

Summary: A Symposium on Iran and Policy Options for the Next Administration
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The 2003 ouster of Iraq's Sunni Baath Party by the United States increased Shiite-Iran's influence in the Middle East, clearing the way for a rapid ascendancy of Iranian power projection. "Iran is now an imperial power," **Richard N. Haass**, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said at a recent CFR symposium, *Iran and Policy Options for the Next Administration*. "Imperial in the sense that it seeks to project its power and seeks to shape a region to its liking," To confront an emboldened Iran, then, the 44th president of the United States will need to move beyond the Bush administration's narrow nuclear focus to consider talks on sanctions, regional stability, and energy security, speakers said. "Iran can go down two roads: Japan of the 1930s, or the road of India," said **Vali R. Nasr**, a Council on Foreign Relations adjunct senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies. "Part of the use of aggressive diplomacy should be to interject ourselves into that debate, to have a say in which way they go."

Though the symposium's three sessions focused on different aspects of U.S. policy toward Iran, speakers continually highlighted the challenges of deciphering Iranian intentions and influencing Iranian behavior. **Ray Takeyh**, Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies, suggested future diplomacy should include "limited negotiations or larger with a nuclear component." But speakers also said Washington may have to come to grips with an inevitable fact: if Tehran wants a nuclear bomb, it will most likely get one. "I doubt we're going to be able to talk them out of it in the sense that we can persuade them that it's a bad idea," said **Gary Samore**, Council on Foreign Relations Vice President, Director of Studies, and Maurice R. Greenberg Chair. The best the United States can do, Samore said, "is create a package of incentives and disincentives that convince them to at least delay or slow down or limit the program."

Hawks within the Bush administration have said a military option must remain on the table. But **Ashton B. Carter**, codirector of the Preventive Defense Project at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, noted that military action alone will not force Iran's hand. Unlike the Israeli bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981, which derailed Saddam Hussein's nuclear program, an airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities would only be a short-term setback, Carter said. "Bombing them now is not an option in the sense that it ends the story. It begins a new chapter in the story."

That leaves diplomacy as the principle tool. But navigating Iran's political structure will present its own challenges for the incoming administration, speakers said. **Farideh Farhi**, an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Hawaii, said Washington should prepare to negotiate with an increasingly fractious camp of conservative Iranian lawmakers. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei continues to support the conservative presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Farhi said, despite the president's poor handling of the economy and growing public unrest. But support for Ahmadinejad does not signal a unified conservative base. "The center of competition has moved inside the principalist camp, the conservative camp," Farhi said. **Ali M. Ansari**, professor and director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews, said Iran's power struggle has become a "contest of the elites behind the background" competing for favor of the ruling mullahs. "I think there were some fairly promising signs of a process of democratization taking place," Ansari said, but "it's been suspended."

Other findings from the symposium included:

Washington's strategy of containment is flawed. "It was a totally unrealistic policy in the first place," Nasr said. "We became very focused on whether we were progressing on nuclear (issues)," but failed in controlling Iran's influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Takeyh said there is no regional Arab consensus on how to handle Iran; attempting to craft a containment strategy similar to the one employed against the Soviets during the Cold War "is not practical." On the nuclear question, speakers were equally critical. "Our administration's policy as far as I can tell has been divided from the camp that wants to contain and isolate to the camp that wants to try and talk them out of it," Carter said. "We've gotten the benefits of neither."

Isolating Iran economically has forced Tehran to move closer to Europe and Asia. Iran's growing ties with the East have lessened the prospect sanctions will successfully curb Iranian actions, speakers said. Put simply, Iran may need the United States less now than it did in 2002. "Iran is deeply integrated into the Middle East structure; its trade with Europe has gone up," Takeyh said. "The level of trade with China and Russia is increasing. Iran is not a country that is isolated like North Korea. We might not have the keys to" isolate Iran with sanctions or economic pressure.

An improved security and political situation in Iraq could improve U.S. standing with Iran. The more it looks like the United States is succeeding in Iraq, said Samore, the more it looks like the U.S. could be freed up to use military force in Iran. "Whatever you think about the wisdom of using military force, unless the Iranians think that is a real danger, I think whatever we put on the table in terms of carrots or inducements is not going to be effective," Samore said.

The office of Iran's Supreme Leader is increasing its political power base and ability to influence the domestic agenda. The last decade has seen "the exponential growth of the leadership office," said Ansari. "What you see is the growth of this shadow government, or this revolutionary government as opposed to the orthodox republican organs of government, and they've started essentially to take over." An examination of Iran's budgets offers evidence. For instance, Ansari said, recent governmental spending on welfare organizations increased by 3.2 percent while spending on religious foundations spiked by more than 100 percent. "When you have that shift in financial wealth ...it shows where the balance of power is going," he said. "The leader is now taking on the role essentially as a monarch."

The current political and social challenges in Iran will not lead to internal collapse of the regime. "I do not think Iran is in a revolutionary situation," Farhi said. "The context is not there, and the context that existed prior to the revolution was essentially the giving up and development of a network of opposition, an organizational structure that allowed mobilization." The biggest threat to Khamenei, Farhi said, is rebellion by social and political elite, including critics within the current government structure. "Khamenei doesn't worry about what the population will do," she said. "It has it under control."

World powers don't share a universal anxiety over Iran's nuclear program. "In the U.S. it's easy to put nuclear non-proliferation as our top interest," Samore said. "But for the Russians and Chinese, it's a competing interest. The Russians and the Chinese have been a very weak link. That's not going to change for the next administration. I'm

afraid the Georgia situation is going to make it very difficult for the U.S. to form any sort of coalition against Iran (with Russia).”

Carter said there’s a “50-50” chance Israel will attack Iran's nuclear facilities between the U.S. presidential election and Inauguration Day. "I think they can do it; for them the regrets are less," Carter said. "They don't have to worry about turning the Iranians against them." But Carter said an Israeli executed strike would still lead to significant blowback for American interests. "If we are seen to have given a green light," Carter said, "we get all the negative consequences of as if we actually did it."