

'Real men want to go to Tehran': Bush, pre-emption and the Iranian nuclear challenge

DAVID HASTINGS DUNN

Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.¹

This quip, which was common currency among the neo-conservatives in Washington in late 2002 and early 2003, was emblematic of the attitude of the Bush administration in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. It captures the essence of the Bush Doctrine, according to which the removal of Saddam Hussein was seen not as a one-act play but rather as the opening scene in the total transformation of the Greater Middle East.² The campaign in Iraq was to be a demonstration of American power so that, as Pentagon adviser Richard Perle told an audience not long after the invasion, 'we could deliver a short message, a two-word message: "You're next."' ³ And the prime focus for American concern after Iraq was the regime in Tehran. This is illustrated by another remark, light-hearted in tone but no less revealing. At a meeting with the outgoing Interim Iraq Administrator General Jay Garner in June 2003, Bush thanked him for doing a 'great job' and slapped him on the back, asking, 'Hey, Jay, you want to do Iran?' The response was equally informative of the mood: 'Sir, the boys and I talked about that and we want to hold out for Cuba.'⁴

This context, namely its desire for regime change in Iran, has coloured the Bush administration's approach to the challenge presented by Tehran's apparent desire to build a nuclear weapons capability. Yet the threat of military force either to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure and/or to effect regime change has proved counterproductive to the simultaneous efforts to stop the Iranian programme through diplomacy. Indeed, the entire US policy towards Iran of wishing to coerce, undermine and replace the regime while simultaneously seeking to persuade it to abandon its nuclear programme through diplomacy has proved both strategically inconsistent

¹ David Renwick, 'War without end', *New Yorker*, 14 April 2003, http://www.newyorker.com/printables/talk/030421ta_talk_remnick, accessed 17 Nov. 2006.

² See Mary Buckley and Rob Singh, *The Bush Doctrine and world order: global reactions, global consequences* (London: Routledge, 2006); Ramesh Thakur and Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, *The Iraq crisis and world order* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 2006); Philip H. Gordon, 'The end of the Bush revolution', *Foreign Affairs* 85: 4, July 2006, pp. 75–86.

³ Renwick, 'War without end'.

⁴ See Bob Woodward, 'Prisoners of war', *Sunday Times*, 8 Oct. 2006, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2092-2393399,00.html>, accessed 8 Oct. 2006. This article is an extract from *State of denial* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2006).

and consistently self-defeating. This article elucidates the rationale behind the Bush administration's approach, demonstrating how, in failing to decide whether its priority is a change of regime or a change of behaviour, it has got neither.

Iran and the Bush Doctrine

Despite America's failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the obvious impact of this on the credibility of the Bush administration's doctrine of pre-emption, Washington remains committed to the controversial strategy adopted after 9/11 in both its rhetoric and its official policy. Indeed, in March 2006 the White House published a new version of *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* which reaffirmed this approach. This document sets out the US government's duty to 'anticipate and counter threats, using all elements of national power, before the threats can do grave damage. The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction—and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack.'⁵ However, this document does not deal only in principles; it is also forthright in setting out those threats which it considers most challenging to America's security and interests. Thus the report continues by stating that 'We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran', and that the US 'has joined with our EU partners and Russia to pressure Iran to meet its international obligations and provide objective guarantees that its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes. This diplomatic effort must succeed if confrontation is to be avoided.'⁶ The precise nature of any such 'confrontation' with Iran, however, is left deliberately unclear. Precisely how America should respond to the Iranian nuclear challenge is shaping up into one of the most pressing and hotly contested foreign policy questions of President Bush's second term.

Since the Iranian decision in January 2006 to recommence the enrichment of uranium outside the safeguards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the options open to Washington have become headline news. For its part, the Bush administration has been keen to stress the range and scope of possible American responses. While making clear that a diplomatic solution is the preferred option, President Bush himself has stated that 'all options are on the table, including military force, to deal with the nuclear threat.'⁷ Vice-President Cheney has been typically more blunt, stating that 'We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon' and that 'meaningful consequences' will follow Tehran's failure to end its dangerous nuclear activity.⁸

Through anonymous leaks, the sabre-rattling from the administration has continued. By such means we learn that Turkey has been approached for possible use of its air bases by American B52 bombers to attack Iranian nuclear targets, and

⁵ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, March 2006, www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss/html, p. 18, accessed 27 Dec. 2006.

⁶ *National Security Strategy of the United States*, p. 20.

⁷ 'Bush to Iran: all options on table', *Boston Herald*, 13 Aug. 2005.

⁸ 'The world wants Iran to stop', *The Economist*, 14 March 2006, p. 59.

that vessels equipped to counter mines have been deployed to the Persian Gulf in preparation for possible Iranian retaliation against international shipping.⁹ In December 2006 America moved a second carrier battle group into the area as a demonstration of military capability following the UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Iran.¹⁰ It has also been suggested that the Bush administration wants to leave office in 2009 having solved this crisis on its watch, partly motivated by the notion that 'A nuclear armed Iran is too dangerous to be left to a potential Democrat president.'¹¹ Others have argued that in his last two years Bush, unconcerned by the electoral consequences of his actions, will be more likely to act on his convictions than for political considerations, and thus that an attack is more likely. Joshua Muravchik of the American Enterprise Institute has urged him to do just that. 'President Bush', he argues, 'will need to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities before leaving office ... Nothing will embolden terrorists and jihadists more than a nuclear-armed Iran.'¹² Presidential candidate Senator John McCain has also joined the debate, declaring that 'There is only one thing worse than the United States exercising a military option. That is a nuclear-armed Iran.'¹³ Opinion polls show that most Americans agree with this proposition, 57 per cent favouring 'military intervention if Iran's Islamic government pursues a programme that could enable it to build a nuclear bomb'.¹⁴

At a rhetorical level at least, then, the threat of military force against Iran is an openly discussed policy option within the United States. The 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, which was leaked to the press, even listed Iran as one state considered as a potential target by the nuclear planners, and such a scenario is used to justify the development of a new generation of mini nuclear weapons.¹⁵ To complicate the situation further, Israel has also indicated its refusal to countenance an Iranian nuclear challenge. In January 2006 the acting Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, stated that 'Under no circumstances can Israel allow someone with hostile intentions against us to have control over weapons of mass destruction that can endanger our existence.'¹⁶ This statement has added force, coming as it does from the country that destroyed the Osirak nuclear facility in Iraq in a preventive strike in 1981. Dick Cheney has also hinted at a possible Israeli response to the Iranian nuclear programme. Speaking in January 2005, the Vice-President speculated that, 'given the fact that Iran has a stated policy that their objective is the destruction of Israel, the Israelis might well decide to act first, and to let the

⁹ Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, 'Bush's salon revolutionaries plot an Iran coup', *Sunday Times*, 9 April 2006.

¹⁰ Tom Shanker, 'US and Britain to add ships to Persian Gulf in alert to Iran', *New York Times*, 21 Dec. 2006.

¹¹ Sarah Baxter, 'Gunning for Iran', *Sunday Times*, 9 April 2006.

¹² The argument continues, 'Apart from the dangers of a direct attack on Israel or a suitcase bomb in Washington, it would mean the end of the global nonproliferation regime and the beginning of Iranian dominance in the Middle East': Joshua Muravchik, 'Operation comeback', *Foreign Policy* 157, Nov.–Dec. 2006, see http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3602&page=1, accessed 22 Nov. 2006.

¹³ David Brooks, 'Hating the bomb', *New York Times*, 22 Jan. 2006.

¹⁴ Greg Miller, '57% Americans support military action in Iran', FT.com, 27 Jan. 2006, see <http://www.ft.com/crus/s821b8elc-8f47-11da-b430-0000779e2340.html>.

¹⁵ Scott D. Sagan, 'How to keep the bomb from Iran', *Foreign Affairs* 85: 5, Sept.–Oct. 2006, p. 50; Jason Zaboriski, 'Deterring a nuclear Iran', *Washington Quarterly* 28: 3, Summer 2005, pp. 153–67.

¹⁶ George Jahn, 'EU drafts Iran Security Council referral resolution', *Boston Sun*, 17 Jan. 2006.

rest of the world worry about cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterwards'.¹⁷ In outlining this scenario without condemning it, Cheney was attempting several things. First, by repeating this scenario himself he was giving it credibility. He was also implying that such an action could be taken independently of Washington's ability (or desire) to prevent it. And in deterrence terms, he was introducing the idea that Iran would face a 'second centre of decision making'—Tel Aviv as well as Washington—in calculating the likely response to its nuclear activities.

Iran: the development of a crisis

Given the stakes in this new diplomatic crisis, it is worthwhile examining how the current situation came about. How did this crisis develop? The answer lies in a couple of paradoxes. The first is that, while immediately after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 US–Iranian relations actually improved, because of the way Washington conceived of the conflict as 'the war on terrorism' Iran was soon categorized by the Bush administration as a first-order threat.¹⁸ This represented a lost opportunity for the United States. Iran was no friend of the Taleban regime, and offered American forces operating in Afghanistan assistance in such areas as search and rescue of downed pilots, and refuelling facilities.¹⁹ Washington was also encouraged by internal developments within Iran, such as evidence of debate about its foreign policy direction and the pro-American outlook of large numbers of young Iranians. As a result of this *rapprochement* many observers, including the Iranians themselves, were surprised and alarmed to find Iran lumped together with Iraq and North Korea as the 'axis of evil' in Bush's 2002 State of the Union address.²⁰

As far as the Bush administration was concerned, however, this assessment was justified by Iran's support for terrorism and its clandestine weapons programmes. According to American intelligence, Iran was linked to the supply of weapons to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and the provision of financial support to the militant Islamist organization the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and to Hizbullah in southern Lebanon. Having conceived of itself as engaged in a 'war against terrorism', Washington made no distinction between Iran's support for Palestinian nationalism in the occupied territories and Lebanon, and support for Islamist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. In this context of the war on terrorism Washington was also concerned about other developments. In 2002 the United States also announced that Iran was developing a long-range missile, the Shahab

¹⁷ Excerpts of remarks by Vice-President Cheney, 20 Jan. 2005, cited in *Foreign Policy Bulletin: The Documentary Record of United States Foreign Policy* 16: 1, Winter 2006, p. 36.

¹⁸ For a wider discussion of the Bush administration's approach, see David Hastings Dunn, 'Bush, 9/11 and the conflicting strategies of the "war on terrorism"', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 16: 1, Oct. 2005.

¹⁹ See Gary Sick, 'A selective partnership: getting US–Iranian relations right', *Foreign Affairs* 85: 6, Nov.–Dec. 2006, p. 142; Ray Tekwyh, *Hidden Iran: paradox and power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006).

²⁰ See William O. Beeman, 'After Ahmadinejad: the prospects for US–Iranian relations', in Walter Posch, ed., *Iranian challenges*, Chaillot Papers 89 (Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2006), <http://www.iss-eu.org/chaillot/chaill89>, accessed 29 Dec. 2006, p. 96; Wyn Q. Bowen and Joanna Kidd, 'The Iranian nuclear challenge', *International Affairs* 80: 2, March 2004, p. 264.

III, with assistance from North Korea, and that its nuclear programme was considered to be some five years away from the production of a bomb.²¹ The result of the 'axis of evil' categorization, however, was to strengthen considerably the position of the conservative nationalists in Iran, culminating ultimately in the election of a new and hardline president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in July 2005.

This process of increasing alienation between the United States and Iran was exacerbated by the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003. It is here that the second paradox is apparent. The invasion of Iraq was partly motivated by concern about the growing influence of Iran as a regional power in the Middle East. In respect of this concern, the invasion was meant to serve three purposes: it was intended to re-establish the US position in the Gulf as a geopolitical counterweight to Iranian influence; it was intended to create a democratic Iraqi state which would serve as a model of what liberal reform in Iran could look like; and it was also intended to provide a more stable and less threatening regime on Iran's border than that previously presented by Saddam Hussein. The neo-conservative theory was that a post-Saddam Iraq with a more benign regime in Baghdad would make neighbouring Iran feel more secure, and that this would in turn enable it to abandon its nuclear ambitions and to seek new commercial opportunities in a reformed Middle East. Events, of course, did not even allow this theory to be put to the test. The Bush administration rightly calculated that its action would alter the balance of power in the region, but was far off the mark in its assumption of the form that this alteration would take. America assumed that the creation of a democratic, pro-western Iraq would be a benign development for Iran, balancing it geopolitically in a way that was non-threatening yet also containing. Instead, however, the exact opposite outcome has transpired, with the exact opposite result. The creation of a weak and strife-ridden Iraq has meant that, geopolitically, Iran is the clearest beneficiary of the American invasion of Iraq. Not only does the fragmentation of Iraq into feuding semi-autonomous provinces deprive the region of its historic counterweight to Iran, but the creation within Iraq of a Shi'i-dominated province considerably increases Tehran's influence within the country in particular and the region in general.²²

If the change in the balance of power was the first inadvertent consequence of the Iraqi invasion for US–Iranian relations, two others were equally important. Perversely, these two consequences derived from completely contradictory moods, but had complementary effects on the activities of Iran. That is to say, the US action against Iraq both heightened Iran's sense of vulnerability, and emboldened it to act to reduce that vulnerability in a period when it perceived that the United States was preoccupied, overburdened and itself made vulnerable by its commitments in Iraq. For Tehran, the American invasion of Iraq was seen—as it was meant to be—as an indication of what the United States was capable of in its post-9/11 posture. Thus Iran became acutely aware of its own vulnerability

²¹ Since then Iran has developed the Shahab IV, which has a range capable of hitting Israel. See Geoffrey Kemp, 'Iran: can the United States do a deal?', *Washington Quarterly* 24: 1, Winter 2001, p. 119.

²² Richard Beeston, 'Two years on, Iran is the only clear winner of war on Saddam', *The Times*, 23 Sept. 2005.

within the region to the threat of attack from the US military in pursuit of regime change on the Iraqi model.²³ These fears were fuelled by discussion about precisely such a policy option in Washington in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghdad. The short-lived bravado of the spring of 2003, encapsulated by the quip—‘everyone wants to go to Baghdad; real men want to go to Tehran’—was not lost on the Iranian leadership, which used the opportunity to make a second overture to the Bush administration, offering comprehensive discussions over a range of issues. In what amounts to another missed opportunity, Washington refused even to acknowledge this overture, badly overplaying what would turn out to be a very weak hand.

Having had its diplomatic efforts spurned, Iran turned to consideration of its other options. The fact that the country was now surrounded by US military forces—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar—added to its perception of threat. Concerns such as these are likely to have reinforced Iran’s motivation to develop a nuclear capacity, both as a symbolic statement of sovereignty and as a potential weapons capability.²⁴ While Iraq was widely considered to have chemical and possibly biological weapons, this did not deter the United States from its invasion: by contrast, nuclear-armed North Korea seemed immune from US military threats. It is not difficult to see why, in such circumstances, Iran coveted nuclear status. Indeed, according to one Bush administration official, ‘We think the Iranians looked at the Koreans and learned a lesson’, not only in its nuclear ambitions but in hyping its own technological status.²⁵ As Sanger and Sciolino observe, ‘Iran has gone so far as to boast about, and perhaps to exaggerate, its nuclear prowess to try to convince the West that its programme is now unstoppable.’²⁶

Another explanation for Iran’s behaviour, and one which in part explains the timing of its pronouncements, is Tehran’s exploitation of an opportune moment in international politics. Tight supply, high demand and high prices in the oil market mean that there is no desire within the international community for energy sanctions. Indeed, every time the nuclear issue is debated the price of oil rises, and Iran’s foreign currency earnings rise with it. At the same time, the US military is distracted and overstretched in Iraq, where it is also deeply vulnerable to an increased insurgent threat should Iran wish to mount such an operation.²⁷ After the failure to find WMD in Iraq, moreover, the Bush administration’s credibility in making a case for actions in support of counterproliferation, both domestically and internationally, is very low indeed. While intended as an exemplary opera-

²³ See Bowen and Kidd, ‘The Iranian nuclear challenge’.

²⁴ See Mark Fitzpatrick, ‘Assessing Iran’s nuclear programme’, *Survival* 48: 3, Autumn 2006, pp. 5–26.

²⁵ David E. Sanger and Elaine Sciolino, ‘Iran strategy: Cold War echo’, *New York Times*, 30 April 2006.

²⁶ Sanger and Sciolino, ‘Iran strategy’.

²⁷ According to the Chief of Central Command, General John Abizaid, Iran presented a number of military threats to the United States: ‘Number one, they have naval capacity to temporarily block the Straits of Hormuz and interfere with global commerce if they should choose to do so. Number two, they’ve got a substantial missile force that can do a lot of damage to our friends and partners in the region. Number three, they’ve got a pretty robust terrorist surrogate arm that could in the event of hostilities cause problems not only in the Middle East but globally. And number four, they have a very substantial land army that, while it’s not offensively worrying, is certainly capable of conducting asymmetric warfare.’ Cited by Alec Russell, ‘Iran could cut West’s oil supplies in event of war, warns American chief in Gulf’, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Sept. 2006.

tion, Iraq is regarded by most observers as a model best not repeated. Instead of presenting an example of American military strength and political resolve, it has demonstrated only the limits of military capability and the political hubris of the Bush administration. As a result, the anti-American mood in the Middle East is such that Iran feels confident that its threats to escalate the crisis in the region will win the current episode of international brinkmanship. Commenting on the Iranian leadership, Nasser Hadian-Jazy of Tehran University observes that 'They feel the west is not in a position to block Iran and that the military option is not an option for the west.'²⁸ The country that most Iranians see as the model for the consequences of their nuclear policies is less Iraq than India. New Delhi's development of nuclear weapons was quickly accepted by the international community, with no significant penalties paid. Indeed, India's standing in the international arena seems to have been enhanced by its nuclear status, with the result that 'matching India in the nuclear realm also appears to be a self evident necessity for Iran'.²⁹ In some respects Pakistan is a closer model for Iran—non-democratic, with strident anti-American Islamic extremist groups—and yet it is accepted as a US ally despite its nuclear weapons status. The key difference is that Pakistan, unlike Iran, is not willing to challenge the United States or its status in the region.³⁰

Given this difficult geopolitical situation and moment, how serious a problem does the Iranian nuclear challenge represent? The answer depends in part on the purpose of the Iranian nuclear programme. Notwithstanding the analysis set out above, Iran still claims that its massive investment in an extensive nuclear programme is for commercial and peaceful purposes only—despite the fact that Iran's oil reserves are the second largest in the world and its substantial gas reserves, believed to be among the largest anywhere, are underdeveloped and lacking investment.³¹ Indeed, Iran annually vents off as much energy in natural gas as any programme of nuclear energy could generate.³² To most observers it does not seem plausible that an oil-rich state would build a nuclear infrastructure of this scale and type purely to generate electricity. Iran's 20-year-old programme of nuclear investment stands in marked contrast to its relative neglect of its technology- and investment-starved gas reserves. More worrying still has been Iran's record of obfuscation and deceit in its dealings with the IAEA. Since 2003 the IAEA has attempted to pressurize Iran into compliance with the provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of which it is a signatory. Given the country's record of deceit, the IAEA has also insisted that Iran sign up for an additional protocol allowing 'anytime anywhere inspections' to ensure that its declared activities match its actual behaviour.

International concerns with Iran's nuclear programme, as represented by the IAEA's negotiations, focus on Tehran's efforts to build a uranium-enrichment

²⁸ Roula Khalaf, 'Crude calculation: why oil-rich Iran believes the west will yield to nuclear brinkmanship', *Financial Times*, 2 Feb. 2006.

²⁹ Kenneth M. Pollack, 'Bringing Iran to the bargaining table', *Current History*, Nov. 2006, p. 366.

³⁰ Judith S. Yaphe and Charles D. Lutes, eds, *Reassessing the implications of a nuclear armed Iran*, McNair Paper 69 (Washington DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University, 2005), p. 34.

³¹ Posch, *Iranian challenges*.

³² Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, 'Debating nuclear aspirations', *Washington Quarterly* 26: 4, Autumn 2003, p. 107.

capability. With such a facility Iran could produce uranium perfectly legally under IAEA safeguards, then announce its withdrawal from the NPT, and then quickly build its own nuclear arsenal. Given the doubts about its need for nuclear energy and the evidence of its past deception, there is widespread suspicion of Iran's motivation. The United States, for its part, argues that because of its past deceptions Iran no longer has any right to such a civil nuclear programme. European efforts in the form of an initiative by Britain, France and Germany to induce Iran to give up its uranium-enrichment facilities in return for improved trade relations and development assistance, including the transfer of technologies for its civil nuclear programme, have proved unsuccessful in persuading Iran to change path. As a result the IAEA has, after offering repeated 'second' chances, reported Iran to the United Nations Security Council for its 'failures and breaches' of its international obligations.

Numerous attempts to delay this process on the part of the IAEA have served only to give Iran more time to develop its capabilities and to demonstrate the lack of willingness of the international community to confront this errant behaviour. When a UN sanctions resolution was finally adopted in December 2006, banning the transfer of nuclear-related technology and materials and restricting the travel and finances of Iranians involved in nuclear research, its value was more symbolic than substantive. Support for Iran in the Security Council from China, which is a major consumer of Iranian oil, and from Russia, which is engaged in the sale of nuclear technology to Iran, prevented any more meaningful sanctions being applied to Tehran.

The Bush administration apparently recognizes this reality and has stated that sanctions against Iran's oil and gas fields are not currently being considered because such action would 'strike too hard at ordinary Iranians', whereas the US aim was to target 'Iran's policies and its political leadership'.³³ This concession is more a recognition of the prevailing political climate than an expression of Washington's preferred approach, however. In particular, neither China nor Russia has shown any willingness to demand the cessation of Iran's nuclear activity under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the provision that authorizes both sanctions and the use of force. Their experience of how article 1441 was used in the case of Iraq, specifically by the US and UK to justify removing Saddam Hussein, has made them wary of such a move. For the international community as a whole, therefore, it seems likely that a nuclear-capable Iran would be a preferable outcome to a confrontation with its regime involving either oil sanctions or force. This in part reflects the perception of some observers that the Iranian nuclear challenge is not yet a pressing security issue. According to most experts, Iran is at least two years and possibly ten years from gaining nuclear weapons capability. As a result, the crisis is more one of a challenge to the non-proliferation regime than a direct and immediate military challenge to regional or international security.

For Washington, however, the calculations are apparently different. According to President Bush, 'The Iranians should not have a nuclear weapon, the capacity to

³³ John Ward Anderson and Colum Lynch, 'US crafts response on Iran', *Washington Post*, 3 May 2006.

have a nuclear weapon, or the knowledge as to how to make a nuclear weapon.'³⁴ In stating this policy, however, Washington has placed the bar very low in respect to what it finds objectionable in Iran's activity, but at the same time has not made clear what steps it intends to take in response to what level of violation of this set of proscriptions. Thus there are simultaneous debates under way on how to respond to Iranian defiance without there being any clear idea as to what instruments are appropriate for what transgressions. At one end of the spectrum, such actions might include targeted sanctions against the Iranian regime, such as travel restrictions, limits on participation in sporting events, and the prohibition of sales of military equipment and of any technologies and materials useful in its nuclear industry. These might be coordinated among America's allies in the EU, NATO and Asia, but are unlikely to generate universal or UN backing. At the other end of the scale is the prospect of military action against Iran, either targeted at its nuclear facilities alone or as part of a strike at the current political leadership. How likely such an option is remains a hotly debated topic.

A pre-emptive military strike?

Whether a military attack by the United States on Iran is likely depends largely on the nature of the provocation America perceives to be offered by Tehran and the momentum of the political debate in both countries at the time. From the American point of view, the range of provocations and the gradations of threat are considerable. In conceptualizing a ladder of escalation, consideration needs to be given to both the stages of the acquisition process and the purposes for which a state would employ the nuclear capability thereby acquired. In the former case, eight rungs on the escalation ladder are identifiable. The first stage has been crossed with the stated desire to break out of the IAEA safeguards; a second is the move to enrich uranium, while a third would be building and equipping facilities to enrich uranium on an industrial scale. What follows need not happen incrementally but could include: giving notice to leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime; five: announcing the existence of a nuclear weapons capability; six: the announcement and/or detection of a nuclear weapons test; seven: the marrying of a nuclear device to a delivery system—weaponization—and eight: the operational deployment of such a system.

Whether and at what point these stages of the nuclear weapons acquisition process would be interrupted by military action would depend on another set of calculations concerning the nature of the threat that the Iranian bomb represented. After all, both India and Pakistan moved to the point of testing and deploying nuclear weapons in recent years, and yet, despite protestations and sanctions, their actions were not considered a serious enough provocation by any party to prompt military action. In the Iranian case, such a judgement will be based not on technical developments alone but on the question of why Iran wants a bomb and what it might do with it. Seven possible uses for an Iranian bomb are identifiable, and

³⁴ Sanger and Sciolino, 'Iran strategy'.

not all of these would present the same degree of threat to US interests or necessarily prompt the same response. At the first level is 'existential deterrence', the possession of a device to protect the homeland against WMD attack or invasion. The second level is 'extended deterrence', where Iran might assert that its nuclear weapons could also be used to protect the security and territorial integrity of an ally, such as Syria, against such an attack. Third, Iran might use its new nuclear status to blackmail other states; or, fourth, it could engage in more aggressive behaviour on the assumption that it was now immune from retaliation.³⁵ Fifth, Iran might seek to spread its capability to allies, perhaps viewing its technological achievement as an 'Islamic bomb' or possibly even a 'Shi'ia bomb'.³⁶ Sixth and much more serious would be the prospect that Iran would pass its capability to terrorist groups in the Middle East or beyond. Lastly, Iran could in theory get set to use or actually use its nuclear weapons to attack its perceived enemies, perhaps to put into action Ahmadinejad's threat to 'wipe Israel off the face of the earth'.

Were America to have strong suspicions that either of the last two scenarios was about to become fact, it is extremely likely that a US pre-emptive disarming first strike would be the immediate result. 'Judging from cold war history,' according to Barry Posen, 'if the Iranians so much as appeared to be readying their nuclear forces for use, the United States might consider a pre-emptive nuclear strike. Israel might adopt a similar doctrine in the face of an Iranian arsenal.'³⁷ The use in such a strike of tactical nuclear weapons could not be ruled out if it was considered operationally necessary. This is, after all, what their role is in the American arsenal; and considerations of collateral damage, while obviously a factor, might not always counterbalance the calculations of risk in such a scenario. 'Senior Bush administration officials' have already begun briefing privately that, in an environment in which it faced 'the growing probability of nuclear attack, the US will reorient its own military nuclear capabilities towards a more tactical stance. The currently sky-high threshold for a US nuclear attack will be lowered sharply to take account of the new threats.'³⁸

What is true of pre-emption is also true of retaliation should a state such as Iran transfer a nuclear device to a terrorist organization that then used it. The concept of 'nuclear accountability' championed by Graham Allison and adopted by the Bush administration requires that such an act would require the United States to 'treat this precisely like a nuclear-tipped-missile attack' and retaliate accordingly.³⁹ The logic behind this posture is that because you can't deter the terrorists you need to deter their potential supplies by making clear that they would suffer the consequences of the detonation of any bomb which originated from them.

By way of contrast to such scenarios, it is equally likely that the mere statement by Iran of deviance from IAEA protocols and of the desire to enrich its own

³⁵ See Yaphe and Lutes, *Reassessing the implications*, p. 34.

³⁶ See Wade L. Huntley, 'Rebels without a cause: North Korea, Iran and the NPT', *International Affairs* 82: 4, July 2006, p. 732.

³⁷ Barry R. Posen, 'We can live with a nuclear Iran', *New York Times*, 27 Feb. 2006.

³⁸ Gerard Baker, 'The price of shilly-shallying', *The Times*, 13 Oct. 2006.

³⁹ Bill Powell, 'When outlaws get the bomb', *Time*, 23 Oct. 2006, p. 29. See also Graham Allison, *Nuclear terrorism: the ultimate preventable catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004); James A. Philips, John Hulsman and James Jay Carafano, 'Countering Iran's nuclear challenge', *Backgrounders*, no. 1903, 14 Dec. 2005 (Washington DC: Heritage Foundation), <http://www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/bg1903.cfm>, accessed 29 Dec. 2006.

nuclear fuel is unlikely to warrant a military response. The difficult question to determine is where in between these poles the point of provocation will be crossed. It has served America's purpose to keep the Iranian regime guessing as to where that point lies in order to induce caution in its decision-making. For this reason the United States has refrained from drawing any specific lines in the sand. While doing so would serve to bring the issue to the top of the international agenda, such a move might force either side towards action or capitulation, either of which would be both dangerous and ruinous to longer-term relations. Furthermore, Iran's experience with the multiple deadlines and pronouncements from the IAEA and indeed the UN which it has ignored repeatedly with impunity has served only to embolden it towards further defiance. The effect of these broken deadlines and the weak Security Council resolution is that Tehran is now convinced that the international community lacks the collective resolve to prioritize the issue over other considerations, and in such circumstances lines in the sand would lack credibility.

Even if Washington is unwilling to specify where it would draw the line on what degree of Iranian nuclear capability it finds acceptable, its plans for what might follow any transgression of such a line have entered the public debate. Leaks from the Pentagon indicate that Washington is considering two distinct military options. The first would involve strikes on all the disputed nuclear facilities. This option is regarded as technically feasible and could be done using the new Big Blu 30,000lb bunker-busting bomb delivered by B2 and B52 aircraft and cruise missiles.⁴⁰ It is estimated, however, that such a mission would delay the Iranian nuclear programme by only two years before it would need to be repeated. Whether the political impact of such an action in the Middle East and wider Islamic world and the likely Iranian response would justify this option is questionable. Again, however, this depends on the degree of perceived provocation that would precipitate any such action. The second option being considered would target both the disputed nuclear facilities and a set of leadership targets. This would involve a larger target set; any such operation would also involve the neutralization of Iran's air defence systems and its capacity to retaliate against American facilities and interests in the region. Thus offensive air strikes on missile facilities, government ministries, the intelligence headquarters, the Revolutionary Guard and the nuclear sites would all feature in this scenario.⁴¹ Special forces might also be used to destroy particularly sensitive targets like the nuclear facilities at Tehran University. In all, this would be a much larger mission, intended not simply as a disarming strike against the nuclear infrastructure but as a decapitation strike aimed at regime change. Such a mission would undoubtedly involve collateral damage, including civilian casualties, and could not be certain of removing the incumbent regime. Indeed, neither mission is assured of success, for Iran has dispersed, concealed, duplicated and hardened its nuclear facilities. America's intelligence on the extent of the nuclear industry is too unreliable to be the basis of such a politically crucial mission.⁴²

⁴⁰ Sarah Baxter and Michael Smith, 'Bush plans strike on Iran's nuclear sites', *Sunday Times*, 9 April 2006.

⁴¹ David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, 'At the White House, engaging Iran with words over action', *New York Times*, 12 April 2006.

⁴² Gerard Baker, 'Read my lips—no attacks on Iran', *The Times*, 28 April 2006.

To attack and fail to destroy the nuclear programme would be the worst possible outcome. What response any attack would induce from the regime and from the Iranian population as a whole is also a massive yet decisive unknown variable. The lesson of Iraq here must act as a cautionary warning in any decision-making process. What is clear, however, is what the regime *says* it would do if attacked, sanctioned, or even threatened with sanctions. Iran has variously indicated that, if attacked by America, it would retaliate against Israel; attack and disrupt oil shipments coming out of the Gulf; incite an uprising in the southern, Shi'ia parts of Iraq; and arm and activate Palestinian terrorists against Israel.⁴³ There is also the danger that any military action would rally the part of the population that is at present alienated from the regime around the existing leadership. It would certainly further increase hostility towards the United States in the region and confirm for many the widely held belief that the Bush administration is engaged in some sort of holy war against Islam.

Such a move is also unlikely to generate much if anything in the way of international support. Action short of a genuinely disarming pre-emptive strike would be in violation of international law. Of the European powers, only the UK and Poland would be likely to offer support—and even this could not be relied upon, given the lack of any international legal fig-leaf such as existed with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The specific circumstances and nature of the provocation would have to be urgent and very convincing to generate any support in Europe, particularly from France and Germany, which remain opposed in principle to military action. Domestically, too, in the wake of events in Iraq, America is in no mood for an additional war to fight. Nor has President Bush the political or moral authority or even credibility to rally his nation to such action. The military, Congress and even members of his own administration would need a lot of convincing that military action was the best option. And, as Gerard Baker observes, 'the Bush team is not remotely in the frame of mind it was in over Iraq four years ago. The political line-up has been transformed ... Most important, even the hawks in the Vice-President's office are far from convinced of the likely efficacy of pre-emptive strikes to take out Iran's nuclear programme.'⁴⁴

If not America, then what about an Israeli military strike against Iran? Again, plans are well publicized as to what contingency plans the Israeli Defence Force has put in place.⁴⁵ Israel has even briefed journalists of plans to destroy the Natanz facility using low-yield tactical nuclear weapons.⁴⁶ In practice, however, the nature of the Iranian programme makes its destruction by Israel much harder than the attack on the Iraq plant in 1981. Given the range, dispersal and hardening of the facilities it is even less assured that an Israeli attack could succeed in destroying Iran's nuclear facilities with conventional munitions and the use of nuclear weapons

⁴³ Anderson and Lynch, 'US crafts response on Iran'.

⁴⁴ Baker, 'Read my lips'.

⁴⁵ Sarah Baxter and Uzi Mahnaimi, 'Sanctions may be the next step', *Sunday Times*, 15 Jan. 2006.

⁴⁶ Sarah Baxter and Uzi Mahnaimi, 'Mission Iran' and 'Revealed: Israel plans nuclear strike on Iran', *Sunday Times*, 7 Jan. 2007.

pre-emptively would be politically inflammatory.⁴⁷ The irony of denying Iran a nuclear weapons capability by the very use of such a weapon would further enrage international opinion and reinforce perceptions of double standards with regard to Israel and the Muslim world. Given that Israel would most probably need to overfly Iraq to get to Iran, America would be implicated as complicit in any action and therefore not immune from retaliation even if it was not directly involved.⁴⁸ For this reason Washington has privately discouraged Israel from contemplating such an attack.

Despite the rhetoric, Israel is itself not keen to undertake such a mission as this would further inflame regional hostility and deepen its international isolation.⁴⁹ Its experience in the short war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 may also have reduced its appetite for such action. Despite unleashing the full strength of its technically sophisticated air force for over a month, Israel failed to identify and destroy the military capacity of Hizbullah to launch rocket attacks on its northern cities. The collective failure to identify and destroy these rocket batteries, command and control systems, and leadership targets does not set a good precedent for a pre-emptive attack mission where success would have to be total to count as success at all—especially as Israel would need to destroy Iran's long-range missile forces in order to prevent retaliation which, Iran says, would be 'swift, strong and crushing'.⁵⁰

Given these difficulties, why has Washington engaged in sabre-rattling with Iran? The answer to this question has several parts. First, there are circumstances, as detailed above, in which Washington *would* act militarily against Iran, and because of that it does not want to remove the military option from the table. Second, threatening a possible military strike against Iran serves the purposes of coercive diplomacy. Not knowing how Washington might react is intended to induce restraint in Iranian decision-making. Here, the fact that the Bush administration invaded Iraq despite widespread warnings to the contrary increases the credibility of the threat to act as apparently irrationally again. Third, the threats to use force are also intended to influence Chinese and Russian decision-making. The argument here is that if these permanent members of the UNSC want to avoid Washington setting the Middle East on fire once again, then it is up to them to put diplomatic pressure on Iran, if necessary through further sanctions or boycotts, to desist from continuing down the nuclear path. The fact that Washington itself has ruled out oil and gas sanctions, however, does somewhat undermine the credibility of its own threat to jump these rungs on the ladder of international pressure in favour of a military solution.

America's policies towards the Middle East in general and Iran in particular are replete with the ironies of unintended consequences. The invasion of Iraq turned out to have precisely the opposite effect on Iran to that predicted. This has

⁴⁷ For a detailed appraisal of the Israeli debate see Gerald Steinberg, 'Walking the tightrope: Israeli options in response to Iranian nuclear developments', pp. 71–84, in Yaphe and Lutes, *Reassessing the implications*.

⁴⁸ An alternative though much longer route could involve over flight of Turkey. Baxter and Mahnaimi, 'Mission Iran'; 'Revealed'.

⁴⁹ Quentin Peel, 'Security holds the key to the Tehran tangle', *Financial Times*, 2 Feb. 2006.

⁵⁰ Stephen Farrell and Tom Baldwin, 'Iran "must start to fear" Israel if it fails to halt nuclear plan', *The Times*, 13 Nov. 2006.

also proved to be the case with Washington's military threats against Iran, both those implied during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and those made more recently in relation to Iran's nuclear challenge. What is clear is that there are no attractive military options available to the United States to disarm Iran of its nuclear pretensions, to persuade it to relinquish them voluntarily, or to effect regime change and to establish a more benign government. What is also clear is that Iran recognizes the relative strength of its position and discounts all such threats as empty gestures. At the same time, however, America's sabre-rattling, together with its geopolitical posture in the region, reinforces the Iranian desire for a nuclear weapons capability. In such circumstances the Bush administration's approach is ultimately self-defeating. The problem lies with the fact that Washington's Iran policy appears to have several competing policy goals, with no clear hierarchy among them and no clear idea how to coordinate policy to achieve these different goals. Its threat of the use of force is symptomatic of this confusion in that Washington appears to be making military threats in relation to all America's policy concerns, when in practice such threats are credible only at the extreme end of the policy spectrum.

Four distinct policy objectives are discernible in American policy towards Iran, and within all these areas a more realistic approach is needed as to what policy instruments are appropriate for what goals and circumstances. These four policy goals are as follows.

(1) Preventing an Iranian nuclear capability and the knock-on regional proliferation

A central tenet of American policy towards Tehran has been the determined effort to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapons capability.⁵¹ There are two separate motivations for this policy: first, to stop Tehran gaining this capability in its own right; and second, to avoid the likely impact that such a development would create in the region, namely the pressure for nuclear proliferation throughout the Middle East and the attendant collapse of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. America's concern is that even the prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon will force other regional actors down the route of acquiring their own nuclear weapons. Already Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria have informed the International Atomic Energy Agency of their intention to develop civil nuclear power programmes, and two more states, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, have expressed interest in following this path. Their simultaneous announcement of the wish to develop such a capability suggests the desire to create an insurance policy against an Iranian bomb.⁵² Such a move would raise the stakes in a volatile region and potentially weaken America's role as guarantor of the security for the Gulf states. If Iran reached the stage of developing a weaponized nuclear capability, Israel might also seek to upgrade its nuclear capability. Just now, Israel's nuclear capability is described as being a 'screwdriver away' from completion. If Iran

⁵¹ On earlier efforts see Geoffrey Kemp, 'Iran: can the United States do a deal?', *Washington Quarterly* 24: 1, Winter 2001, pp. 109–24.

⁵² See 'Nuclear knock-on', editorial, *The Times*, 4 Nov. 2006.

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were to gain a nuclear weapons capability, Israel could be expected to want to move away from its policy of 'deliberate ambiguity' and to deploy an operational weapons system capable of surviving to carry out a second strike and possibly even with some first-strike capability. Such moves would be seen as provocative in the region. Thus a snowballing arms race, including the deployment of ballistic missile defences leading to an offence–defence competition, could result throughout the Middle East as a result of the Iranian nuclear challenge.⁵³

Until now the United States has been seeking to deal with this challenge primarily through the multilateral mechanisms of the IAEA, by supporting European diplomatic efforts, and through the diplomatic efforts of the UN Security Council. The instruments employed in these forums have been diplomatic engagement, promises of access to the EU and world markets, and ultimately the threat of limited economic sanctions. The Bush administration has also hinted at the prospect of military action against Iranian nuclear facilities but, for the reasons outlined above, such threats lack credibility.

(2) Preventing nuclear rogue state behaviour

A second and closely related American policy concern about Iran's actually developing a nuclear capability is the fear of what Tehran might do with it. As mentioned above, this could take several forms beyond the mere establishment of a nuclear capability. Indeed, the most serious threat that Iran could pose to the United States and to American interests would be its emergence as a nuclear weapons-capable state with an aggressive policy agenda. While Washington has focused its concern about this potential on its non-proliferation efforts, it needs to be much more precise in detailing the consequences that would follow, including the prospects of military action, if Iran were to use its nuclear capability to arm terrorists or threaten regional stability. It is only in this context, the notion of nuclear accountability, that America can credibly and legitimately threaten Iran with a military response.

(3) Preventing state-sponsored terrorism and regional destabilization

The third concern and associated US policy goal relates to Iran's support for terrorist and insurgent groups, such as Hamas and Hizbullah, and for Shi'ia sectarianism in Iraq. American acquiescence in the Israeli military action in Lebanon in July 2006 was in part motivated by a desire to see Iranian influence reduced in that country by destroying Hizbullah. Israel's failure to do this militarily increased Hizbullah's—and therefore Iran's—influence in Lebanon. This, together with the worsening situation in Iraq, has increased the salience of this concern within Bush's Iranian policy. Despite the evidence that Iran has been training and equipping Shi'ia Iraqi insurgents who then go on to attack American and British forces in Iraq, Washington has been careful not to threaten military retaliation for this

⁵³ See Steinberg, 'Walking the tightrope'.

conduct overtly. This self-restraint on the part of the Bush administration represents an awareness of both the lack of meaningful military options in this area and the potential for greater escalation of both Iranian involvement in Iraq and the crisis situation between the two states.

(4) Promoting regime change in Tehran

While denying that regime change is official US government policy, the Bush administration has made no secret of its dislike of the Iranian regime and has made clear its pledge to 'support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy in their country'.⁵⁴ At the Bush administration's request, Congress has voted \$75 million to promote democracy and civil society in Iran and fund the new Voice of America's Persian-language service. Within Congress, initiatives such as the Iran Freedom and Support Bill have received widespread support without yet becoming law.⁵⁵ Such activities aimed at regime change from within, however, paradoxically serve to bolster the authority of the present regime, allowing it to portray any and all opposition to it as agents of the American state. What is true of soft power instruments is even more so of military threats. In this respect the debate about possible American military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, and the speculation in political circles in Washington that this might necessitate and therefore create the opportunity for counterleadership targeting, only serves to increase Iranian mistrust, insecurity and desire for a nuclear capability. A set of policies which allows the current regime to use an external threat in order to rally nationalist support and to denounce internal opposition is not a recipe for long-term success. At its root lies America's distaste for the Ahmadinejad regime and its ultimate desire to see it gone, which constitutes a barrier to better relations. The Bush administration's 'with us or against us' brand of diplomacy has prevented a more pragmatic search for areas of common ground with the Iranian regime and a reluctance to respond positively to Iranian overtures when they have been forthcoming.

An integrated Iran policy

The seriousness of the foreign policy challenge that Iran presents to American interests in the Middle East requires a new and more coordinated policy response from Washington. What is needed is a genuinely integrated approach towards Iran which recognizes and prioritizes the competing policy goals involved, but also creates linkages in the negotiating process on all concerns and regains the initiative which recently has rested solely with Iran. More importantly, Washington's Iran policy needs to be determined within an overarching US policy towards the Middle East as a whole, including a new approach towards Syria in coordination

⁵⁴ These words are Condoleezza Rice's; see Ewen MacAskill and Julian Borger, 'Bush plans huge propaganda campaign in Iran', *Guardian*, 16 Feb. 2006, http://www.guardian.co.uk/usa/story/0,,1710699,00.html#article_continue, accessed 24 Nov. 2006.

⁵⁵ Kelly Beaur Vlahos, 'Capitol Hill mulls "regime change" in Iran', *Foxnews.com*, 4 Feb. 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,146342,00.html>, accessed 24 Nov. 2006.

with the other Arab states, and the reinvigoration of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Without coordination of American policy towards individual states in relation to a holistic plan there is little prospect of success. With regard to the nuclear proliferation challenge, this requires direct engagement with the Iranian regime. Not talking directly to the regime about this issue serves only to limit Washington's ability to negotiate across a range of issues and to increase Tehran's suspicions that it is not serious in claiming to want a deal. The prospect should be offered, as part of a comprehensive agreement, of some form of recognition of the legitimacy of the Iranian state. The United States maintained diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War and re-established them with China in 1972. In this spirit it should move towards the establishment of diplomatic relations with Iran. The appropriate diplomatic price for such a move should be that mutual dialogue be met with mutual respect and that Iran's fiery propaganda and vitriolic rhetoric be toned down as part of a process of recognizing the interests of all parties.⁵⁶ If the legacy of the US–Iranian rift could be diminished and removed from the politics of the current situation, however difficult this may be, then the prospects for tangible progress would be greatly improved.

Recognizing and addressing Iranian security concerns is another policy area where Washington could take the initiative. The two main areas of US policy concern relating to Iran, nuclear proliferation and Iraq, are directly linked to Tehran's threat perception of the United States. Iran is highly unlikely to relinquish its apparent quest for a nuclear weapons capability while it believes that this is the only means of ensuring regime survival against an American threat. While Tehran's nuclear policy is partly motivated by prestige, the legacy of the Iran–Iraq war has also left a very real desire to deter outside threats, which for the present means the threat from the United States.⁵⁷ Similarly, part of its motivation for its current subversive involvement in Iraq is to embroil the 'imperialist' America in bloody conflict there and thus prevent it from targeting Iran. Tehran cannot be expected to help bring stability to Iraq while it believes America is trying to destabilize Iran. If it can be convinced that America has no hostile intent against it and no plans for permanent bases in Iraq, but does have a commitment to the future stability of the region, then its positive involvement in bringing stability to Iraq may be secured. If Iran could be persuaded that America's intentions in the Middle East are benign and that working with Washington could be beneficial to its own security and regional stability, then the basis for progress on a range of issues would be possible.

At present the Bush administration has offered security assurances to North Korea but not to Iran. In 2004 it 'affirmed it has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK' and that 'the DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalise their relations'.⁵⁸ As Mark Fitzpatrick argues, 'If the United States can do this for

⁵⁶ Posch, *Iranian challenges*, p. 131.

⁵⁷ Ali Gheissari and Vali Nasr, 'The conservative consolidation in Iran', *Survival* 47: 2, Summer 2005, p. 187.

⁵⁸ See Mark Fitzpatrick, 'Iran and North Korea: the proliferation nexus', *Survival* 48: 1, Spring 2006, p. 75.

North Korea, surely it can do it for Iran.⁵⁹ And yet Washington refuses to do this, because of Iran's support for terrorism and Bush's wish to keep open the threat of military force. Such an approach is counterproductive to the goal of changing Iranian policy in these two key areas. While Washington should make clear that any security guarantee would be nullified if Iran directly threatened or attacked its neighbours or exported nuclear weapons or materials, it would be in the US interest to take the first steps in this process by announcing its commitment to promote democracy in Iran by peaceful means only. Ironically, the weakened US position in the region as a consequence of its embroilment in Iraq makes such assurances more credible. With the hubris and the apparent capability to effect change gone, the opportunity for a less tense relationship could prove fruitful.

Another security concern often cited by Tehran is the threat presented by Israel and its possession of nuclear weapons. While many scholars consider this argument to be motivated more by ideology than by national security concerns, it remains an issue to be addressed.⁶⁰ In this policy area the establishment of a regional forum along the lines of the 1991 Arms Control and Regional Security model could be a useful initiative. More ambitious goals of a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone, however, are unlikely to make any progress while Israel feels that its own security and survival are at stake.⁶¹ And yet at the same time Israel's possession of nuclear weapons is anomalous and the juxtaposition of its situation with the international response to Iran raises accusations of hypocrisy. How progress on this issue can be made is not immediately obvious, since Israel is not likely to join the NPT regime as a non-nuclear state and would not be admitted as a nuclear weapons state. Some measures need to be initiated, however, either by Israel or by the international community, to address and be seen to address Israel's anomalous nuclear situation. Progress on the settlement of the Israeli–Palestinian question, removing the perceived need for the Israeli bomb, would be a first step in removing the justification of such a capability. This would be in everyone's interests and as such requires a redoubled effort by Washington. If the last steps in this peace process could be achieved this would also remove Iran's justification of its support for Hamas and Hizbullah, and at the same time would undercut one of the stated rationales for Iran's possession of such a deterrent capability. If the ultimate goal of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction could be agreed as a target worth working towards, then this would at least embrace equal status as an agreed end point. The alternative of Iran following Israel down the nuclear path with other regional states likely to do likewise is a much less attractive option.

In determining how to engage Iran, however, America first of all needs to decide what price it is willing to pay to stop Iran developing what level of nuclear capability. Need America really insist, for example, that 'not a single centrifuge can spin', as the Bush administration recently announced?⁶² To insist on this maximalist position might be to set America's goals unnecessarily and unrealisti-

⁵⁹ Fitzpatrick, 'Iran and North Korea'.

⁶⁰ See Bowen and Kidd, 'The Iranian nuclear challenge'.

⁶¹ Steinberg, 'Walking the tightrope', p. 82.

⁶² Sagan, 'How to keep the bomb from Iran', p. 6.

cally high. It might be that allowing Tehran to save face by keeping its experimental 164-centrifuge cascade, which poses no immediate danger of active proliferation, would be an easier way to reach an agreement with Tehran than insisting that it relinquish everything.⁶³ Whether such a possibility exists, however, can only be discovered by active negotiation. An associated question is whether the nuclear policy goal takes priority over engaging Iran in the process of American disengagement from Iraq. It may be that it is possible to achieve aspects of both policy goals in return for the quid pro quos of *rapprochement* and the internationalization of a regional settlement of the problems of Middle East security and stability. After all, both America and Iran would benefit from Iraq and Afghanistan being stable, prosperous non-threatening neighbours to Iran. The difficulty remains how and whether this can be achieved.

Even with such common interests and possible diplomatic approaches, it remains possible that no deal will prevent Iran moving towards a nuclear capability. Nor do UN sanctions or the threat of pre-emptive attack seem promising policy instruments in inducing restraint on Iran's path towards nuclear procurement. That is not to say that positive and negative incentives have no role in American and international policy towards Iran; rather, that such instruments are only likely to be effective as part of a broader, coordinated policy approach—and even then their effectiveness cannot be assumed.⁶⁴ In such circumstances Washington will need to be much more specific in identifying and communicating what are merely desirable policy goals and what are absolute real red lines in Iranian nuclear behaviour, and what consequences Tehran can expect should it contemplate breaking these nuclear taboos.

The approach advocated here is essentially a call for a new detente with Iran within the framework of an overall containment policy, with the crucial backstop of the threat that if Iran were to engage in nuclear rogue state behaviour then the military option is always there. Having this clearly stated as a last resort is more credible and less damaging to overall relations than the present strategy of military ambiguity. This was the context of the superpower detente of the 1970s and that should be the model here. The parallels between the current situation and that of the 1970s go further. Then as now, one side was weakened by an ill-advised and overambitious intervention and was seeking to lessen tensions as part of an exit strategy, in return for recognition of status and role for the rising power. Now as then, to adopt such a policy is not to give up on the hope of eventual regime change or transformation, in this case in Tehran. It is to recognize that a policy that seeks engagement with Iranian society as a means of nurturing the pro-western outlook of the majority population represents an understanding that reform from within will be much more sustainable than that manufactured from without. It is also important that this should not be entered into simply as a means of American disengagement from Iraq. To approach Iran as part of an abandonment of Iraq and a de facto withdrawal from the region would be seen for what it was: a weak and

⁶³ Sagan, 'How to keep the bomb from Iran', p. 6.

⁶⁴ See Pollack, 'Bringing Iran to the bargaining table', p. 369.

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defeated diplomacy with nothing to offer. Instead, what America needs to embrace in its Iranian policy is a coherent and coordinated, internationally supported, new approach to the Middle East. To reinterpret the neo-con quip, perhaps not literally, but certainly metaphorically, America needs to embrace the idea that real men *should* want to go to Tehran.