



# POLARIS

## SPECIAL ISSUE

JULY 2008

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### IRANIAN GEOPOLITICS, THE NUCLEAR ISSUE AND EMERGING COUNTERSTRATEGIES

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## **Editorial**

Within NATO discussion circles, certain issues vital to regional and global security are often treated as taboo – either because they lie outside the Alliance’s orthodox area of operations or simply because they garner too much controversy. The war in Iraq is a classic example of both. So, one might say, is Iran.

The particularly tense environment this summer - generated by inflammatory rhetoric, imprudent missile tests, and sky-high energy prices - reminds us though that the Iranian nuclear issue looms large over areas of NATO interest, even if the organization itself is not directly involved. The multiple and overlapping dynamics of Tehran’s policy course will have significant effects on Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as on Mediterranean security and counter-proliferation efforts. Perhaps most immediately, varying assessments over the possible threat coming from the Islamic Republic drive the continuing debate over missile defence, and by extension Russian concerns in that area.

Jochen Kleinschmidt’s contribution is therefore extremely timely, and sheds valuable light on the complexities of Iranian strategy. Indeed, the term ‘strategy’ may presume a coherence which is not existent in this case – and Kleinschmidt’s multiple-level approach is therefore appropriate to navigate the links between domestic, regional, and global political drivers. And in the end, the analysis yields a rather optimistic outlook – paving the way for targeted and effective counterstrategies to avoid the proliferation of violence in a region already rife with it.

While the reformist hopes of the 1990s may have dimmed in Iran, the country is not the coherently anti-western aggressor portrayed by Ahmadinejad or much of the western media. Approaching it as such risks alienating those domestic forces and regional allies who encourage moderation – and could have disastrous wider repercussions in a region where political tensions and conflict-prone issues are so interconnected. At the same time, firm approaches are necessary to elicit policy change. Careful calibration and targeted efforts are the obvious link.

This paper is a result of the NATO School’s visiting research program, in conjunction with the Chair of International Relations at the Geschwister Scholl Institute for Political Science, University of Munich (LMU). The program is designed to provide junior scholars with valuable research and teaching experience in a multinational environment.

The author of this particular paper, Jochen Kleinschmidt, is a doctoral student at the Geschwister Scholl Institute. His pending doctoral thesis on multiple constructions of political spaces and his extensive academic achievements at LMU and elsewhere place him well to contribute much needed nuance to the NATO debate on Iran.

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## Iranian Geopolitics, the Nuclear Issue and Emerging Counterstrategies

### Introduction

The current academic and political discussion on the Iranian nuclear program shapes a popular perception of the situation as a confrontation between the West and Teheran. This paper aims to show that such a view is insufficient because it underestimates the complexity of Iranian strategy. A systemic approach to conflict theory is applied to disaggregate the 'binary confrontation pattern' into a more sophisticated model of three distinct conflict systems, which are then used to suggest possible counterstrategies for working towards the resolution of the issue.

The Iranian nuclear program is perceived as a threat for two basic reasons: first, the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran would drastically alter the strategic landscape of the region to the detriment of Israel, the United States, and any status quo powers in the region (cf. Rubin 2008: 61f). And second, it would further undermine the "nuclear taboo" already imperiled by the nuclearization of India and Pakistan as well as by the privilege accorded to some nations through the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Daase 2003: 34). This of course presupposes that, contrary to the public statements of the Ahmadinejad government, the aim of the nuclear program is one of military application. That assumption is may be plausible given the Iranian military's responsibility for some aspects of the nuclear program; the secrecy surrounding the program despite the international legality and acceptance of a purely civilian application (cf. Harrington 2008); the parallel development of ballistic missiles adapted for nuclear weapons deployment;<sup>1</sup> and probably most relevant, seemingly transparent geostrategic motivations for the Islamic Republic's nuclear aspirations (cf. Cordesman 2008: 26). By 2006, it appeared as a general consensus among academics that the aim of the program was to eventually generate an option for weaponization (Finger/Hiemann 2006). This opinion was not seriously shaken by the

publishing of the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which is mostly seen as describing a change in the *strategy* to acquire a nuclear option despite international opposition, not a change of this aim itself (cf. Rudolf 2008).

Therefore, the dominant question in current research is not *whether* Iran wants to 'go nuclear', but *how* this can be prevented. Conceivable outcomes of the crisis include a limited military strike with delaying effects on the nuclear program (but presumably even more dedicated efforts towards weaponization afterwards and the risk of retaliation through terrorist or asymmetric military attacks); a full scale invasion with the aim of regime change (very unlikely after the experience gained in Iraq); the dissuasion of Iran through a mix of sanctions, threats and offers and even the eventual acquiescence to the prospect of a nuclear Iran, in some cases with the argument that she has already passed the 'point of no return'. What most of the current analyses have in common, however, is that they see the situation as defined by a *single* conflict, one between Iran or her current government on one side and the United States, Israel, and some other Western and Middle Eastern states on the other side (e.g. Perkovich 2006, Pollack 2006). This belies the complexity of the conflict dynamics at work.

The model which is used here is based very loosely on the systemic theory of conflict originating from the works of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1984: 488-550), which can provide a simple frame of reference for the problematic issues surrounding the Iranian nuclear program. Conflict is defined as a self-reproducing system of mutually negatory communication, as it is clearly observable in the Iranian case. Any social context needs the following minimal criteria in order to be defined as a single conflict system: a), in the *social* dimension, a common perception of who is at conflict with whom, b) in the *temporal* dimension, a common history of mutually negating the premises of the other side's communication and c), a common issue describing what the conflict is about in the *factual* dimension (Bonacker 2002: 274f). If several conflictive dyads generally seen as relevant for the crisis<sup>2</sup> were analyzed according to these dimensions, it could relatively easily be shown that for the actors playing a role, the Iranian nuclear program appears as carrying a very different significance in each. This hints at

<sup>1</sup> Especially the new Shahab-4 missile, the development of which is basically inexplicable if it is not intended for WMD use (cf. Schmidt 2006: 7). Also telling is the recent hurried acquisition of two S-300PT air-defence missile systems from Belarus at above market prices, which are obviously intended for the protection of important sites most likely associated with the nuclear program (Harrington 2008a: 6).

<sup>2</sup> Such as Iran-Israel, Iran-US, Iran-Security Council, status quo powers-'revolutionary powers', principlists-opposition etc.



the parallel existence of distinct conflict systems in the case examined, each with its own internal logic and dynamics, and it will be demonstrated that this complexity is a major impediment to the resolution of the problem as well as an integral part of the Iranian government's strategy, but still provides opportunities for a diplomatic solution.

## **1. The Logical Framework of Iranian Geopolitical Strategy**

### **1.1 Domestic Level**

First of all, there is the issue of internal dissent in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Mostly described as taking place between 'hardliners' and 'reformers', or more recently between 'principlists' and 'pragmatists' (since the reformist camp's role has declined drastically since the presidential elections of 2005), this conflict has its roots in the struggle between different political currents beginning after the death of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The issue at stake here is the choice of priorities regarding Iran's political, economic and social development. The aptly named 'principlists', led by the current President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, see their aim as the preservation and furtherance of the ideals of Khomeini's Islamic Revolution by any means, including support for terrorist actors and possibly the development of nuclear weapons. At the centre of their ideology, however, is the maintenance of an ideologically rigid stance in internal politics. Their opponents, the 'pragmatic conservatives' headed by figures such as the former president Hashemi Rafsanjani and the mayor of Teheran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf pursue a more moderate approach with a priority on economic well-being; while still not averse to power politics in order to increase regional influence and ensure regime security, they do not see the development of the nuclear option as an ultimate necessity (Pollack 2006: 76).

The power struggle between the two factions has been going on for many years and in different configurations, indeed since before the rise to power of Ahmadinejad. But especially after his taking office, the nuclear program became a cornerstone of government policy. I argue that, in the context of the inner-Iranian conflict, it serves a purpose far removed from traditional ideas of foreign policy – namely that of preserving the increasingly authoritarian rule of the principlist faction. By constantly evoking the specter of armed conflict with Israel or external intervention by

the United States, the nuclear program could, in combination with the bellicose rhetoric of the president, generate a sufficiently threatening environment in which to paint as traitors those willing to compromise over the program (cf. Goodman 2008: 19, Schirmer 2008: 115f). This connection was made most obvious in 2004 when the former Iranian intelligence official, politician and hard-line cleric Ali Fallahian sought to discredit the Khatami government by claiming that crucial information about the Natanz facility had been leaked by reformist officials (Ganji 2005: 10f).

The phenomenon of hardliners using independent informal foreign policy and more or less clandestine military action to influence the internal power distribution in Iran is nothing new. Previous examples include the occupation of three islands in the Persian Gulf by units of the Sea Pasdaran in order to modify the Rafsanjani government's more conciliatory tendencies, as well as the kidnapping of British sailors by the same organization in March 2007 (Reissner 2007: 18). The nuclear program in this context serves the function of perpetuating such a 'strategy of tension'.

### **1.2 Regional Level**

The second conflict related to the nuclear program could be described as that between the Islamic Republic of Iran and her state and non-state allies on one side, and several regional status quo powers on the other. Iran and its allies are sometimes called the "HISH alliance", referring to the initials of the major entities making up that presumed pact.<sup>3</sup> The other side can be seen as comprising Saudi Arabia, Jordan, most of the Arab Gulf states, Egypt and other actors allied with them (Rubin 2007: 60f). Even though this lineup of adversaries seems like a reenactment of the centuries-old Sunni-Shia conflict, religious or sectarian questions are not deciding factors. For example, the militant Sunni ideology of Hamas has not impeded cooperation with Shiite Iran. Rather, the current configuration of pro-Iranian versus anti-Iranian forces could be dated back to the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war. This conflict system should be seen as a continuation of the struggle for political survival in an area where governments generally lack both wide popular legitimacy and essential problem-solving capacities in the economic and legal sectors. In this situation, most of them view transnational ideological threats equally seriously as those more

<sup>3</sup> Hamas, Iran, Syria and Hizballah.





conventional military threats which are often overemphasized by more traditional state-centric analyses (Gause 2007: 120f). The more conservative Middle Eastern regimes have tried to cope with these challenges through internal repression and accommodation with the United States and Israel, relying on Western support for their security sectors and Saudi financial support for their economies. Those avenues are closed or unattractive to regimes whose legitimating strategies are to a large degree based on opposition to the existence of Israel (especially in the case of Syria) or on enmity towards the United States (in the case of Iran). Being unable to confront either directly, they have adopted a stance that relies on an asymmetric strategy by supporting irregular actors – principally Hamas and Hizballah – that pose a threat to regional stability, and particularly to the ‘cooperative’ states’ regime security (Goodman 2007: 6).

Some analysts describe this strategy as aggressive, the nuclear program being the cornerstone of an alliance that strives for regional hegemony under an Iranian nuclear umbrella (Amidror 2007: 2). This is questionable considering the insufficiency of conventional forces under the control of Iran and its allies to impose anything resembling regional hegemony, especially in a context that would imply the eventual involvement of Israel and/or the United States (cf. Lange/Schmidt 2007). This is a region where most adversaries could either seek protection from the United States or, in the case of Israel, possess their own nuclear deterrent. Therefore, the consequences of an Iranian nuclear capability with regard to its regional allies are not at all clear. The expectation that irregular actors supported by Iran would be emboldened by an Iranian ‘nuclear umbrella’ is questionable: it remains doubtful that Iran would be willing to risk its own destruction over interests of its proxies, who also might not be inclined to endanger their local freedom of action in exchange for a highly implausible nuclear guarantee (for the case of Hizballah, cf. Lowe/Spencer 2006: 28). In a comparable situation in South Asia, a functional nuclear deterrent did not deter India from acting against irregular groups supported by Pakistan. It could be argued that a nuclear capability would at least enable Iran to support irregular actors with virtual impunity. But it is equally likely that a nuclear armed Iran would generally act with more restraint towards radical organizations out of fear of escalation.

Whether there is a direct connection between the nuclear program and Iran’s support for irregular actors, if the purpose of the nuclear program was to provide some sort of protection for the latter, then the bellicose rhetoric used by the Iranian president would have been pointless before the actual possession of atomic weapons. Recent research suggests that while the program is still in the enrichment stage, even a relatively limited military strike on the respective facilities – one that might be undertaken by the Israeli Air Force – could disrupt the enrichment process for a considerable time span and “deal a significant blow to Iran’s nuclear ambitions” (Raas/Long 2007: 9).

Yet, it would be too easy to dismiss the issue as an instance of simple irrationality. It seems that instead of providing a means of coercion, the nuclear program serves a function of legitimation in the context of what could be called “radical, intra-Islamic diplomacy”: by symbolically challenging the strategic dominance of the United States and Israel in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic under Ahmadinejad projects the image of a consistently radical foreign policy that has influenced public opinion in the Middle East to a certain degree (Friedman 2006). This provides an additional degree of security to the Iranian regime by threatening regional destabilization in the case of an attack on itself (Goodman 2007: 7f).

### 1.3 Global Level

And finally, there is the system of conflict between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran and some or all of her allies on the other. It would be interesting to debate precisely which entities would make up either side. Suffice to say that one will contain Israel and the United States, while the other will contain Iran and those members of the ‘HISH’ axis which stay loyal in case of escalation. This is the conflict that usually provides the cognitive frame for the Iranian nuclear ‘problem’ to Western publics, and likely also to Western governments. It is also the way the situation is most often described by the Iranian government – though with the opposite moral values attached (Goodman 2007: 6). Here, the issue is one of norm compliance: According to its opponents, Iran should adhere to the NPT, should respect the sovereignty of countries in the region, and should not payroll terrorist movements – whereas Iran insists on the peaceful character of its nuclear program and describes its meddling in regional affairs



as directed against illegitimate foreign intervention (Ganji 2005a: 16).

Again, the interpretations of the nuclear program's role in this conflict differ: a very small minority of analysts considers its purpose to be the creation of a nuclear first strike option against Israel or other targets, such as oil facilities and American military bases in the Persian Gulf. This interpretation would first of all assume the Iranian leadership's acquiescence in the destruction of their own country. Such an apocalyptic attitude would supposedly stem from the rather crude version of Twelver Shia Islam espoused by the principlist hardliners surrounding Ahmadinejad – an ideology that is detested and increasingly criticized by more traditionalist clerics (cf. Maghen 2008). In this case, however, it would be a sign of extreme ineptitude for the Iranian leadership to make public announcements about the impending elimination of Israel when a nuclear weapons capability is not even within short reach (Ganji 2005a: 18). As outlined above, it would create unwanted international attention towards the program that might lead to its violent demise, or at least provide the intended victims with lead time.

And while the professed ideological beliefs of the Ahmadinejad government may not align with basic assumptions of modern rationality, the decision-makers of that government are certainly not unintelligent or incompetent. They managed to gain and maintain power successfully in one of the most complex, dynamic and treacherous political systems even in the Middle East, while operating in a very difficult international and economic environment (Kamrava 2007).

A less radical proposition thus appears more plausible, namely that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapons option in order to eventually deter American or Israeli use of military force in the theater (Schake/Yaphe 2001: 6). But in the end, this idea suffers from the same problems that make the offensive character of the Iranian nuclear program implausible: without a deployed force of nuclear weapons, there can be no nuclear deterrence – and the aggressive posture of the Ahmadinejad government seems to generate considerable risks for the program while any weaponization efforts are still far from the deployment stage. Furthermore, traditional theories of nuclear deterrence would suggest that simply possessing a few atomic weapons would not suffice as a functional deterrent; rather, a country would need to have respectable conventional forces as well (cf. Luttwak 2003:

250). Due to financial and technological constraints, that is not a prospect for Iran. The country's irregular proxies may be seen as some kind of substitute, but this is a rather risky proposition. Those proxies are far from being under the direct control of Teheran, making them very unreliable assets in a scenario of possible nuclear escalation: their potential for independent action might generate risks which Teheran is not willing to take (cf. Lowe/Spencer 2006: 28). In any case, if the singular Iranian goal was to possess a nuclear deterrent, than the logical course of action would be to assuage Western and Israeli fears over the current program by allowing inspections until a truly clandestine military program could be pursued in relative silence – as how Pakistan obtained her now realized nuclear deterrent (cf. Zeb 2006: 388).

Thus, while the Iranian government would certainly not object to having a nuclear deterrent given its many security challenges, it is highly likely that its nuclear program, even though it started out as such (Schake/Yaphe 2001: 6), now serves less as a future deterrent than as a bargaining chip. Not unlike North Korea, it changes the international status of Iran from an isolated country with economic problems to a potential troublemaker with worrying capabilities that the international community might try to appease with concessions in the economic, political and security fields. If recent developments in foreign policy theory are taken into account, the heightened international attention garnered by the crisis situation might even be an incentive by itself (Wolf 2008: 22). Some of the more substantial advantages that the Iranian government might seek from its counterparts appear to be an arrangement with the USA over its influence in Iraq and maybe Afghanistan; the opening of diplomatic relations, and – perhaps most important with the goal of regime survival in mind – access to Western sources of funding and expertise for its extractive industries (cf. Friedman 2005). At the same time, the nuclear project as a bargaining chip also allows the continuation of other problematic aspects of Iranian policy, primarily the support for irregular groups in the Middle East.



## **2. Iranian Strategy and Emerging Counterstrategies**

### **2.1 Iran: A Coherent Strategy?**

After having defined its frame of reference in terms of three distinct geopolitical conflict systems – domestic, regional and global – some conclusions can be drawn regarding the Iranian government's strategy. This should aid in the formulation of policy options for NATO nations – primarily for those engaged with Iran in nuclear negotiations – that might influence Teheran's behavior. Those policies shall presumably seek to avoid the deployment of a nuclear weapon by Iran, and also to avoid or limit the occurrence of armed conflict related to the nuclear question. Indeed, the consequences of an armed strike would likely be counterproductive to nonproliferation in the long term (Barnaby 2007). The following thus could be considered as a basic "normative scenario", attempting to formulate efficient and risk-averse strategies to achieve those goals (Börjeson et al 2006: 728).

Assuming the Iranian government acts within the triple cognitive framework outlined above, its internal logic of action and its benchmarks for success can be presumed to be different but complementary within each, if a coherent strategy is pursued. Indeed, this coherence might be in doubt in view of the considerable fragmentation of the Iranian political system, and also of its dispersed decision-making structures in the security sector (cf. Kamrava 2007: 92). The factions that profit from success or failure in the different conflicts vary – consensus is probably highest in regard to support for Shiite actors in the Middle East (especially for Hizballah), but Iranian opinion on confronting the international community over the nuclear program, and of course on the Ahmadinejad government itself, is divided. The "mainstream conservatives", led by the Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Speaker of Parliament Larijani, are apparently far more willing to compromise – as well as to use the issue as a tool to put pressure on the hardliner principlists around Mahmud Ahmadinejad (cf. Pollack 2006: 76).

However, despite the internal conflicts in Iran often spilling over into foreign policy (Reissner 2007: 18), the course of action of the Ahmadinejad government can still be described as relatively coherent, despite the polyvalence of the nuclear program in the three contexts described above. Since international pressure was put on Iran over the nuclear issue, the program has served to channel that

pressure against the internal opposition; to generate legitimacy for Iran in the intra-regional struggle for regime survival; and to provide Teheran with a bargaining chip in negotiations with the USA despite the latter's far superior power and military capability. So far, the government's strategy has mostly been successful.

### **2.2 Weaknesses of the Hardliner Strategy**

But the apparent coherence of the Iranian strategy should not be confused with its infallibility. The question is where weaknesses are located in the outlined framework of conflict systems.

On the domestic level, the Iranian government's strategy is determined to a great extent by the continued preeminence of the principlist hardliner faction. While the principlists might very well be endangered by the presidential elections in 2009, they are on the other hand bolstered by vigilante groups which might still preempt a more conciliatory foreign policy – as they effectively did during the Khatami administration (Rubin 2001: 120).

Another question is whether a new 'pragmatic conservative' leadership elected in 2009 (the discredited reformist camp formerly led by ex-President Khatami will likely not be able to participate in a meaningful way) would not find it attractive or even necessary to use the nuclear program in the same way as the Ahmadinejad government has done. The ultimate determinant would be the position of Khamenei, who usually refrains from taking part in public policy discussions but is in direct control of "issues of vital political and military importance" (Kamrava 2007: 86). While he supported the nuclear program in the Khatami era (Pollack 2006: 75), he seems to have shifted his support towards the more moderate conservative forces. The result has been public controversy between Khamenei's protégé Ali Larijani and supporters of Ahmadinejad. The disputed issue was, among many others, whether Iran should pursue a "free-hand strategy" or rather coordinate its activities more closely with Russia and take a more conciliatory tone in negotiations with Western powers (Goodman 2008: 11f).

One possibility is that the Supreme Leader changed his mind on the nuclear program because of reduced probability of outside military intervention. However, the reverse could also be true: that Khamenei reversed his stance on the nuclear program in order to build up pressure against an unpopular government perceived as





incompetent in economic policy and too antagonistic in its relations with other political factions (cf. *ibid.*: 15). Most likely, both options play into his policy. Whatever his precise plans, a possible change of government would considerably improve the prospects for nuclear negotiations, since enrichment suspension and International Atomic Energy Agency access to nuclear facilities would not cause the same loss of face engendered by the current government's public enthusiasm for the program.

On the regional level, possible consequences of change are harder to make out. An Iran isolated from its HISH allies might view itself as more vulnerable because of the lack of asymmetric deterrence options. In consequence, nuclear weapons might become more attractive as a potential deterrent, or for extracting concessions from both the USA and those states in the region who would still feel threatened by actors such as Hizballah and the Mahdi Army (cf. Yehiav 2007: 6f). On the other hand, leading support for radical Islamic insurgency in the Middle East has become such a defining component of Iranian foreign policy that the disruption of its informal alliance system might trigger a veritable crisis for any Iranian government – especially the current one given its exceptional support for transnational militant movements (Kamrava 2007: 94). If Hamas or Hizballah pursued a strongly independent course from Iran, the radical hardliners in the Pasdaran – who are responsible for running relations with irregular actors – would most likely be alienated from the Ahmadinejad government. Pragmatic forces could then present this as a damning foreign policy failure, further discrediting a leader already unpopular for his economic mistakes (cf. Goodman 2008: 19).

How likely is the collapse of Iran's alliance network? The question is of course difficult to answer in a context of very opaque decision-making. It is Syria that must be seen as the crucial link between Teheran and Hizballah as well as Hamas, with both groups operating important headquarters in Damascus and relying on supply lines flowing through the country. Some scholars argue that "there is nothing the West can offer Syria [...] to split from Teheran, which gives it so much geopolitical leverage, Islamist legitimacy, and material benefits" (Rubin 2007: 70). While these are important and valid points, it appears that the Syrian position is currently shifting towards a possible deal with the advent of Israeli-Syrian negotiations under Turkish

mediation. Such a deal might include a peace settlement with Israel in exchange for parts of the Golan Heights; the return of some Syrian influence over Lebanon in exchange for the ending of militant action by Hizballah; and, most important in this context, the end of the diplomatic isolation of Syria in exchange for withdrawal of its support to Teheran over the nuclear question (Friedman/Zeihan 2008). Obviously, such an arrangement would be difficult to implement considering the contrary interests not only of Iran, but also of Palestinian groups. Also, the isolation of the Syrian regime and the sovereignty of Lebanon have been cornerstones of American Middle East policy. On the other hand, regaining its role in Lebanon and its possession of the Golan have always been major objectives for the Assad regime, and might compensate for the loss of Iranian-provided assets. Such a development would definitely strike a major blow against the internal standing of hardliners in Iran. Its likelihood, however, is extremely difficult to assess.

On the global scale, the main issue for the Islamic Republic is regime survival – and not necessarily the survival of the Ahmadinejad government *per se*, keeping in mind that the ultimate decision-making capacity lies with the office of the Supreme Leader (Kamrava 2007: 86f). The key weakness of the government's strategy is therefore the possibility that Khomeini might come to the conclusion that the nuclear program, combined with the radical rhetoric of the President and the economic consequences of international isolation, is actually more of a long-term risk to regime survival than a possible compromise with Western powers. This is not entirely unlikely considering that Iran's most urgent external security problems have been alleviated somewhat in recent years. The destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (where Western powers and Iran actually perceive quite similar security interests), the ending of the Hussein regime in Iraq and the progressive establishment of a government that is unlikely to be hostile to Iranian interests, and the current unlikelihood of a full-scale American invasion aimed at regime change have all lowered threat levels (Gasirowski 2007: 127). The limited military strikes now being considered, even if they were effective against nuclear installations, would not endanger the political survival of the Iranian regime. As a consequence, the main challenge to regime survival is increasingly being perceived not to come from outside military action, but rather from the disastrous consequences of



international isolation for the economic and scientific sectors of Iranian society. Pragmatic conservative politicians in the newly elected parliament have already hinted at this threat, and are apparently willing to apply public pressure in order to reach an agreement with Western states – or at least to pursue a more careful approach to diplomacy (Reissner/Fuchs 2008: 4). Such an agreement, however, would be contingent upon the Iranian side emerging from negotiations with substantial security guarantees to alleviate concerns over Iranian weakness – particularly in the context of a foreign policy discourse that has long centered on the hostile intentions of foreign powers (Smyth 2006: 21).

### 2.3. Emerging Counterstrategies

Considering these substantial weaknesses in the Iranian hardliners' strategy, what policies on the part of Western states could prevent the eventual weaponization of the nuclear program at an acceptable cost? Potential diplomatic options (as opposed to military strikes) should again be grouped by their location within the cognitive framework outlined in Section 1.

A direct intervention in the domestic politics of Iran via clandestine action or the massive sponsoring of opposition groups appears to have very little chance of success, and both are very unlikely approaches. This is due to the "popular resentment against foreign interference" (Smyth 2006: 4) that is a significant feature of Iranian politics, largely stemming from the American- and British-sponsored coup against the popular prime minister Mossadegh in 1953. Any determined intervention in domestic affairs would likely see the current opponents of Ahmadinejad rallying around him to defend against what would be seen as a far more serious threat. Recently published accounts of funding increases for American covert activity in Iran (Hersh 2008) might suggest erroneous policy in this context, but could also be seen as one step in a complex process of signalling. In that case, the decision would build up an asset in future negotiations, providing something Washington could give up in return for concessions made by Iran. Another such bargaining chip pertaining to domestic conflict in Iran is the Mujahideen-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) – currently interned under American supervision in Iraq – that could be demobilized as a significant step towards alleviating Iranian security concerns. All in all, Western policy relating to domestic issues in Iran should focus

on avoiding an image of hostility towards the Islamic Republic's regime in general, while demonstrating a very determined opposition towards the possible military applications of the nuclear program. Such a policy would be helpful in alleviating Iranian fears over the dominant issue of regime security, while strengthening pragmatic opponents of the Ahmadinejad government.

On the regional level, options for direct intervention are also limited. Caution should be applied to any measures aiming to isolate Iran from its regional allies; as such isolation could result in a heightened sense of vulnerability. More important than the actual results of Western policy on regional issues should be the principle of moving with caution – and not antagonizing Iran to a degree that it feels its regime security threatened. One issue merits special attention: a military strike by Israel would virtually force any Iranian leadership to take a hostile stance towards any states friendly to the former; increasing the probability of the weaponization option taking on a new and more determined character (cf. Barnaby 2007). The consequence would be a dead-end situation with few visible options for both sides other than military conflict. Reliable security guarantees for Israel are therefore of high importance. However, recent Israeli threats in relation to Iran seem to be of a symbolic nature, and the aforementioned negotiations with Syria also seem to suggest a general relaxation of tensions, so this aspect can be seen as moving in the right direction.

The same strategy of what could be called 'focused pressure' should be applied at the global level: a clear connection of increasingly severe sanctions to the continuing pursuit of nuclear weapons should bring the most important Iranian decision makers to the realization that ultimately their regime security is endangered more by domestic discontent and economic failure than by external military threats. If the current role of the nuclear program in Iranian foreign policy is indeed more that of a bargaining chip than that of providing a future deterrent, then success should be possible. The question is, however, what kind of concessions can be made without unduly endangering other legitimate security concerns. Central to the Iranian willingness to compromise is likely the assurance of the friendly status of Iraq, for which it should be given substantial guarantees (cf. Goodman 2007: 19). Current political developments there seem to encourage such a solution, which could take various forms, from a status of



neutrality to a permanent consultative process with Iran.

### 3. Conclusions

While Western sources tend to view the nuclear issue as a traditional power conflict between states, the prism through which the Iranian leadership views its strategy is primarily one of regime security. This leads to relatively coherent approaches to the nuclear issue on the three distinct levels of domestic, regional and global conflict, all of which are designed to preserve some potential for action in case it is perceived as threatened. 'Regime security' in this context, however, should be interpreted as meaning the continued functioning of the general power structure of the Islamic Republic. As long as the foreign policy of Western states carries the message that regime survival is not the issue at stake, but rather focuses exclusively on the military aspects of the nuclear program, the prospects for a peaceful solution are relatively bright. This would of course necessitate a period of relative restraint concerning other problematic issues regarding Iranian policy. But such restraint seems to be an acceptable price to pay for the peaceful resolution of the current crisis. This could still be derailed, however, by one or several actors in the region deciding that they have more to lose from an agreement than from continued conflict.

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