

[one war at a time]

Iran: The Logic of Deterrence

Tehran's quest for nuclear weapons is a rational response to a real threat, which makes diplomacy a more prudent option than regime change.

By Christopher Layne

AT THIS WRITING it is not known if the United Nations, when it receives the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency on the status of Iran's compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, will impose sanctions on Tehran or whether a last-minute diplomatic compromise will avert—at least for the time being—the need for punitive measures. Neither outcome, however, will bring about a definitive resolution of the deepening crisis between the U.S. and Iran. Washington and Tehran will remain on a collision course that could eventuate in military conflict.

The main source of conflict—or at least the one that has grabbed the lion's share of the headlines—is Tehran's evident determination to develop a nuclear-weapons program. Washington's policy, as President George W. Bush has stated on several occasions in language that recalls his pre-war stance on Iraq, is that a nuclear-armed Iran is “intolerable.”

Beyond nuclear weapons, however, there are other important issues that are driving the U.S. and Iran toward an armed confrontation. Chief among these is Iraq. Recently, Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, accused Tehran of meddling in Iraqi affairs by providing arms and training to Shi'ite militias and by currying favor with the Shi'ite politicians who will likely domi-

nate Iraq's new elected government. With Iraq teetering on the brink of a civil war between Shi'ites and Sunnis, concerns about Iranian interference have been magnified. In a real sense, however, Iran's nuclear program and role in Iraq are merely the tip of the iceberg.

Clashing interests and a tangled history have left the United States and Iran estranged for more than a quarter of a century. Since the 1940s, the U.S. has had important strategic interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East, a region where Iran sees itself as the dominant power. Iranians remember—and still resent—the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that overthrew the nationalist prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh because he threatened Anglo-American oil interests in Iran. Following the coup, during the reign of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran aligned with the United States in the Cold War and served as America's strategic surrogate in the Persian Gulf. While the Shah's authoritarian regime served the U.S. geopolitically, the close American relationship with him boomeranged when he was overthrown in the 1978 Islamic Revolution. Washington's association with the Shah fanned widespread Iranian resentment against the U.S.

From the American standpoint, relations with Iran never have recovered

from the crisis of 1979-1980, when Iranian militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and held its staff hostage. The hostility between the United States and Iran and U.S. fear that Iran would export its Islamic Revolution were underscored during the Iran-Iraq War (1981-1988), when Washington tilted toward Baghdad and covertly aided Saddam Hussein's regime. From 1987 to 1988, American forces actually waged a low-intensity naval conflict against Iran, a consequence of which was the shoot-down of an Iranian civilian Airbus passenger jet by an American naval vessel, which heightened Iranian ire at the United States. Also contributing to American distrust of Iran are Tehran's longstanding support for Hamas and Hezbollah and its involvement in the attack on the Khobar Towers.

Since the Shah's overthrow, there have been several tentative attempts to thaw relations between Washington and Tehran. These have failed because domestic political considerations in both capitals prevented anything approaching détente—much less rapprochement. The rockiness in Washington's relations with Tehran long predated the Bush administration.

During the 1990s, however, Iran and the U.S. were not drifting toward war. The obvious question, then, is what has

changed? The answer is to be found in George W. Bush's grand strategy, the so-called Bush Doctrine, the three key components of which are rejection of deterrence in favor of preventive/pre-emptive military action; determination to shake up the politics of the Persian Gulf and Middle East; and extension of U.S. dominance over that region. Here, administration officials betrayed a naïveté about international politics. States and the regimes that rule them want to survive, which means they are very sensitive to external threats to their

when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies." Henceforth, instead of relying on deterrence and containment, he said, the United States would deal with such threats pre-emptively. "If we wait for threats to fully materialize," Bush said, "we will have waited too long."

The administration's stance with respect to so-called rogue states was amplified in its September 2002 National Security Strategy. Here, the offending

would adopt a new strategic posture: "To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively." The pre-emptive stance of the U.S. against rogue-state threats provided the impetus for the invasion of Iraq and is also driving American policy toward Iran.

Although the administration's strategy is logical on its own terms, the assumptions on which it is based are dubious. First, the administration conflates two different threats: the threat from terrorist groups and the threat from rogue states. Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda do present a novel set of challenges strategically. Precisely because these groups are shadowy, non-state actors, it is hard to deter them. As is often said, unlike states, rogue or otherwise, terrorist groups have no return address to which retaliation can be directed. On the other hand, the threat of retaliation effectively deters states for several reasons. For one thing, in contrast to terrorist organizations, if a state attacks the U.S., Washington knows where to aim a retaliatory strike. Moreover, states can be deterred because, unlike terrorists, they have a lot to lose: if their actions prompt the U.S. to hit back, a state will suffer devastating damage to its economy, huge loss of life among its citizens, and regime survival will be jeopardized. To put it simply, although there is considerable strategic rationale for pre-empting terrorist threats, there is very little justification for attacking states pre-emptively or preventively.

The very notion that undeterrable rogue states exist is the second questionable assumption on which the administration's strategy is based. In an important article in the Winter 2004/2005 issue of *International Security*, Francis Gavin points out that the post-9/11 era is not the only time that American policymakers have believed that the U.S. faced a

THROWING NEARLY A HALF-CENTURY OF AMERICAN STRATEGIC DOCTRINE OUT THE WINDOW, BUSH DECLARED, "CONTAINMENT IS NOT POSSIBLE."

security. The Bush Doctrine heightened Iran's sense of vulnerability, which resulted in an acceleration of its nuclear program. In this respect, the administration's policy—particularly President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech—had the effect of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: it made U.S. relations worse than they already were and triggered a self-defensive reaction by Tehran.

Doubtless 9/11 had an impact in shaping the administration's grand strategy. Whether the terrorist attacks caused that strategy or rather served as a pretext for the administration to pursue a set of pre-existing goals, however, is an open question. The "axis of evil" pronouncement came in January 2002. Its strategic implications became apparent in an address that Bush gave in June 2002 at West Point. In that speech, Bush said that the post-9/11 threat to the U.S. "lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology"—that is, the ability of rogue states and terrorist groups to obtain weapons of mass destruction. Throwing nearly a half-century of American strategic doctrine out the window, Bush declared, "Containment is not possible

characteristics of such regimes were defined with specificity. These states "brutalize their own people"; flout international law and violate the treaties they have signed; are engaged in the acquisition of WMD, which are "to be used as threats or offensively to achieve the aggressive designs of these regimes"; support terrorism; and "hate the United States and everything it stands for." Given the nature of the threat, the National Security Strategy concluded that the Cold War doctrine of deterrence through the threat of retaliation is inadequate to deal with rogue states because the rulers of these regimes are "more willing to take risks, gambling with the lives of their people and the wealth of their nations." Moreover, in contrast to the doctrines of the two superpowers during the Cold War, rogue states consider WMD to be the "weapons of choice" rather than weapons of last resort. Consequently, the administration argued, rogue states represent a qualitatively different kind of strategic threat, and the United States "cannot remain idle while threats gather." The United States, the administration announced,

lethal threat from a rogue state. During the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, the People's Republic of China was perceived by Washington in very much the same way as the U.S. perceived Saddam Hussein's Iraq or, currently, Iran. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist Party imposed harsh repression and killed millions of Chinese citizens, and Beijing—which had entered the Korean War in 1950, menaced Taiwan, gone to war with India in 1962, and seemingly was poised to intervene in Vietnam—was viewed as an aggressor. For Washington, Mao's China was the epitome of a rogue state, and during the Johnson administration, the United States seriously considered launching a preventive war to destroy China's embryonic nuclear program.

In many ways, Mao was seen by U.S. policymakers as the Saddam Hussein of his time. Like Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has made outrageous comments denying the Holocaust and threatening Israel's destruction, Mao also indulged in irresponsible rhetoric, even cavalierly embracing the possibility of nuclear war. "If the worse came to worst and half of mankind died," Mao said, "the other half would remain while imperialism would be razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist." Once China became a nuclear power, however, where nuclear weapons were concerned both its rhetoric and its policy quickly became circumspect. In fact, a mere five years after the Johnson administration pondered the possibility of striking China preventively, the U.S. and China were engaged in secret negotiations that, in 1972, culminated in President Richard Nixon's trip to Beijing and Sino-American co-operation to contain the Soviet Union.

The U.S. experience with China illustrates an important point: the reasons states acquire nuclear weapons are primarily to gain security and, secondarily, to enhance their prestige. This certainly

was true of China, which believed its security was threatened by the United States and by the Soviet Union. It was also true of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and is true of Iran. As Gavin writes, "In some ways, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' early analysis of China mirrors the Bush administration's public portrayal of Iraq in the lead-up to the war. Insofar as Iraq was surrounded by potential nuclear adversaries (Iran and Israel) and threatened by regime change by the most powerful country in the world, Saddam Hussein's desire to develop nuclear weapons may be seen as understandable." The same can be said for Iran, which is ringed by U.S. conventional forces in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq and in the Persian Gulf, and which is a stated target of the Bush administration's policy of regime change and democratization. Tehran may be paranoid, but in the United States and Israel, it has real enemies. It is Iran's fear for its security that drives its quest to obtain nuclear weapons.

THE REASONS STATES ACQUIRE **NUCLEAR WEAPONS** ARE PRIMARILY TO **GAIN SECURITY** AND, SECONDARILY, TO **ENHANCE THEIR PRESTIGE**.

The same architects of illusion who fulminated for war with Iraq say that if Iran gets nuclear weapons, three bad things could happen: it could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; it might supply nuclear weapons to terrorists; and Tehran could use its nuclear weapons to blackmail other states in the region or to engage in aggression. Each of these scenarios, however, is improbable in the extreme. During the early 1960s, American policymakers had similar fears that China's acquisition of nuclear weapons would trigger a proliferation stampede, but these fears did not materialize, and a nuclear Iran is no more likely to start a proliferation snow-

ball in the Middle East. Israel, of course, already is a nuclear power. The other three states that might be tempted to seek nuclear-weapons capability are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. But as MIT professor Barry Posen points out, each of these three states would be under strong pressure not to do so. Egypt is particularly vulnerable to outside pressure to refrain from going nuclear because its shaky economy depends on foreign—especially U.S.—economic assistance. Saudi Arabia would find it hard to purchase nuclear weapons or material on the black market, which is closely watched by the United States, and, Posen notes, it would take the Saudis years to develop the industrial and engineering capabilities to develop nuclear weapons indigenously.

Notwithstanding the near-hysterical rhetoric of the Bush administration and the neoconservatives, Iran is not going to give nuclear weapons to terrorists. This is not to say that Tehran has not abetted groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or

Hamas in the Palestinian Authority. However, there are good reasons that states—even those that have ties to terrorists—draw the line at giving them nuclear weapons or other WMD: if the terrorists were to use these weapons against the United States or its allies, the weapons could be traced back to the donor state, which would be at risk of annihilation by an American retaliatory strike. Iran's leaders have too much at stake to run this risk. Even if one believed the administration's hype about the indifference of rogue-state leaders to the fate of their populations, they care very much about the survival of their regimes, which is why deterrence works.

For the same reason, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons will not invest Tehran with options to attack or intimidate its neighbors. Just as it did during the Cold War, the U.S. can extend its own deterrence umbrella to protect its clients in the region like Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Turkey. American security guarantees will not only dissuade Iran from acting recklessly but also restrain proliferation by negating the incentives for states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to build their own nuclear weapons. Given the overwhelming U.S. advantage in both nuclear and conventional military capabilities, Iran is not going to risk national suicide by challenging America's security commitments in the region. In this sense, dealing with the Iranian "nuclear threat" is actually one of the easier strategic challenges the United States faces. It is a threat that can be handled by an off-shore balancing strategy that relies on missile, air, and naval power well away from the volatile Persian Gulf, thus reducing the American politico-military footprint in the region. In short, while a nuclear-armed Iran is hardly desirable, neither is it "intolerable," because it could be contained and deterred successfully by the United States.

In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the administration and neoconservative hawks argued that the post-1991 policy of containing Iraq was not working and, consequently, it was necessary to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Today, similar arguments are being invoked as a rationale for regime change in Iran. In February, the administration requested that Congress appropriate \$75 million to "support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom in their own country." In language eerily reminiscent of that used by the administration during the run-up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, President Bush declared, "By supporting democratic change in Iran, we

will hasten the day when the people of Iran can determine their own future and be free to choose their own leaders. Freedom in the Middle East requires freedom for the Iranian people, and America looks forward to the day when our nation can be the closest of friends with a free and democratic Iran." As the administration sees it, the government in Tehran is illegitimate because it is unrepresentative of the Iranian people. As Bush put it, "Iran is a nation held hostage by a small clerical elite that is isolating and repressing its people and denying them basic liberties and human rights." This is a simplistic view—and a dangerous one if it fosters in American policymakers the expectation that Iranians will welcome U.S.-initiated regime change.

For sure, there are important political divisions among Iranians. In Tehran,

attempt by the administration to orchestrate regime change in Tehran.

No serious observer doubts that Tehran is inching closer to developing a nuclear-weapons capability. Yet at least some feel that at the end of the day, this crisis—unlike Iraq—will not culminate in war. In part, this is because the U.S.—perhaps having learned from the Iraq War that there are high diplomatic costs of playing the Lone Ranger—is working in concert with Britain, France, Germany, and Russia to bring Iran before the bar of world opinion at the United Nations and ask the international community to impose sanctions on Tehran. Yet if sanctions are imposed they are unlikely to be effective. They seldom are. So the United States will be left with the options of either using military power or accepting a nuclear-armed Iran.

IRANIANS HAVE LONG MEMORIES OF FOREIGN—AND ESPECIALLY AMERICAN—INTERFERENCE IN THEIR NATION'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS.

especially among the educated and wealthy business elites, many resent the strict Islamic rule imposed by the regime. On the other hand, the regime has deep bases of support among the traditional bazzaris, the working class, and in the rural areas, the segments of society from which the clerics—who have always been politically influential in Iran—traditionally have drawn support. These internal political differences notwithstanding, it is folly to think that the U.S. can exploit them successfully.

Iran experts agree that Tehran's nuclear aspirations enjoy broad public support. Even more important, Iranians have long memories of foreign—and especially American—interference in their nation's internal affairs. Nothing could be better calculated to trigger a strong Iranian nationalist backlash against the United States than a serious

Some believe that the Bush administration has been chastened by its experience in Iraq and will avoid using military force against Iran. It is also commonly argued that the United States has been overstretched by its military commitment in Iraq and lacks the ground forces to go to war with Iran. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the administration has abandoned the military option. In January 2005, it was reported that since the summer of 2004 the United States has been mounting reconnaissance missions using both aerial surveillance and on-the-ground Special Forces teams to pinpoint nuclear installations and missile launching sites inside Iran. There have been recent press reports that the U.S. Central Command is preparing war plans for a sustained bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear installations.

Indeed, in a recent talk at Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service, a senior Central Command war-planner stated that all options for dealing with Iran—including the military option—are possible, while implying that Centcom is engaged in serious strategizing for a possible conflict with Iran.

Although these efforts could be written off as either routine contingency planning or as a way of supplementing diplomacy with the threat of military action, we should not dismiss the possibility that the administration really is contemplating war with Iran. After all, this is a notoriously cloistered administration in which power remains tightly concentrated among a small circle of policymakers who remain committed to their pre-existing worldview. President Bush remains at the apex of this decision-making process, imprisoned in his intellectual bubble and impervious to facts that create cognitive dissonance. We have had ample time to observe Bush's decision-making style, and it seems clear that once his mind is made up he dismisses discrepant facts and stays resolutely on course. Given his oft-stated view that a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable and that Iran is a rogue state, it would be foolish to think the military option is off the table.

But it should be. Attacking Iran would be a strategic blunder of the first magnitude—far worse than going to war with Iraq. To be sure, while the United States may be short of ground troops, it still possesses more than enough air power to mount a sustained bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities. The problem, of course, is that the U.S. does not know the location of all of Iran's nuclear sites. Consequently, a bombing campaign would inflict enough damage to impose some delay on the Iranian nuclear program, but because it is incapable of locating and targeting all

of Tehran's nuclear facilities, this is the best the United States can do. The U.S. ultimately cannot prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the risks to the United States are higher than any benefit that might be gained by slowing down Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Because of its links to the Iraqi Shi'ites, Iran has the capability to intervene in Iraq and put U.S. forces and the entire American project there in serious jeopardy. Tehran can also use its ties to Hezbollah and Hamas to create instability throughout the region. And the Iranians have the capacity to create a good deal of trouble for the U.S. in Afghanistan as well.

The administration has flirted with the idea of farming-out to Israel the task of attacking Iran's nuclear installations. But this—to recall what one Soviet official said about Nikita Khrushchev's decision to deploy missiles in Cuba—truly would be “harebrained scheming.” To reach targets in Iran, Israeli planes would have to overfly Iraq, which would require not only American consent but active co-ordination between the Israeli air force and the U.S. military. Absolutely no one would be fooled into thinking the U.S. was an innocent bystander. The whole world—and most important, the whole Islamic world—would know that Washington's hand was the directing force behind an Israeli strike on Iran, which means that the U.S. would be the main target of an Islamic backlash.

War is always a risky proposition—even for states that have impressive military capabilities. As German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg said during the July 1914 Crisis, war is “a leap into the dark” and a roll of the “iron dice” because there are so many imponderables and so many things that can go wrong. U.S. military and civilian strategists are so enamored with using shock and awe to impose America's will on its

enemies that they forget what strategy is all about: strategy is a two-player game in which America's adversaries have options of their own. Iran, in fact, has many options because of its links to terrorists, its own military capabilities—which are sufficient to impose high costs should American forces ever launch a ground war against Iran—and the importance of its oil to the global economy.

Iran is in no position to slug it out toe-to-toe against the U.S. in a conventional military conflict, but it has political, economic, and even diplomatic cards that it can use to make it very costly to the United States to employ military force in an attempt to halt or delay Iran's nuclear-weapons program. If the U.S. does use force against Iran it will be opposed diplomatically by China, Russia, and much of Europe. More important, a military strike against Iran would unleash forces that could trigger a true clash of civilizations, and would make the Persian Gulf and Middle East even more unstable and more anti-American than they already are. Simply put—unpalatable though it may be—the military option is not viable with respect to Iran.

Still, although a nuclear-armed Iran is not a pleasant prospect, neither is it an intolerable one. Tehran won't be the first distasteful regime to acquire nuclear weapons. The United States has adjusted to similar situations in the past and can do so this time. Rather than preventive war and regime change, the best policies for the U.S. with respect to Iran are the tried and true ones: containment, deterrence, and diplomatic engagement. ■

Christopher Layne is Associate Professor of International Affairs at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University and a member of the Board of Directors of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy.

Minding Our Manners

Egalitarianism's assault on class aims to make us all equally rude.

By Theodore Dalrymple

MY PARENTS HAD conflicting views about the nature and origin of good manners. My father took the Romantic view that they were the expression of man's natural goodness of heart and that they therefore emerged spontaneously—that is, if they emerged at all. If they didn't, it was because of the social injustice that inhibited or destroyed natural goodness. My mother took the classical view that good manners were a matter of discipline, training, and habit and that goodness of heart would, at least to an extent, follow in their wake. The older I grow, the more decisively I take my mother's side.

My father, who was left-wing in everything except his life, believed that manners in my mother's sense were but etiquette and that in turn etiquette was but a code by which the elite distinguished itself from *hoi polloi* in order to maintain its economic and cultural dominance. An elaborate code of conduct with arbitrary rules was a mask for sectional self-interest.

No doubt there is sometimes an element of truth in this. My mother taught me that when a gentleman accompanied a lady in the street—and he was to treat all women as ladies—he was always to walk on her outside, nearer the curb. There once was a time when this would have protected her from the splashes created by vehicles passing hurriedly by on muddy roads or perhaps even from the slops that householders emptied from their windows above. But this rationale had long since ceased to be the reason for a gentleman to walk on the outside of a lady.

My mother, however, instilled this principle so deeply in me that to this day I cannot walk on the inside of a lady—or, as we would call her now, a woman—without a feeling of unease very akin to guilt, as if I were doing something morally wrong. The fact is that most women nowadays have no idea why I change the side on which I accompany them when we cross the road, and some are even slightly disturbed by it, which, of course, obviates the whole purpose of good manners. I am thus left with an uncomfortable dilemma: either I must put up with an inner discomfort myself or risk causing my companion discomfort. It is clear which a true gentleman must choose.

It is obvious that, from the moral point of view, it matters not a bit on which side of the sidewalk a man accompanies a woman, unless she expresses a preference for one or the other. In this instance, my father would appear to have been right and to insist upon walking on the outer side of a woman would be not so much good manners as the self-conscious expression of superior caste.

A problem arises, however, when all such rules, arbitrary as some of them might be, are eroded to the point of total informality. The culture of any society becomes graceless in the absence of all formality, a development that is peculiarly evident in my own country, Great Britain. Here, gracelessness has become, by a peculiar ideological inversion that has occurred in my lifetime, a manifestation of political virtue. My

father's view of the whole matter of manners has triumphed all but completely.

The argument goes something like this: formality is etiquette, and etiquette is a manifestation of an unjust, class-ridden, patriarchal society. The rejection of etiquette and the formality it entails is therefore a sign that one is on the side of the angels, that is to say, of the egalitarians. Modern egalitarians, at least in Britain, do not content themselves with the kind of abstract or formal equality before the law that allows any amount of difference in wealth, status, taste, and sensibility; they demand some progress towards equalization of everything, including manners.

Of course, egalitarians are just as attached as everyone else to their own material possessions and wealth and have no real intention of forgoing them by radical redistribution, at any rate, of their own money and possessions. The struggle for equality—of the actual rather than the formal kind—has therefore to be transferred to fields in which it will cost the egalitarian nothing, or nothing material and financial.

What better way to prove your egalitarian credentials than by adopting the supposedly free and easy, utterly informal manners of those at the bottom of the social scale? The freer and easier the better, for such informality demonstrates another quality beloved of, and praised by, intellectuals: a superiority to the dictates of convention. Thus you can never be quite informal or unconventional enough.