



**Iran Is Not the Problem —
Our Misreading of Iran Is**
*Fifty Years of Policies Built on the
Hope of Moderation*

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Uncompressed Thinking

“Hope is not a strategy.”
— commonly attributed to military planning doctrine

Abstract

Western policy toward Iran has for decades been guided by a recurring assumption: that the Iranian regime, although difficult and confrontational, ultimately behaves like a conventional state whose conduct can be moderated through negotiation, sanctions, and diplomatic engagement. Nearly half a century of Iranian behavior suggests a different conclusion. The regime has remained ideologically rigid, militarized, and consistently hostile toward the democratic West while skillfully using negotiations and economic pressure as tactical instruments rather than pathways toward moderation. Policies built on the hope of gradual transformation have therefore repeatedly produced disappointment. The deeper problem explored in this essay is the tendency in modern Western strategic thinking to confuse defense with deterrence. True deterrence occurs not when attacks are intercepted, but when adversaries decide not to attack at all.

Introduction: A Question Raised in Conversation

The reflections presented here grew out of a conversation with a friend about Western policy toward Iran. The discussion itself was entirely reasonable and reflected a view that many thoughtful observers share. The argument was simple: diplomatic agreements should be preserved when possible, economic pressure should be intensified when necessary, and the United States should rely on serious professional advisers while avoiding unnecessary military escalation. On its surface this approach appears measured, responsible, and balanced.

Yet the more I considered it, the more I realized that the disagreement between us was not really about any single policy decision, nor about the personalities of particular American presidents or administrations. The deeper disagreement lay elsewhere. It concerned the nature of the Iranian regime itself and the assumptions that Western policy has repeatedly made about it.

For nearly half a century Western governments have approached Iran through alternating cycles of negotiation, sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and occasional confrontation. Despite these efforts one question remains curiously unresolved. Are these policies dealing with a difficult but ultimately

conventional state actor, or are they confronting a revolutionary ideological regime whose strategic behavior is fundamentally different from that of ordinary states?

The distinction is not merely academic. Policies that might successfully moderate the behavior of a conventional government can have very different effects when applied to regimes whose identity and legitimacy are rooted in ideological confrontation. In such cases, the instruments of diplomacy and economic pressure may produce results very different from those policymakers originally expected.

The Persistent Character of the Iranian Regime

Looking across the decades since the 1979 revolution, one does not see a regime gradually moderating its behavior as it becomes integrated into the international system. Instead, what emerges is a striking pattern of continuity.

Iran has consistently maintained a political system that combines ideological rigidity with militarized governance and an enduring hostility toward the democratic West. Negotiations have often been approached with tactical flexibility, yet the underlying strategic posture has remained largely unchanged. The regime has shown itself willing to employ regional proxies, to maintain confrontation with Israel and the United States, and to sustain a domestic system in which internal dissent is often met with severe repression.

These characteristics have not softened with time. If anything, the regime has become increasingly adept at navigating international pressure while preserving its central ideological and strategic objectives. This persistence is crucial to understanding why many policies that appear reasonable in theory have repeatedly failed in practice.

The problem, in other words, may not lie primarily in the difficulty of dealing with Iran. Rather, it may lie in the tendency to interpret Iran through conceptual frameworks designed for dealing with conventional states.

The Nuclear Agreement and the Question of “Buying Time”

Supporters of the nuclear agreement negotiated during the Obama administration often argue that the deal imposed meaningful restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program while establishing a framework of inspections and monitoring that helped slow the regime’s progress toward nuclear weapons capability. If one evaluates the agreement solely through this narrow lens, the argument carries some weight.

Yet the central strategic question is broader than the technical details of enrichment levels or inspection regimes. The deeper question is whether the agreement altered the strategic trajectory of the regime itself or merely regulated the pace at which certain developments could occur.

From this wider perspective, the agreement appears less transformative than its supporters hoped. The deal did not dismantle the fundamental infrastructure of Iran’s nuclear program. It did not change the ideological character of the regime. It did not fundamentally alter Iran’s regional ambitions. What it did accomplish was to create a period of reduced tension accompanied by sanctions relief and greater economic breathing room for the Iranian state.

Western governments frequently described this outcome as having “bought time.” Yet time in strategic affairs is rarely neutral. The question that must always follow is who ultimately benefits from the passage of that time.

If the underlying political and strategic character of the regime remains unchanged, then time may strengthen the very system whose behavior one hopes to moderate. A delay in technical capability may coexist with a strengthening of political and economic foundations. Under such conditions the concept of “buying time” becomes ambiguous. It may delay certain developments while simultaneously enabling others.

For this reason, the nuclear agreement can be viewed not as a definitive solution to the Iranian challenge but as an arrangement that postponed rather than resolved the deeper strategic problem.

The Limits of Sanctions

Economic sanctions have long been regarded as a principal instrument for influencing the behavior of hostile states. Their logic appears straightforward: by imposing economic hardship on a government, sanctions can create incentives for policy change.

In practice, however, the effectiveness of sanctions varies greatly depending on the nature of the regime being targeted. In political systems where leaders depend heavily on economic performance and public approval, economic pressure can indeed produce meaningful change. In regimes whose legitimacy is grounded in ideology, repression, and resistance to external pressure, the results can be quite different.

Iran belongs firmly to the latter category. Its political system has demonstrated a capacity to absorb significant economic hardship while maintaining internal control and external confrontation. Economic suffering is often framed as evidence of foreign hostility rather than as a reason for policy adjustment. In such circumstances sanctions may weaken economic performance without necessarily altering strategic behavior.

None of this means that sanctions are entirely ineffective. They can restrict resources, complicate procurement, and create internal stress within governing systems. Yet sanctions alone rarely transform regimes whose identity is intertwined with ideological resistance. Rather than producing moderation, they may reinforce narratives of external hostility that strengthen internal cohesion among ruling elites.

Sanctions therefore remain a tool, but they are not a solution. Their effects are limited when applied to regimes that view economic hardship as an acceptable cost of ideological persistence.

Advisers, Expertise, and Strategic Judgment

Debates over Iran policy often extend beyond the substance of strategy to questions about the advisers shaping it. Critics sometimes argue that recent American administrations have relied excessively on political figures or media personalities rather than on experienced professionals. While this criticism carries rhetorical appeal, it often oversimplifies the more complex reality of strategic decision-making.

The essential issue is not whether particular advisers possess public visibility, but whether policymakers have access to a wide range of serious expertise capable of addressing the challenges of a rapidly changing strategic environment. The modern security landscape includes the proliferation of missile technologies, the spread of nuclear capabilities, the rise of proxy warfare, and the emergence of openly hostile regimes willing to challenge established international norms.

In such an environment military expertise cannot be treated as optional or suspect. Military advisers possess essential knowledge about capabilities, escalation dynamics, and operational realities. At the

same time, military advice must be balanced with diplomatic, intelligence, and economic perspectives. Effective strategy emerges not from privileging one type of expertise over another but from integrating multiple forms of knowledge into coherent policy.

Why We Continue to Misread Iran

A deeper question naturally follows from this discussion. If the record of Iranian behavior over the past five decades is so consistent, why do Western policymakers repeatedly interpret the regime through frameworks that assume eventual moderation?

Part of the answer lies in the intellectual habits of modern Western political thinking. Contemporary policy analysis is deeply shaped by the experience of dealing with conventional states whose behavior is primarily guided by material interests, economic incentives, and the pragmatic calculations of political leadership. Within that framework it appears reasonable to assume that pressure and incentives, applied in the right balance, will eventually shift the behavior of any government.

This assumption has worked in many contexts. It reflects the experience of dealing with states that, despite political differences, operate within broadly similar assumptions about governance, legitimacy, and national interest.

The Iranian regime, however, emerged from a revolution whose legitimacy is grounded not only in state authority but also in ideological confrontation. Its political identity is tied to a narrative of resistance against external domination and cultural encroachment. Under such conditions the relationship between external pressure and internal behavior becomes more complex. Actions that Western policymakers expect to produce moderation may instead reinforce the regime's ideological narrative.

Another factor contributing to this persistent misreading is the natural human inclination toward optimism in diplomacy. Policymakers understandably hope that negotiations, economic integration, and international engagement will gradually soften confrontational regimes. The alternative — the recognition that a regime may remain fundamentally adversarial for generations — is politically and psychologically difficult to accept.

Yet strategic clarity often requires precisely that kind of recognition. History provides many examples of regimes whose behavior remained remarkably stable over long periods despite changing external conditions. When dealing with such systems, policies designed to encourage gradual moderation may repeatedly collide with the structural realities of the regime itself.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply to design better policies. It is to begin with a more accurate understanding of the political system one is confronting.

Defense and the Nature of Deterrence

Beneath these specific policy debates lies a deeper conceptual problem that increasingly shapes Western strategic thinking. Modern societies often emphasize defensive capabilities — missile interception systems, protective technologies, and damage mitigation — as evidence of strengthened security. While these measures undoubtedly save lives, they can also obscure a crucial strategic distinction.

Defense and deterrence are not the same thing.

Defense focuses on limiting the damage caused by an attack. Deterrence seeks to prevent the attack from occurring in the first place. A society that becomes increasingly skilled at absorbing and intercepting attacks may still fail to influence the adversary's initial decision to launch them.

This distinction formed the basis of a short position paper I recently wrote examining the relationship between defensive capability and strategic deterrence. The central argument is that deterrence operates at an earlier stage than defensive response. The critical moment occurs when a potential attacker evaluates whether the benefits of aggression outweigh the risks.

If an attack is launched despite the existence of defensive systems, the attacker has already judged those defenses acceptable within the broader strategic calculation. In that sense the contest of deterrence has already been partially lost before the first missile is intercepted. Effective strategy must therefore influence the attacker's decision before the attack begins. The decisive moment of deterrence lies upstream, in the adversary's calculations about risk and consequence.

Conclusion

The history of Western engagement with Iran over the past five decades reveals a persistent pattern. Despite changing tactics, evolving diplomatic initiatives, and repeated efforts at economic pressure, the fundamental character of the Iranian regime has remained remarkably consistent. It has not gradually evolved toward responsible coexistence with the democratic West. Instead it has maintained a revolutionary identity combined with tactical flexibility in its use of negotiation and diplomacy.

This persistence suggests that many Western policies have been shaped by an expectation that Iran would eventually moderate its behavior if provided sufficient incentives or pressure. The evidence of the past half century indicates that this expectation has repeatedly proven unrealistic.

Agreements have postponed certain developments without altering the regime's strategic direction. Sanctions have imposed economic costs without producing fundamental political change. Diplomatic engagement has often served as a tactical instrument for the regime rather than a pathway toward genuine normalization.

The central lesson that emerges is therefore both simple and uncomfortable. Effective policy cannot be built on the Iran that policymakers hope will eventually exist. It must begin with the Iran that has existed for nearly fifty years.

Only strategies grounded in that reality have any chance of producing durable deterrence.