The Paradox of Iran’s Nuclear Consensus

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TEHRAN—Though from American shores it may seem as if Iran’s recent election turmoil speaks of deep divisions in society and politics, there is one policy issue on which public opinion remains nearly unanimous: the nuclear program. Among the Iranian political elite, there is a clear internal consensus—in the run-up to the recent elections, even President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reformist challenger, Mir Hossein Moussavi, professed his support for the nascent program. As such, unless this consensus dramatically falls apart, the politics of Iran’s nuclear program will likely continue down the current path, making progress in negotiations with the United States a challenge, but a distinct possibility. In the aftermath of Iran’s post-election drama, some Western observers have argued that the apparent weakening of the Iranian elite’s policy consensus, and also by implication the legitimacy of the incumbent government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, will enable the West to acquire leverage vis-à-vis the nuclear issue. In fact, the reality is quite different. Divisions within the Islamic Republic, if they truly exist, will not provide the space for reconsidering the nuclear question. Only when there is an internal consensus among Iran’s elite and the possibility of negotiating from a position of strength will Tehran come to a genuine and definitive agreement with the United States over the nuclear issue.

Iran seeks an “independent nuclear fuel cycle,” the domestic capacity to produce enriched uranium and plutonium to fuel nuclear reactors for electricity generation. The legitimacy of this civilian goal is almost universally acknowledged, but Western governments have voiced concerns over Iran’s reluctance to allow inspectors to view facilities and over fears that, once a nuclear capability is achieved, producing weapons-grade material is but a few steps away. The Iranian government, for its part, has said it does not intend to pursue this secondary course. Yet, from the perspective of Iran’s elite, any negotiations between Tehran and Washington which might cause Iran to deviate from the long-term project of an independent nuclear fuel cycle would be an untenable strategic mistake.

There is little doubt that post-election events have splintered the consensus over issues of foreign policy among the Iranian elite, but such divisions will not severely impact the previous consensus around the nuclear issue as a matter of national and geostrategic pride. Some Western policymakers have suggested it would be unwise to proceed with nuclear negotiations in
light of post-election events. However, the reality is that the Iranian nuclear program will continue to progress independently of the pace of any future nuclear negotiations—as key Iranian players across the ideological spectrum have pointed out. What this means is that there is a limited timeframe in which negotiations can take place.

If the West continues to stall, not only will Tehran’s nuclear program continue, but there is a distinct possibility that the current Iranian dilemma of whether to choose between civilian capability and weaponization will be settled simply by the course of events. While Western governments scold the Ahmadinejad regime for its crackdown on post-election protests and for the trial of dissidents, and while the right-wing government in Tel Aviv contemplates taking preemptive military action against Iranian nuclear facilities, the leadership in Tehran, frustrated by Western pronouncements, may well feel itself compelled to harden its position and pursue a policy with destabilizing repercussions for the entire region.

This is the ultimate Iranian dilemma—choosing between capability and deterrence. The outcome of this quandary will be determined not only by its own cost-benefit analysis, but also by the policy the United States decides to pursue in the coming months. Therefore, time is of the essence. At the very least, it is crucial that the West immediately cease questioning the legitimacy of the incumbent government, since this will only be detrimental to its goal of curbing nuclear proliferation and preventing growing instability in the region.

It is important to dispel the belief that Ahmadinejad will simply continue his previous line, or that he intends to pursue a more intransigent position with respect to the West over the nuclear issue. Ahmadinejad’s first term can be seen as laying the groundwork for extracting tangible benefits from the United States. His hard line on the nuclear issue has allowed him to cultivate factional support within Iran and the backing of the establishment, thus making it possible in a way hitherto unimaginable to broker a deal with the United States. Ahmadinejad’s institutional backing allows him to break taboos and offer real assurances to the United States in a way that previous Iranian presidents could not. He knows full well that bravado cannot sustain the consensus of the Iranian elite and public indefinitely—his outspokenness and proactive stance on regional and international issues can sustain support both at home and abroad for only so long. Not only is he aware that such rhetoric is unsustainable in the long term on the domestic front, but given the significant change of position undertaken by the Obama administration with respect to Iran, Ahmadinejad could find himself in great difficulty in the coming years, unless he too decides to pursue a more pragmatic line.

A Long Trajectory
Over the past two centuries, Iranian governments—whether democratic, monarchical, or theocratic—have been criticized for failing to acquire substantial power, influence, and wealth. This may seem like old history, but these currents persist throughout Iranian society to this day. Thus each government in Tehran comes to power with the burden of legitimizing itself in the eyes of the nation, shaking off the yoke of colonialism, and reclaiming for the people of Iran the true measure of respect, legitimacy, and stature commensurate with their long and glorious history. This has never been an easy task, and many leaders have failed to achieve these goals. In recent history, this runs from the incompetence and weakness of the central Qajar state, which ceded vast territories in the course of two wars with Russia, to the Pahlavi state’s dependence on the United States, which was a powerful source of
discontent in the events which led up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. One notable success was Mohammad Mossadegh’s nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1951, which was framed as key to Iran’s national interest and development strategy. The victory was short-lived. The Mossadegh government, under considerable pressure from both Britain and the United States, was eventually overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency and Britain’s MI-6. The episode left an indelible mark, fueling a long-standing paranoia about the meddling of foreign powers and reaffirming the sanctity of Iran’s natural resources and their connection to national character and identity.

At the same time, the Iranian political and intellectual elites have often felt slighted by the West—arguing that American and British interests have repeatedly thrown obstacles in the path of Iranian economic development, prosperity, and regional influence. British roadblocks to Reza Shah’s national railroad project were followed by Western resistance to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah’s Isfahan steel manufacturing project, which led Iran to turn to the Sovi-
ets for technical assistance. Since the revolution, the fear of foreign meddling in Iranian affairs was vividly affirmed by Western support for Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist regime, in particular through the supply of sophisticated chemical and biological weaponry, whose scars mark the Iranian national consciousness to this day. More recently, the European Union has attempted to stunt the development and growth of Iran’s nuclear program. President Ahmadinejad seized the opportunity to castigate the EU for not permitting “even ten centrifuges to operate on Iranian soil.”

Ahmadinejad has similarly sought to frame the nuclear issue as one of critical national independence that would stymie foreign powers seeking to deprive Iran of its rightful place—as a major international and technological power. It is within this construct of national independence that Ahmadinejad has sought to build an internal consensus for Iran’s nascent nuclear program at both the political elite and national levels. The president’s key innovation with respect to the nuclear issue was to bring the matter before the public. Unlike past Iranian governments when the issue remained largely confined to policy elites, Ahmadinejad has managed to build unprecedented public support for his nuclear policy. According to a 2007 survey sponsored by Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based polling organization, more than 90 percent of all Iranians support the nation’s right to develop nuclear energy. This is now seen throughout society as a matter of technological advancement, national pride, and solidarity, a goal that will surely bolster Iran’s image at home and abroad.

Thus, since the nuclear issue has come to the fore, all political parties in Iran have hewed to a consistent policy in pursuing nuclear talks with the West. Despite differences of negotiating style with respect to the nuclear program and the possession of enrichment capacity, the standard reformist and hard-line policy disagreements disappear when it comes to ceding ground to the West over an independent nuclear fuel cycle. The few reformist parties and individuals who have tried to oppose the continued pursuit of an independent nuclear fuel cycle have been largely isolated, not merely at a political level, but also by a backlash in public opinion.

Regional Leadership

Iranian political and intellectual elites have always sought a regional status in keeping with Iran’s long history and geographically important location, as well as its wealth of natural and human resources. Successive governments have sought this goal in different ways. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi sought to turn Iran into a regional power through an alliance with the United States, with Iran emerging as the gendarme of the region. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution, the new government sought to connect with the Islamic world, aiming to become a regional power. In the heady days after the 1979 revolution, the Iranian leadership sought to export revolution under the banner of pan-Islamism, supporting marginalized Shiite populations in the Persian Gulf region, to little avail. As a result of this ineffective policy, a new and more pragmatic line emerged in Iranian foreign policy, one that ought to be viewed as Iran’s attempt at détente and confidence-building with its Arab neighbors.

Today, the Iranian elite and public perceive the nuclear issue as the means to cement the nation’s regional status. Take, for example, Ali Larijani, former chief negotiator of the nuclear program and current speaker of the Majlis, Iran’s parliament, who has argued that “Iran has a strategic perspective with respect to its nuclear program. When other nations of the region such as
Egypt and Turkey have managed to progress, there is no reason why Iran shouldn’t also be able to do so.” Larijani’s perspective is elaborated in Iran’s Strategic 20-Year Plan (2005–25), ratified by the ruling Expediency Council, whose ambition is to transform “Iran into a developed country ranking first in the region economically, scientifically, and technologically.”

In practical terms, Iran faces a number of growing challenges. Its population is increasing rapidly, it is prevented from trading with some Western nations, it has aging oil production facilities and expanding domestic energy consumption—all of which, say Iran’s leadership, will require a capacity to produce nuclear energy.

At present, the bulk of Iran’s foreign currency earnings come from oil exports. The production of nuclear energy will allow Iran to sell more of the oil it produces to international markets, thus securing a substantial flow of foreign currency for economic and developmental goals. But, to be fair, there are security reasons that also play a role in the nuclear equation. It is no secret that Iranians and their government feel they are living in a dangerous neighborhood, due to foreign military forces in the region and the ongoing ethnic and political challenges from unstable neighbors such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Challenges from Central Asia and the Caucasus are an ongoing source of uncertainty along Iran’s northern border. Moreover, Iran is well aware that it is surrounded by four nuclear powers—Israel, Pakistan, India, and Russia—all of which pose potential threats to its security. In this light, it is no wonder that the Iranian leadership sees in the nuclear powers of Pakistan, Israel, and India proof of double standards in the American approach to nuclear proliferation in the region. They take umbrage at the fact that Washington has supported these nations in their quest for civilian nuclear energy and looked the other way at weaponization, while threatening Tehran if it should attempt to do the same. Regarding Pakistan, Iranians are wary of a fractured government in Islamabad, a growing Islamic insurgency spilling over from Afghanistan, and rightly fear that Sunni militants could lay their hands on a stray nuclear weapon or “dirty bomb.” In

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Effectively, under such circumstances, and situated in what it sees as a hostile neighborhood, it is hardly surprising that the Iranian government views an independent nuclear fuel cycle as interchangeable with deterrence, rather than as a bid for building a nuclear arsenal. While building a nuclear arsenal would be a costly endeavor, risking international isolation and assuring Iran’s “pariah status,” acquiring civilian nuclear capability would afford Iran the security and psychological edge it has long sought, and at a lower cost. Indeed, just attaining a nuclear capability will afford Iran a measure of deterrence, since in the advent of a nuclear attack—or a conventional attack on nuclear facilities—by either the United States or Israel, Iran would not be far from being able to respond in similar fashion. But the hope of the Iranian leadership is to avoid any such eventuality through the deterrent power provided by the independent nuclear fuel cycle.

From the outset, the debate over the Iranian nuclear issue has taken the form of a cost/benefit analysis. Though the costs certainly have already been heavy, we should not be misled into thinking that the debate has been closed. There remains some ambiguity with regard to weaponization: in practice (when or indeed if this would be possible); morally (environmental consequences and dangers); and strategically (if possessing nuclear weapons would make Iran more or less secure). But the vigorous public debate among students, the media, and intellectuals has focused solely on the goal of Iran’s desire to obtain an independent civilian nuclear fuel cycle, and how this would affect the nation’s sense of security, regional status, development, and role in the broader international community. The Ahmadinejad government has framed the debate for public consumption in just such terms. The issue of weaponization is simply not discussed in any public forums.

Skeptics who doubt that Tehran would limit itself to a purely civilian capacity would be wise to recall three salient facts about Iranian society today. First, Iranians have an enormous respect for international laws and institutions and, above all, want to become full members of the international community from which they have long been exiled. Second, the Iran-Iraq War, in which some 500,000 soldiers and civilians were killed (on both sides), has left the public with a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards weapons of mass destruction. The devastation wreaked by Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons in the course of the eight-year conflict is still clear. One need only walk Tehran’s streets to see the grisly plight of scarred, disfigured Iranian war veterans. Finally, most Iranians are concerned that, should their government pursue nuclear weapons, the costs of such action would be extremely high. A nuclear weapon might guarantee some existential measure of security, but would surely cut off Iran’s interactions with the Western world and stunt the nation’s economic prospects. No one in Tehran wants to see the country become a pariah state like North Korea.

**Dismissing an Arsenal**

The national debate over the question of building a nuclear arsenal currently focuses on two issues. First, the benefit: what is the value of deterrence—how effectively would such weapons deter outside aggression? Second, the cost: what is the price tag, if Iran decides to pursue a nuclear weapon?

There are quite a number of reasons why, from the perspective of the Iranian leadership, weaponization is untenable, unnecessary, and unwise. Iran has already begun to build substantial status as a major regional power. Since the start of the Iraq War in 2003, Iran has used its influence as a leading Shiite nation to forge coalitions and friendships with regional states and political
groups. By pursuing weaponization, Iran would jeopardize such gains, since it would itself be perceived as a potential source of instability in the region and a threat to neighbors. These nations, in turn, might feel it necessary to go nuclear, thereby countering Iran’s natural influence and geopolitical position. Indeed, a weaponized Iran would likely spark a regional arms race. There have already been some signs that Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan might be interested in obtaining nuclear technology with Western backing. This might lead to an anti-Iran coalition among neighboring states to offset collectively the security threat posed by an Iranian nuclear bomb. Regardless, the Iranian leadership has stressed that the nation has no need to pursue nuclear weapons because its conventional weapons currently allow it to respond in kind in the advent of a military attack by the United States or Israel. If either power were to attack Iran, Israeli and American targets within the region would be open to retaliation.

Moreover, the Iranian leadership is well aware that the development of a domestic nuclear bomb would work against its interest in having fewer American troops in the region. For good reason, Iran has been hostile to the presence of foreign troops along its borders. The long-term presence of the U.S. military in the region is seen clearly by Iran as a threat to its security. But an Iranian nuclear weapon will not send U.S. forces scurrying back home. Rather, it would likely embed American forces in greater numbers, with their weapons focused on Tehran. It would also be ample pretext for Washington to provide Arab states of the Persian Gulf with a nuclear security umbrella, and thus a permanent American military presence in the region. From an Iranian perspective, this would be a most undesirable outcome. It is unlikely that Washington wants to have its hand forced in this manner either; the misadventure in Iraq and the ongoing war in Afghanistan have been enormous drains on the United States, in both blood and treasure. From Washington’s perspective, a massive, unending presence for the U.S. military in the Middle East is undesirable. Thus, any signs that Tehran is moving toward weaponization would be a red line as far as the United States and Israel are concerned, and could set a course toward international backing of an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

At the same time, there is the potential for vast economic reprisals. A move toward weaponization would immediately provoke further sanctions, which would severely threaten the Iranian government’s public commitment to rapid development and economic growth. While President Ahmadinejad would likely win some currency with the public by spinning this as yet another insult from the West, a serious economic downturn due to increased sanctions would last far beyond the rhetoric. Eventually, the citizenry would clamor for change. Though the Iranian government remains unfazed by the existing sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, its preference is to avoid another costly round. This, tough talk aside, is the view from Tehran. A full-scale weapons program has slim public backing,

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though there is an unparalleled consensus behind the civilian nuclear project.

**Ahmadinejad's Second Term**

Many Western critics have assumed that the Ahmadinejad administration will either continue along its present course with respect to nuclear policy or take an even harder and more belligerent line. Such an assumption, however, is deeply flawed for a number of reasons. First, given the president’s significant role in forging such a consensus it would be unlikely for him to back-track at this point and relinquish the Iranian assertion of the right to the independent nuclear fuel cycle. Even if he wished to do so, given the intricate structure of the Iranian decision-making process, he would not have the power to abandon the existing consensus.

Until now, Ahmadinejad’s nuclear diplomacy has rested on framing the entire debate as an issue of nationalism: focusing on independence and resistance to foreign aggression, and issues of justice and inalienable rights pertaining to the double-standards of Western states with respect to nuclear powers in the region, such as Israel. As a result of such rhetoric, which resonates with large segments of the Iranian public, Ahmadinejad has been able to attract support on the nuclear issue from a broad cross-section of people, ranging from elites and intellectuals, to the middle class and poorer sectors of society. From a Western perspective, it may seem as if post-election protests have illuminated the deep political wedge among the citizens of the Islamic Republic. But in Tehran, things are seen quite differently. There has been much friction and jockeying for position among the political elite, but this has a historical precedent in the Islamic Republic. Though the protests in the immediate aftermath of the election were certainly unprecedented, they have now been reduced to a small core of politically active students and organizers. The much anticipated “second wave” never came. Opposition leaders have been isolated and are no longer able to coordinate their activities—the sheer weight of state power has forced the majority of the population (even those who voted for Moussavi) to get on with their everyday lives. It may not have been pretty, but it is the reality on the ground. None of this turmoil, however, has any bearing on the consensus of opinion on the independent nuclear fuel cycle.

As he begins his second term, Ahmadinejad will continue to build on his “look to the East” foreign policy, exchanging economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation with his Russian and Chinese counterparts for their greater involvement and backing of Iran’s independent nuclear fuel cycle, particularly at the Security Council. He will also likely continue to strengthen ties to non-aligned nations and leftist governments in Latin America. Such backing has allowed Ahmadinejad to broaden the nuclear debate beyond merely a United States vs. Iran showdown to encompass still resonant anger over colonialism and Western imperialism, pride in the rise of the global South, and the immorality of denying other nations the technology their people desire.

Ahmadinejad will also continue his proactive policy of tying the nuclear issue to regional dynamics across the Middle East. Since September 11, 2001, Iran has demonstrated that it is indispensable to regional stability—both in positive and negative ways, depending on one’s perspective. The importance of Iran’s role and influence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the Arab-Israeli conflict is widely acknowledged. The Iranian government has long supported Hezbollah and Hamas against Israel, and has equipped friendly Shiite factions in Iraq. During the July 2006 Israel-Lebanon war
and the January 2009 assault on Gaza, Ahmadinejad was vociferous in his condemnation of Israel. He has attempted to portray Iran as the sole defender of the Palestinian cause, fighting tirelessly against occupation and oppression. In the same manner, Ahmadinejad has managed successfully to link the Iranian nuclear issue to the cause of justice and equity within the Islamic world. Though the president’s rhetoric may not sit well in the corridors of power in Riyadh, it has touched a nerve on the Arab street, where the issue is seen almost as a matter of regional pride, beyond merely Iranian interests. Thus, international efforts to curb the Iranian nuclear program are perceived as further evidence of Western arrogance and imperialism. The political reality, both across the region and in Tehran, seems to allow for few options.

**Testing Times**

Put simply, the nuclear issue can go three ways: 1) Iran manages to reach an agreement with the United States and Western powers to establish a verifiable nuclear fuel producing facility on Iranian territory, subject to international monitoring. Iran would then have its nuclear fuel cycle, if not entirely “independent.” This eventuality could only come if Iran’s security and legitimacy were to be guaranteed by Washington. If the nation’s fears are allayed, the Iranian elite would not feel compelled to pursue a nuclear weapon. 2) Iran’s leaders fail to gain traction in nuclear talks with the United States and, fearing instability, continue to pursue an independent civilian nuclear capability without aspiring to weaponization, much like Japan. Tehran would possess the capacity for developing a deterrent, thus warding off potential threats of regime change or military attack by the United States and Israel—but likely encouraging increased militarization of the Middle East. 3) Iranian leadership feels itself sufficiently under threat, or is preemptively attacked by either the United States or Israel, and sets weaponization as the goal of the nuclear program. Such action—from either side—would provoke hugely destabilizing consequences for the region and beyond.

Though the third option appears to be the least likely scenario, the effects would be so damaging that all parties must take extra care to avoid any chance of inadvertently heading down this road. The looming question, though, is how to start talking.

Though the intra-elite consensus has been seriously tested by events since the June presidential elections, there remains near unanimity of opinion regarding the nuclear issue among Iran’s decision makers. But the war of words between the Ahmadinejad government and Western leaders, following the unrest, has complicated the potential for substantive talks regarding the nuclear program. Diplomatic progress on this front will only be furthered once the legitimacy of the Iranian leadership is accepted by the United States. When threatened from outside, experience has shown that the Iranian leadership slams the door on negotiations. Given the urgent timeline so often stressed by Western governments, such an outcome is clearly undesirable. History shows that only a self-assured and strong government in Tehran will be so motivated as to initiate negotiations.

However, the window of opportunity is not only a matter of concern for Western...
powers. Iran’s influence and reach in the region will attenuate with time as the various regional crises settle down and head toward a resolution. As a result of such developments, Iran’s and its regional allies’ interests will unlikely be in step to the same extent as they were in previous years. The growing independence of action evident in the behavior of numerous Iraqi factions is proof that Tehran’s friends will not unqualifiedly hew to the Iranian line forever, given that they have their own interests and local political geography to consider. Ahmadinejad himself is also well aware that the policies pursued in his first-term have a limited shelf-life. Not only is he under pressure to achieve tangible results at home, but international dynamics have significantly changed with the arrival of the Obama administration, which has decided to diverge dramatically from the tactics and tenor of the Bush administration in engaging Iran. Ahmadinejad, for all the demonization in the Western press, appears a rational actor. He, like Western leaders, also fears the consequences of nuclear proliferation and a regional arms race, and is aware of the urgent need to make progress in nuclear talks. Now that his power has been consolidated and approved by religious leaders, he finds himself in a much better position to represent the Islamic Republic and bargain with the West. On this basis, we can assume that, in his second term, Ahmadinejad is likely to pursue a more pragmatic tone with the United States, as long as strategic parity is preserved.

But it is critical to remember that it is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on who heads up the nuclear portfolio and who will negotiate with Washington. All other issues of negotiation—democratization, increased trade links, and human rights—are merely window dressing. It is only the nuclear issue that has the power to forge a “grand bargain” as it intrinsically embodies a convergence of American and Iranian interests. Thus far, the Supreme Leader’s position seems in line with that of President Ahmadinejad: Iran will only negotiate with the United States on an equal basis and providing the Obama administration is intent on “genuine change” in its attitude toward the Islamic Republic.

Despite the acrimony which has marred U.S.-Iranian relations in the past, it is a remarkable paradox that only the nuclear issue still carries enough weight to lay the groundwork for a broader détente and reconciliation between the two countries. This is not to say that a favorable outcome is guaranteed. Many obstacles, some seen and some not yet apparent, remain in the way. From the Iranian perspective, however, the first step is Washington’s acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the current leadership, recognition of the right to an independent nuclear fuel cycle, and a measure of respect for the nation’s long-held history as a regional power.

Both Washington and Tehran know which cards the other is holding. The only question now is how to play out the hand.●