A Test of Power

U.S. Policy and Iran

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PROJECTIONS OF the rise and fall of nations form an indispensable element in the conduct of diplomacy, yet such estimates of what power is and how it is changing are very uncertain. Some observers, indeed, have suggested that we are nearly destined to get it wrong. The English statesman Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, noted that those "who are in the sinking scale do not easily come off from the habitual prejudices of superior wealth, or power, or skill, or courage, nor from the confidence that these prejudices inspire. They who are in the rising scale do not immediately feel their strength, nor assume that confidence in it which successful experience gives them afterwards."

There are undoubtedly perils associated with either underestimating or overestimating one's power. The former mistake may lead to departures from an otherwise sound position or to a failure to exploit opportunities. The latter mistake is also familiar. History is littered with the examples of states that, acting on the "habitual prejudices of superior wealth, or power, or skill, or courage", undertake enterprises that prove the cause of their undoing. Though common sense suggests that these opposing traits would seldom be found together, historical experience often finds them joined at the hip. In Vietnam, for instance, both errors were committed. At the outset of American involvement, U.S. policymakers overestimated their ability to beat an ostensibly third rate power into submission and underestimated the true strength of the American position *vis-à-vis* the communist powers, mistakenly believing that if Vietnam turned communist the entire structure of peace would crumble.

The Bush Administration is committing the same dual error in its approach to Iran. It has vastly exaggerated the dangers associated with the development of an Iranian nuclear weapons program and underestimated the deterrent capacity of American military power. It has also vastly underestimated the potential perils of a preventive war against Iran.

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Lessons of the Iraq War

ONE OF the most remarkable features of the Iraq war is that it did not discredit the argument that preventive war must remain "on the table" as a way of preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In the aftermath of the American invasion, when it was discovered that there were no weapons to be found, attention was focused instead on the colossal intelligence failure that lay

behind the American effort. Mainstream critics made hay with an administration that had "stovepiped" intelligence to fit preconceived opinions, not with the underlying assumption that force would indeed have been justified had Iraqi WMD been found. Whether the administration deceived others or simply deceived itself became the vital question to disentangle, and Democratic critics looking to score political points did not directly challenge the underlying logic of the war.

The curious failure of the political opposition to meet the administration head on is also apparent in what emerged as the second great rationale for the Iraq war, which justified the enterprise as a noble crusade to depose a tyrant and to bring democracy to the Middle East. It is not exactly true to say that the administration switched rationales for the war once the banned WMD were not found, for the "we shall transform the Middle East by bringing democracy to Iraq" argument was present from the very outset, but it is undoubtedly true that the missing weapons did lead the administration to place far greater emphasis on the democratizing rationale. As with the argument over the weapons of mass destructions, critics in the main did not challenge the idea that bringing democracy to an oppressed people via external force was a noble and legitimate enterprise. Instead, they stressed the ham-handedness, lack of planning and operational errors that attended Operation Iraqi Freedom. Had Rumsfeld not displayed such hubris and had the advice of the generals for a larger force been heeded, they implied, it would all have worked out nicely in the end.

The Iraq War has become deeply unpopular with the American people, and only a third of the public approves of the Bush Administration's handling of the conflict. Despite these misgivings, however, it is remarkable that the swelling public disapproval has not really reached either of the two major rationales the administration adopted in making its case for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. The critique has focused on operational execution rather than the great objectives of national policy. It is probably fair to say that any future war justified simply on the supposed benefits of extending democracy would have great difficulty commanding public support, for the anticipated costs of such an enterprise would likely be seen by the public as outweighing any potential benefits. But a war to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a much different proposition. This meets, or appears to meet, the security test that the public imposes on projected uses of U.S. military power.

John McCain's formulation—"there is only one thing worse than military action, and that is a nuclear-armed Iran"—may well reflect a majority in public opinion. He appears to be joined in that perception by the "national security Democrats" and their new spokeswoman, Hillary Clinton, who has argued that "We cannot and should not—must not—permit Iran to build or acquire nuclear weapons."

Despite the confident assertions that Iran is hell-bent on acquiring nuclear weapons, the evidence available supports a much more guarded conclusion. Iran's public position is simply to insist upon its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to develop a civilian nuclear program, and it has offered to pair that acknowledgment with its acceptance of an intrusive inspections program. Its case for civilian nuclear power, though usually dismissed as transparently mendacious, is reasonably strong. Its reliance on oil for export earnings makes it reasonable to want diversification in its energy sector. Iranian public opinion—not simply the mullahs, but Western-leaning groups as well—bridles under the assumption that Iran is to be stigmatized and denied the rights common to all under the NPT. It is true that the development of a civilian nuclear indus-

try, even accompanied by international inspections, would give Iran the capability to move more rapidly to the production of a bomb were the decision taken to do so. Still, the confident assertions that Iran has decided to acquire nuclear weapons and will bend every effort to do so is simply worst-case speculation dressed up as fact. An equally plausible reading of the evidence is that Iran would be content with the recessed nuclear capability that such a bargain—enrichment on Iranian soil combined with intrusive inspections—would provide them.

The consensus view that Iran could not be deterred if it did acquire nuclear weapons is also dubious in the extreme. These alarms were a regular feature of the Cold War, and it was confidently predicted that neither the Soviet Union nor China would be susceptible to deterrence once they acquired atomic devices. Events showed otherwise. It is said today that President Ahmadinejad is different, that he welcomes the coming of the twelfth imam that a nuclear holocaust would entail, and that a crazed religious fanatic in control of a nuclear-armed state would represent an intolerable danger to Israel, the Gulf sheikhdoms, the United States and the rest of the world. Against these considerations, however, it may be asserted that the Iranian public did not elect their new president on the basis of the expectation that they would soon be burnt to a crisp, but rather that he would improve their standard of living in the here and now; that Ahmadinejad's reputed common touch is utterly incompatible with the careless disregard for the lives of his countrymen that such an act would entail; that any decision for war by Iran could not, from all we know of Iranian decision-making, be undertaken simply on the president's say so but would also require the consent of the religious establishment; and that it is inconceivable that Iran's rulers would display such a complete disregard of Iran's true interests as to invite the retaliation against it that would surely follow.

The restraints governing the use of nuclear weapons rest on far more than the strong likelihood of retaliation. Any regime that used nuclear weapons in a first strike "bolt from the blue" would almost certainly be signing its death warrant. The infamy that would attach to any such action, both at home and abroad; the license it would give to others to retaliate or otherwise attempt to bring the regime down; the international isolation and withering contempt it would draw upon itself; the reputation for brigandage it would entail—all this constitutes an insurance policy against the dangers of an Iranian bomb. As a practical matter, it makes extremely unlikely—nay, virtually inconceivable—what is now taken by consensus opinion in America as a sort of moral certainty.

The Perils of Preventive War

WERE THE Iran crisis to follow the Iraq script, it is to be expected that the advocates of a preventive war would simultaneously maximize the dangers of not acting and minimize the dangers of so acting. That pattern would likely hold good in the event the United States approached the brink of war, but so far at least there is an acknowledgment, even among those who believe that preventive war must remain an option, that the consequences could be very serious indeed. Still, if the hypothetical costs of not acting are seen to be infinite, even the disastrous consequences of a preventive war may be seen as a case of *faute de mieux*.

A preventive war against Iran would likely feature a large-scale aerial attack that had the aim of setting back Iran's nuclear program and destroying other aspects of its military capability. The U.S. government has given consideration to other options, ranging from stepping up

assistance to groups aiming to overthrow the Iranian regime to a full-scale invasion by American ground forces. However, the likely insufficiency of the one and the prohibitive costs of the other make an aerial assault the most probable course of action, were the decision made to use force against Iran.

The assumption that the Iranian regime would be weakened by such an attack is almost certainly wrong. Such an attack on Iranian national territory would rather seem calculated to rally support for the regime and to enable it to demand great sacrifices of the population to carry on a long struggle with the United States. Already, Ahmadinejad's position has been strengthened by the sense that legitimate Iranian national interests are under attack from abroad; an actual attack could not fail to have the same effect in spades. Domestic unanimity among the American people was the result following the attacks of Pearl Harbor and of 9/11, and the phenomenon holds even when an unpopular regime suffers a surprise attack—witness the effect of the 1941 German invasion on Stalin's Russia. The only plausible forecast is that a U.S. attack would stiffen Iran's spine rather than break its back.

War carries with it so many unknowns that it is difficult and hazardous to speculate on its immediate consequences, to say nothing of its long-term effects. But clearly a U.S. attack has the potential to make untenable the American position in Iraq. The Shi'a groups that the United States has brought to power all enjoy close ties to the Iranian regime, and the Iraqi Shi'a would be far more likely to sympathize with victims of an aerial assault than with its perpetrators (especially if, as is probable, the attack were attended by significant civilian casualties). A vast Shi'a insurgency, aided and supplemented by Iranian forces, could easily result from a U.S. preventive war. Just as the Iraqi war compromised the ability of the United States to successfully complete its mission in Afghanistan, so an Iranian war would likely compromise the U.S. position in Iraq. Indeed, given Iranian ties to various Afghani warlords, the prospect of a vast arc of instability extending from Afghanistan to Iraq seems a very likely consequence of an American preventive war.

It is the effect on the geography of oil production and on world oil prices that is likely to be of most immediate concern to the American people. The price at the pump is, oddly, for Americans a sort of litmus test for the success of a presidential administration, and woe to those—like Jimmy Carter and, now, George W. Bush—who have the misfortune to rule in an era of rising prices. How high oil prices would rise, and how long they would remain in the stratosphere, is a function of how much and for how long production capacity is shut down. Here, too, there are a host of imponderables. Would the Iranians attempt a closure of the Straits of Hormuz, and could the U.S. Navy thwart such an attempt if made? Would Saudi production be partially disabled, either because of Iranian missile strikes or the long awaited internal revolution by Shi'a oil field workers in the Saudi Eastern Provinces? Would Iran's four-million-barrel-per-day production be taken off the market?

Various probabilities might be assigned to each of these scenarios, but the truth is that we cannot know the answer in advance. At a minimum, however, the present tightness in world oil markets creates the decent possibility of an explosive rise in oil prices, above and beyond the $150 per barrel price often bruited about—a development that could easily threaten the stability of the world financial system. That system—and the American economy—is beset with a range of imbalances that make it susceptible to crisis even in the absence of an external geopolitical shock. The litany of ills is familiar and includes the slow bleed of

the dollar and growing doubts that it can function much longer as a reserve currency, a huge and expanding current account deficit now running at some $800 billion a year, a budget deficit much worse than the official figures let on, and an unbalanced U.S. economic recovery heavily dependent on low interest rates.

Much of the U.S. economic recovery from the downturn experienced after the crash of the Nasdaq and the 9/11 attacks has been centered on the housing sector and the inflated prices that arose when the Federal Reserve injected massive amounts of liquidity into the system by bringing short-term interest rates down to very low levels. This has made the economy much more vulnerable than it was even in the 1970s to the rising interest rates that explosive spikes in the oil price would surely bring. The stagflation of the 1970s, captured in Ronald Reagan's "misery index", may be in the cards even without an Iranian war; it is a virtual certainty with it. Theoretically, it is undoubtedly true that the United States could afford a much higher level of military expenditure. Practically, however, the evidence indicates that higher levels of military spending are palatable to the public only on the condition that they are paid for through deficit financing and not higher taxes.

Above and beyond these tangible consequences is the deepening of the legitimacy crisis that has bedeviled American power in the last several years. That crisis has been centered on uses of force that the rest of the world has deemed both reckless and unilateral; a preventive war against Iran would confirm the diagnosis of the harshest critics—that the United States is an out-of-control imperial power that has lost its sense of restraint. Apart from a few states, like Japan, that have thrown in with the United States and seem determined to support it regardless, world public opinion would undoubtedly run decisively against the U.S. action. Even in Britain, whose support was so important in the Iraq war, public opinion would undoubtedly be hostile. A straw in the wind was former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's characterization of such a preventive attack as "inconceivable." The neoconservative assumption that such hostility can be safely neglected strains credulity.

Nor can American domestic support be taken for granted, especially if, as is probable, the war were to go on for a long time. It may be that public opinion could be brought to support the war initially. The public is clearly susceptible to the demagogic prophecies that would allegedly ensue from the Iranian possession of nuclear weapons. Once the true costs of the war became apparent, however, public support would probably falter. The public would almost certainly oppose the "solution" that some neoconservatives have favored—a ground invasion of Iran that would sweep away the regime—for this would require the return of conscription and the mobilization of resources on a scale far beyond anything now contemplated. Finding itself committed to a protracted war that the United States did not know how to win but could not afford to lose, the public might well turn against the Iran war, as they have turned against the "war of choice" against Iraq.

When Karl von Clausewitz observed that defense was the stronger form of warfare, he was not thinking of public opinion, but today it is precisely the importance of public opinion that gives defensive war a decisive edge over offensive war. This applies not only to the United States but also to Iran; not only to the participants in a conflict but also to the bystanders who judge of its rights and wrongs, its expediency or recklessness. The twentieth century's judgment that aggressive war counted among the great crimes of humanity—a judgment registered in the United Nations charter and in repeated declarations of American statesmen—bears not only on the morality but on the expediency of preventive

war. Wars of choice cannot sustain public support if things go badly, as in war they often do, whereas wars that are begun defensively and from necessity fortify public support behind a regime and its cause. It is not a contradiction, but a reflection of the character of contemporary warfare, to insist that a war of aggression undertaken by Iran would risk the fall of the regime, whereas a war of aggression undertaken by the United States against Iran would strengthen it.[1]

A Grand Bargain?

IN LATE May 2006, the United States dropped its previous insistence on refusing negotiations with Iran and offered to join in the negotiations led by the EU-3 powers (Britain, France and Germany) if Iran suspended its enrichment activities. China and Russia were persuaded to embrace a proposal, presented by EU negotiator Javier Solana, that demanded an end to enrichment on Iranian territory and offered Iran in return a program of light-water nuclear reactors together with various economic incentives, including Iranian membership in the World Trade Organization. Conspicuously missing from the proposal was a willingness on the part of the United States to either open diplomatic relations with Iran or offer security guarantees against a preventive U.S. attack. Though force was to remain an option if diplomacy failed, security guarantees, said Secretary Rice, are "not on the table."

Though some press commentary attributed the decision to the recognition by the Bush Administration that a preventive war was not a viable option in dealing with Iran, considerable evidence (adduced by Seymour Hersh) indicates that military planning for a preventive attack proceeds forthwith.[2] The dynamic within administration councils was probably quite similar to that which occurred in the summer of 2002, when Secretary of State Colin Powell persuaded President Bush to make an approach to the UN Security Council before attacking Iraq. Undoubtedly, an appreciation of the hazards of preventive war are far greater in the Iranian case than they were in the case of Iraq, but even a hawkish administration prepared in the end to use force would have an interest in attempting to show that it was impossible to resolve the conflict through diplomacy. The willingness to go the diplomatic route, however, was not accompanied by a willingness to make the concessions necessary for the diplomatic route to succeed.

If a diplomatic solution is to prove viable, the United States will need to add to the package of incentives hitherto offered to Iran. Above all, the United States should be prepared to recognize the regime and give up the objective of seeking its overthrow. It is implausible to believe that a negotiation whose central purpose is to ease Western fears of Iranian attack should not have as its complement the easing of Iranian fears of U.S. attack. This would not be a negotiation at all but a diktat, and we have every reason for thinking that the Iranians will not accept any such procedure.

The West also needs to back down

[1]For further analysis of the pros and cons (mostly the latter) of a U.S. preventive war against Iran, see the Spring 2006 issue of *The National Interest*. W. Patrick Lang and Larry C. Johnson, "Contemplating the Ifs", emphasize the grim consequences of a U.S. preventive war but also insist that an Iranian bomb might have consequences even more severe. Richard K. Betts, "The Osirak Fallacy", challenges the assumption that a preventive war would seriously set back Iran's capacity to produce nuclear weapons and argues convincingly for the superiority of a strategy of containment and deterrence.

[2]Seymour M. Hersh, "Last Stand: The Military's Problem with the President's Iran Policy", *The New Yorker*, July 10, 2006.

from its symbolically important demand that Iran cease all enrichment activities. A far better stance would be to accept limited enrichment together with internationally verified limits on the number of centrifuges the Iranians could operate. This would allow to Iran the right it claims, with justification, under the NPT, while also providing assurances that Iran could not make significant progress towards building nuclear weapons. Though it would undoubtedly be desirable for the Iranians to give up enrichment on their own territory, it would still be preferable for Iran to conduct limited enrichment under outside inspections, than to do so outside the NPT—the likely result if negotiations fail. Such a limited concession would have the further advantage of increasing the likelihood of Russian and Chinese acquiescence to sanctions, were Iran to break its agreement. (The May 2006 agreement of the six powers on the incentives to be offered Iran, it should be noted, was not matched by comparable agreement on the sanctions to be imposed were Iran to refuse the offer.)[3]

Finally, the international community should put back on the table the series of proposals for a comprehensive settlement communicated by Iran in the spring of 2003—then brusquely rejected by the United States—that entailed Iranian acceptance of Israel's existence, the cessation of support for groups seeking the armed overthrow of Israel, and the acceptance of comprehensive IAEA inspections in return for the normalization of diplomatic relations, the lifting of U.S. sanctions, and the acceptance of a legitimate Iranian role in the region. Whether those terms would prove acceptable today to Iran is unclear, but they indicate the essential terms of a "grand bargain" that the United States should be willing to support.[4]

As much as a grand bargain would be in the interests of both Iran and the United States, it is improbable that it will happen. What proved impossible under former Presidents Khatami and Clinton is unlikely to transpire under Ahmadinejad and Bush. For the Bush Administration, a grand bargain would constitute a repudiation of its predominant strategic approach and make it difficult, domestically, to play the national security card that has hitherto redounded so much to its political advantage.

So, too, the enthusiastic response among both Republican and Democratic leaders to Israel's attack on Lebanon shows that there continues to be a big market in America for the disproportionate act. Iran has also seen a sharp improvement in its situation due to much higher oil prices and, ironically, to the results of the war in Iraq, where Iran's old and dear friends play vital roles in the coalition government. The realistic prospect is, at best, for a frigid peace, at worst, a raging war.

Getting Power Right

IT IS THE irony of the present crisis that the United States manages to both overestimate and underestimate its true power—hence its interest in schemes that would court certain disaster in an effort to ward off a hypothetical catastrophe. The overestimation is reflected above all in the belief that the pre-emptive use of U.S. military power affords a viable way out of our strategic predicaments and must always remain "on the table." Even with the failure of these strategies in the Iraq War staring us in the face, we do not, in Bolingbroke's words, "easily come off from the habitual

[3]The limits of Russian and Chinese cooperation are assessed in Flynt Leverett and Pierre Noël, "The New Axis of Oil", *The National Interest*, Summer 2006, pp. 62-70.

[4]Iran's 2003 initiatives and their rejection by the Bush Administration are described in Gareth Porter, "Burnt Offerings", *The American Prospect*, June 2006, pp. 20-25.

prejudices of superior wealth, or power, or skill, or courage, nor from the confidence that these prejudices inspire."

Oddly, however, the confidence that maximalism in aim and method has been the winning strategy over the last generation and will continue to be so in the future is attended by a remarkable underestimation of the deterrent power of U.S. conventional and nuclear forces. The consensus view is that a handful of nuclear weapons in the arms of a "rogue state" would overturn the existing international order. When the objection is raised that offensive actions by the rogues would almost surely bring destruction upon these regimes, the alarmist response is to insist upon the utter irrationality of our adversaries—in effect, reading them out of the human race. This fixation on the putative irrationality of America's enemies is an indispensable feature of the hawks' position, since it renders pointless the examination of the power position of states according to any conventional metric. The emphasis on irrationality enables proponents of preventive war to maintain that what was sufficient to deter a Soviet Union armed with thousands of nuclear weapons is radically insufficient in dealing with "rogue states" armed with a few.

A more reasonable understanding of America's true power is that it maintains in abundance the elements whereby to contain and deter threatening actions by hostile regimes. For defensive purposes, it can still marshal an impressive international consensus; it is only when it finds aggressive war necessary to ensure its security that it becomes isolated and friendless in the international community. For defensive purposes, its military power, both conventional and nuclear, is prodigious; it is only when the United States seeks to assign to military power tasks that press against its inherent limitations—e.g. using force to promote liberal democracy, or threatening force to compel change within the national territory of hostile regimes—that it appears insufficient for the tasks it is called upon to perform.

These simultaneous tendencies toward the over- and underestimation of American power, unfortunately, are propelled by powerful outlooks of both sides of the political spectrum. The Right, undoubtedly, has sinned most grievously in this regard, since it has both assaulted the institution of deterrence and sought to substitute for it the nostrum of preventive war, but the Left is not blameless. The Left does not share the Right's confidence in preventive war, but it does attack the stability of deterrent relationships and thereby contributes to a political climate in which preventive war seems the least bad among a set of awful choices. Neither perspective offers a safe way forward.

The safe way forward does not consist in the invention of entirely new strategic approaches but in a return to the strategies of containment and deterrence that dealt successfully with the Soviet challenge during the Cold War. The stability of deterrence was often challenged in the course of that long struggle, as the Soviet adversary was often portrayed in "essentialist" terms, yielding the conviction that our enemies would prefer to destroy the hated West rather than save their own hides. Little that was said of radical Islamist leaders today—their irrationality, their utter indifference to the security and well-being of their own peoples—was not said of the Communists of yore.

Then, as now, alarmist voices insisted that the choice was between "suicide and surrender", and that no alternative beckoned, save being either Red or dead. Yet through it all, the iron logic of deterrence continued to hold good even as it progressively lost its hold on the strategic imagination. That it will do so again is the solid, though fraying, expectation on which the peace of the world now hinges. □