concentrate on the weapons. By focusing narrowly on the issues of Iran's weapons, any discussion of the larger consequences for American policy can be avoided.

What would the consequences be of a bargain with Iran—be it grand or small—for a strategy of political transformation in the greater Middle East? Is it possible to pursue détente with Iran and regime change elsewhere?

Throughout the greater Middle East, any overt bargain with Iran will surely be read as a retreat on the part of the United States. Three years after September 11, the question remains: do the Americans have the strength, stomach, and sincerity to carry through their project of democratization and regional transformation? Observers in the Middle East can see that President Bush is committed, but there are doubts about the rest of his government, even heading into his second term. The world's other industrial powers either are openly afraid and thus hostile, skeptical, or at best noncommittal; but for a handful of allies, America stands alone. Détente with Iran would compel the forces of freedom in the Middle East to further hedge their bets, and our sometime allies, like the Saudis, who through the 1990s tried to reach an accommodation with Tehran, would equally reckon that U.S. ambitions for change had overleaped themselves. Even Pakistan, congenitally unstable and prone to play all ends against the middle absent unceasing American attention, might toy with the idea of reversing its post-9/11 policies.

Even more importantly, an obsessive attention to Iran would divert the United States from the most important, ideological aspect

of its effort in the Middle East: the project to reform politics among the Sunni Arabs. This is the real heart of the conflict in the region. The essential question is whether the Sunni community will cling to near-monarchical autocracies—be they relatively benign and modern, as in Jordan, or actively aggressive, such as the Wahhabi-fueled Saudis—or opt for an even more repressive, Osama-bin-Laden-style revolution. U.S. strategy is to foment a genuinely democratic and modernizing revolution. Over the coming decades, the hearts and minds of Sunnis represent the strategic center of gravity in the region, and the likely effect of an Iran-centric U.S. policy would be to obscure this fact and reinforce the impulse to cling to the Sunni status quo—an “old order” which almost certainly is in the midst of collapsing.

A bargain with Iran would also have global effects. The most serious would not be in France or Germany, whose governments have made it plain that they have no heart for transformation in the Middle East or for a serious effort to oppose Iran, but in China. Beijing and Tehran share a mutual dissatisfaction with the Pax Americana and have a long record of direct and indirect cooperation on nuclear and missile programs. Hu Jintao and the new generation of leaders in China have a much larger, global perspective than did Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping before them, greater confidence flowing from China’s economic modernization, and, almost certainly, an appetite to play the geopolitical game more actively. Their horizons very clearly extend throughout the greater Middle East—China’s energy interest in Sudan already has posed perhaps the largest roadblock to stopping the genocide in Darfur, for example—and they are deeply conscious of the potential U.S. stranglehold on China’s future growth. Torn between their interests in U.S. security guarantees and a desire for greater autonomy, Beijing will keenly note, and perhaps be happy to broker, any bargain for Iran.

Regime Change by Other Means.

If détente with a nuclear Islamic Republic jeopardizes the project of Middle East transformation, then direct military confrontation is an equally unappetizing method of regime change. In the heat of the

“do something!” moment, the difficulties of even limited military strikes are too little appreciated. While a full discussion of the operational realities is beyond the scope of this chapter, some hard truths are worth mentioning. Iran is large, populous, rugged, and its nuclear facilities are spread throughout the country.²³ Its nuclear program probably cannot be crippled in a single, surgical strike, as was Iraq’s in Israel’s famous Osiraq raid.

And speaking of the Israelis, it is not uncommon to hear the hope expressed among U.S. policymakers, albeit sotto voce, that they somehow will solve the puzzle that perplexes us. Earlier in September, the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, reported that Tel Aviv was planning on buying 500 bunker-busters, precisely the kind of munitions that might be able to destroy Iran’s underground nuclear facilities.²⁴ In truth, however, a preemptive strike by Tel Aviv would be exceedingly difficult. Israel’s long-range strike capacity is a fraction of the U.S. military’s and would, as a matter of logistics, require at least American acquiescence (we own a good deal of the airspace between Tel Aviv and Tehran). And even if, miraculously, an Israeli strike achieved some tactical success, the Iranians would surely hold us responsible and target U.S. interests in retaliation. In sum, punitive strikes cannot be designed to end the Iranian nuclear threat nor ensure regime change, as our decade-long experience with Saddam Hussein should remind us.

A full-scale invasion would be a “porridge-too-hot” prospect in other than the most dire circumstances. While in a conventional fight, the Iranian army might provide no stiffer resistance than did the Iraqi army in 1991 or 2003, and a post-invasion campaign might concentrate solely on a full dismantling of Iranian nuclear infrastructure and identifying scientists and program officials, it is far from certain that U.S. objectives could be so neatly limited. It is impossible to know the degree of post-invasion resistance, but to underestimate it would be an even greater folly than underestimating it was in Iraq.

The military approach that perhaps best balances risks and rewards might be a comprehensive air campaign, lasting perhaps a week, to be followed by fomenting an Afghanistan-style insurgency. Iran continues to suppress separatist moments among Iranian

Kurds, Azeris, and Baluchis—Tehran has never had perfect control of its own borders. Even the most successful strike campaign would have only transitory effect; having crossed the military threshold, the United States must be ready to keep regime-threatening pressure on the mullahs. Indeed, the Bush administration would do well to put in place covert contacts with Iranian dissident factions—as well as military supplies capable of sustaining them if needed—before considering any punitive air campaign. And while there are tremendous risks associated with any proxy war, it provides an improvement over air strikes alone. The United States should not enter a war with Iran without at least some reasonable plan for victory, measured by regime change in Tehran.

Yet perhaps the most attractive strategy for a nuclear Iran is traditional containment. There are risks associated with this approach, and it does not mean “multilateral” diplomacy. From Khartoum to Tehran, the “international community” is proving again that it is unwilling to confront renegade regimes. Iran’s flouting of the IAEA and the United Nations (UN) also takes a page from Saddam’s book. Despite growing evidence of Iran’s nuclear malfeasance, many countries are reluctant to sanction it for what they view as its legitimate right to develop a complete nuclear fuel cycle. We must anticipate that the primary burden of isolating and containing a nearly nuclear Iran rests with the United States. Like so much of our future work in the greater Middle East, this must be a long-term effort requiring patience and resolve.

The first order of business is to keep Iran from establishing a deeper relationship with great-power sponsors. Breaking Tehran’s ties to China will be difficult, given that no American administration, Republican or Democrat, has yet been willing to force Beijing to choose between the constraints and the benefits of the Pax Americana—witness Taiwan, North Korea, and now Sudan. Better hopes lie with India, which, if pressured to scale back its links to Iran as the price of a real strategic partnership with the United States, might become a serious future ally.

The second order of business is for the United States to retain the initiative in its new project of reform and transformation in the greater Middle East. The real isolation of revolutionary Iran will come when

it is drowned in a larger sea of liberal, accountable governments in the region. As democracy takes hold in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran's dictatorship will come under increasing pressure.

In a curious way, Iran suffers from both the Middle East's great maladies: it is both a sclerotic autocracy and a backward-looking theocracy. The success of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq not only will surround Iran strategically, but ideologically as well. In the final analysis, supporting and expanding the forces of freedom in the region offers, for now, our best hope for containing Iran and diluting the value of its nuclear deterrent.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 7

1. Max Boot, "Bush Can't Afford Inaction on Iran," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2004.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America*, New York: Random House, 2004, p. 245.

4. Pollack, pp. 258-259; see also Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Nuclear Calculations," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2003.

5. Pollack, esp. pp. 303-343.

6. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks at Millenium Evening: The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned from a Violent Century," April 12, 1999; quoted in Pollack, p. 323.

7. Pollack, p. xxv.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 341-342.

9. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 343.

10. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert M. Gates, cochairs, *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004. Accessed at http://www.cfr.org/pdf/Iran_TF.pdf.

11. *Ibid.*, p 2.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

16. Douglas V. Johnson and Stephen C. Pelletiere, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War, Volume I*, Fleet Marine Force Reference Publication 3-203, Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, December 10, 1990.

17. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, April 2004. Available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2003/>.

18. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, July 2004, p. 61. Available at http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report_FM.pdf.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 240-241.

20. Douglas Jehl and Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Suggests al Qaeda Cell in Iran Directed Saudi Bombings," *New York Times*, May 21, 2003.

21. *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003*.

22. Brzezinski and Gates, p. 2.

23. The December 2004 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine printed a long article discussing the operational issues involved in both an air campaign targeted at Iran's nuclear program and an invasion aimed at regime change. The discussion in many ways was manipulated to lead a reader to the conclusion that any military action against Iran would not be worth the cost, but the discussion nonetheless was illustrative of the magnitude of the challenge. See James Fallows, "Will Iran Be Next?" *The Atlantic*, December 2004.

24. Craig S. Smith, "Iran Moves Toward Enriching Uranium," *New York Times*, September 22, 2004.