

IRAN

A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

DMITRI TRENIN and
ALEXEY MALASHENKO



CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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CONTENTS

v	Summary
1	Iran—The World’s Top Challenge of the Next Decade
3	Basic Assumptions and Key Questions
7	Domestic Developments
13	What Does Iran Want?
17	The Iranian Nuclear Issue
19	Russian–Iranian Relations
25	The Way Forward With Iran
29	Acknowledgments
30	About the Authors
31	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

SUMMARY

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW

v

Iran's emergence as a rising power is straining its relations with Russia. While many outside observers assume the two countries enjoy a close relationship, in reality it is highly complex. Although Iran and Russia have strong economic and military ties, Moscow is increasingly wary of Tehran's growing ambitions.

Offering a view from Moscow, Dmitri Trenin and Alexey Malashenko explore how an empowered Iran threatens Russia. Home to the world's second-largest natural gas resources—behind only Russia—Iran can severely cut into the profits of Russia's state-controlled energy company, Gazprom, by selling more gas to Europe. And a nuclear Iran would significantly diminish Russia's influence in the wider Caspian region that includes the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Iran's relationship with Russia has evolved. While Moscow did not want to strengthen a potential regional rival, it was desperate in the past to save its crumbling defense industry and Tehran seemed to offer a large and willing market.

Still, the relationship is growing more contentious on both sides. After Iran failed to agree to a nuclear deal with the international community that was brokered by Moscow last year, it continued to use Russia as a foil to undercut U.S. policies. Meanwhile, Russia—as it resets relations with the United States—has backed economic sanctions against Tehran and supported a United Nations Security Council resolution blocking heavy weapons exports to Iran.

Given the economic and military ties and points of contention, Russia must act delicately in trying to curb Iran's behavior. Moscow does not have enough sway to directly alter Tehran's policies and it does not want to be an intermediary between Iran and the United States. But as Iran's neighbor, economic and military partner, and as a permanent member of the Security Council, Russia can encourage moderate forces in Iran to compromise with the West on the nuclear issue instead of confronting Washington.

Russia should help to lead the international community's efforts to stem Iran's belligerence, working instead with moderate voices in Iran and appealing to the Iranian people, who are disappointed with

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their leaders. With a strong understanding of domestic developments inside Iran, Russia should also push global powers to keep talking with Tehran on nuclear and other security issues and restrain international actions that will empower Iran's hard-liners.

Russia needs to find a way to prevent any nation from launching a military attack against Iran that could destabilize the Middle East and divide the international community. While it will be difficult to maintain unity among the five permanent members of the Security Council in the face of an emerging Iranian threat, Russia can play a critical role in crafting a reasonable compromise.

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
vi

IRAN—THE WORLD’S TOP CHALLENGE OF THE NEXT DECADE

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
1

The Islamic Republic of Iran is emerging as one of the most important international issues of the 2010s, easily overshadowing both of its neighbors, Iraq and Afghanistan, which seemed to have a lock on newspaper headlines throughout this past decade. In fact, Iran soon might even surpass its neighbors in one regard: It might become the ultimate Middle East issue, eclipsing the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. As with Israel–Palestine, how the United States deals with the Iran issue in these present moments will probably set U.S. foreign policy—not to mention that of other important players like Russia, China, India, and Iran’s neighbors—on a course that it will follow for years or even decades to come.

Until the Obama administration came to Washington, one could still argue that the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue largely depended on the willingness of the United States to do three things: renounce regime change in Tehran as a policy objective; reach out to the Iranian leadership and the Iranian people; and engage Tehran in face-to-face talks on the basis of the recognition of Iran’s legitimate security interests. In other words, “regime change” in Washington, not Tehran, was what the United States needed to reach a compromise with Iran.

Such a regime change occurred in January 2009. Barack Obama moved swiftly to engage Iranian leaders. In the spring of 2009, he personally reached out to the Islamic Republic and its citizens with a Persian New Year message. A few months later, he was careful not to let the domestic developments in Iran following the disputed June 12, 2009, presidential election derail the budding bilateral dialogue. The Obama administration announced that it was ready, in principle, to allow Iran to engage in limited uranium enrichment on its own territory, provided that the bulk of enrichment would be done outside of Iran with the assistance of France and Russia—both of which are anything but Washington’s stooges.

In response to this entreaty, Iran thus far has chosen—or has been forced—not to make a deal that has the backing of the major

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powers. This decision earned Iran a new sanctions resolution, number 1929, passed by the UN Security Council in June with Russia's and China's votes. With the help of Brazil and Turkey, Iran mounted a doomed attempt to block that resolution, but that move was probably only intended to split the international community at the G20 level, since the P5 members had already reached agreement among themselves.

Iran's problem surely is not that its leaders have somehow failed to recognize the fact that Obama's presidency represents their best chance in a generation of reaching accommodation with the United States, the UN Security Council, and the International Atomic Energy Agency. Their unwillingness or inability to reach out can only mean that they have cast their geopolitical fortunes on an unrestricted nuclear program and continued confrontation. Nevertheless, for the moment, accommodation is still possible, but the window of opportunity may not remain open longer than twelve to eighteen months. Beyond that horizon, Tehran's rejection of engagement will create enormous risks for Iran and the region.

The failure of engagement with Iran thus far demands fresh and dispassionate analysis: We say "fresh" because so many assumed that "regime change" in Washington (Obama) and unity in New York (in the P5) was all that was needed to reach a deal, and we say "dispassionate" because over the years Iran has become a highly charged ideological and emotional issue. We aim here to provide that analysis.

The report has been written from a Moscow-centric perspective. This is certainly not to say that our view is shared by the Russian government; rather, it draws upon Russia's long and mixed experience with Iran. While many in the United States assume that Russia is close to Iran, or even in league with it against the United States, the reality is almost exactly the opposite, and in any case is much more complex.

Historically, Russia has been an imperial rival to Iran, a colonial oppressor and an atheist adversary. The two have also enjoyed periods of more collaborative relations, however. Long memories, physical proximity, and close contact at times when very different circumstances have prevailed have produced in Russians a distinct attitude toward Iran. This attitude combines respect with apprehension, fascination with revulsion. Needless to say, this complex history colors Russia's current position on Iran.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND KEY QUESTIONS

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
3

Viewed from Moscow, Iran presents a multidimensional narrative, not a single storyline about nuclear proliferation. As the Russians tell it, above all Iran is a story of a rising regional power, and its nuclear ambitions play a major role in that script, not a bit part. Iran's story is also about more than just its support for terrorism and its leaders' Holocaust denial. It is a story of geopolitical and strategic asymmetries in a very complex region. At first glance, Iran looks like a Goliath to Israel's David. But in this story David probably wields a nuclear "sling" and has a friend, the United States, who possesses supreme military power; Goliath, meanwhile, exerts influence through groups like Hizbollah and Hamas, which are capable of striking deep into Israel's territory and terrorizing its population. Nor is this merely a tale about religious autocracy coming into conflict with secular democracy, or a clash of civilizations. The Islamic Republic is freer politically, for instance, than the majority of Arab countries, and furthermore both the regime and its opponents operate in an Islamic context. Yet Iran also yearns for modernization.

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The Russian reading of the Iran story suggests several questions.

First, given the U.S. experience since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, will the United States tolerate the emergence of a nuclear-capable Iran and resign itself to a policy of regional containment and nuclear deterrence? Or will it seek to prevent this occurrence, either directly by means of its air- and sea-power assets, or indirectly by giving intelligence and logistical assistance to an Israeli strike.

Second, what will Israel do? Israel is the only country in the Middle East today with a nuclear arsenal (albeit an undeclared one). However, it is also the only country whose very existence would be called into question by Iranian nuclear weapons. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's dual denials—denial of the Holocaust and denial of Israel's right to exist—make for an ominous combination. The people of Israel have every right

to be worried. However, is Israel's recent tough talk a sign of mounting resolve to deal with Iran's nuclear advances as they dealt with Iraq's at Osirak? Or is it just a diplomatic gambit?

What about the other major players? How will the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—Britain, France, Russia, and China—react to events, given their business interests with Iran? (Though it isn't a permanent Security Council member, Germany is a major player and also has business interests in Iran.)

What about India, a major rising power in its own right? Like Tel Aviv but unlike Tehran, New Delhi never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), nor did it give up its right to pursue nuclear weapons. Its testing of a nuclear device a dozen years ago—international protests and condemnations notwithstanding—added a nuclear dimension to the stand-off on the Subcontinent.

Pakistan, Iran's immediate neighbor to the east, is another non-signatory to the NPT, as well as the owner of a nuclear weapons capability that it developed in competition with India. Pakistan has also provided more than just moral support and inspiration for Iran's bomb: In the 1990s and the early 2000s, the network of Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan provided technology assistance to the Iranian nuclear program. How do these facts fit into the Iranian puzzle?

Tucked somewhere in the vaults of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal may be a weapon or two owned by Tehran's regional rival, Saudi Arabia. Riyadh purportedly bankrolled the Pakistani nuclear program, and the United States has offered its protection in the form of extended deterrence. Will Saudi Arabia be satisfied with Washington's assurances, or will it seek a national nuclear capability under its own control instead?

What about the smaller Gulf States, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council? Just as Saddam Hussein's Iraq once claimed Kuwait as a wayward province, so too does Iran sometimes claim Bahrain, most of whose people are Shi'a. The United Arab Emirates, the biggest of the smaller Gulf states, has a schizophrenic relationship with Iran. On the one hand, Iran is its biggest trading partner; on the other, Iran is also its most formidable geopolitical challenger. Will the UAE seek the shade of a nuclear umbrella, too?

What about the rest of the Arab world, historically distrustful of the Persians? Present-day Iraq is certainly no longer in any danger of going nuclear—at least not for a very long time. Libya has surrendered its nuclear program, making it difficult if not impossible to revive. Israel recently destroyed Syria's alleged nuclear facility, and it isn't likely to rise from the rubble for some time. While Egypt's formerly strong influence throughout the Arab world has been waning for the past couple of decades, Cairo still views itself as the natural leader and spokesman for the Arab nation. Might Egypt decide that a nuclear program to compete with Iran's is just the medicine it needs to revive its fading influence?

In recent years, Turkey has gone through an interesting and important foreign policy transformation. Turkey sees itself not as a country huddling on Europe's doorstep but as a regional power, proudly standing astride the juncture between Europe and the Middle East. Over the years, Ankara has developed an independent relationship with Tehran and has recently attempted to act as an international mediator with regard to the Iranian nuclear dispute. What would Turkey do if Iran renders that dispute moot?

As to the question of Iran itself, we in Moscow see little hope in stopping Iran if it is dead-set on building a bomb. If a nation with 70 million people, 2,500 years of continuous statehood (as they see it), and sufficient technical expertise really wants to go nuclear, it will. The only way to stop it from doing so is by making it perfectly clear to the leadership of that country that the disadvantages of such a course massively outweigh the perceived benefits. We could call this a strategy of dissuasion, or diplomatic deterrence.

For such a strategy to be successful, it has to be based on a good understanding of Iran's domestic situation, the structure of its government, and its political dynamics. It also has to take stock of Tehran's international ambitions and its relationships with the key players in the region and the world. Finally, it has to temper opposition to Tehran's nuclear program with recognition of its legitimate national interests, including security.

This report discusses the building blocks of such a strategy. In particular, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is happening inside Iran?
- What does Iran want?
- How is the nuclear issue likely to evolve?
- What are the international community's options?

The only way to stop Iran from going nuclear is by making it perfectly clear to the leadership of that country that the disadvantages of such a course massively outweigh the perceived benefits.

DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
7

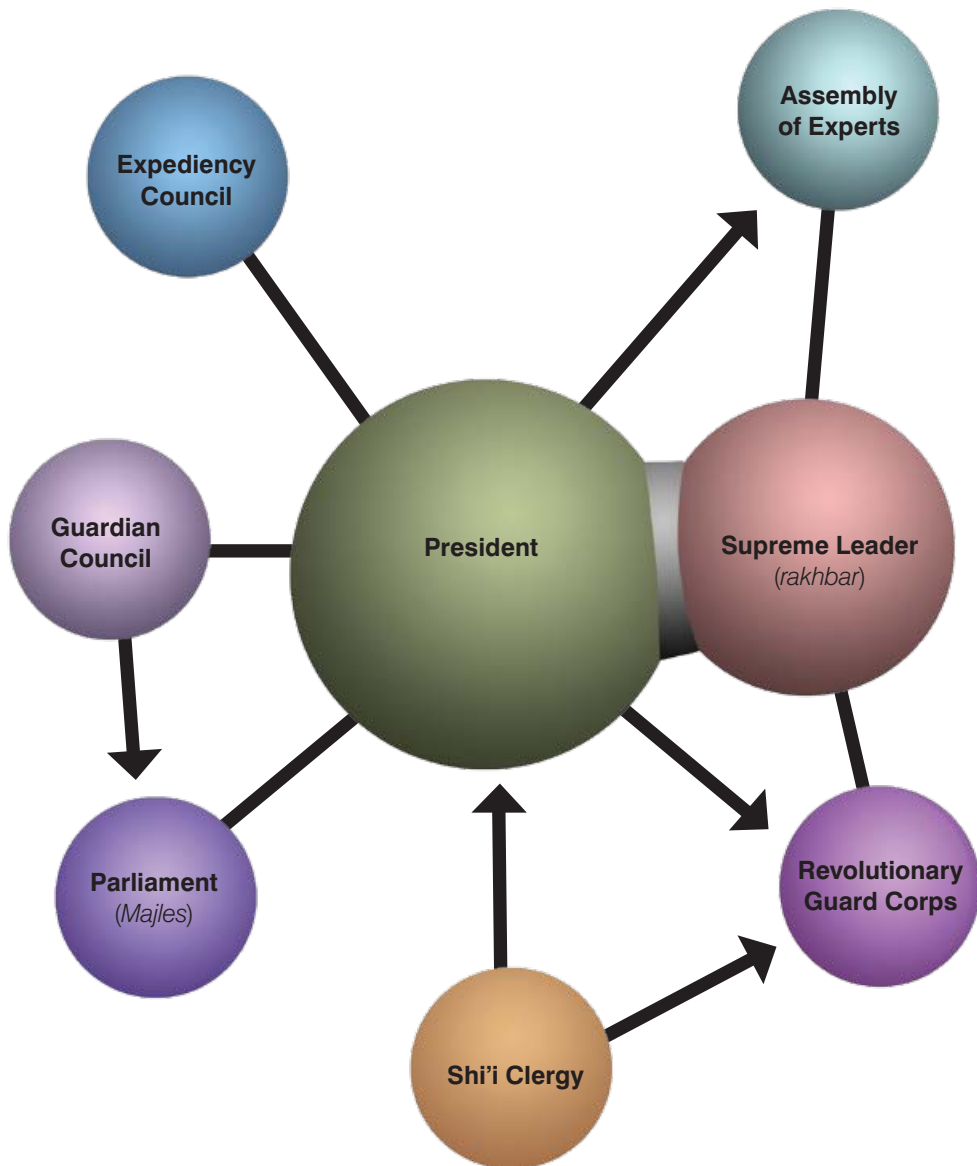
The year 2009 marked both the thirtieth anniversary of Iran's Islamic revolution and the most serious domestic crisis to strike the regime to date. The Green Movement, led by Mir-Hussein Moussavi, Iranian prime minister from 1981 to 1989, attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters. These supporters staged near-continuous demonstrations challenging the regime and the legitimacy of the July 12 re-election of President Ahmadinejad.

Yet despite the scale and intensity of the demonstrations, the Iranian regime has now survived into its fourth decade. As the protestors gradually cleared the streets and put away their signs, the hopes of many in the United States and Europe that a secular democracy would topple the corrupt "mullahcracy" subsided as well. Today, the countryside still largely supports Ahmadinejad. The Iranian establishment, if not most ordinary Iranians, probably believes that the Islamic system of government is a natural fit for Iran, that it can be modified but not abolished. Politicians, whether in government or opposition, are careful not to stray from the realm of Islam. Thus the bond between religion and politics remains strong, and the regime will probably not "collapse" in a short- or medium-term time frame.

Political power in Iran currently rests in the hands of the Islamic leadership's first generation (led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei) and second generation (led by figures like Ahmadinejad, and Chairman of Parliament Ali Larijani). The third generation, now in their 30s and 40s, are on their way up the greasy pole and will have increasing impact on policy making during the 2010s. There is some inter-generational tension but no fundamental disagreement about the system of government. The Iranian political elite remains essentially conservative and averse to deep political reforms.

One reason for the resilience of the Iranian regime is its polycentric structure. Unlike Soviet Communism, the Iranian system is not balanced on a static, single-party pyramid. Rather, it's more akin to a proto-planetary system, in which cosmic matter gradually coalesces into a delicate, balanced orbit of attractions, repulsions, eddies, and flows. It is a system in constant flux at

IRAN'S "CHECKS AND BALANCES": INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS



This graphic represents our view of how Iran is governed. The arrows show who influences whom. The Supreme Leader (*rakhbar*) and president are closely tied to one another. The *rakhbar* is the ultimate decision maker; the President has a popular mandate and executive authority but cannot act without the blessing of the *rakhbar*. While our model differs from the formal constitutional structure, it shows the informal links among the multiple centers of authority in the Islamic Republic and reflects the day-to-day functioning of Iran's institutions.

smaller scales, but remarkably stable overall. According to this analogy, then, the 2009 protests would be just a temporary bit of turbulent motion.

Under the *vilayet-e faqih*¹ principle, enshrined in the Iranian Constitution, supreme power in the land is vested in the *rakhbar*, the religious leader appointed by a small number of senior clerics. While the *rakhbar* is the ultimate decision maker, he is at a remove from the day-to-day operations of the government. The president of the Islamic Republic, in contrast, has a popular mandate and an executive authority, but he cannot act without the blessing of the *rakhbar*. The effectiveness of the government thus depends on how smoothly the *rakhbar* and the president cooperate.

We know that Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, after his death in 1989, broadly supports President Ahmadinejad. However, their relationship is an increasingly competitive one. The 71-year-old Khamenei wants to shore up his slowly declining authority, and the ambitious, energetic 54-year-old Ahmadinejad wants to stamp his indelible mark onto the country's history.

The regime, however, could survive the fall from grace of either—or even both—of these figures. The Islamic regime is anchored by more than Khamenei and Ahmadinejad.

Thus, while the *rakhbar*-presidential relationship is central to the Iranian system of government, it is not a *sine qua non*. A number of other important bodies play significant autonomous roles. The Assembly of Experts, which operates behind closed doors, is a key institution if only because it has the authority to appoint and dismiss the Supreme Leader. The importance of this 86-man body of religious experts (*mojtahed*) rises precisely at times of tension within the regime and disagreement between the *rakhbar* and the president. Ahmadinejad is clearly interested in winning the assembly's support. He is depending on it—especially in view of Khamenei's advanced age and declining health—to appoint a successor who sees eye to eye with him. However, the current chair of the Assembly of Experts (as well as chair of the Expediency Council), former president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a leading regime pragmatist, has been critical of both the Supreme Leader and the president.

The Council of Guardians of the Constitution, composed of six clergymen and an equal number of Islamic jurists (*faqih*s), oversees the decisions of the parliament (*Majles*) and the conduct

The opposition is ideologically and politically diverse and thus fragmented. Its many would-be leaders lack personal charisma and find it difficult to come together for a common cause.

of elections. It can veto laws and validate election results. A very conservative body, the Council of Guardians draws criticism from the more liberal members of parliament, but the *Majles* as a whole refrains from passing legislation that the council might deem controversial in terms of Islamic norms. This reflects the fact that parliament, though popularly elected, is dominated by conservative radicals. Nevertheless, the *Majles* gives even the vastly outnumbered Iranian liberals and independent members of parliament a platform for airing dissenting views.

Among the parliament's formal powers is confirmation of the government. Ahmadinejad has had problems having his cabinet nominations confirmed before. On the other hand, a few technocrats among his ministers criticize the president's economic failures and quietly call for more flexibility in Tehran's foreign policy, fearing the negative impact of the international sanctions against Iran.

In terms of enforcement and coercion, the Iranian regime relies on the 125,000-men strong Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is formally subordinated to the Supreme Leader. This is a highly ideologically regimented force. The hard-line leadership of the Guards actually sees itself as guardian of the revolutionary ideals, and they use their authority and power against the more liberal regime figures.

The Guards are balanced by the 550,000-strong Armed Forces, which resent the Guards' rabid ideology and intimate involvement in politics. The two forces see each other as prime competitors. Government attempts to smooth relations at the top by swapping senior commanders between the Guards and the Armed Forces have not been particularly successful. The professional military, however, traditionally looks beyond the country's borders for actual or potential adversaries; they do not relish the memories of the Shah using their tanks to crush street protestors in 1978.

Perhaps for this reason, during the domestic unrest in 2009, the Armed Forces high command opted not to get involved in suppressing Iran's restive population. The Guards, who are more ideological and political, were not called into action either. The regime did, however, make full use of the *basij*, a paramilitary force that takes orders directly from the president and acts as a kind of Islamic vice squad. Thus the *basij* are the ones most immediately responsible for the casualties suffered by the opposition.

In truth, Iran doesn't really live up to the popular sobriquet, "mul-lahcracy"; the Iranian Shi'i clergy does not function as a consolidated

group. Both supreme leaders, of course, have been Grand Ayatollahs. Rafsanjani, head of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council, and Ali Jennati, head of the Guardian Council, are both Ayatollahs. The former Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami, an avowed liberal, was a *hojjat-ol-islam*, an honorific title meaning an “authority on Islam.” The prominent critic of the regime, the late Ali Montazeri, was an Ayatollah. The speaker of the *Majles* and former chief Iranian negotiator in the nuclear talks, Ali Larijani, is a leading Islamic scholar, whose father was an Ayatollah. Mehdi Kerubbi, an opposition leader, is an accomplished cleric. The clergy at the holy city of Qom are notorious for their independent thinking. Many among them today believe that the policies of the current leadership do not fully conform with the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, that is, “guardianship of the jurist,” which calls Ahmadinejad’s legitimacy into question and represents implicit criticism of Khamenei’s stance. So as we can see, there is a broad range of views among the Islamic clergy, not a coherent political force.

Nor is there a stark divide between the regime and the opposition. The regime is anything but monolithic. Conservatives, radicals and traditionalists are not clearly defined groups. Generally, political interests trump ideological predilections. Old ayatollahs, for example, have been irritated by Ahmadinejad’s attempts to steal the mantle of the Islamic Revolution and by his criticism of those who used the people’s revolutionary enthusiasm to enrich themselves. “Conservatives” reject Ahmadinejad’s socio-political radicalism but support his strong-arm tactics against the protest movement, which threatened the stability of the country. Competing elements within the regime reach out to parts of the opposition, even if they do not fully share their views. Thus, the label “liberal,” typically pinned on former president Khatami (1997–2005) and his supporters, can also be applied to some members of Ahmadinejad’s cabinet, to some of the dissident ayatollahs who criticize the *rakhabar*, and even to Rafsanjani, the epitome of Iranian pragmatism. The opposition is ideologically and politically diverse and thus fragmented. Its many would-be leaders lack personal charisma and find it difficult to come together for a common cause.

The Green Movement led by Mir-Hussein Moussavi is an urban movement. Its proximate goal is to replace the current president, whom they view as a usurper after the 2009 elections, and install a more liberal economic and political regime. Some adherents of the movement, however, go further and are arch-enemies of the *velayat-e faqih* principle, such as the monarchists. The Green

Movement is supported by an assortment of Iranian émigrés, including the Committee of Fifteen, which operates out of London and unites some Khatami-era liberals and secular intellectuals.

Following the failure of the mass protests of 2009, the Green Movement has entered a crisis period. Its community centers and websites have been destroyed. The openly professed secularism of some of the “greens” and their links to Iranian émigrés have robbed the movement of some of its popular support. Its leaders themselves admit that two-thirds of ordinary Iranians support the principle of Islamic government. If the movement is to succeed, its leaders need to rethink their strategy, avoid secular radicalism, and tone down their cooperation with Iranian émigrés.

Islamic reformers are also a troubled group. They lack an attractive religious ideologue who could make the idea of reform popular. Ayatollah Ali Shariati (1933–1977) played this role on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. His ideas made a great impact on Iranian society at the time, only to be rejected later by the clergy. Ayatollah Montazeri (1922–2009), who was particularly popular among the younger generation, filled a similar role in later years.

Having fought off the recent challenge from the opposition, the regime does not seek its adversaries’ utter destruction. Among the reasons it doesn’t take this approach is the fact that the Iranian domestic opposition includes a number of popular figures. Faced with pressure from abroad, the regime is also interested in national consolidation. After all, Iran’s leaders, regardless of their generation, are both Islamists and Iranian nationalists. Islamism governs their worldview and gives them a template for policy making. Nationalism orients them toward increasing Iran’s regional and international clout.

Note

- 1 *Vilayat-e faqih* or “Role of the Islamic jurist” is a theory in Shi’i Islam that holds that Islam gives a *faqih* (Islamic jurist) or *fuqaha* (jurists) custodianship, divine providence, or guardianship over those in need of it.

WHAT DOES IRAN WANT?

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
13

Iran's Islamic Revolution is more than 30 years old, but fervor to export it to the world beyond died long ago, when even Khomeini was still alive. Today it is mainly reserved for the purposes of domestic and foreign propaganda. Events early in the Islamic Republic's history explain in part the reasons that the Revolution stopped at Iran's borders. Within eighteen months of the fall of the Shah, Iraq attacked Iran with the support of much of the outside world. The war, which lasted eight years and claimed a million lives, became a uniquely defining national experience for the Iranian people. Iranians understood one of the lessons of that experience to be that Iran was essentially friendless in the world.

The psychological experience of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) is something that Russians in particular can immediately appreciate. The eastern front of World War II in Europe, known to Russians then and since as the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany (1941–1945), was a devastating conflict that left deep scars across European landscapes and psyches. As the Great Patriotic War did for Russia, the Iran–Iraq War became a crucible for the regime.

But one need not be a Russian to understand that Iran's three decades of experience have taught the ruling regime in Tehran to put security at the top of the national agenda. Iran thus heard in President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech and Vice President Richard Cheney's comments about "regime change" more than just stirring rhetoric. They are especially sensitive to the fact that the United States and the United Kingdom are both home to Iranian royalists who have not resigned themselves to the permanence of the Islamic Republic. When Western media and NGOs speak out in support of Iranian human rights activists and the opposition Green Movement, the Iranian leadership takes it as proof that the United States would support any of their domestic critics and adversaries against them. The memory of the 1953 CIA-engineered coup against the nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosadeq, who sought to nationalize the Anglo–Iranian Oil Company (now BP), still burns bright as a badge of humiliation. And as Saddam Hussein's fate has further taught them, regimes can be toppled from the outside as well as from the inside.

When Western media and NGOs speak out in support of Iranian human rights activists and the opposition Green Movement, the Iranian leadership takes it as proof that the United States would support any of their domestic critics and adversaries against them.

Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of its neighbor, Iran has had to live with massive deployments of U.S. ground and air forces on both its western (Iraq) and eastern (Afghanistan) flanks, in addition to the ongoing presence of the U.S. Navy south of its Persian Gulf coastline. Tehran has also cast a wary eye on U.S. Air Force deployments in the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan and, until 2005, Uzbekistan. Moreover, these U.S. and NATO military personnel were not merely advisers or trainers, but battle-hardened troops actively engaged in combat. When they further considered that Turkey was a U.S. NATO ally, and that, until 2008, NATO seemed to be moving toward including Georgia, the overall effect was more than enough to create a fortress mentality in the minds of the Iranian leadership.

Though Iran never cared much for the “Little Satan” (the Soviet Union), to say the least, superpower competition still gave Iran some room to maneuver. But when the end of the Cold War brought a close to that competition, Iran faced the “Great Satan” (the United States) alone. One can well imagine that Iran took a certain pride in being able to withstand such a challenge. Iran is too big to be a mere victim of Western imperialism. A historical empire, it feels it has every right to claim regional pre-eminence. It dwarfs the Arab countries of the Fertile Crescent and the Gulf, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan. Being one of only a few predominantly Shi'i countries in the world gives it a natural sense of mission as a leader of the worldwide community. In other words, if it can be said that Iran's politics are Islamic, then its geopolitics are Shi'i.

Where does this worldwide Shi'i community live? Outside Iran, Shi'a hold a majority only in Iraq and Bahrain. Iraqi Shi'a, though they constitute a majority in Iraq, have to live side by side with two other major communities: Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. And though 40–60 percent of Azerbaijan's Muslims are officially considered Shi'i, this population became largely secularized during the Soviet period. Shi'a also form minorities in a number of countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. Tajikistan, though Persian-speaking, is mainly Sunni. But should Iran ever try to use these worldwide Shi'i majorities and minorities as fifth columns, its actions would likely lead to even more alienation from Sunni countries, whether Arab or non-Arab.

Tehran, of course, will continue to seek to use Shi'i radicals, such as Hizbollah, as agents of its power. However, Hizbollah, which has entered Lebanon's power-sharing arrangements, has been increasingly inclined to use political methods and is thus a very

different organization than either al-Qaeda or the Taliban. It is becoming less of a military organization with a political cover and more of a political party with a military wing. Other militant Shi'a groupings are too small and weak to make a significant impact on the regional balance.

Clearly, not all Iranian geopolitics are Shi'i. Iran balances these goals with relations with other key regional players such as Turkey and Pakistan, with the continent's great powers, China and India, and even with countries like Christian Armenia, Sunni Muslim Turkmenistan, and its Persian-speaking (but Sunni) cousin, Tajikistan. Tehran has also developed a politico-military alliance with Syria, a mainly Sunni country led by Alawite rulers. It has recently begun reaching out to countries that defy the United States, wherever they may be found, whether in Asia (North Korea), Africa (Zimbabwe), Latin America (Venezuela), or Eastern Europe (Belarus).

These, then, are the facts about Iran, its history, the character of its politics and geopolitics, and its intentions as we see them from our vantage point in Moscow. Now it only remains to apply this analysis to the two remaining questions of our paper: How is the nuclear issue likely to evolve? And what options does the international community have for directing that evolution in a mutually beneficial direction?

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
15

Iranians understood one of the lessons of the war with Iraq to be that Iran was essentially friendless in the world.

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR ISSUE

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
17

The quest for nuclear power, up to and including its weaponization, is a grail of sorts, symbolizing the Iranian leadership's aspirations for security and power projection in its neighborhood and beyond. In this, Tehran's motivations are not dissimilar from the motives of other international actors. In fact, to see its quest as somehow intrinsically tied to the Islamic revolution would be a mistake. Rather, it must be stressed that Iran's nuclear program predates the revolution, and that domestic support for Iran's nuclear program is broad-based and not just an elite obsession.

Domestic support for Iran's nuclear program is broad-based and not just an elite obsession.

We can describe Iran's objectives in the nuclear field as follows:

- To create a full fuel cycle within Iran.
- To develop a nuclear weapons capability.
- To develop long-range means of delivery capable of striking targets within and beyond the Greater Middle East.

From Iran's perspective, acceptable compromise with the international community must satisfy all three objectives listed above, as well as leading to Iran's full international rehabilitation and access to advanced technology, investment inflows, credit, and global and regional markets. Iran might agree to remain technically non-nuclear, satisfying the letter of the Non-Proliferation Treaty but keeping its capabilities within easy reach of the nuclear threshold (the "Japan model").

Whether the international community could accept this outcome depends on its attitudes toward the Iranian leadership. It would likely trust nuclear capability in the hands of a Western-friendly Iran, either one similar to the Shah-led regime or one that undergoes some sort of democratic transformation. By contrast, it will subject a hostile Iran to sanctions and restrictions.

But no Iranian government—not even a hypothetical democratic one—will ever negotiate away the country's nuclear program

completely. Indeed, since democracies tend toward nationalism, a democratic Iran might view its nuclear program as a symbol of domestic rebirth and international reassertion.

In nuclear and other top-tier issues, Iran's principal international counterpart is the United States. The European Union's three leading members—Britain, France, and Germany—function mainly as facilitators between Tehran and Washington. (They used to act as proxies in Iran's dialogue with the West when the United States refused to deal with Iran directly.)

China, however, has increasingly become a major player in Middle East and Iran issues. Pragmatic Beijing views Iran not only as a major energy supplier but also as one whose oil and gas can reach China's western regions by overland routes, bypassing the possibility of their disruption at sea by the navies of the United States or India.

Russia is an important side player in the Iranian drama. It cannot influence Iranian behavior directly, nor can it be an intermediary between Tehran and Washington. Yet as a neighbor, a partner in military and nuclear energy cooperation, and a P5 member, Russia has the option of choosing either to encourage figures in Iran who seek a confrontation with the United States or to back those who seek compromise. Thus far, Russia has made no clear choice. Its relations with Iran remain highly ambivalent.

RUSSIAN–IRANIAN RELATIONS

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
19

Historically, Russia's relations with Iran have been marked by bilateral trade, bitter regional rivalry, and geopolitical competition for dominance over Iran with third parties. In the early eighteenth century, Peter the Great engaged the Persians in the Caucasus and along the Caspian, annexing a strip of land along the coast that his successors soon ceded back to Iran as not worth defending. In the course of the nineteenth century, Russia defeated the Shah's armies and gradually absorbed all Persian possessions in the Caucasus: Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Persia's humiliation was felt deeply by its people: In 1829, an angry mob in Tehran ransacked the Russian mission and killed its entire staff, including the ambassador. This history is well known by every school child in Russia today, because the murdered ambassador, Alexander Griboyedov, was a great author whose writings are required reading.

By the early twentieth century, Russia came to dominate northern Iran. In 1907 it struck a deal with Britain, carving up the country into two spheres of influence (Britain dominated the southern half of the country). This deal also marked the end of the century-long Great Game, a contest played out across Asia, from the Caucasus to the Caspian to Central Asia. This arrangement persisted throughout both World Wars, at the beginnings of which both Russia and Britain invaded Iran militarily as a precautionary measure. (In World War II, the Soviet Union used its military presence to help sustain pro-Soviet regimes in Iranian Azerbaijan but had to withdraw in 1946 under Anglo-American pressure.) During the Cold War, the Shah aligned himself closely with the United States, joined CENTO, and hosted U.S. military advisers and intelligence-gathering facilities. For its part, Moscow supported left-wing and even nationalist Iranians who opposed Western imperialism.

Moscow reacted with mixed feelings to the 1979 Islamic revolution. There was joy for the U.S. strategic debacle, as well as the subsequent politico-military humiliation of the hostage crisis, but there was also bewilderment over the import of the Islamic revival. As Leonid Brezhnev put it in a famous quote from his 1981 Party

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Congress speech, Islamic movements “could also be liberating.” In the years that followed, years that included Moscow’s own harrowing experiences in Afghanistan, Russians came to fully appreciate the power of Islam and the resolve of those who fought in its name. During the Soviet Union’s Afghan War (1979–1989), Iran accepted refugees from Afghanistan and provided support to the anti-Soviet *mujahideen*, especially in Herat province. The Soviet Union, for its part, remained formally neutral during the war between Iran and Iraq but continued providing weapons and technical assistance to the Iraqi forces under the auspices of a 1971 friendship treaty.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow feared that Iran might export the Islamic revolution to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. So it was pleasantly surprised to see Tehran desist from poaching in the former Soviet borderlands. Even as Turkey loudly proclaimed solidarity with the new Turkic states around the Caspian, Iran not only kept quiet; it teamed with Russia to bring the civil war in Tajikistan to a diplomatic solution (1997) and lobbied for Russia’s admission to the Islamic Organization Conference as an observer (2005), despite its war in Chechnya. Iran had good reasons for this posture toward Russia. Isolated from Western technology and arms imports, it needed an opening elsewhere. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the end of Communist rule in Russia provided that opening. When German firms bowed out of a nuclear power plant project in Bushehr in the 1990s, Tehran turned to Russia’s Nuclear Power Ministry, *Minatom*.

In deciding how to respond to Iran’s entreaties, Russia has had to brush up on its math skills, for Russia has a difficult equation to solve, with its many interests comprising a daunting set of variables. Desperate for money to save its crumbling defense industry, Russia has a strong incentive to sign contracts with Iran. It also has no interest in strengthening a potential rival, especially during an unprecedented time of weakness. It is especially wary of Iran’s efforts in the nuclear field and in missile technology. In broader geopolitical terms, Russia’s leaders have had to balance an equation weighted toward, on one side, refusing Iran’s requests for more advanced technology, thus pushing it into Europe’s arms if not America’s and, on the other, cooperating too closely with Iran, thus incurring America’s wrath.

So Russian–American relations have been one decisive factor in Russian–Iranian relations, and Iran’s nuclear and missile activities, another. For a time, Moscow sought to play a facilitating role in bringing Iran and the international community to a negotiated

solution under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency. It made Iran's return of spent nuclear fuel to Russia a condition of its fulfillment of the Bushehr contract. In 2007, President Putin ventured to Tehran in a bid to get Ahmadinejad to accept a deal with the international community on Iran's nuclear program, an effort that was to no avail. Moscow publicly voiced concern over Iranian missile tests and put an Iranian nuclear spy on trial. It also tried to dissuade Israel and the United States from striking at Iran by giving it the *Tor M-1* air defense system and agreeing to sell the more effective *S-300* system. (The latter delivery was eventually canceled.)

Russia's economic interests in Iran have been important, but limited. The Bushehr nuclear power reactor, officially launched in August 2010, is a flagship of Russo-Iranian economic cooperation, but as such, it reflects its limitations. The cost of the project is relatively modest: around \$1 billion. And Russian complaints about Iran's late payments matched Iran's complaints about the slow pace of construction. Politically, Bushehr is also a highly vulnerable project. Russia occasionally halted construction, citing technical difficulties; in reality they were reacting to U.S. sensitivity to the project. Iranians, meanwhile, tempted both Russia and Europe with lucrative projects, including orders to build additional power plants.

Since the early 1990s, Russia has sold Iran a fair amount of ground forces weaponry, such as T-72 tanks, infantry combat vehicles, and armored personnel carriers. Combat aircraft such as the Su-24 and submarines, however, are the more consequential sales. The latter, for instance, could be used against the U.S. naval forces in the Gulf. Israel also suspects that recent Russian arms contracts with Syria, including MiG-29s, have been partially financed by Iran and are destined to go there.

U.S. and European sanctions against Iran have turned it into a rare market for Russian-manufactured goods like passenger airplanes. Yet plans to sell Iran newer jets like the Tu-204 have been thwarted in retaliation for Russia's refusal to deliver the *S-300* air defense system.

Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves after Russia. Moscow's interest with regard to natural gas is twofold: to win a share of upstream production, and to become involved in Iranian gas transportation to South Asia. What Moscow does not want is Iranian gas deliveries to Europe, Gazprom's most lucrative market. Essentially, the viability of the Nabucco pipeline, an

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alternative European project to Gazprom's "streams," depends on Iranian gas becoming available to the project—a long shot under the present circumstances. While Russia has cooperated with Iran and Qatar in the forum of leading gas producers, it is wary of any development that would significantly reduce its freedom in the gas market. The natural gas forum is thus unlikely to evolve into an OPEC-like structure, an unfortunate state of affairs from Tehran's perspective.

Russia has absolutely no interest in seeing Iran acquire nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. Should that occur, the geopolitical and strategic balance from the Caucasus to Central Asia would shift dramatically against Moscow. Russia has dominated the region since the early nineteenth century, even retaining a strong position there after the fall of the Soviet Union. Moscow has views on issues like the status of the Caspian and border delimitation that clash with those of Tehran. These disagreements could no longer be safely ignored if Iran acquires a nuclear weapons capability.

Indeed, a nuclear-armed Iran would be a more serious regional rival to Russia in a number of places, from the Caucasus to Tajikistan. Nuclear capability would create a "curved space" around Iran, with some neighbors like Turkmenistan having to adopt Tehran-friendly policies. This would affect energy geopolitics around the Caspian.

While Iran is in Russia's eyes a strategic factor of regional significance, Russia in Iran's eyes has been more an instrument for undercutting U.S. policies. Iranian establishment circles express great disdain privately, and sometimes not-so-privately, for Russia. Russians as a result have begun to lose patience with their Iranian counterparts.

The arrival of the Obama administration presented Moscow with a better opportunity to connect its overall approach to international order to its relations with both the United States and Iran. Having reset U.S. policy toward Russia, and in the process having eliminated a few major irritants like NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia and a U.S. ballistic missile defense system in Europe, Barack Obama seemed to be someone that Moscow could do business with. Satisfied that President Obama was no longer considering regime change and a possible military strike among its Iran policy options, Moscow agreed in November 2009 and June 2010 to sets of limited economic sanctions against Iran.

In mid-2009, Russia canceled delivery of five batteries of the S-300 air defense system. A year later, it voted for UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which effectively prohibits heavy weapons exports to Iran. The S-300 deal, worth about \$1 billion, is now dead. The fact that the deal was made when U.S.–Russian tensions were rising and halted when they were falling is a perfect illustration of how U.S.–Russian relations factor into Moscow’s Iran policy.

Not that the Iranian leadership needed this truth illustrated for them. In July 2010, Iranian President Ahmadinejad lashed out at President Medvedev, accusing him of trailing in the wake of U.S. foreign policy and becoming an instrument of American propaganda against Iran. From Tehran’s perspective, Russia has moved into the camp of Iran’s historical enemies. The vehemence of official Iranian accusations testifies to the depth of Tehran’s disappointment over the shift in Russian policy, which has robbed them of their favorite diplomatic play: using Russia to split the UN Security Council and blunt the force of U.S. policy. Russia’s change of position has also exposed China, which has long been accustomed to sheltering under Russia’s diplomatic cover in Security Council votes. With China thus put under a spotlight, it decided to support the June 2010 sanctions resolution against Iran, thus isolating Tehran much more than it had expected.

Nevertheless, Russia sees Iran as an emerging regional power with an exalted self-image and strong ambitions—not the kind of country it wants to court as an adversary. Thus Moscow would not join in any military action against Iran. Russian leaders are also mindful not only of the growing Muslim element within Russia and on its new borders; they remember well the disastrous consequences of the early twentieth-century alliance with the Franco-British *Entente*, which threw their country into the First World War and paved the way to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Russia no longer has an ally facing an existential threat, as it did in 1914 in Serbia. As a result, it will attempt to stake out a neutral posture in any major conflict today.

This means that any Israeli or U.S. strike on Iran will prompt Russia to distance itself from the attackers and denounce any use of force without a UN Security Council mandate. It doesn’t mean, however, that Russia would rush to embrace Iran under such circumstances. Rather, it will brace itself for the shockwaves such an attack would be sure to create in the Greater Middle East.

Russia has absolutely no interest in seeing Iran acquire nuclear weapons and their means of delivery. Should that occur, the geopolitical and strategic balance from the Caucasus to Central Asia would shift dramatically against Moscow.

THE WAY FORWARD WITH IRAN

IRAN
A VIEW FROM
MOSCOW
25

Several prescriptions for Iran policy, especially with regard to its nuclear ambitions, follow from these observations from a Russian perspective:

Regime change unlikely. Hopes of an early regime change in Iran are premature. The Iranian opposition has no chance of toppling the government in the foreseeable future, but the opposition is unlikely to be snuffed out completely by the ruling conservatives.

Iran is stable. Iran's pluralist structure and the checks and balances built into its political system protect Iran from a Soviet-style collapse. Even a shock as serious as the aftermath of the 2009 presidential election failed to destabilize the country.

Backlash and disillusionment. Even under its existing, conservative political system, Iran is evolving. Disillusionment with the liberals under President Khatami (1997–2005) has now been followed by a backlash against the conservatives under Ahmadinejad (2005–) and his patron, Supreme Leader Khamenei.

Iran is evolving. Gradual evolution, eventually even substantial transformation of the Iranian regime, cannot be ruled out. More openness toward the outside world and more international contacts with the Iranian people will help the process of evolution along. Yet no amount of transformation will convince Iran to give up its international ambitions.

Iran as a regional power. Iran wants to become a regional power whose neighbors respect its interests and defer to it on major security issues. It sees U.S. military involvement in the region as both a threat to itself and a factor that limits further U.S. freedom of action. Iran sees Saudi Arabia as its most serious rival in the quest for regional dominance.

Potential nuclear arsenal. Iran may have already decided to go beyond the “Japan option”—that is, achieving merely the capacity to build a weapon—and create a small nuclear arsenal as Pakistan has done. This carries high risks to the region and to international security now and for the foreseeable future.

Iran wants to become a regional power whose neighbors respect its interests and defer to it on major security issues.

Domination of ideologues and security implications. These risks will grow even greater should Iran fall completely under the control of aggressive ideologues and their Revolutionary Guard allies, who might use the nuclear threat to do more than just ensure security for the regime and international prestige.

Based on these conclusions, we believe that the following would be a sensible strategy for dealing with Iran:

Keep on talking. Dialogue with Tehran on nuclear and other security issues is essential. Concern over the regime's repressive domestic policies should not preempt such dialogue. The window of opportunity will remain open for some time yet. Conceivably, the international community could forge an accommodation between Iran and the UN Security Council/International Atomic Energy Agency if Iran agreed to verifiable nuclear restraint and the rest of the world agreed to bring Iran back into its good graces. Iran's hardliners, however, would hardly prefer such an outcome because it would threaten their hold on power.

Have multiple partners. Dialogue with Iran will be impeded or advanced as a function of intra-regime competition between the hard-liners and the more moderate forces. The international community needs to devise a strategy that favors the moderate group and prevents the hardliners from rallying popular support to their cause. Parallel to this effort, the international community must foster closer engagement with the Iranian people as a whole, especially with younger technocrats who express disappointment with Ahmadinejad. Such engagement will help prepare Iran for re-integration into the global economy.

Do not compromise the opposition. Standing up to human rights abuses wherever they may occur is both a moral imperative and an essential part of modern statecraft, but in the Iranian context, if opposition figures are associated too closely with external human rights groups, the regime will succeed in labeling them as Western agents. Thus the human rights community and Western governments need to remember to keep their distance.

Maintain P5 cohesion. It is crucial to maintain unity on the Iranian nuclear issue within the international community, and in particular within the UN Security Council and its five permanent members. Speaking with one voice resounds much more clearly in Tehran, and it sets the stage for reasonable compromise. This unity, however, must not appear as an all-Christian crusade against Shi'i Muslim Iran.

Sanctions are not the sum total of a strategy. If mishandled, they can consolidate the regime's power in Iran and divide the international community. Handle with care.

Don't overdo sanctions. Sanctions are not the sum total of a strategy. If mishandled, they can consolidate the regime's power in Iran and divide the international community. Handle with care.

Avoid the disaster of a military strike. A military attack against Iranian nuclear installations would not solve the issue. In fact, it would do quite the opposite. It would divide the international community and destabilize the Greater Middle East. It will also make it a virtual certainty that Iran would re-emerge as a nuclear-weapon state led by vengeful hard-liners.

Prepare to deter a nuclear iran. If Iran does indeed go nuclear, it will have to be credibly deterred. Theater missile defense, coupled with a European missile defense system capable of intercepting long-range missiles, could form part of a collaborative effort among the United States, NATO, and the Russian Federation to meet this challenge. Coordinated and joint ballistic missile defense systems could also become the basis for strategic collaboration between Russia and the United States, helping transform their Cold War-style strategic relationship into one of a security community.

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