

## Keeping Iran in Check: The Next President Must Focus on Achievable Goals

The question of what to do about the Islamic Republic of Iran has proved a reliable feature of American campaign debates for more than three decades. This reflects U.S. policymakers' abiding concern surrounding the threats posed by Tehran's nuclear program, support for terrorism, and repression of the democratic aspirations of its people. Beyond the tangible dimensions of the Iranian challenge, the history of Tehran's tormented relationship with Washington entails a special resonance with the American electorate and a pointed relevance for aspirants to political office, who are all too familiar with the fallout from the hostage crisis and the Iran-Contra scandal on prior American presidencies.

So it is hardly surprising that Iran has already emerged as a major point of contention in the jousting over foreign policy in the 2012 presidential campaign. The Republicans have identified Iran as a chief foreign policy vulnerability for the president, one that underscores their narrative that the Obama administration has mishandled the country's most urgent challenges and that American primacy in the world must be restored. For its part, the White House has argued that its

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approach has succeeded in generating greater multilateral cooperation on the threat from Iran and in imposing high costs on its leadership.

Unfortunately, the campaign debate on Iran thus far has generated more heat than light. Beneath the Republican recriminations and White House cheerleading, the overall approach and specific policy prescriptions of the two parties vary only modestly. They share the same expressed objective and, for the most part, the same instruments; the principal difference is one of tone. However, the political rewards for talking tough on Tehran tend to discourage serious and realistic discussion of an issue that has stymied presidents from both parties for more than three decades. That electoral theatrics eclipse sober analysis is hardly unusual, but on this issue at this juncture, it is particularly unhelpful. As tensions between Washington and Tehran intensify, the campaign discourse on Iran risks escalating the spiral between the two countries with a profoundly negative impact on American security interests and the international economy.

In the next term, the president must clarify U.S. goals and intentions and commit his administration to the strenuous and often-complicated diplomacy needed to deal with such a persistent problem. This diplomatic effort must remain focused on continuing to prolong Iran's path toward a nuclear weapon and preventing Tehran from threatening its neighbors or global energy markets. Sanctions and regional security policy have succeeded in constraining Iran's most dangerous policies. Ultimately, the Iranian threat will not reach a conclusive end without a transformation of the country's leadership—and only the Iranian people themselves can accomplish this.

## The Obama Record

During his own campaign four years ago, Barack Obama, then a U.S. senator from Illinois, signaled his support for engaging Iran by proclaiming in a primary debate his willingness to meet with Iran's reviled president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This was a potentially costly political move for a candidate with limited national security credentials; however, Obama doubled down as the campaign proceeded, highlighting his stance on Iran as emblematic of his commitment to revitalizing American diplomacy and, with it, U.S. standing in the world.

In office, Obama retained the basic framework for Iran policy that had evolved over the second term of the Bush administration, with the same priorities, policy vehicles, and even many of the same senior personnel. The focus remained almost exclusively on Iran's

nuclear ambitions, with “the P5 plus one” (the permanent five member countries of the UN Security Council, as well as Germany) continuing as the forum for any dialogue with Tehran. Like his predecessor, Obama sought to use both pressure and persuasion to draw Tehran into negotiations aimed at ending Iran’s uranium enrichment and constraining its nuclear activities. Obama has repeatedly invoked the mantra that all options for dealing with Iran are on the table, including the military option. Still, despite the substantive continuity, Obama’s inauguration raised expectations about the prospects for reinvigorating the multilateral negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program that had been stalled for more than two years, thanks to Tehran’s refusal to suspend enrichment.

Over the course of the ensuing months, there were multiple U.S. efforts to communicate the renewed American commitment to a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue: through public diplomacy and the media, in diplomatic settings, and, reportedly, in multiple, unprecedented, direct communications from President Obama to Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Tehran made no reciprocal gestures, although U.S. officials hoped that Iran’s June 2009 presidential elections might facilitate some response. During this period, Washington also worked to enhance international coordination on Iran, launching an ambitious “reset” of the U.S.-Russian relationship that traded American compromises on missile defense for greater Russian support on Iran.

In addition, the new U.S. administration saw the threat of punitive measures as an essential tool for forcing Iranian leaders to alter their policies. Washington wanted to preclude Tehran from exploiting any negotiations as a means of buying time for its nuclear advances, a ploy predicted by Obama’s critics. The White House announced from the outset that its initial goodwill would have a one-year expiration date and warned of new measures should Tehran prove unreceptive to dialogue. In practice, developments within Iran spurred multilateral discussions over punitive measures well before the year’s end.

Ultimately, like each of his predecessors, President Obama found his best-laid plans on Iran overtaken by events. Instead of freeing Tehran to focus on foreign policy, the June elections sparked historic protests over the improbable reelection of Ahmadinejad. The internal upheaval eventually had a dramatic impact on the options available for dealing with Tehran and the outlook and alignments of the Iranian leadership. Caught off guard, Washington initially moved cautiously to avoid tainting protestors as stooges of the “great Satan.” There was more to it, of course; Washington’s reticence on the protests underscored the disinclination for any steps that might poison the prospects for

negotiations. In September 2009 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly subordinated the democracy question, noting, “We encourage the free expression of ideas and political choices, but this nuclear program really is the core of our concern right now.”

Briefly, it appeared that this hard-nosed realism might pay off. With Russian help, Washington crafted a proposal to resupply Tehran’s medical research reactor in exchange for extracting much of Iran’s stockpile of low-enriched uranium. The arrangement would not have resolved the fundamental concerns over Iranian nuclear ambitions, but it might have eased the urgency at a time when revelations of a clandestine enrichment facility had spiked international concerns about Tehran’s military intentions. U.S. officials also hoped the fuel swap could instigate a sustainable negotiating process. Despite continuing turmoil within Iran, both sides signaled readiness to move forward. But no sooner had Iranian officials signed a preliminary agreement for the fuel swap than the regime began repudiating the bargain.

Collectively, Tehran’s actions from June through October 2009—engaging in electoral fraud, repressing public dissent, engaging in internecine warfare among the leadership, disclosing a suspicious new enrichment plant, and walking away from the fuel swap—corroded any Western inclinations for further engagement. All evidence pointed to an increasingly autocratic state, whose legitimacy had imploded and whose leadership was either unwilling or incapable of negotiating in a serious fashion. On this basis, Obama’s initial efforts to engage the revolutionary regime quickly gave way to efforts to mobilize the most robust and multilateral array of pressure on Iran in more than three decades.

In its embrace of pressure and effort to construct a robust regime of economic sanctions on Iran, the Obama administration followed the Bush second-term game plan of sanctioning Iranian entities on grounds of terrorism, nuclear activities, or both. The measures precluded foreign banks with U.S. interests or presence from having any contact with sanctioned Iranian organizations and had already boosted Washington’s capacity to constrain the Iranian economy. Obama also levied sanctions against individual Iranian officials for human rights abuses and signed new measures to prevent Tehran from restricting access to information technology. Like the Bush administration, Obama introduced the centerpiece of his pressure strategy at the United Nations, through a tough resolution passed in June 2010. UN Security Council Resolution 1929 included a ban on conventional arms sales and was designed to facilitate even more robust measures by

“like-minded” European and Asian states. In its aftermath, several hard-hitting measures were quickly implemented, including an EU ban on new energy investments, Russia’s cancellation of an antimissile systems sale, and new American sanctions targeting Iran’s reliance on imported gasoline.

Beyond sanctions, Obama deployed other forms of pressure in hopes of altering Iran’s decision-making calculus, including a variety of covert programs attributed to Washington, its allies, or both, such as releasing the Stuxnet computer virus and assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists. Still, even this forceful campaign generated little evidence of new Iranian compliance or moderation. In late 2011 the administration moved—after a congressional ultimatum—to up the ante by sanctioning Iran’s central bank. This measure will not be fully implemented until June 2012, and Obama retains significant flexibility to preclude escalating gas prices that would further damage the U.S. economy. Coupled with an impending European ban on Iranian crude imports, Iran’s ability to market its crude will be severely disrupted, with corrosive consequences for Iran’s economy and the regime’s crucial stream of resource revenues. At the same time, the new sanctions create new hazards for Washington in managing a complicated balance between ratcheting up pressure on Iran while avoiding undue impact on world energy markets and prices. The new measures produced a vitriolic response from Tehran, and the mutual recriminations and ominous rhetoric emanating from Israeli leaders contributed to a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the prospects for direct conflict in the run-up to the U.S. presidential election.

Any assessment of the Obama administration’s track record on Iran must acknowledge the current sanctions as an extraordinary achievement. Although Tehran has endured periods of tremendous isolation and scarcity, Iran’s revolutionary regime is now confronted with exponentially more severe restrictions in interacting with the world. This is the direct product of the Obama administration’s profound investment in diplomacy. Cooperation on Iran between Europe and Washington is at an all-time high, and despite periodic protestations about their opposition to new sanctions, Moscow and Beijing remain in close partnership with the United States as well. For the first time, dozens of countries have curtailed their lucrative trade and investment with Tehran. Equally important, all the world’s major powers are cooperating strategically on an issue that until recently was the subject of considerable discord. A confluence of circumstances helped facilitate this progress, but without the hard work of bringing along reluctant players and orchestrating a

multifaceted campaign, it is hardly certain that the international consensus on Iran today would be as strenuous or as meaningful as it is.

However, the Obama approach can hardly be declared a success, as vigorous multilateral cooperation and penalties have yet to translate into progress toward the primary objective of halting Iran's nuclear program. Sanctions have imposed heavy costs, but they have not generated public evidence of any greater moderation by the Iranian leadership on either foreign or domestic policies. The White House has forcefully defended its policy toward Tehran from the increasing criticism voiced by domestic and international critics for not applying even greater pressure on Iran. Senior U.S. officials remain fixated on their initial formula—that “pressure works”—pointing to Iran's past reversals such as its grudging 1988 cease-fire with Iraq. Ultimately, however, the administration's uncritical adherence to this formula seems to be promoting a kind of circular reasoning; when pressure fails to achieve its desired outcome, the only solution is additional pressure. Such logic offers little opportunity for de-escalation, and even as Obama has sought to tamp down heightening war jitters, his rhetoric has also become more explicit in committing the United States to military action should Iran continue to resist constraints on its nuclear activities.

As a result, not only has the Obama strategy fallen short of its aims, it may actually prove counterproductive. Maximalist measures merely confirm Tehran's darkest delusions of an implacable American conspiracy that will only conclude with the Islamic Republic's ouster, and the intensification of U.S. measures has reinforced Iran's own tendency to play hardball. Ayatollah Khamenei recently proclaimed, “We are a nation that will respond strongly and with full power to any aggression or threats,” adding, “We are not the kind of nation to sit idle and let materialistic paper tigers, which are rotten from the inside and eaten by termites from within, threaten the strong and iron-like Iranian nation. We respond to threats with threats.” A serious dialogue on security issues simply cannot succeed between a paranoid leadership and a government that has explicitly set out to collapse its economy. As the world turns up the heat on Tehran, a nuclear deterrent surely becomes a more valuable option for its leadership.

## The Republican Critique

Even before the recent intensification of frictions between Washington and Tehran, the issue of Iran had drawn considerable attention from the various candidates who were

ving for the Republican nomination for the presidency. With the exception of Ron Paul, whose contrarian, anti-interventionist stance has made him a useful foil for the rest of the field, the Republican campaign discourse has brandished Iran's continuing nuclear activities and other destabilizing policies as one of the chief disqualifications of the Obama administration. In their primary debates, the candidates have spent considerably more time discussing the Iranian challenge than almost any other foreign policy issue. *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens has identified Iran as "the central [foreign policy] issue" for the campaign, one on which President Obama is "most vulnerable, because that is where he has been weakest in the face of the gravest important policy challenge the United States faces."

Frontrunner Mitt Romney sees Iran as a headline issue emblematic of his overarching themes on the current president's approach to the international arena—namely, that Obama has failed in projecting U.S. leadership around the world and that he has "conveyed an image of American weakness" that endangers national security. Romney has consistently articulated a wide-ranging critique of Obama's Iran policy and signaled that addressing the Iranian threat will constitute the centerpiece of his own foreign policy agenda, as in his November 2011 op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* not so subtly titled "I Won't Let Iran Get Nukes." Ironically, Romney's refrain has been echoed by Tehran, with hard-line newspapers exulting in his characterization of Obama's term as a "failed presidency."

The Republican narrative elevates Tehran as the focal point of an international threat on a par with the menace of global communism. Romney has described Iran "as intent on building, once again, an evil empire based upon the resources of the Middle East" and as "the heart of the Jihadist threat," which constitutes "the greatest threat to the world since the fall of the Soviet Union and, before that, Nazi Germany." The Republican position on Iran reflects the binary worldview espoused by former president George W. Bush. Romney explained in an interview, "I see Iran's leadership as evil. When the president stands up and says that we have shared interests with all the people in the world, I disagree. There are people who are evil. There are people who have as their intent the subjugation and repression of other people; they are evil. America is good."

A core dimension of the Republican argument is the need for a more strenuous and decisive American action against Iran's nuclear program. Like Obama, the mainstream Republican candidates have committed Washington to ensuring that Iran

does not achieve a nuclear weapons capability. However, most Republicans have gone beyond the carefully parsed rhetoric of Obama who, like his predecessor, has declared such a capability “unacceptable.” The Republican policy is more explicit and ambitious. “If we reelect Barack Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon,” Romney predicted in a November 2011 debate. “And if we elect Mitt Romney, if you'd like me as the next president, they will not have a nuclear weapon.” This commitment to fortifying U.S. policy toward Tehran goes beyond rhetoric. Republicans were skeptical of Obama’s efforts at engagement at the outset, arguing that the offer of dialogue fostered an impression of American pusillanimity. In October 2009 Romney told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that the president should “stop thinking that a charm offensive will talk the Iranians out of their pursuit of nuclear weapons. It will not. . . . Once an outstretched hand is met with a clenched fist, it becomes a symbol of weakness and impotence.” For the most part, Republicans are also critical of the Obama reliance on sanctions as the primary tool of U.S. policy toward Tehran as insufficiently strenuous and ill suited to the task. Consistent with their more absolutist language on the Iranian nuclear threat, most of the Republican candidates have no qualms about an explicit endorsement of military action.

While the Republican discourse on Iran has a tendency to devolve into an uncritical competition for tough posturing, there has been some degree of nuance in the statements of various candidates. Before he dropped out of the Republican race, John Huntsman pointed out that Tehran may simply be willing to pay any price necessary to reach “their ultimate aspiration . . . to become a nuclear power, in which case sanctions probably aren’t going to get you there. And that means [it’s] likely we’re going to have a conversation with Israel at some point.” Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich has noted the logistical impediments to fully ending Tehran’s nuclear activities, describing his rivals’ advocacy of military action against Iran’s nuclear program as “a fantasy,” and instead advocates measures directly intended to “break the Iranian regime.”

Regime change is, of course, where Gingrich earned infamy with the Iranian regime during his days in Congress, spearheading efforts to generate a covert U.S. effort to topple Tehran. In fact, most of the Republican candidates have placed greater emphasis on utilizing U.S. power and diplomacy to transform Iran’s internal politics in a positive fashion—an issue that the Obama administration, despite its occasional references to Iranian protestors and its alignment with the democratic transitions elsewhere in the Middle East, has been more reticent to embrace. In 2005 then senator



Rick Santorum cosponsored a similar measure that would have appropriated \$10 million for regime change in Iran. For his part, Romney trumpets his refusal to provide state police protection for Iran's former president Muhammad Khatami, now a quasi-opposition figure, during a visit to Harvard in 2006, and calls for Ahmadinejad to be indicted for incitement to genocide.

Inevitably, there is an instrumental dimension to the centrality of Iran in the Republican narrative. Iran's regime presents a conveniently cartoonish adversary, one whose toxic ideology and long track record of malfeasance are easily identifiable for the American public. And focusing on Iran may reinforce another Republican campaign tactic on foreign policy—appealing to Jewish and Christian evangelical pro-Israeli voters who may be disaffected by the apparent discord between the Obama administration and the Jewish state. Iran also offers an opportunity for Republicans to criticize the current administration's environmental policy and ambivalence over expanding the exploration and development of U.S.-based petroleum resources. However, it would be misleading to portray Republican saber-rattling on Iran as purely manipulative. At the heart of the Republican critique on Iran is a deeply felt concern about the credibility of U.S. coercive power and the exigency of American leadership on profound threats to international security. Republicans have repeatedly criticized the ambivalence toward military action against Iran that has been conveyed by a variety of senior U.S. officials over the course of recent years. From this perspective, Iran represents the most vital and most pressing arena in which to reset the world's respect for U.S. resolve and deterrent power.

Still, for each of the candidates, the mechanics of actually achieving what they describe as both an urgent and immutable priority appears to have received relatively limited attention at this very early point in the campaign. This is somewhat paradoxical, since many of them reproach President Obama for lacking “a clearly articulated plan for dealing with Iran's growing nuclear threat.” When asked by the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board for specifics, Romney, for example, remained ambiguous. He ruled out the use of ground troops to deal with Iran and explained that his lack of a security clearance limits his ability to offer specific recommendations but added that “the range includes something of a blockade nature, to something of a surgical strike nature, to something of a decapitate the regime nature, to eliminate the military threat of Iran altogether.” The campaign's official strategy paper also offers little detail on how a Romney administration might improve the prospects for democracy in Iran beyond offering rhetorical support and

access to information about Tehran's misdeeds, tactics that are similar to the Obama approach.

The intense focus on Iran may also prove more of a political gamble than anticipated, particularly if tensions escalate further. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that American voters are eager to embark on another military venture in the Middle East, and a Republican discourse that appears overly casual about the costs and risks of war with Iran may alienate undecided voters as well as the anti-interventionist segment of the Republican base that has gravitated toward the Tea Party in recent years. As war jitters intensify, the seemingly blithe advocacy of another war may disquiet voters who are more interested in economic recovery than new commitments overseas. For his part, President Obama may prove less vulnerable on Iran than his rivals perceive; he has already proved capable of pushing back at claims that he has failed on Iran, declaring that "if some of these folks think that it's time to launch a war, they should say so. They should explain to the American people exactly why they would do that and what the consequences would be. Everything else is just talk."

## Iran Policy in the Next Term

Whoever inherits the presidency in 2013 will in fact face a historic opportunity and a historic responsibility with regard to Iran. Although the timeline of Iran's march toward the nuclear threshold is notoriously imprecise and subject to both argumentation and exaggeration, the present trajectory of its program makes the next five years the decisive interval. Moreover, the recent escalation of international pressure on Iran and the ferocious Iranian response have shifted the standoff into high gear and potentially put the two sides on a path toward direct military conflict. For that reason, it is entirely appropriate that the presidential candidates engage in a serious debate on how to handle Tehran. Regrettably, the American political calendar does not facilitate the kind of sober discussion that is necessary given the stakes and Washington's uninspiring track record over the past three decades in dealing decisively with the Islamic Republic. It can only be hoped that the next year will see more statesmanship than showmanship on Iran in the presidential debates, and closer scrutiny of the implications of both the incumbent's and the challengers' proposals.

Future American policy toward Iran should remain consumed with continuing to prolong the path to a nuclear weapons capability and deterring the influence and intentions

of its current regime. Diplomacy can and should take center stage under the next administration, with an investment in diplomacy that is at least as creative and determined as the punitive campaign against Iran has proved in recent years. This diplomatic initiative should be aimed at generating a mutually acceptable agreement on the boundaries of Iran's nuclear activities and demonstrating to Tehran the benefits of adhering to its commitments and to international law more broadly.

Should renewed diplomacy run aground, the reality is that Iran has long proved itself to be both an intractable threat and a manageable one for Washington. Even implicit acknowledgment of either dimension of this reality has become verboten for American politicians. Yet a decision to commit the nation to war, with its attendant risks to American lives and treasure and to the stability of the world economy, should require both candor and courage from Washington. As Obama found, pressure creates leverage, but it cannot create an interlocutor, and for all the focus from both the current administration and its challengers on the military options for dealing with Iran, even the most comprehensive use of force against Iran can only defer its capacity to develop nuclear weapons. There simply are no knockout punches to eliminate a threat of this magnitude, as Tehran itself is all too well aware.

The only fail-safe mechanism for permanently ending Iran's destabilizing policies is the transformation of its leadership's psychology, an outcome that remains, on grounds of both legitimacy and capability, the sole prerogative of the Iranian people. Washington and its allies can only help—or, more likely, hurt—around the edges. Even so, it is past time for a more sophisticated discussion surrounding what, if anything, the United States can do to foster a meaningful transformation in Iran's political dynamics.

If diplomacy should fail and democracy continues to be out of reach, then another option remains available to the United States and its allies: deferring and deterring. For the past thirty-three years, the influence and the intentions of the Islamic Republic have been mostly blunted by a combination of American power projection, Washington's durable alliances with and among Iran's neighbors, and the limitations on Iran's own capabilities. A policy that is aimed at deferring Iran's nuclear advances through sanctions and other measures, as well as at deterring its capacity for destabilizing the region can defend America's interests and those of its allies, particularly as the Iranian regime's economic, ideological, and conventional military clout withers.