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BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE: A ROADMAP FOR U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

The United States and Iran are entangled in a volatile standoff. On more than one occasion in 2019 and 2020, the two countries have approached the brink of war. The sources of tension seem apparent, at least superficially. From the perspective of the United States, Iran presents a complex threat involving its nuclear program and destabilizing activities across the Middle East. From the Islamic Republic's perspective, the United States is a hostile country that is intent on regime change and uses economic sanctions and military pressure to deny Iran what it sees as its rightful place as a regional power.

After more than four decades of estrangement, neither country understands the other very well. The United States believes its “maximum pressure” campaign of severe sanctions will eventually compel Iran to come to the negotiating table and make sweeping concessions. The strategy has failed as Iran has grown more aggressive and has reduced its breakout time to a nuclear weapon to just a few months. It has also left the United States isolated from the international community, including its closest allies, after its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—a multilateral agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program that was negotiated between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (P5+1).

Iran also has made significant misjudg-

ments. In response to American sanctions following U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, it has ramped up its nuclear program and launched attacks against oil-related targets in the Persian Gulf and U.S. troops in Iraq. Iran has gambled that the United States will not risk another Middle Eastern war, believing that American weariness with military adventures will lead the United States to eventually withdraw its forces from the region. Yet, in January 2020, the United States carried out a strike in Iraq that killed Major General Qassem Soleimani, arguably the second most powerful official in Iran. Iranian retaliation brought the two countries to the edge of war, and Iran continues to vow revenge for Soleimani's slaying.

These miscalculations have created an environment in which diplomacy has stalled and military options are increasingly likely. If conflict breaks out, each side may assume that it can manage escalation and prevent a confrontation from becoming a full-blown conflagration. Neither side wants war, but each may assume that the other side wants one even less, which could lead to greater risk taking.

There are no easy solutions to the U.S.-Iran conflict. U.S. policy over the years has shifted between regime change, “maximum pressure,” and containment, as well as periods of diplomatic engagement. Iran has resisted a comprehensive dialogue with the United States and made clear that it wants to drive American forces out of the



The broad international coalition President Obama assembled was shattered by the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.

region. Yet, both countries have shown that they can be pragmatic when necessary. This is evident from the negotiations that produced the JCPOA as well as cooperation on Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11. While expectations should be kept modest, diplomacy continues to be the best option for addressing the potential sources of conflict and laying the groundwork to improve relations incrementally.

This paper examines the main sources of tension involving Iran, including its nuclear program and regional frictions. It lays out four potential scenarios for the United States and Iran, ranging from military escalation to a grand bargain, to clarify the policy choices. Finally, it offers several recommendations for a policy of diplomatic engagement, especially on the nuclear issue, coupled with firm pushback against Iran's destabilizing activities such as its support for Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Yemeni Houthis, and violent extremists in the Palestinian territories.

SOURCES OF TENSION

The Nuclear Program

When assessing the threats posed by Iran, none is as consequential as its nuclear program. Until 2003, Iran engaged in an active effort to develop nuclear weapons, and it retains the knowledge to restart that program. An Iranian nuclear weapon would be uniquely destabilizing. It could spark a cascade of proliferation with countries such as Saudi Arabia seeking nuclear weapons of their own, which would undermine regional security and deal a fatal blow to the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. It also would embolden Iran to increase support for violent non-state actors and terrorists such as Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militia, and Palestinian rejectionists. Moreover, Israel

regards the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon as an existential threat and has previously considered launching a preventive military strike that could ignite a wider regional conflict.

For these reasons, the Obama administration prioritized the nuclear issue above other concerns. It assembled a united international front to isolate Iran over its nuclear activities, imposed severe sanctions on Iranian oil exports, and prepared military options. But it also presented realistic proposals that created a pathway for diplomacy. The two countries began secret talks and reached an agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear activities and create an extensive verification system while providing Iran with sanctions relief. The bilateral U.S.-Iran agreement was incorporated into the multilateral P5+1 negotiation structure and laid the foundation for the JCPOA.

In 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, complaining that the agreement's sunset clauses were too short and that the agreement did not cover Iran's non-nuclear threats. He reimposed sanctions on Iranian oil exports. In response, Iran has gradually breached the JCPOA's enrichment limits, and today its breakout time to a nuclear weapon has shrunk to just a few months. President Trump has made repeated offers to Iran to negotiate a "better deal," but Iran has refused, insisting that the United States first rejoin the JCPOA.

The broad international coalition President Obama assembled was shattered by the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. A recent diplomatic debacle epitomizes America's self-imposed isolation. In August 2020, citing the imminent expiration of the arms embargo on Iran, the United States went to the United Nations Security Council to seek



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an automatic snapback of UN sanctions and restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program, citing a provision of the JCPOA. However, all former U.S. partners in the P5+1 rejected the effort, arguing that the United States had no legal standing to proceed as it has formally withdrawn from the JCPOA.

Regional Issues

The Islamic Republic was born in a revolution that featured a strong anti-American current. While revolutionary fervor has gradually waned over the past four decades, the country's leaders remain deeply mistrustful of the United States and reject an American-led regional and global order.

Iran believes that its principal regional adversaries—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—are entirely dependent upon American support. It has a healthy respect for Israel's military capabilities, but it dismisses its Arab rivals as artificial constructs lacking popular legitimacy. It shares President Trump's assessment that Saudi Arabia "wouldn't last a week" without U.S. support.¹

Iran's frequent boasts about driving American forces out of the region belie a deep sense of insecurity. Iran knows that it is no match for the United States, so it compensates through an array of asymmetric capabilities—the nuclear program, drones, missiles, and fast boats. It also projects its influence in the region through a constellation of non-state actors it calls the "Axis of Resistance." These include Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian rejectionists, Iraqi Shi'a militia, and the Yemeni Houthis, among others.

The Islamic Republic's ideological hardliners believe that the Axis reflects the true popular sentiment in a region they see as dominated by corrupt, American-backed

governments. In their view, Iran is a source of inspiration for the oppressed populations represented by the groups comprising the Axis. It provides financial and political assistance as well as weapons and training to them through the Qods Force, the external operations arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Many governments in the region regard the Axis as a euphemism for a network of terrorist proxies that enables Iran to extend its reach. Israel regularly strikes Iran and its allies in Syria to disrupt the transfer of sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah and to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent military presence. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain also see Iran as an existential threat. Their fears have driven them to forge deeper ties with Israel, with the UAE and Bahrain normalizing relations, becoming only the third and fourth Arab states to do so.

Iran is a central piece in the regional kaleidoscope, and it is difficult to imagine a stable order emerging without the country playing a more constructive role. Continued regional instability presents the United States with a conundrum. It is forced to maintain a large military footprint in the Persian Gulf region partly because of the Iranian threat. This hinders its ability to rebalance the U.S. diplomatic and military focus to East Asia and the growing competition with China. A reduction of tensions between Iran and its neighbors would not only benefit the region, it also would enable the United States to redirect its energies to securing its global strategic objectives.

THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

Iranian Politics

The main political dividing line in Iran is between reformists who believe that the



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Islamic Republic must adapt and modernize to retain popular legitimacy and hardliners who believe that fidelity to revolutionary principles is the only way to ensure the system's survival. The reformists are more open to dialogue and compromise with the United States, while hardliners are deeply suspicious.

Hardliners are ascendant, and the American maximum pressure campaign has only strengthened their hand while discrediting reformists who advocated for the JCPOA. Hardline candidates decisively won parliamentary elections in February 2020, and the IRGC and its allies are tightening their grip on the levers of power in the lead-up to the country's presidential election in June 2021. But their top priority is to ensure that the successor to Iran's 81-year-old Supreme Leader will preserve the system and the prerogatives they enjoy.

Many ordinary Iranians, especially the younger generation, are disenchanted with an economic and political system they see as corrupt and unresponsive. They have taken to the streets in massive protests in recent years. In 2019, hundreds of demonstrators were brutally killed by security forces. Popular anger is real, and anti-regime slogans are often heard at protests, but the government remains firmly entrenched. Moreover, while sanctions have set back Iran as a whole, they have hurt ordinary Iranians even more, forcing them to prioritize their everyday existence and focus less on their government's failures.

Partisan Disagreement in the United States

In the United States, there is a broad agreement that Iran is an adversary that must be countered. At the same time, the JCPOA

revealed a partisan divide that persists. President Obama secured the support of all but a few Democrats to support the nuclear deal, but congressional Republicans opposed it. That partisan divide deepened when President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA.

The politicization of the JCPOA has called into question the ability of the United States to follow through on its international commitments and underscores the importance of a bipartisan policy toward Iran. That may be easier said than done in an era when hyper-partisanship has infected American foreign policy. Still, given the stakes as well as broad agreement on the nature of the threat from Iran, Democrats and Republicans may be able to find common ground.

SCENARIOS

With tensions running high, the key question for the United States is what policy options are available. One method to make policy choices more tangible is through a mental exercise of playing out different scenarios. This can help clarify the trade-offs between various courses of action and allow policymakers to evaluate their relative costs and benefits. The scenarios that follow cover four broad directions for U.S.-Iran relations. They are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is bound to be overlap among them, and the ultimate policy will likely be a hybrid and evolve with ever-changing circumstances.

Scenario 1: Selective Engagement

Iran and the United States accept that a comprehensive agreement is not possible in the near term. Instead, they concentrate on the area of greatest friction—the Iranian nuclear program. The United States rejoins



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the JCPOA if Iran returns to compliance with the agreement. Alternatively, the United States works with the P5+1 to reach an interim nuclear agreement with Iran.

Iran curtails its aggressive activities in the region, which it increased in response to the American maximum pressure campaign. Attacks against American targets in Iraq come to an end. However, it almost certainly would continue its support for Yemeni Houthis, Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian rejectionists, and Iraqi Shi'a militia. The United States and its partners could deepen cooperation to counter such activity by using a range of tools, including targeted sanctions and interdiction operations.

At the same time, Iran and the United States reestablish a direct channel of communication, which prevents unintended escalation. Redlines can be more easily conveyed on topics such as threats to U.S. forces or the free flow of commerce in the region. There is a clear-eyed recognition of the Iranian threat, but ongoing diplomatic conversations continue to cover more ground. They also serve as a buffer in case of unforeseen events, and they point the two countries in the direction of a broader dialogue.

The two sides discuss promoting stability in Afghanistan. They also make humanitarian gestures to lower the temperature. The United States removes restrictions on the provision of aid to support Iran's response to COVID-19. Iran releases American prisoners it is unjustly holding.

The easing of tensions spills into Iranian domestic politics. The hardliners, who thrive on crisis, suddenly lose one of their strongest talking points. A reformist candi-

date, if one is allowed to run, wins the 2021 presidential election. The hardliners retain a dominant position, but other voices become more assertive within the system. Ordinary Iranians gain economic relief and are emboldened to demand change if their grievances regarding corruption and governance are left unaddressed.

Scenario 2: Status Quo

The United States and Iran remain mired in their current standoff as the American maximum pressure strategy is sustained. Iran digs in for the long haul, hoping to frustrate the United States and eventually convince it to change course. It seeks to build leverage by stepping up its aggression across the region. The two countries trade blows, sometimes in the shadows, but occasionally out in the open. Yet, they avoid crossing the threshold into all-out conflict.

Iran continues to expand its nuclear program but does not make any drastic moves so as not to alienate Europe, Russia, and China. The United States, believing it can detect any sign of a nuclear breakout, refrains from preemptive military action while keeping the threat alive. It believes that the economic pain for Iran will become unbearable, ultimately forcing it to return to the negotiating table where it will make sweeping concessions. Even if this assumption proves incorrect, the United States nonetheless believes that maximum pressure will effectively contain Iran at a manageable cost. The occasional disruptions to global markets when U.S.-Iran tensions flare up, while unwelcome, are not seen as a fundamental threat to the global economy.

In the region, Israel continues its campaign of airstrikes to prevent Iran from establishing a permanent presence in Syria and to limit Hezbollah's capabilities. Saudi



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Arabia and the UAE remain satisfied with a U.S. policy that constrains their nemesis, though they seek limited accommodations with Iran to prevent tensions from spilling out of control.

Internationally, the United States remains isolated from its former partners in the P5+1, which continue their focus on limiting Iran's nuclear program and encouraging the United States to either return to the JCPOA or reach an alternative agreement. Washington rejects their entreaties, believing that they have little choice but to live with the American approach.

Within Iran, hardliners complete their takeover of all branches of government by winning the presidency. Attention turns to the succession of the Supreme Leader. There is widespread popular dissatisfaction and protests break out occasionally, but they are quickly suppressed and pose no real threat to the government.

Economically, Iran struggles, but the initial shock of American sanctions has long since worn off, and the country has adjusted to a new normal. Smuggling provides some relief from the pain but mainly benefits the corrupt and powerful. Iran seeks to accelerate its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with China, hoping that the promise of massive Chinese investment can boost the public's confidence and prevent an economic collapse.

This scenario is essentially a straight-line extrapolation of the current situation. Both countries would remain on a high state of alert and could easily miscalculate. Iran would be incentivized to take provocative actions to build leverage and break the status quo, which could lead to a harsh response from the United States and result

in a cycle of escalation. Heightened tensions would also keep the United States tied down in the region.

Scenario 3: Military Escalation

Iran crosses an American redline by taking steps that appear consistent with a nuclear breakout or attacking American personnel. The United States responds initially by launching limited but highly impactful military strikes against Iranian targets. Iran retaliates with attacks on American military facilities in the region.

Open hostilities could end there, but if escalation control breaks down, the cycle could continue. Iran might try to temporarily shut down the region's energy exports. It could expand retaliation to include Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It might also carry out terrorist attacks against American targets in the region and other parts of the world. The United States could respond by destroying much of Iran's military infrastructure and taking aim at economic and oil-related targets.

Russia, China, and major European powers might intervene to convince Iran to stand down. Iran would play the victim, especially if the American attack appeared unprovoked or disproportionate. It might harden and expand its nuclear infrastructure, which would set the stage for a future round of American military strikes.

America's Arab partners quietly support the United States but say little or nothing in public, fearful of provoking Iran. Their position is further complicated if Israel is drawn into the conflict. The region remains on edge indefinitely as the United States and Iran enter a protracted period of heightened tensions.



U.S.-Iran rapprochement, if it is to occur, would be more likely to result from a step-by-step process that builds on selective engagement.

Domestically, the IRGC seizes control of much of the state. With Iranians initially rallying around the flag, internal dissent dissipates. The IRGC embarks on a campaign to rebuild the country and the military while simultaneously purging enemies and mobilizing for a significantly increased campaign of destabilization across the region. It increases clandestine operations aimed at Saudi Arabia and the UAE, seeing them as particularly vulnerable targets.

It is important to note that there is an alternative view regarding the potential outcome of an American strike against Iran. Some believe it would expose the regime's weakness and lead to its capitulation to American demands or even provoke its collapse. If such assumptions were to drive a decision to strike Iran, the costs could be high if they turn out to be incorrect.

Scenario 4: Grand Bargain

The stated goal of current U.S. policy is to reach a comprehensive agreement with Iran that resolves all outstanding differences between the two countries—from the nuclear program to Iran's regional activities. From the American perspective, the elements of a grand bargain would include Iran

- Agreeing to indefinite constraints on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs
- Halting weapons supplies, training, and other assistance for violent extremists
- Releasing Americans it is unjustly detaining
- Supporting the dissolution of Shi'a militias in Iraq, which challenge the authority of the central government
- Withdrawing its military personnel from Syria and supporting a political

solution that reflects the views of the Syrian people

- Ceasing support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad
- Halting support to Houthis in Yemen and supporting a political solution to end the war
- Ending support for the Taliban in Afghanistan

In return for these and other steps, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said the United States would agree to lift the principal components of all sanctions against Iran, reestablish full diplomatic and commercial relations, and formalize a comprehensive agreement in a treaty.

Yet, it is hard to imagine Iran agreeing to a list of demands that would require the Islamic Republic to abandon its long-standing foreign policy paradigm. Nor is it plausible that the United States would ever agree to Iran's maximalist demands, which include pulling all U.S. troops out of the region, lifting all sanctions, compensating Iran for economic losses, and abandoning any effort to expand or extend the JCPOA.

U.S.-Iran rapprochement, if it is to occur, would be more likely to result from a step-by-step process that builds on the selective engagement scenario (Scenario 1) described at the beginning of this section. The trust deficit is vast and can only be reduced gradually.

As farfetched as a grand bargain may seem, in 2003 Iranian diplomats, including the current Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, worked on a short document outlining a comprehensive settlement that was transmitted to the United States.² The proposal called for three parallel roadmaps on disar-



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mament, regional security, and economic cooperation. It covered issues ranging from the Iranian nuclear program to Middle East peace, terrorism, Iran's role in the region, and sanctions. It was never explored seriously by the United States amid questions surrounding its provenance. The document's specific elements may have been overtaken by events, but it demonstrates that some in Iran's government have devoted serious thought to a framework for a wide-ranging agreement with the United States.

ELEMENTS OF A ROADMAP

Devising an effective policy requires defining clear objectives. As baseball great Yogi Berra observed, "if you don't know where you're going, you might end up some place else." American national security interests are best served by preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, countering its destabilizing activities in the region, and engaging Iran on areas of mutual interest. The specific policies to achieve these objectives include the following:

1. **Prioritize the Nuclear Issue:** Iran's nuclear program poses the most significant and urgent threat to U.S. national security. Iran has reduced its breakout time to a nuclear weapon to just a few months, almost where it stood before the JCPOA. The United States should state clearly that it would prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The United States also should rejoin the JCPOA if Iran returns to compliance with the agreement. An alternative would be to reach an interim agreement similar to a proposal by French President Emmanuel Macron to which President Trump reportedly (and fleetingly) agreed in 2019.³ Under the Macron plan, Iran would roll back

its nuclear activities in line with the JCPOA in exchange for temporary sanctions relief. It also would help end the war in Yemen and ensure freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf. The two sides, joined by the remaining members of the P5+1, would then commence negotiations for a broader agreement.

2. **Rebuild International Consensus to Extend the JCPOA:** A united international front was critical to the ultimate success of the diplomacy that produced the JCPOA. Today, the United States stands largely alone, isolated even from its closest partners.

The international community would welcome the United States returning to the JCPOA or a similar arrangement, which would provide a diplomatic opening to pursue an extension and expansion of the JCPOA's terms. This could include extending sunset clauses, as well as incorporating constraints on research activities and ballistic missiles. Upcoming sunsets in the JCPOA are in 2023 and 2025, which leaves time for diplomacy.

A united international community also should insist on Iran's full cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, including access to all Iranian facilities to ensure there are no undeclared activities.

While Iran will initially oppose the idea of an expanded JCPOA, it should recognize that it has an interest in such an arrangement. The past several years have demonstrated that sanctions relief will not meet Iran's expectations if international banks and investors believe that an agreement is not durable. Convincing others to do busi-



A broad regional dialogue aimed at developing comprehensive security architecture in the Persian Gulf would be premature, but bilateral understandings could lay the foundation for a future region-wide conversation.

ness with Iran requires an expanded agreement with a longer time horizon.

3. **No Compensation:** Iran is demanding compensation for the economic losses it has incurred from American sanctions imposed after the United States withdrew from the JCPOA. However, there is no requirement for the United States to provide such remuneration. The United States could make a similar case for costs it has incurred related to Iranian threats and violation of agreements over the years. The more productive course of action for Iran would be to ensure that any follow-on agreement it reaches with the United States is durable.
4. **Expand the Dialogue:** As tensions ease on the nuclear issue, gauge Iran's willingness to expand the conversation to include non-nuclear topics, focusing first on high-priority areas where there are overlapping interests, such as Afghanistan. For conversations that touch on broader equities in the Persian Gulf, coordinate with regional states that fear the United States will reach a strategic understanding with Iran at their expense. The United States should welcome, not block, bilateral discussions between Iran and the Arab Gulf countries. Iran also should take tangible steps to end its destabilizing activities that threaten these countries. A broad regional dialogue aimed at developing comprehensive security architecture in the Persian Gulf would be premature, but bilateral understandings could lay the foundation for a future region-wide conversation.
5. **Take Steps to Build Confidence:** The United States and Iran can take confidence-building measures to improve the atmosphere, while recognizing that they are not a substitute for tackling more difficult issues:
 - The United States should provide sanctions waivers to permit COVID-19-related humanitarian assistance to Iran.
 - The United States should drop the so-called "Muslim ban" that bars the entry of Iranian nationals among others.
 - Iran should release unjustly imprisoned American citizens, whose continued detention only deepens antipathy toward the Islamic Republic.
 - Both sides should remove barriers to people-to-people ties and cultural exchanges.
6. **Implement a de Facto Arms Embargo:** While a UN arms embargo lapsed on October 18, 2020, the United States can pursue de facto restrictions on Iranian arms exports and imports. Existing UN embargoes already cover Iranian arms exports to Hezbollah and Yemeni Houthis. Imports of major weapons systems by Iran should be prevented through understandings with China and Russia, which would be Iran's most likely arms suppliers. While Russia has indicated an interest in providing a sophisticated air defense system to Iran, it has demonstrated restraint in the past in response to high-level U.S. diplomacy.
7. **Counter Iran's Destabilizing Activities:** The United States should actively disrupt Iran's destabilizing activities across the region. This includes interdicting Iranian weapons shipments to non-state actors, which requires close



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coordination with U.S. partners in the region. The United States should also use the goodwill it engenders by rejoining the JCPOA or reaching a similar agreement to bring European allies into this effort. Moreover, targeted sanctions should be used against individuals and entities that are engaged in destabilizing activities.

8. **Limit Iran's Influence through Renewed Diplomacy:** The United States can also limit Iran's ability to exploit conflicts and fragile states by stepping up its diplomatic engagement to bring greater stability to the region. This includes the following:

- Strengthening the Iraqi central government
- Backing efforts to end the disastrous war in Yemen
- Advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace
- Supporting political and economic reform in Lebanon
- Pursuing a political solution to end the war in Syria
- Pressing for political and economic reform in Arab states to improve governance and weaken the pull of extremists

None of these is easily accomplished, but they are important steps toward denying Iran avenues to project its influence.

9. **Support Human Rights in Iran:** Even as the United States engages Iran on strategic priorities, it should simultaneously call attention to Iran's poor human rights record. This includes arbitrary detentions, violent crackdowns

on peaceful protests, the imprisonment and execution of political prisoners, persecution of religious minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as restrictions on social freedoms. Human rights abuses should be raised in diplomatic settings. Sanctions, ideally multilateral, should be imposed on organizations and individuals who violate human rights. Championing universal rights in Iran must not be confused as a call for regime change. And, of course, advancing civil rights in the United States will enhance American credibility to support human rights in Iran.

10. **Develop a Durable Bipartisan U.S. Policy toward Iran:** American national security figures in both major political parties should forge a consensus on U.S. policy toward Iran. Unfortunately, the policy has fallen victim to increasing partisanship. A foreign policy that sways erratically based on the prevailing political winds undermines U.S. credibility.

While it will be difficult to develop a policy that appeals to the entire spectrum of political opinion, it may be possible to find common ground given the shared understanding of the Iranian threat. For example, there should be a consensus on additional nuclear constraints in an expanded follow-on agreement to the JCPOA. Similarly, an agreement on actions to counter Iran's destabilizing activities should be possible.

CONCLUSION

There are no magical solutions to the standoff between the United States and Iran. The United States will not be able to force Iran to capitulate through sanctions



There is a path forward, but it requires a clear-eyed approach. The formula is to prioritize the greatest sources of tension first and lower the risk of conflict.

and pressure alone. On those occasions when it has made progress toward achieving its objectives, the United States has coupled pressure with a realistic diplomatic proposal that is backed by a united international community.

Similarly, Iran will be disappointed if it rests its hopes on the United States growing weary and departing the region. Iran must come to terms with the fact that the United States will not be leaving anytime soon. It must be prepared to compromise and assume a less threatening posture in the region.

Neither side is well served with a continuation of the status quo. Tensions could spark a conflict at any moment, which would come with a prohibitive cost and have little domestic political support in either country. Even if war could be avoided, heightened tensions would keep the United States tied down in the region, preventing it from reorienting a substantial share of its resources and attention to the growing competition with China. Iran would find its economic growth badly impaired and its aspirations for regional influence frus-

trated. It already sees realignment in the region taking place with the Gulf monarchies normalizing relations with Israel.

There is a path forward, but it requires a clear-eyed approach. The formula is to prioritize the greatest sources of tension first and lower the risk of conflict. A gradual process of dialogue on areas of mutual interest can then begin. The many points of contention should not be ignored. Diplomacy is not capitulation, and it does not require the United States to shelve other tools to address the Iranian threat. Indeed, it will be critical to convince Iran that the alternative to a comprehensive diplomatic solution is undesirable.

Diplomacy rarely affords the luxury of choosing between optimal outcomes. In the real world, it involves prioritization, trade-offs, and creative thinking to expand options and avoid worst-case outcomes. Over time, through a patient strategy that emphasizes diplomacy backed by incentives and disincentives, the United States can achieve its most important national security objectives concerning Iran.

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ENDNOTES

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