Iran: A Developing Grand Strategy

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Key Points

- Hassan Rouhani’s victory in the 14 June presidential election, and his apparent willingness for policies of increased Western engagement and nuclear transparency may be challenged by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

- Iran’s nuclear weapons programme will not be the game changer that is expected by media outlets and political pundits.

- Iran is rapidly developing the capability to challenge the United States and its allies. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and Qods Force have significant asymmetric capabilities that could give the US a bloody nose in the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.

- A lack of US willingness to intervene and contest regional change in the Middle East will play into Tehran’s hands. The “strategic arc” from Gaza to Pakistan that has been challenged in recent years by US efforts, will be reinforced to provide Iran with the strategic influence and buffer that the regime desires.

Summary

Hassan Rouhani’s victory in the 14 June presidential election was largely unexpected. Compared to Saeed Jalili and Mohammad Ghalibaf, Rouhani represents the moderate wing of Iranian politics. With an apparent willingness for engagement with the West, his tenure as
president – he will be inaugurated on 3 August – will not be without some degree of conflict with the clerical regime.

With the election process now out of the way, the Iranian Government and the clerical regime can refocus their attention on geostrategic concerns, with the attempted expansion of Iranian influence across a strategic arc. The Iranian Navy and Special Forces are likely to exploit the current regional chaos to export Iranian influence further afield and to consolidate it in its immediate neighbourhood. Consequently, the next ten years of Iranian foreign policy will potentially focus on making contacts both on the ground and politically and then utilising those contacts to further Iranian security goals.

Analysis

An Unexpected Win

A week prior to the 14 June election, Hassan Rouhani was seen as unlikely to become president. His victory, though, was secured with 50.71 per cent of the total vote, gathering 18.6 million out of the total 36.71 million votes and avoiding any second round run-off. Skilful political manouevring by former Presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, along with Mohammad Reza Aref, another presidential candidate, consolidated public support behind Rouhani. It is likely that Aref would have not been allowed to become president by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is opposed to Aref’s reformist policies. Consequently, Rouhani received massive support, having got the backing and support of both the reformist and moderate camps.

A cleric himself, Rouhani campaigned on seeking increased engagement with the West and economic revitalisation. These objectives are to be achieved by increasing the transparency of Iran’s nuclear programme and correcting the perceived economic mismanagement of the outgoing government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As a moderate, though, with plans to engage in dialogue with the United States, he will face opposition from Khamenei. The resulting conflict may be a characteristic of Rouhani’s presidency, as he confronts institutional constraints from both the political élite and the clerical regime.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, speculates that Rouhani is highly favoured by the clerics. Rouhani was, after all, one of the select few chosen by the Guardian Council, a body under the auspices of the Supreme Leader responsible for vetting potential presidential candidates. Speaking from Poland, Netanyahu was highly critical of the election, warning of another Holocaust, this time from Iran. Conversely, the White House stated ‘it
respected the will of Iranian people and congratulated them for taking part in the election.’ For Washington, Rouhani’s victory may represent a significant opportunity to reduce tensions with Tehran, notwithstanding any unforeseen elements that may impede Rouhani’s ability to implement his policies.

The celebrations across Iran on the evening of 14-15 June testified that, although Khamenei may wield great influence over the electoral process, Rouhani was clearly the people’s choice. The crowds this year bore no resemblance to those of 2009, in which thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest what was seen as heavy-handed intervention by Khamenei to put Ahmadinejad in power. Many of those who celebrated into the night wore the colour purple, indicating their support for the moderate cleric. With protests occurring in neighbouring Turkey, Khamenei may have been pragmatic and allowed Rouhani to win so as not to spark off similar protests.

Iran is always conscious of its geopolitical security environment. With a decline in US willingness to again become engaged in a large Middle Eastern war, Tehran will make good use of the time it has available. Iran’s growing indigenous anti-area/area denial (A²/AD),¹ nuclear and asymmetric capabilities will provide Tehran with a substantial degree of hard power. Iran’s suspected nuclear capability is thus significant because it is a key foreign policy

¹ Anti-area and area denial capabilities are those that prevent an adversary from traversing an area of land. These can include mine-laying, booby-traps, anti-ship missiles and hypothetically, even tactical nuclear devices.
tool of the Iranian Government. With the election over, international attention will once again return to Iran’s nuclear programme, which, although mainly seen as a deterrent, will certainly continue to worry its neighbours.

**A Nuclear Peace? Can Peace Exist With a Nuclear Armed Iran?**

The presidential election once again highlighted Iran’s longstanding feud with the West over its nuclear programme. The nuclear arms development process, which was resumed in 2005 by Ahmadinejad, has resulted in the hardest-hitting sanctions applied against any country in modern history. The sanctions, however, have failed to prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear programme, and analysts are speculating on the timelines for the achievement of an Iranian bomb. Israeli analysts have pointed out, however, that Iran is likely to already be in possession of a nuclear weapon and often speak of preventive strikes to eliminate the potential threat.

Rouhani’s win in the presidential election may indicate a potential change in Iran’s nuclear policy. If his election campaign is anything to go by, Rouhani’s policy is a significant departure from those of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. His objective of increasing Iran’s nuclear transparency may boost international confidence in the country’s nuclear programme. Suspected by outside powers to be predominately tasked with the development of nuclear weapons, Rouhani hopes to achieve a working dialogue with the West and to prove that Iran’s nuclear programme is solely for civilian purposes and does not pose a threat to the region.

Crucially, however, the nuclear policy does not fall within the purview of Rouhani, but his position will be a significant factor influencing the decisions taken by Khamenei, who has the responsibility for it. It is important to note that, in this sense, Iran is ruled not by its president, but by its religious authorities, headed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In the opaque system that is the Iranian Government, executive decisions traditionally lie within Khamenei’s domain. Consequently, despite lively and intellectual debates on the relative merits of nuclear negotiations, the decisions on such a highly important state project will not rest with Rouhani. The perceived strategic importance gained from the possession of nuclear capability is likely to continue to be a key motivator behind Khamenei’s continued support for the nuclear programme.

The nuclear agenda is an extension of Tehran’s grand strategy for both self-preservation and expansion. By having a nuclear capability, Iran will feel be able to secure its borders from foreign attack, which is seen as a persistent threat. Given the events in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria over the past decade, the security of national borders has taken on a renewed significance for Tehran. These conflicts have reinforced pre-conceived notions in
Tehran about self-defence, which have been a constant theme since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. It contrasts with the strategic doctrine of pre-revolutionary Iran, when the Shah sought military capabilities that would facilitate expansionism, such as having a large blue-water navy.

The danger posed by a future nuclear-armed Iran is minimal. Past and current Iranian strategic doctrine has mainly been tailored to the export of ideology and reducing the geographical vulnerabilities caused by Iran’s size and location. Consequently, Iran’s armed forces are primarily defensive in nature. Although possessing a very high degree of offensive capability, they are limited in their scope of action to the shallow, narrow corridor of the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf and the rugged geography of Iran’s mountainous borders.

A future nuclear arsenal would therefore have to fit within this structure. While Iran may possess some ballistic missiles, which would be a threat to its immediate neighbours, their function would be largely to act as a deterrent. Additional developments by the Iranian nuclear research team will refine Iran’s nuclear capabilities and, in line with the existing structure of the armed forces, are most likely to be restricted to theatre-level usage.

Notably, some have argued that Iran’s nuclear programme is less about actually acquiring operational nuclear weapons, than demonstrating its capability. For Tehran, the possession of a nuclear weapon may create an arms race with Saudi Arabia which, in the face of current sanctions, it may not be able to win. Ben Rich at Monash University, however, has stated that the Iranian nuclear programme may only be utilised for military means if Iran’s security environment declines. Furthermore, for Saudi Arabia to counter a nuclear-armed Iran, it would need the assistance of Pakistan; Islamabad and Riyadh have a history of sharing information and technology. Though Rich speculates that conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is quite likely, Iran’s armed forces have primarily a defensive role. Its nuclear programme is likely to be tailored to fit into that role.

A critical factor that might affect Iran’s nuclear programme in the next few years, is the possibility of a change in leadership, either planned or unplanned. The Supreme Leader is 73 years old and a potential successor has not been publicly discussed. Any succession process will have to take three major considerations into account. The first is that a future leader will need to have an existing influence over both the Iranian political and clerical establishments. Second, he will need to profess adherence to the same strategic doctrine as Khamenei, including the nuclear programme, which may be operational by that time. Last, the successor to Khamenei will need to appear legitimate, especially to the “Children of the Revolution”, whose changing social attitudes are clashing with the clerical regime, some of whom are actively opposed to the idea of a theocracy.

Iran will also have to be prepared for the region-wide security crisis that an operational nuclear programme may create, given the potential prospect of a diminished US presence in the future. A classic “Prisoner's Dilemma” may ensue, with states in the Middle East, fearing a lack of US support, organising their own nuclear security. This may, however, lead to a higher degree of stability among Middle Eastern countries, given the increased risks.

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associated with the use – and misuse – of nuclear weapons and technology. Furthermore, despite what some analysts say, Iran is unlikely to allow the distribution of nuclear technology to its clients, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Such an action by Tehran’s Qods Force would create an unacceptable level of responsibility for Iran and might also provide Israel and the United States with a legitimate cause to strike at Iran.

**Iran’s Military Options: The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy and Qods Force**

Iran, much like the United States, has had considerable experience in unconventional and asymmetric conflict. Unlike the US, though, which seeks to counter unconventional conflict with highly modernised conventional forces, Iran has chosen to adopt many of the techniques native to asymmetric conflict. The two principal arms that Iran has available to it are the IRGCN and the IRGC Qods Force.

The Iranian armed forces operate a two navy system comprising the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN). These two navies operate in their own fields of jurisdiction and are tasked with individual objectives. The IRGCN, commanded by Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, is a specialised force comprising 20,000 personnel,\(^3\) utilising many small craft and asymmetric capabilities to protect the Iranian coast from potential invasion. The force is specially designed for this task, with small boats being well-suited to the shallow and narrow passage of the Strait of Hormuz. The maritime strategy employed by the IRGCN is one of swarming an adversary with more vessels than it is capable of countering simultaneously.\(^4\) The critical mass achieved by such a strategy gives the IRGCN the ability to achieve local naval superiority and to then retreat. By employing “hit and run” tactics, the IRGCN is theoretically able to preserve most of its force, while delivering significant damage to any opposition. It is unlikely that the IRGCN could defeat the combined naval and air forces of the US and its the Gulf Co-operation Council allies, but its ability to punch above its weight would prompt a re-evaluation of the necessity of conflict with Iran. Additionally, the Iranian maritime doctrine is well-suited to countering a conventional opponent. Through a “mosaic defence”, IRGCN boat captains are required to operate independently of central authority in times of war, achieving the general objective of defeating the opposition without being encumbered by channels of command.

This scenario was simulated by the US Armed Forces in the *Millennium Challenge 2002* exercise. The asymmetric strategy employed in that exercise by retired US Marine Corps Lieutenant-General Paul K. Van Riper, illustrated the impressive results that can be achieved with limited capabilities, mirroring those employed by the Iranian armed forces, and the IRGCN in particular. Riper was able to destroy or damage 16 capital vessels of the US Navy, including an aircraft carrier, translating to the loss of 20,000 service personnel in a single day. Though the military exercise failed produce a change of doctrine, it highlighted the dangers the US Navy faces in engaging in hostilities with Iran. This leads to an important consideration: as the US becomes less willing to have a big military footprint in the Middle East, the political will to engage Iran in what would likely be a major conflict will diminish.

\[^3\] This makes the IRGC Navy larger in personnel size than the Iranian Navy.

\[^4\] Francois, V., *Asymmetric Threats at Sea: A Perspective on Three Cases*, Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2013.
To secure its advantage, Iran is likely to continue developing its naval capability and doctrine to combat the conventional superiority of the United States. Its tactics may include the development of Bavar II, which was delivered in 2010, offering the IRGCN the ability to use a mass of low-flying seaplanes to overwhelm opposition radar systems. At the same time, the IRGCN acquired 21 Ghadir midget submarines, which the Iranian media claims have a very low radar cross-section. Furthermore, the Iranian defence industry is constructing a stop-gap submarine, filling the void between the 160 tonne Ghadir submarine and the 3,000-4,000 tonne Russian-built Kilo-class submarine. The new 600 tonne Fateh-class submarine is expected to achieve the best of both worlds, having the low radar cross-section and manoeuvrability of the Ghadir, while mounting some of the massive firepower of the Kilo-class. This will increase Iran’s ability to control the Strait of Hormuz by achieving A²/AD through the advancement of its anti-ship capabilities.

Moreover, although the IRGCN is expected to continue to increase its capabilities in the near future, the main way in which Tehran will extend its influence is through its IRGC Qods Force. As mentioned above, this force is a special branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, charged with the export of the Iranian revolution and with organising and participating in extra-territorial operations. This force, to a large degree, directs Hezbollah’s actions, utilising it as a proxy force against Western and Israeli interests, both regionally and further abroad. Hezbollah’s dependence on Iran for finance, materiel, training and political support, means that Iran has a suitable force in hand to affect regional issues.

This was most evident in two recent operations by Hezbollah, in conjunction with the Qods Force. The first was in Iraq, where Iraqi Shiite militants were trained by Hezbollah handlers in northern Iran over a period of years. Many of these militants were further trained in Tehran or Qom, to become specialised operatives for the Iranian regime, either back in Iraq or in other countries chosen by their Lebanese handlers. There, they were strategically placed to start their own cells and programmes. Tehran’s rationale in utilising its Hezbollah links to find and train potential operatives is that they have a larger grass-roots presence in certain theatres than Iran. In addition, Iraqi militants, especially at the start of the US invasion of Iraq, were mistrustful of Iranian intentions.

These attacks demonstrated Tehran’s ability to reach beyond its borders and are expected to increase, as it feels a reduced security threat on its periphery. With a potentially reduced US presence in the Middle East, Tehran, in conjunction with Hezbollah, is likely to consolidate its existing ties with the Iraqi Government of Nouri al-Malaki. This has been an ongoing process since the normalisation of ties between Iran and Iraq in 2003, with the two countries exchanging high-level visits in recent years. Tehran has utilised the power vacuum
created by the US invasion to establish deep ties with Baghdad. This has been built upon a shared culture, as the two countries are part of the same Persian civilisation.5

The second example of the intimate relationship between Hezbollah and the Qods Force lies in their current operations in Syria. On 5 June 2013, Hezbollah-backed Syrian Government troops overran the town of Qusayr. The town is considered crucial to the forces of President Bashar al-Assad, which have been utilising it as a transit point for materiel and personnel from Hezbollah bases in Lebanon. There is a strong suspicion that Hezbollah’s operations in Syria are being heavily backed by Tehran, which wants to maintain the country as a principal transit corridor both for arms into Lebanon and access to the Mediterranean Sea. The forces loyal to Assad have lost ground to the rebel forces, prompting Iran to take measures to ensure the maintenance of the Assad regime. In this, Hezbollah has been especially useful to both Damascus and Tehran, as the organisation’s fighters are extremely well-trained in guerrilla warfare.

The visit of a Taliban delegation to Tehran, between 31 May and 2 June, highlighted Iran’s desire to stretch its influence. The high-level meetings represented a consolidation of ties between Iran and Afghanistan, with Tehran utilising the talks to gain influence in a post-NATO Afghanistan. With the Taliban engaged in conflict with Islamabad, the situation is ripe for Iranian intervention, which is likely to see Tehran providing rhetorical and materiel support for the Afghan Taliban, in exchange for expanded Iranian influence.

With the presidential election over, Tehran is likely to reassess its geopolitical environment. Iran will increase its support for various militant groups, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, but also in Israel and, potentially, Yemen, and, as mentioned above, Afghanistan. This will assist Tehran by increasing its strategic depth and providing a layered defence, politically, economically and militarily, against Western and Gulf states.

Lastly, the IRGC is of growing importance in Iran’s political and economic sectors. Its increasing influence over aspects of Iranian society and politics has occasionally put it at odds with the clerics. There is, therefore, the potential that there will be a future power struggle between the IRGC, the government and the clerical élite. The IRGC exercises considerable autonomy and, although supposedly loyal to Khamenei, is sufficiently organised and powerful enough to administer the country in the event of a coup or revolution. The result is that Khamenei, whose traditional power rests on a religious authority backed by a loyal military cadre, will seek to assert his dominance over the institution to prevent a potential future uprising.

**Conclusion**

The Iranian state, having survived the calamities of the Middle East and been more or less unaffected by the conflicts within Iraq and Afghanistan on its borders, will emerge a stronger power. An underlying assumption when examining Tehran’s goals and objectives is that regime survival is paramount. After 34 years, the clerical regime born in the 1979 revolution,

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believes its position needs to be constantly guarded. Therefore, it will be seen in the years ahead that Tehran’s interactions with the world, and the Middle East in particular, will be centred on increasing its influence. This will primarily be accomplished through three different forces: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy, the Qods Force and Iran’s (future) nuclear capability.

The United States will exhibit increased restraint in conducting large operations within the Middle East for the foreseeable future. Iran’s ruling regime will utilise this opportunity to expand its operations, which have been both curtailed and supplemented by the effects created by US operations. The Iraq invasion has paved the way for an Iranian arc of influence stretching from Gaza to Pakistan. Though the Syrian Crisis has thrown a spanner in the works, it is unlikely to severely constrain Iran, as even a failed state is still more beneficial to Iran’s cause than a Western-aligned state. The expectation is that the Syrian Crisis will continue to get worse in the months to come, as Hezbollah and Iran ramp up their support for Bashar al-Assad, both militarily and rhetorically. Additionally, while US naval doctrine fails to change, it will continue to facilitate an Iranian naval superiority in the Strait of Hormuz that, if not addressed, will increase efforts among the Gulf states to create land-based transport alternatives.

Hassan Rouhani’s victory is unlikely to change much, with the Iranian regime still being effectively under the direction of Supreme Leader Khamenei. However, Rouhani, as the face of government, will need to make tough decisions and occasionally, confront or convince the Supreme Leader. Iran’s nuclear policy will continue to be of critical importance both to the government and the clerical regime. They will need to work out how to maintain a civilian nuclear programme, and possibly a military one also, without placing further strain on the Iranian public. How this plays out, though, depends on how Khamenei chooses to deal with Rouhani, and whether, in a political fight, Rouhani can win.

Though having the mandate of the people, in what has been seen as a largely fair election despite the lack of international observers, Rouhani’s ability to exercise authority comes from Khamenei. Therefore, an effective Rouhani Presidency will be marked by how well he manages to find the middle ground, achieving what he, as a moderate, feels is best for the Iranian people, while also not pressing Khamenei too greatly. Consequently, the next four years for the Iranian government will be marked by conflict and compromise, which will succeed with no small degree of luck.

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