

# The United States, Iran and the Middle East's New "Cold War"

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Relations between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran need to be analysed and understood not only in terms of their bilateral dynamics, but also in their strategic context. Broadly speaking, the Middle East today is deeply divided between two camps – a reality that some commentators describe as a new regional “Cold War”.<sup>1</sup>

- On one side of this divide are those states willing to work in various forms of strategic partnership with the United States, with an implied acceptance of American hegemony over the region. This camp includes Israel, those Arab states that have made peace with Israel (Egypt and Jordan), and other so-called moderate Arab states (for example, Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council).
- On the other side of this divide are those Middle Eastern states and non-state actors that are unwilling to legitimise American (and, some in this camp would say, Israeli) hegemony over the region. The Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged in recent years as the *de facto* leader of this camp, which also includes Syria and prominent non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Notwithstanding its close security ties to the United States, Qatar has also aligned itself with the “resistance” camp on some issues in recent years. And, the rise of the Justice and Development Party and declining military involvement in Turkish politics have prompted an intensification of Turkey’s diplomatic engagement in the Middle East, in ways that give additional strategic options to various actors in the “resistance” camp.

Thus, the relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic both shapes and is shaped by the new Middle Eastern Cold War.

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<sup>1</sup>The Cold War metaphor is taken from Malcolm Kerr’s classic *The Arab Cold War*.

As the new regional Cold War plays out, analysts suggest different scenarios for how the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and Iran will evolve. Some, like former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, see this competition as a struggle for regional hegemony in the Middle East comparable to that in late nineteenth century Europe following German unification; from this perspective, Fischer warns that, without careful handling, tensions between the United States and the Islamic Republic could ultimately erupt in a large-scale military confrontation.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Fareed Zakaria, believe that the United States and its regional and international partners will move inexorably toward a posture of containing and deterring the Islamic Republic and its allies, in a manner reminiscent of the West's Cold War posture toward the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Against the backdrop of these scenarios, we argue that the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran should transcend the prospects for hegemonial war or strategic standoff and seek a fundamental realignment of their relations, in a manner similar to the realignment in relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China during Richard Nixon's tenure in the White House. We further argue that such a fundamental realignment of US–Iranian relations can only be achieved through a comprehensive rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

This article develops these arguments in three sections. The first section looks at the imperatives for a comprehensive and strategic realignment of US–Iranian relations from the perspective of Iranian interests and foreign policy concepts. The second section offers a comparable look at the imperatives for comprehensive and strategic realignment of US–Iranian relations from an American perspective. Finally, the third section briefly considers the prospects for US–Iranian rapprochement.

## **The Islamic Republic and the United States**

Like the emergence of the Middle East's new Cold War, the Islamic Republic's rise has occurred during a still ongoing period of tectonic shifts in the region's strategic environment. These shifts include the effective collapse of the traditional Arab–Israeli peace process, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, the rise of Hezbollah and Hamas as political actors in their national and regional contexts, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and subsequent Israeli military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza, structural changes in global energy markets and a tremendous transfer of wealth to major Middle Eastern energy producers. All of these shifts are playing out against what is increasingly perceived, in the Middle East and

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<sup>2</sup>Fischer's views are presented in *Iraq and Its Neighbors*.

<sup>3</sup>F. Zakaria, "Containing a Nuclear Iran", *Newsweek*, 12 October 2009.

elsewhere, as a decline in America's relative power and influence. After President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's initial election in 2005, the Islamic Republic was able to take advantage of these developments to effect a significant boost in its own regional standing.<sup>4</sup> But notwithstanding these strategic gains, Iran continues to face serious national security and foreign policy challenges, both regionally and internationally.<sup>5</sup>

To address these challenges, a critical mass of Iranian elites, cutting across the Islamic Republic's factional spectrum, has long supported the pursuit of rapprochement with the West and, especially, with the United States. To be sure, Iran does not want rapprochement with the United States at any price. But, for 20 years, decision-makers in Tehran have recognised that the Islamic Republic has basic national security and foreign policy needs which can only be met – or, only optimally met – through rapprochement with Washington. And, over the course of this period, Iranian decision-makers have come to believe that the only reliable way to effect such a rapprochement is by forging a comprehensive set of strategic understandings between Tehran and Washington.

Iranian foreign policy has moved in a progressively less ideological and more interest-based direction since the end of the Iran–Iraq war in 1998 and the death of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's "founding father", in 1989.<sup>6</sup> In practical terms, the shift toward greater pragmatism in Iranian foreign policy has driven a stronger emphasis on building strategic relationships with "great powers" outside the Middle East – countries that could support Tehran's efforts at postwar reconstruction, long-term economic development and modernisation, and realising Iran's enormous potential as an exporter of oil and natural gas. At the same time, positive relations with such countries could help the Islamic Republic address core national security challenges.<sup>7</sup>

In this regard, the Soviet Union's demise in 1991 deprived Tehran of the option of "balancing" between the two Cold War superpowers, at precisely the point at

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<sup>4</sup>For an elaboration of this point by a prominent Iranian analyst, see Barzegar, "Iran, the Middle East, and International Security".

<sup>5</sup>For discussion of regional challenges to Iranian interests, see Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy After Saddam". For a discussion of both regional and international challenges to Iranian interests, see Maleki, "Future of Iran's Foreign Relations".

<sup>6</sup>As one of the Islamic Republic's most prominent scholarly commentators on international affairs (and a former deputy foreign minister) has written, "Following the war with Iraq, the urgent need for reconstruction and the necessity of social and economic development to meet the needs of a young population led policymakers to focus more on material national interests in all areas. In foreign relations this was expressed in an emphasis on expanding trade and attracting investment through the development of mutually beneficial state-to-state relations and integration into the global economy." See Maleki, "Iran's Regional Foreign/Energy Policy". For further discussion, see H. Mann Leverett, "Think Again: Talking With Iran", *ForeignPolicy.com*, February 2009; "Iran and Thou: Productive Dialogue with Iran is Possible", *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 13 February 2009; and "Strategic Framework for US-Iranian Engagement", [http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed\\_archives\\_09spring/Leverett.html](http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives_09spring/Leverett.html)

<sup>7</sup>In this context, Anoush Ehteshami usefully refers to the "three Gs" of Iran's post-Cold War foreign policy – "geopolitics, geostrategic instabilities, and globalization"; see Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran".

which, from an Iranian perspective, American policy toward the Islamic Republic became increasingly hostile.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, during the presidency of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-97) – and with the acquiescence of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader – Iran repeatedly explored possibilities for a diplomatic opening with the United States. These efforts, however, were almost wholly unsuccessful in any strategically meaningful sense.

Under Rafsanjani's leadership, Iran cooperated with the George H.W. Bush administration to secure the release of the last US hostages in Lebanon, and took a "neutral" position during the first Gulf war that was, in practical terms, supportive of US interests. In the end, though, Iranian leaders were disappointed by the lack of any concrete reciprocal steps by the George H.W. Bush administration to improve US–Iranian relations.<sup>9</sup>

Rafsanjani continued efforts to reach out to the United States after the Clinton administration was inaugurated, notwithstanding President Clinton's policy of "dual containment" in the Gulf, which was directed against the Islamic Republic as well as Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Among other initiatives, the Rafsanjani administration put forward a pipeline proposal for marketing oil exports from the Caspian basin *via* Iran; as an alternative, Tehran also offered to facilitate transport of oil exports from the Caspian basin through Iran by way of oil "swaps". But the Clinton administration insisted that Iran be excluded from regional and international efforts to bring Caspian basin hydrocarbons to international markets. During the same period, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) began negotiations with international energy companies over "buy back" contracts to participate in the development of Iranian hydrocarbon assets. In 1995, Rafsanjani authorised the NIOC to award the first "buy back" contract offered to a foreign energy company – a \$600 million contract to develop two oil and gas fields off Sirri Island in the Persian Gulf – to the American company Conoco.<sup>10</sup> But, within two weeks of the offer to Conoco, President Clinton issued an executive order effectively barring US energy companies from participating in the development of Iran's hydrocarbon resources.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>On this point, see Maleki, "Iran's Regional Foreign/Energy Policy".

<sup>9</sup>Iranian officials working on relations with the United States during this period have told us that Rafsanjani and his foreign minister, Ali Akbar Velayati, were positively impressed by President George H.W. Bush's statement regarding the Islamic Republic that "goodwill will beget goodwill". But, on the American side, former US officials have told us that the George H.W. Bush administration decided to postpone pursuit of a broader rapprochement with Iran until after what administration officials assumed would be Bush's re-election in 1992.

<sup>10</sup>The NIOC had recommended Conoco and the French company Total for the Sirri Island contract as "qualified" to undertake the project; Rafsanjani then selected Conoco.

<sup>11</sup>This was Executive Order 12957, issued by President Clinton in March 1995. Two months later, in May 1995, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12959, which banned US companies from trading with or investing in Iran – in effect, imposing a comprehensive US economic embargo on the Islamic Republic.

Additionally, in the mid 1990s, Iran cooperated with the United States to provide weapons to Bosnian Muslims when American law prohibited Washington from doing so. But the leak of this activity in 1996 and criticism from Senator Robert Dole, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee that year, prompted the Clinton administration to denounce Iran's involvement in Bosnia, thereby shaping Iranian perceptions that Washington could not sustain cooperation with Tehran even when it served US interests.<sup>12</sup>

These experiences undoubtedly helped to confirm Ayatollah Khamenei's already deep suspicions about US intentions toward the Islamic Republic, prompting the Supreme Leader to argue for what Iranian officials described as the pursuit of an opening to "the West without America", focusing on Europe and Japan.<sup>13</sup> During the first term of Mohammad Khatami's presidency (1997–2001), the Islamic Republic put considerable energy into cultivating an opening to "the West without America". It was in this context that Iranian leaders – still stinging from the recent imposition of a comprehensive US economic embargo against the Islamic Republic – rejected Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's expressions of US openness to an unconditional dialogue with Tehran. Iranian leaders insisted that Washington had to lift its unilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic before official dialogue would be possible.

During Khatami's second term (2001–05), however, Iranian leaders calculated that the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States provided a unique opening for strategic alignment between the US and the Islamic Republic. This assessment prompted Iran's extensive post-9/11 cooperation with the United States over Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda. Strikingly, the Islamic Republic extended this cooperation without asking for anything in return, to encourage new thinking in Washington about the US–Iranian relationship. But the George W. Bush administration was not interested in using tactical cooperation with Tehran to facilitate a broader, strategic opening, and cut off dialogue with the Islamic Republic in May 2003.<sup>14</sup>

From this long history, Iranian elites across the Islamic Republic's ideological spectrum took the lesson that issue-specific cooperation with the United States will

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<sup>12</sup>It should also be noted that American perceptions of Iranian involvement in the terrorist attack on a US military barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996 brought President Clinton very close to ordering military strikes against Iran; these strikes were only averted by the election of Mohammad Khatami as the Islamic Republic's President in 1997. But Richard Clarke and Steven Simon, senior counterterrorism officials at the National Security Council during Clinton's tenure, have stated publicly that the attack on US forces in Saudi Arabia was an Iranian response to the appropriation of \$18 million by the US Congress to support the Islamic Republic's overthrow; see their "Bombs That Would Backfire", *The New York Times*, 16 April 2006.

<sup>13</sup>The phrase is reported in Mousavian, *Iran-Europe Relations*, 64. Iranian officials have told us privately that Khamenei was the principal backer of this approach in the Islamic Republic's highest policymaking circles.

<sup>14</sup>For a detailed assessment of Iranian cooperation with the United States over Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda by a former US official directly involved in negotiations with Iranian counterparts during this period, see Mann Leverett, "US Diplomacy With Iran", and "Strategic Framework for US–Iranian Engagement".

not work to put US–Iranian relations on a fundamentally more positive trajectory. In the end, Washington pockets whatever cooperation Tehran offers without offering anything substantial in return. But, notwithstanding an increasing interest in forging closer ties to major Eastern powers (China, India, Russia), Iranian foreign policy elites continued to be attracted by the prospective benefits of rapprochement with the United States.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence, during the last two years of Khatami’s presidency and the presidential tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–present), Iranian foreign policy has emphasized the importance of defining, *a priori*, a “comprehensive framework” for any sustained US–Iranian dialogue – a framework that would be clearly oriented toward fundamentally realigning US–Iranian relations, addressing the Islamic Republic’s security interests, recognising its regional role, and normalising its international status.<sup>16</sup> Without such a framework, Iranian leaders cannot have confidence in the end goal of engagement with the United States. As Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki put it recently, “Before I go into a room, I need to know what will be in it.”<sup>17</sup> From an Iranian perspective, an incremental process of *détente* with the United States is not workable. If there is to be an improvement in US–Iranian relations, it will have to be achieved as a consequence of a fundamental and comprehensive realignment of those relations.

There has always been a current in Western analyses of Iranian politics that sees the Islamic Republic as too ideologically constrained and/or politically fractious to pursue a strategic opening to the United States. From this perspective, a determinative portion of the Iranian leadership sees opposition to rapprochement with Washington as critical to regime legitimation and a weapon to use against political opponents. Since the Islamic Republic’s 12 June 2009 presidential election, such arguments have gained greater prominence in Western discussions of Iranian politics.

But the historical record of the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy since 1989 strongly suggests that this view is fundamentally mistaken. Even after the 2009 presidential election, there continues to be a critical mass of Iranian elites, cutting across the Islamic Republic’s factional spectrum, that is interested in rapprochement with the United States, within the parameters discussed above. Indeed, conversations with current and former Iranian officials suggest that, to the extent that there is intra-elite competition over the issue of relations with the United States,

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<sup>15</sup>For discussion of the “Eastern orientation” in Iranian foreign policy, see Garver, Leverett and Mann Leverett, *Moving (Slightly) Closer to Iran*, 20–32.

<sup>16</sup>The phrase “comprehensive framework” is used, for example, in the May 2008 letter of Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki to Secretary General of the United Nations Ban-ki Moon. Other examples of high-level Iranian proposals for comprehensive dialogue with the United States include the Iranian response to the 2006 incentives “package” put forward by the P-5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany) to facilitate multilateral negotiations over Iran’s nuclear activities and a 2003 “non-paper” passed to the United States through Swiss intermediaries.

<sup>17</sup>Personal communications with the authors.

this competition is over who will get political "credit" for any opening that might occur. At the same time, though, the Western reaction to the 2009 election and subsequent protests in Iran against the outcome is reinforcing perceptions among Iranian elites that American policy continues to support the possibility of "regime change" in Tehran.<sup>18</sup>

## **The United States and the Islamic Republic**

From an interest-based perspective, the imperatives for comprehensive realignment of US–Iranian relations are as compelling for Washington as they are for Tehran. Certainly, the costs accrued from the dysfunctional Iran policy are substantial. As we have noted,

nearly three decades of US policy toward Iran emphasizing diplomatic isolation, escalating economic pressure, and thinly veiled support for regime change have damaged the interests of the United States and its allies in the Middle East. US–Iranian tensions have been a constant source of regional instability and are an increasingly dangerous risk factor for global energy security. As a result of a dysfunctional Iran policy, among other foreign policy blunders, the American position in the region is currently under greater strain than at any point since the end of the Cold War.<sup>19</sup>

Looking ahead, how Washington deals with the Islamic Republic has become, in the context of the Middle East's new Cold War, the primary litmus test for the future of America's regional position. At this point in the evolution of the Middle East's balance of power and geopolitical influence, the United States cannot achieve any of its high-priority objectives in the region – reaching negotiated settlements to the unresolved tracks of the Arab–Israeli conflict, stabilising Iraq and Afghanistan, containing terrorist threats from violent *jihadi* extremists, curbing nuclear proliferation, putting Lebanon on a more stable trajectory and ensuring an adequate long-term flow of oil and natural gas to international energy markets – absent a productive strategic relationship with Iran.

There is a powerful analogy here to the reorientation of American policy toward the People's Republic of China undertaken by President Nixon during the early 1970s. Recognising that a quarter century of efforts to isolate, weaken and press China had not served US interests, in Asia or globally, Nixon recast America's China policy so that it would serve those interests. Some observers question the parallel between the policy challenges confronting Nixon regarding China and those confronting decision-makers today regarding Iran, arguing that there was

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<sup>18</sup>Such perceptions are reflected in Ahmadinejad's recent statements that the United States and its Western partners need to change their "attitude" toward Iran; see "The West Must Change Its Approach", *Press TV*, 20 December 2009, and "Middle East: Atomic Agitation", *Financial Times*, 8 January 2010.

<sup>19</sup>Leverett and Mann Leverett, *Time for a US–Iranian "Grand Bargain"*.



an immediate Cold War rationale for US–China rapprochement (to “triangulate” against the Soviet Union) that is absent in the Iranian case. From this perspective, the best that America can do *vis-à-vis* the Islamic Republic is incremental détente. But, as discussed above, this is not a workable approach from an Iranian perspective.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, such a recommendation defines both Nixon’s accomplishment *vis-à-vis* China and the contemporary challenge of Iran too narrowly. The primary impetus for US–China rapprochement was not a common enemy, but the need to align US and Chinese interests to deal with an array of strategic challenges; that is why the relationship established by Nixon and his Chinese counterparts has become even more important in the post-Cold War era. And, as with China in the 1970s, the United States today cannot address some of its most important foreign policy problems without a strategic opening to Iran.

To achieve this, Washington needs to pursue a genuinely comprehensive and strategic approach to diplomacy with Tehran. Such an approach would be grounded in a reaffirmation of America’s commitment in the Algiers Accord not to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs and in the prospect of a US guarantee not to use force to change the borders or form of government of the Islamic Republic. It would seek to resolve major bilateral differences and channel Iran’s exercise of its regional influence in support of US interests and policies.

Unfortunately, the United States – even with the Obama administration in office – has yet to pursue such an approach. This deficiency is highlighted clearly through an examination of the various incentives “packages” that Western powers have offered Tehran to support multilateral negotiations over Iran’s nuclear activities. In particular, it is illuminating to compare the incentives package tabled by the “EU-3” (Britain, France and Germany) in August 2005,<sup>21</sup> when the United States was still refusing to participate in multilateral nuclear talks, to the package tabled by the “P-5 + 1” (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany) in June 2006,<sup>22</sup> after the Bush administration had conditionally agreed to join the process. Regarding the prospects for economic and technological cooperation with Iran, the two packages are broadly similar – indeed, in a few passages, the two documents are almost identical, word-for-word. But there is a profound disconnect between the two packages regarding regional security issues.

- The 2005 EU-3 package offers the Islamic Republic positive security assurances, negative security guarantees and a commitment to cooperate in

<sup>20</sup>For further discussion of why Cold War-style détente between the United States and the Islamic Republic is not sustainable, see *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>This proposal (*Framework for a Long-Term Agreement*) was registered with the International Atomic Energy Agency on 5 August 2005, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Infocircs/Numbers/nr651-700.shtml>

<sup>22</sup>See *Elements of a Proposal to Iran*, 1 June 2006, [http://www.bilaterals.org/article.php3?id\\_article=5294](http://www.bilaterals.org/article.php3?id_article=5294)



establishing "confidence-building measures and regional security arrangements" as well as a regional weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone. But, as European diplomats involved in nuclear discussions with Iran readily acknowledge, security assurances and guarantees from Europe alone were never especially interesting to Tehran – to be meaningful for the Islamic Republic's strategic needs and interests, it was essential that the United States endorse such measures.

- But the George W. Bush Administration refused to join in offers of security assurances and guarantees to the Islamic Republic. In contrast to the 2005 EU-3 package, there is little mention of security issues in the 2006 P-5 + 1 package endorsed by the United States, except for an offer of "support for a new conference to promote dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues".<sup>23</sup> Conversations with officials from P-5 + 1 governments indicate that the George W. Bush administration insisted that fuller references to security be removed as a condition for US endorsement.<sup>24</sup>

This deficit was not substantially corrected in the "revised" P-5 + 1 package tabled in June 2008.<sup>25</sup> Strikingly, the Obama administration has decided not to go beyond the terms of the P-5 + 1 package in its representations to Iran. Since President Obama took office, there has been no offer to Tehran of comprehensive engagement with a well-defined agenda and the clearly stated goal of realigning US–Iranian relations in a manner that would address the Islamic Republic's legitimate security interests and regional role. In private communications to Iranian leaders as well as in public statements, there has been only vague rhetoric. On the nuclear issue, the Obama administration remains focused on "zero enrichment" as the goal of nuclear negotiations with Tehran – at this point, a wholly unrealistic proposition that undermines possibilities for winning Iran's agreement to rigorous international monitoring of its fuel cycle activities to minimise their associated

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<sup>23</sup>US officials subsequently noted that, in their view, participation in a meeting like the annual "Track 2/Track 1 and 1/2" conference on regional security sponsored in Bahrain by the International Institute for Strategic Studies would suffice to satisfy this commitment.

<sup>24</sup>Personal communications with the authors. European diplomats involved in the negotiations at the time say privately that their governments calculated it was more important to get the United States involved in multilateral diplomacy over the Iranian nuclear issue than to get the substance of the incentives package right. In our view, this is one of the most damaging mistakes made by European participants in the P-5 + 1 process.

<sup>25</sup>See *P-5 + 1 Updated Incentives Package*, 17 June 2008, <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/June/20080617165530eafas0.1855738.html>. Although the revised package included more language on regional political and security issues than the 2006 package, on the core issue of the Islamic Republic's national security, the document only reaffirms states' "obligation under the UN Charter to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the integrity or political independence of any state or in any manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations". But, unless the United States and the United Kingdom are prepared to acknowledge that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was inconsistent with those countries' obligations under the UN Charter, it is not clear why Iranian leaders should be satisfied with this revised P-5 + 1 package.

proliferation risks.<sup>26</sup> And, the Obama administration is still conducting overt and covert programs inherited from the George W. Bush administration, intended to destabilise the Islamic Republic.<sup>27</sup> If Iran wants rapprochement with the United States, but not at any price, the Obama administration seems to want rapprochement without paying anything.

It is not difficult to discern why the George W. Bush administration – or even the Obama administration – would find it difficult to provide more robust security guarantees to the Islamic Republic in the context of a multilateral incentives package designed to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. The US policy agenda *vis-à-vis* Iran extends well beyond the nuclear issue, encompassing Iranian ties to groups Washington identifies as terrorist organisations, Tehran's posture toward a negotiated resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, and management of other regional conflicts like Iraq and Afghanistan. Given political realities in the United States, no US administration of either major party would be able to provide security guarantees to the Islamic Republic unless US concerns about these other issues were also addressed.<sup>28</sup> And, without a comprehensive framework for engagement, experience shows that perceived Iranian provocations in other arenas will inevitably undercut Washington's willingness to sustain issue-specific cooperation with Tehran.

Thus, American political realities strongly suggest the need for a comprehensive approach to US–Iranian diplomacy, just as Iranian strategic concerns do. So why has the United States – even under the Obama administration – not moved more purposefully to embrace comprehensive engagement with Tehran, aimed at a fundamental realignment of relations?

Part of the answer lies in domestic politics. While US domestic political dynamics necessitate a comprehensive approach to rapprochement with Iran, they also make this difficult to do. Certainly, American foreign policy since the end of the US–Soviet Cold War remains heavily influenced by domestic constituencies mobilised in ways that raise the political risks to an American administration of pursuing strategic realignment with Iran.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>On the implausibility of “zero enrichment”, see, *inter alia*, Bunn, *Beyond Zero Enrichment* and F. Leverett and H. Mann Leverett, “Iran Is No Existential Threat”, *ForeignPolicy.com*, 4 December 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/04/iran\\_is\\_no\\_existential\\_threat](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/04/iran_is_no_existential_threat)

<sup>27</sup>See F. Leverett and H. Mann Leverett, “Have We Already Lost Iran?”, *The New York Times*, 24 May 2009. By contrast, when President Nixon came to office, he moved quickly to show the Chinese leadership that he was serious about rapprochement by directing the Central Intelligence Agency to stand down from conducting covert operations in Tibet and ordering the US Navy to stop patrols in the Straits of Taiwan.

<sup>28</sup>See Leverett, “All or Nothing”, [http://onsi.newamerica.net/publications/resources/2007/all\\_or\\_nothing\\_case\\_u\\_s\\_iranian\\_grand\\_bargain](http://onsi.newamerica.net/publications/resources/2007/all_or_nothing_case_u_s_iranian_grand_bargain)

<sup>29</sup>Most of the pro-Israel community in the United States fits this description; in the wake of Iran's 2009 presidential election, the Iranian–American community has become, on balance, more “hard line” in its policy advocacy.

But a larger part of the explanation, in our view, lies in ongoing confusion among American foreign policy elites about two critical questions:

- The first of these questions is the relative stability/fragility of the Islamic Republic's political order. This question has become even more controversial following Iran's June 2009 presidential election. We have argued elsewhere that the Islamic Republic is not imploding – the Islamic Republic has withstood numerous internal and external political challenges during its 30-year history, and there is no evidence that the "Green" movement which emerged out of the 2009 election could displace the current political order.<sup>30</sup> On this basis, we argue that Washington should engage the Islamic Republic as it is presently constituted, not as some in the United States and elsewhere might wish it to be. Of course, other analysts take a different view; within this camp, even some who oppose the imposition of sanctions or US military action against Iran argue that the United States should pull back from diplomatic engagement with Tehran until the political situation becomes clearer.
- The second of these questions is whether Tehran's national security and foreign policy strategies are designed to resist aspects of US hegemony that threaten Iranian interests and regional prerogatives or to replace American hegemony in the Middle East with Iranian hegemony. We have argued elsewhere that, since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the Islamic Republic's national security and foreign policy strategies have been primarily defensive in nature, designed to resist and undermine various aspects of American hegemony.<sup>31</sup> On the basis of that analysis we argue for strategically grounded rapprochement with Tehran as the optimal policy choice for the United States. For those who believe that the Islamic Republic aspires to replace the United States as the Middle East's regional hegemon, real rapprochement seems impossible; from this perspective, Washington's strategic options toward Iran boil down to some mix of containment and deterrence, on the one hand, or the explicit embrace of regime change in Tehran as the ultimate objective of America's Iran policy.

In the absence of intellectual consensus on these critical questions – or a clear presidential choice to deal with the Islamic Republic as it is presently constituted and seek rapprochement based on a balance of US and Iranian interests – US policy toward Iran has been and will remain, at best, incoherent.

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<sup>30</sup>See F. Leverett and H. Mann Leverett, "Ahmadinejad Won. Get Over It", *POLITICO*, 15 June 2009; F. Leverett, H. Mann Leverett, and Seyed M. Marandi, "Will Iran Be President Obama's Iraq?", *POLITICO*, June 2009; and F. Leverett and H. Mann Leverett, "Another Iranian Revolution? Not Likely", *The New York Times*, 6 January 2010.

<sup>31</sup>See Leverett and Mann Leverett, *Time for a US–Iranian "Grand Bargain"*, and Mann Leverett, "The Strategic Framework for US–Iranian Engagement".

## Looking ahead

In the language of social science, US–Iranian rapprochement – like an Arab–Israeli settlement – seems “overdetermined”. But, just as the world continues to wait for Arab–Israeli peace, it is not likely to witness realignment of US–Iranian relations in the foreseeable future. Because of the intellectual confusion and policy incoherence described above, US efforts to encourage internal liberalisation and contain perceived Iranian threats will continue to undercut the credibility, in Iranian eyes, of whatever attempts Washington makes to engage diplomatically. And, thus, the United States – even under the Obama administration – will continue to fall short of the Islamic Republic’s minimum threshold for determining that Washington is finally serious about rapprochement.

The absence of US–Iranian rapprochement will perpetuate the new Middle Eastern Cold War, imposing costs on the United States, Iran and other regional and international players. However, in strategic terms, the heaviest costs of continued US–Iranian estrangement are likely to be borne by the United States. In particular, lack of productive relations with Tehran will contribute significantly to Washington’s failure to achieve important policy objectives in the Middle East, thereby conditioning further erosion of America’s regional standing and influence. It is puzzling that the most prominent trend in Europe’s approach to the Middle East in recent years has been to align European positions more closely with US positions. In the near-to-medium term, this enables bad American policy while not serving Europe’s interests; in the longer term, it will hasten the diminution of Western influence in the world’s most strategically critical region.

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