

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
May 18, 2006

Vali Nasr
Professor of Middle East and South Asia Politics
Department of National Security Affairs
Naval Postgraduate School

Iran today presents a serious foreign policy challenge to the United States. The growing prominence of security concerns: escalation of tensions over Iran's continued development of a nuclear capability, the country's role in Iraq and Afghanistan and support for Hamas and Hezbollah have preoccupied U.S. foreign policy. The election of a hard-line president in Iran in 2005, who has adopted a belligerent rhetoric, has added urgency to contending with these challenges.

The U.S. policy between 2001 and 2005 was focused on promotion of democracy in Iran with the hope that such a transition would result in a breakthrough in U.S.-Iran relations, and that in turn would solve the above mentioned challenges. It was hoped that the example of democracy in Iraq would undermine theocracy. Many observers looked to the presidential elections of 2005 in Iran as an opening: expecting that it would exacerbate internal tensions in Iran and produce a "Ukrainian moment."

The election results defied expectations. The reformist lost, and the most radical conservative forces won. The turn-out was higher than expected, and despite electoral irregularities there were no wide-spread protests and a new militant and hard-line president assumed power, and quickly escalated tensions with the West. The United States now confronted a more aggressive Iran at a time when the Iraq war was taxing America's military capability, constricting its ability to deter Iran.

Iran in particular intensified its campaign to acquire nuclear capability, and after the break-down of negotiations with the EU-3 became less cooperative with IAEA and less willing to compromise. It in fact, adopted a policy of deliberately escalating tensions, believing that it had ample room to push for maximum gains.

It became clear that the priority for U.S. policy in its relations with Iran would have to be first and foremost, containment of its nuclear program; and in addition, contending with Iran's regional role—in particular in Iraq and Palestinian territories.

U.S. policy has since 2005 continued to look to democracy as a solution to the Iranian challenge. There are inherent problems in this approach:

1. The scope of intensification of Iran's nuclear program requires a more direct and focused policy to address specific threats and concerns. Democratization does not amount to such a policy.
2. It is increasingly doubtful that there is in fact a credible democracy movement in Iran, and if it is likely to have an impact on regime behavior or decision-making in the small policy-making window that is available to the U.S. to deal with the nuclear issue.
3. It is also likely that democracy promotion and contending with security concerns regarding Iran may not be compatible with each other, and in fact may interfere with one another.

Prospects for Democracy in Iran

Iran today has many ingredients of democracy. It has an educated youth (some 70% of the population), who are receptive to western ideas, thousands of activist NGOs, more women in universities than men, and the level of cultural dynamism that is unique in the Middle East. Persian is today, after English and Mandarin Chinese, the third most popular language on the internet, and there are over eighty thousand Iranian blogs. There are hundreds of widely read newspapers, magazines, and periodicals, and there is relatively easy access to outside sources of information. One third of Iranians listen to BBC Radio, and BBC's Persian website at one point received 450,000 hits a day. Iranians watch everything from CNN to Al-Jazeera on satellite TV. Although unelected authorities screen election candidates, and there are deep flaws in electoral politics, still Iranians are more familiar with the rudiments of elections than their neighbors. Iranians take the campaigning and voting seriously. The voting age is fifteen. An entire generation has now grown up with ballots and electioneering, promises from politicians, and the ideals of democracy as well as its mechanics.

These social factors, however, have not produced democracy. Conversely, over the past five years Iran has witnessed growing power of conservative forces that since the 2005 elections are consolidating their hold on power. The conservative leadership comprise of clerics and Revolutionary Guards commanders, and their allies in the bureaucracy, media, and private sector. They now control all institutions of power—the executive, legislature and judiciary—and are in command of key decision-making bodies. Their political ethos combines loyalty to the ideals of the revolution with an ascendant nationalism that sees Iran as a regional power. Although Iranian society may look like Eastern Europe of 1980s the Iranian government does not.

The conservative leadership in Iran unlike Eastern European governments of 1980s is not completely alienated from society, and hence isolated and vulnerable. The ruling regime in Iran is confident and in control, and has a base of support of around 20% (a steady number in election after election), and far from feeling under pressure is confident of its own legitimacy and ability to govern. It sees itself as capable to confronting social opposition. The conservative leadership has proven itself capable to defending its own prerogative to power. It combines nationalism with revolutionary ideology with populism to mobilize the poor in its own support and marginalize the more affluent middle classes that demand democracy. The rising price of oil has made such an approach possible. In this regard the Iranian regime resembles Hugo Chavez's regime in Venezuela or Evo Morales' in Bolivia.

Since 2005 elections Iran's pro-democracy forces are demoralized and marginalized. They have lost their access to power and are excluded from all state institutions. They are disorganized. They lack political parties, and infighting has prevented them from forming a united front before the regime. They do not have a program of action or a platform that could challenge the current government's foreign policy or populist economic policies. In addition there is no wedge issue around which they could mobilize their followers, organize demonstrations, and build a movement. There is no major election on the calendar for the next five years—nothing to rally around. Escalation of tensions between U.S. and Iran—and especially the prospects of sanctions and a military strike on Iran—has moreover, created a rally to the flag phenomenon in Iran—war and nationalist fervor do not favor democracy. As strong as the demand for democracy is in Iran the democracy movement is weak. It poses no palpable threats to regime stability.

Contending with the Challenge

In the past five years the challenges posed by Iran to U.S. policy have not gone away, they have in fact grown. The prospect for democracy has in the meantime faded. It is fair to conclude that democracy is not in the short run a solution to the pressing problems in US-Iranian relations. There is no democratic partner organization, no clear opening, or an election to rally around.

At the same time it is possible that contending with pressing issues in U.S.-Iranian relations will require engaging Iran more directly. Any conversation between U.S. and Iran that yields results will have to contend with security guarantees that will be sought by Iran. A key element of such a guarantee is likely to be a removal of U.S. threat to regime survival in Iran. Such a guarantee will run counter to the goal of democracy promotion. Hence, not only will democracy not solve the security challenges facing the U.S., but rather, the solution to those challenges will adversely impact democracy-promotion. Three considerations are important at this juncture:

1. U.S. policy-making must realize that democratization is a long-run process in Iran. It will not address short run problems.
2. At a time of escalating tensions between U.S. and Iran overt U.S. support for democracy in Iran will be counterproductive. It will cast democracy advocates as unpatriotic. It is also likely to be futile as pro-democracy forces are unlikely to engage the U.S. at a time when U.S. and Iran are in conflict. Faced with a choice between democracy or nationalism the Iranian population will likely choose nationalism, and pro-democracy forces will likely follow the same trend.
3. The imperative of solving short run crises requires that policies directed at solving them be decoupled from the long run goal of democracy promotion.

Democracy promotion should remain a U.S. objective, and U.S. should continue to lend its moral authority to advocating its cause. However, the U.S. should not see this as a short run policy or a solution to the nuclear crisis. Democracy promotion should not be a substitute for diplomacy.