

Iran's New Leader and the Limits of Diplomacy

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Hassan Rouhani, Iran's new president, may sometimes talk like a "moderate", but he clearly knows how to maximize power in the international arena. Rouhani's record as Iran's top nuclear negotiator reflects his inner [Clausewitz](#) — behind the winks and nods, the opening and closing of "windows of opportunity", diplomacy is simply warfare by other means.

So while the leaders of the international community and accompanying choir of pundits sing Rouhani's praises, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu strikes a different note:

"Fifteen years ago, the election of another president, also considered a moderate by the West, led to no change in these aggressive policies. Over the last twenty years, the only thing that has led to a temporary freeze in the Iranian nuclear program was Iran's concern over aggressive policy against it in 2003."

As Yehuda Yaakov, an Israeli Foreign Ministry senior specialist in political-military affairs, has documented in detail, Rouhani successfully shepherded Iran's illicit nuclear weapons program through its greatest crisis in 2003-2004. Yaakov's research was presented in his MA thesis for the Israeli National Defense College, and [the English text was published in June](#). (Full disclosure — I served as his academic adviser.) The analysis is based on extensive interviews with key Western diplomats, as well as documents from this period and public records, including [a revealing speech by Rouhani in 2004](#) and the 2012 [memoir of his aide Houssein Mousavian](#).

The case made by this evidence is compelling.

A thorough analysis of Rouhani's conduct and statements while chief negotiator reveals the cardinal goals he sought to achieve through diplomatic engagement with the "international community" to advance the nuclear program; to deflect the use of force and sanctions; to bolster Iran's regional status in strategic terms; and to orient the country's inter-agency dynamic to confronting an international crisis waged against it. In conceiving and implementing this strategy, Clausewitz would have given him high marks.

In 2003, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic in Teheran had good reason to worry that their slow but steady progress towards becoming a nuclear weapons state, in blatant violation of their legal obligations, was about to be halted, and worse. US President Bush had recently overthrown Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq, citing the nuclear ambitions of this regime. As Rouhani admitted, throughout 2003 the Iranians greatly feared the possibility of an American military strike — and Rouhani's job was to prevent this, while protecting their nuclear assets. As Yaakov's analysis demonstrates, the chief negotiator did his job very well. Through carefully packaged diplomatic feints, he kept his country off of the Security Council's agenda and away from America's target list.

Rouhani acknowledged that his model was Pakistan, whose leaders had managed to walk the tightrope of building nuclear weapons while avoiding becoming the target for a military strike. In his 2004 speech, he also discussed the North Korean experience of negotiating while producing weapons, and Brazil, which used diplomatic engagement for two decades to quietly progress towards a threshold nuclear weapons capability.

With Washington busy attempting to create democracy in Iraq, the European Union claimed Iran as its chance to play a leading international role. But the Europeans, led by Britain, Germany and France, talked softly and instead of sticks, carried carrots designed to buy Iran's cooperation. Rouhani saw his opportunity to gain from European naïveté, and played along, encouraging the facade of progress through agreements that were never implemented. In parallel, Iran provided deceptive evidence by hiding and slowing the visible production of weapons grade material.

Rouhani's strategy also took in the Bush Administration. A [US National Intelligence Council Estimate in 2007](#) concluded: "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program." As consistently documented by IAEA reports, this slowdown was a temporary, tactical move; as soon as the immediate threat had passed, Iran made up the lost ground, and far more.

Throughout this period, Rouhani navigated to maximize gains while minimizing the price Iran paid for keeping its nuclear ambitions alive during the period of greatest threat. The agreements that he negotiated, declared by European interlocutors as major diplomatic triumphs, were disposable political band-aids without substance. Iran's commitments evaporated as soon as the immediate need had passed.

Indeed, Rouhani himself repeatedly emphasized throughout the campaign that his greatest achievement as chief nuclear negotiator between 2003-2005 was advancing the nuclear program while preventing both force and sanctions.

Clausewitz would have been proud. Using diplomatic skill, under Rouhani's guiding hand, Iran not only preserved its power, but expanded it, particularly in progressing towards nuclear weapons. The only costs were economic, and the leadership was immune.

For his service, Rouhani was rewarded, and after winning the Iranian version of a presidential election (closely supervised by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameni), he declared that his "future government will protect Iran's fundamental rights [code for nuclear weapons], while seeking to gradually remove sanctions." His previous experience suggests that this is not empty rhetoric, and his reported appointments to key positions suggest a rerun of the successful policies from the earlier decade.

But much has changed since 2003, and Rouhani will find that the political environment that encouraged long negotiations towards meaningless agreements has changed. His European interlocutors have learned some lessons, hardened by years of Tehran's cat-and-mouse game at their expense. Despite the severe economic crisis, today's European leaders are willing to pay the cost of increased sanctions to increase pressure on the regime. And Obama, although a very reluctant warrior, has shown that he is capable of ordering effective military strikes to protect vital US interests including international stability.

At the same time, since Rouhani's term as chief negotiator, Tehran has made significant progress and is now on the verge of having a first-generation weapons capability. As Iran sprints towards the nuclear finish line, Rouhani faces an Israeli leadership that also understands Clausewitz. In some cases, diplomacy can serve as war by other means, but Netanyahu also knows that in the current Middle Eastern reality, credible military threats are necessary to ensure that international obligations are actually honored.

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