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Iran's Strategy

By George Friedman

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For centuries, the dilemma facing Iran (and before it, Persia) has been guaranteeing national survival and autonomy in the face of stronger regional powers like Ottoman Turkey and the Russian Empire. Though always weaker than these larger empires, Iran survived for three reasons: geography, resources and diplomacy. Iran's size and mountainous terrain made military forays into the country difficult and dangerous. Iran also was able to field sufficient force to deter attacks while permitting occasional assertions of power. At the same time, Tehran engaged in clever diplomatic efforts, playing threatening powers off each other.

The intrusion of European imperial powers into the region compounded Iran's difficulties in the 19th century, along with the lodging of British power to Iran's west in Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula following the end of World War I. This coincided with a transformation of the global economy to an oil-based system. Then as now, the region was a major source of global oil. Where the British once had interests in the region, the emergence of oil as the foundation of industrial and military power made these interests urgent. Following World War II, the Americans and the Soviets became the outside powers with the ability and desire to influence the region, but Tehran's basic strategic reality persisted. Iran faced both regional and global threats that it had to deflect or align with. And because of oil, the global power could not lose interest while the regional powers did not have the option of losing interest.

Whether ruled by shah or ayatollah, Iran's strategy remained the same: deter by geography, protect with defensive forces, and engage in complex diplomatic maneuvers. But underneath this reality, another vision of Iran's role always lurked.

Iran as Regional Power

A vision of Iran -- a country with an essentially defensive posture -- as a regional power remained. The shah competed with Saudi Arabia over Oman and dreamed of nuclear weapons. Ahmadinejad duels with Saudi Arabia over Bahrain, and also dreams of nuclear weapons. When we look beyond the rhetoric -- something we always should do when studying foreign policy, since the rhetoric is intended to intimidate, seduce and confuse foreign powers and the public -- we see substantial continuity in Iran's strategy since World War II. Iran dreams of achieving regional dominance by breaking free from its constraints and the threats posed by nearby powers.

Since World War II, Iran has had to deal with regional dangers like Iraq, with which it fought a brutal war lasting nearly a decade and costing Iran about 1 million casualties. It also has had to deal with the United States, whose power ultimately defined patterns in the region. So long as the United States had an overriding interest in the region, Iran had no choice but to define its policies in terms of the United States. For the shah, that meant submitting to the United States while subtly trying to control American actions. For the Islamic republic, it meant opposing the United States while trying to manipulate it into taking actions in the interests of Iran. Both acted within the traditions of Iranian strategic subtlety.

The Islamic republic proved more successful than the shah. It conducted a sophisticated disinformation campaign prior to the 2003 Iraq war to convince the United States that invading Iraq would be militarily easy and that Iraqis would welcome the Americans with open arms. This fed the existing U.S. desire to invade Iraq, becoming one factor among many that made the invasion seem doable. In a second phase, the Iranians helped many factions in Iraq resist the Americans, turning the occupation -- and plans for reconstructing Iraq according to American blueprints -- into a nightmare. In a third and final phase, Iran used its influence in Iraq to divide and paralyze the country after the Americans withdrew.

As a result of this maneuvering, Iran achieved two goals. First, the Americans disposed of Iran's archenemy, Saddam Hussein, turning Iraq into a strategic cripple. Second, Iran helped force the United States out of Iraq, creating a vacuum in Iraq and undermining U.S. credibility in the region -- and sapping any U.S. appetite for further military adventures in the Middle East. I want to emphasize that all of this was not an Iranian plot: Many other factors contributed to this sequence of events. At the same time, Iranian maneuvering was no minor factor in the process; Iran skillfully exploited events that it helped shape.

There was a defensive point to this. Iran had seen the United States invade the countries surrounding it, Iraq to its west and Afghanistan to its east. It viewed the United States as extremely powerful and unpredictable to the point of irrationality, though also able to be manipulated. Tehran therefore could not dismiss the possibility that the United States would choose war with Iran. Expelling the United States from Iraq, however, limited American military options in the region.

This strategy also had an offensive dimension. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq positioned Iran to fill the vacuum. Critically, the geopolitics of the region had created an opening for Iran probably for the first time in centuries. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union released pressure from the north. Coming on top of the Ottoman collapse after World War I, Iran now no longer faced a regional power that could challenge it. Second, with the drawdown of U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, the global power had limited military options and even more limited political options for acting against Iran.

Iran's Opportunity

Iran now had the opportunity to consider emerging as a regional power rather than solely pursuing complex maneuvers to protect Iranian autonomy and the regime. The Iranians understood that the moods of global powers shifted unpredictably, the United States more than most. Therefore it knew that the more aggressive it became, the more the United States may militarily commit itself to containing Iran. At the same time, the United States might do so even without Iranian action. Accordingly, Iran searched for a strategy that might solidify its regional influence while not triggering U.S. retaliation.

Anyone studying the United States understands its concern with nuclear weapons. Throughout the Cold War it lived in the shadow of a Soviet first strike. The Bush administration used the possibility of an Iraqi nuclear program to rally domestic support for the invasion. When the Soviets and the Chinese attained nuclear weapons, the American response bordered on panic. The United States simultaneously became more cautious in its approach to those countries.

In looking at North Korea, the Iranians recognized a pattern they could use to their advantage. Regime survival in North Korea, a country of little consequence, was uncertain in the 1990s. When it undertook a nuclear program, however, the United States focused heavily on North Korea, simultaneously becoming more cautious in its approach to the North. Tremendous diplomatic activity and periodic aid was brought to bear to limit North Korea's program. From the North Korean point of view, actually acquiring deliverable nuclear weapons was not the point; North Korea was not a major power like China and Russia, and a miscalculation on Pyongyang's part could lead to more U.S. aggression. Rather, the process of developing nuclear weapons itself inflated North Korea's importance while inducing the United States to offer incentives or impose relatively ineffective economic sanctions (and thereby avoiding more dangerous military action). North Korea became a centerpiece of U.S. concern while the United States avoided actions that might destabilize North Korea and shake loose the weapons the North might have.

The North Koreans knew that having a deliverable weapon would prove dangerous, but that having a weapons program gave them leverage -- a lesson the Iranians learned well. From the Iranians' point of view, a nuclear program causes the United States simultaneously to take them more seriously and to increase its caution while dealing with them. At present, the United States leads a group of countries with varying degrees of enthusiasm for imposing sanctions that might cause some economic pain to Iran, but give the United States a pretext not to undertake the military action Iran really fears and that the United States does not want to take.

Israel, however, must take a different view of Iran's weapons program. While not a threat to the United States, the program may threaten Israel. The Israelis' problem is that they must trust their intelligence on the level of development of Iran's weapons. The United States can afford a miscalculation; Israel might not be able to afford it. This lack of certainty makes Israel unpredictable. From the Iranian point of view, however, an Israeli attack might be welcome.

Iran does not have nuclear weapons and may be following the North Korean strategy of never developing deliverable weapons. If they did, however, and the Israelis attacked and destroyed them, the Iranians would be as they were before acquiring nuclear weapons. But if the Israelis attacked and failed to destroy them, the Iranians would emerge stronger. The Iranians could retaliate by taking action in the Strait of Hormuz. The United States, which ultimately is the guarantor of the global maritime flow of oil, might engage Iran militarily. Or it might enter into negotiations with Iran to guarantee the flow. An Israeli attack, whether successful or unsuccessful, would set the stage for Iranian actions that would threaten the global economy, paint Israel as the villain, and result in the United States being forced by European and Asian powers to guarantee the flow of oil with diplomatic concessions rather than military action. An attack by Israel, successful or unsuccessful, would cost Iran little and create substantial opportunities. In my view, the Iranians want a program, not a weapon, but having the Israelis attack the program would suit Iran's interests quite nicely.

The nuclear option falls into the category of Iranian manipulation of regional and global powers, long a historical necessity for the Iranians. But another, and more significant event is under way in Syria.

Syria's Importance to Iran

As we have written, if the Syrian regime survives, this in part would be due to Iranian support. Isolated from the rest of the world, Syria would become dependent on Iran. If that were to happen, an Iranian sphere of influence would stretch from western Afghanistan to Beirut. This in turn would fundamentally shift the balance of power in the Middle East, fulfilling Iran's dream of becoming a dominant regional power in the Persian Gulf and beyond. This was the shah's and the ayatollah's dream. And this is why the United States is currently obsessing over Syria.

What would such a sphere of influence give the Iranians? Three things. First, it would force the global power, the United States, to abandon ideas of destroying Iran, as the breadth of its influence would produce dangerously unpredictable results. Second, it would legitimize the regime inside Iran and in the region beyond any legitimacy it currently has. Third, with proxies along Saudi Arabia's northern border in Iraq and Shia along the western coast of the Persian Gulf, Iran could force shifts in the financial distribution of revenues from oil. Faced with regime preservation, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would have to be flexible on Iranian demands, to say the least. Diverting that money to Iran would strengthen it greatly.

Iran has applied its strategy under regimes of various ideologies. The shah, whom many considered psychologically unstable and megalomaniacal, pursued this strategy with restraint and care. The current regime, also considered ideologically and psychologically unstable, has

been equally restrained in its actions. Rhetoric and ideology can mislead, and usually are intended to do just that.

This long-term strategy, pursued since the 16th century after Persia became Islamic, now sees a window of opportunity opening, engineered in some measure by Iran itself. Tehran's goal is to extend the American paralysis while it exploits the opportunities that the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq has created. Simultaneously, it wants to create a coherent sphere of influence that the United States will have to accommodate itself to in order to satisfy the demand of its coalition for a stable supply of oil and limited conflict in the region.

Iran is pursuing a two-pronged strategy toward this end. The first is to avoid any sudden moves, to allow processes to run their course. The second is to create a diversion through its nuclear program, causing the United States to replicate its North Korea policy in Iran. If its program causes an Israeli airstrike, Iran can turn that to its advantage as well. The Iranians understand that having nuclear weapons is dangerous but that having a weapons program is advantageous. But the key is not the nuclear program. That is merely a tool to divert attention from what is actually happening -- a shift in the balance of power in the Middle East.