

Iran

Countering Iran's Revolutionary Challenge A Strategy for the Next Phase

Background

Iran is a revolutionary power, still in an exuberant phase of its revolution. Geopolitically it seeks to dominate the Persian Gulf. Ideologically it challenges the legitimacy of moderate governments in the region. Iran's conventional military buildup, its pursuit of nuclear weapons in defiance of the UN Security Council, and its interventions in Lebanon and Iraq not only reflect its ambitions but also explain its current self-confidence.

Iran is not mainly an American problem; it is also a challenge to our allies and friends in the Middle East. Thus, the first stage in a counter-strategy is to bolster Arab allies and friends as counter-weights to Iranian power. How we conduct ourselves in Iraq is also crucial. Our friends in the Middle East view our policy in Iraq in a broader context -- as a test of the credibility of the reassurances we are trying to give them over Iran. There is no way for the United States to be strong against Iran if we are weak in Iraq.

Recommendations

The United States needs to achieve a better geopolitical and psychological balance -- some deflation of the Iranians' self-confidence and bolstering of our friends' confidence in us -- before pursuing a political dialogue with Iran; otherwise we appear a supplicant. To restore this balance, the United States needs to:

- declare its commitment to shield Gulf security against nuclear blackmail
- achieve some success in stabilizing Iraq
- opt for a broader use of economic pressures, rather than the narrowly targeted sanctions resorted to thus far
- step up support of civil society in Iran, including improving the quality of U.S. official broadcasting into Iran



Key Facts

- Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979 after the ruling monarchy was overthrown and the shah was forced into exile
- a group of Iranian students seized the US Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979 and held it until Jan. 20, 1981
- from 1980 to 1988, Iran fought a bloody, indecisive war with Iraq that eventually expanded into the Persian Gulf and led to clashes between US Navy and Iranian military forces between 1987 and 1988
- in March 2007, the regime's elite radical force took British sailors and Marines hostage in an apparent effort to blunt pressures from the international community over Iran's nuclear weapons program, interference in Iraq, and other issues

A full version of this paper, as well as supporting background material, is available at www.opportunity08.org

About the Authors and the Project

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Peter W. Rodman is a Brookings senior fellow. He is an expert in regional policies relating to Europe; East Asia; South Asia; Middle East and Persian Gulf. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in the George W. Bush administration. He has also held posts in the administrations of Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and George Herbert Walker Bush. Rodman also was a senior editor at the National Review from 1991 to 1999, and the director of national security studies at the Nixon Center.

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