

Iran's Long Reach: Iran as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World

Suzanne Maloney

Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2008. 156 pages.

This short analytical book attempts to serve American decision-maker policy choices with respect to the “pivotal” country of Iran. The pivotal state thesis has sought to organize the United States’ national security strategy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war.¹ Maloney applies it to the Iranian case, given that country’s geostrategic value and significant role in global issues and negotiations (pp. 4-5). She adopts the thesis’ main assumption that by investing attention and resources in regional heavy-weights, the United States can benefit from the “multiplier” effect of their weight. Arguing that as the United States seeks to change its strategic approach toward the region, the author posits that focusing on the Muslim world’s pivotal states will help prioritize challenges and opportunities and thus better serve its vital interests (p. 5). She proceeds to do so by making the case for Iran’s crucial importance while outlining what she perceives to be its political, economic, security and theological dilemmas – presumably so that Washington and its allies can take advantage of them.

The study also attempts to examine the shifts from reformist (Khatami) toward more radical (Ahmadinejad) politics in Iran’s domestic scene. She traces the reasons why the Iranian “reform movement,” under Khatami failed and attributes that outcome to self-imposed constraints (redlines), fear of bringing about instability, and the movement’s elitist structure (pp. 12-13). Maloney also points to Ahmadinejad’s “perverse” but “compelling” incentive to preserve the long-standing antagonism toward the United States. She expresses her concern that such shifts may serve to undermine any remaining international consensus necessary to address “problematic elements of Iran’s foreign policy” (p. 23).

Apart of the introduction (chapter 1), the study comprises three additional chapters. Chapter 2 points out the “sources of Iranian influence and significance,” particularly in the Muslim world, and the extent to which they they pose challenges for American interests there. The chapter identifies five broad dimensions of Iran’s foreign policy that American policymakers should be aware of so that they can respond more effectively to that country’s “multifaceted” challenges (p. 26). Maloney identifies those dimensions in terms of

Iran's long reach, the rise of the Shi'a, Iran's bid for "extraregional" influence, its economic influence, and its religious and cultural sway.

Having identified the factors driving Iranian foreign policy, chapter 3 proceeds to enumerate perceived "agents of change" and the possible impact of "unintended consequences" emanating from what she terms actions of "hard-line autocrats" that serve to increase demands for democracy (p. 83). These agents of change range from a large pool of postrevolutionary youths and students who do not recall the shah's time, an oil-dependent economy, regional changes (particularly in Iraq) to women and technology (the Internet and communication) issues. For instance, she posits that the resurgence of Iraqi religious institutions offers a long-term potential for fostering "constructive" change in Iran (divide and conquer) (p. 110). Women, as a "key constituency" for the regime, are to be targeted as well so that they will challenge it and, together with others, are to be encouraged to use the Internet as an outlet to express their dissent (pp. 113-15).

The whole idea is that given the failure of Khatami's reformist movement, any kind of meaningful political change, as the author puts it, "will require some pressure on Iran's existing political system from its own population" (p. 116). The policy recommendation here appears to be that the United States should encourage and support internal dissension. Maloney also ponders about the disappearance of Ayatollah Khamenei from the political scene, possibly for health or other reasons. This, according to her, may well open up new "fissures" within the political elite and create new opportunities "to *subvert* the current political system" (p. 118; my emphasis).

Finally, chapter 4 offers policy recommendations as to how American policymakers should deal with Iran – the "most durable foreign [U.S.] policy dilemma" (p. 121). Washington's top challenge, as Maloney states, will be to foster "responsible" Iranian conduct toward its neighbors as well as its own citizenry (p. 121); in short, to get Iranian leadership to change its *behavior*. Here the author suggests several steps or principles. The first is for American policymakers to acknowledge that "diplomacy" is the only alternative available in dealing with Iran (p. 123). The second is to "engage" Iran as an "abiding commitment" toward getting it to "liberalize" socially, politically, and economically (pp. 125 and 126). President Obama's recent policy approach of "*engaging*" Iran seems to have achieving these goals in mind. Engagement very likely will not be much different from the earlier "détente" policy that ultimately led to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Ironically and inconsistently, Maloney states the third principle as one in which the United States must "drive a stake" through the heart of the

“myth” of regime change in Iran (p. 127). This is so despite the fact that she talks about “subverting” the political system there and despite “engagement” being the mechanism by which such a goal is to be achieved. The above principles seem to be essentially nothing but a smokescreen. Finally, she suggests that the United States need not wait for an ideal opportunity to deal with Tehran. In other words, engaging Iran cannot wait until democracy prevails in that country. Maloney seems to be adopting the “security first” proposition of Amitai Etzioni.²

In adopting the steps suggested above, the new Obama administration is unlikely to pursue strategic goals that differ from those sought by former President George Bush Jr. Any change is likely to be only in tactics. According to the author, the basic failure of the Bush policy can be traced to its erroneous presumption that the Islamic Republic was on the verge of collapse. She argues that there is no longer any justification for such “amateurishness” in American policy (pp. 121-22). With the Bush administration’s confrontational whirlwind having come to naught, the same goals will have to be achieved differently. In this respect, the magician must revert to his same old tricks: engagement, détente, dialogue, liberalization, peace, security, change in behavior, as well as a host of other potentially undermining and subversive concepts and mechanisms.

Endnotes

1. This thesis was first outlined by Robert Chase, Emily Hill, and Paul Kennedy, “Pivotal States and U.S. Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1996).
2. See Amitai Etzioni, *Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

Amr G. E. Sabet
Department of Public Management
Vaasa University, Finland