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Gawdat Bahgat
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Iranian Nuclear Proliferation: The Trans-Atlantic Division

by Gawdat Bahgat

For many years, Western intelligence agencies have suspected that Iran and Iraq have engaged in clandestine activities to develop nuclear capability. The toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and the slow construction of the "new Iraq" has removed Baghdad from the category of potential proliferators. Increasingly, the international community's focus has shifted to the other Persian Gulf giant—Iran. In 2003 a series of revelations about Tehran's nuclear program shook the Western intelligence assessment. After intense negotiations that included the United States, several European powers (particularly Britain, France, and Germany), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and Iran, a crisis was contained, at least temporarily.

These successful international efforts to convince Iran to disclose its nuclear program and accept closer cooperation and vigorous inspection by the IAEA were the outcome of different approaches by Washington and Brussels. While the British, French, and Germans urged Iran to cooperate and offered economic and technological incentives, the Americans threatened Tehran with economic and political sanctions. Moreover, although Washington's threat of military force was never explicit, it was certainly implicit. At the end of the day, this "good cop/bad cop formula" produced a positive outcome, i.e., Iran's acceptance of a rigorous inspection of its nuclear facilities). This outcome was documented in a resolution adopted by the Board of Governors of the IAEA, issued in late November 2003.

The American harsh stand reflects the longstanding mutual suspicion that has characterized the relations between Washington and Tehran for more than two decades. Diplomatic relations between the two nations have been severed since fifty-two American diplomats were taken as hostages in Tehran in 1979. In the 1980s several military skirmishes occurred between the U.S. navy, which was protecting oil shipments from the Persian Gulf, and Iranian civilian and military targets. Shortly after taking office, President Clinton initiated the "Dual Containment" policy, which imposed series of economic and political sanctions on the Islamic Republic. President Bush's approach to Iran is not different from that of President Clinton. In the State of the Union speech, January 2002, President Bush described Iran as part of an international "axis of evil" along with Iraq and North Korea. In the aftermath of toppling the Iraqi regime several prominent figures inside and outside the Bush administration have advocated a "regime change" in Tehran and mentioned

Gawdat Bahgat is the Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies in the Department of Political Science at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

Iran as the next target in the global war on terrorism. Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, Elliott Abrams, and William Kristol are the most prominent “neo-conservatives”, who have strongly advocated an aggressive approach toward Iran.¹

This hostile American attitude toward Iran is the opposite of the approach adopted by the Europeans. Like the United States, most European countries had hostile relations with Tehran in most of the 1980s in response to the revolutionary regime’s extremist domestic and foreign policies. However, the slow but steady rise of a moderate camp within the Iranian leadership since the early 1990s has facilitated a rapprochement with Brussels. The election of President Muhammad Khatami in 1997 represented a turning point in the relations between the two sides. Since taking office, Khatami has paid highly successful visits to several European countries including Italy, Spain, France, and Germany. Although a dialogue between the European Union (EU) and Iran was launched in 1995, it was for the first time in 2001 that Brussels and Tehran took practical steps to put bilateral ties and cooperation in a contractual framework. Top EU leaders, including foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Commissioner Chris Patten, visited Tehran. Similarly, a European Parliament delegation paid a highly publicized visit to Tehran in 2002, which was followed by a visit to Brussels by Kamal Kharrazi, the Iranian foreign minister, who was the first Iranian official to address the European Parliament in February 2003. These diplomatic talks between European and Iranian officials have strengthened their common stands on several issues, particularly trade, energy, terrorism, and the war in Iraq.²

The Iranian case suggests that external pressure, combining both incentives and threats, in conjunction with internal debate regarding the benefits and costs of nuclear capabilities is the most effective approach to prevent nuclear proliferation.

The European Union is Iran’s main trading partner concerning both imports and exports. While most of the EU imports from Iran consist of oil products, the exports to Iran are more diversified including several manufacture products. For the last few years the two sides have been negotiating a Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA). The United States government’s decision to ban American oil companies from investing in the Iranian energy sector since 1995 has offered the European companies a golden opportunity to develop Iran’s hydrocarbon resources. Furthermore, unlike the United States, several European countries support Tehran’s application to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). With regard to terrorism, after a rough start, Tehran and Brussels have adopted similar positions. In a significant gesture to Iran in May 2002, the EU declared the leading opposition group to the Islamic regime, Mujahideen Khalq a terrorist organization. Finally, Iran and several European countries have supported a leading role for the United Nations in Iraq.³

This essay examines Iran's motives and incentives to acquire nuclear capability. Then, a brief review of Iranian efforts to start and develop nuclear program is provided. American and European efforts to disclose, stop or slow down Iranian nuclear capabilities will be compared and analyzed. The lessons learned from this multifaceted diplomacy will be highlighted. The Iranian case suggests that external pressure, combining both incentives and threats, in conjunction with internal debate regarding the benefits and costs of nuclear capabilities is the most effective approach to prevent nuclear proliferation.

MOTIVES TO ACQUIRE NUCLEAR CAPABILITY

An examination of Iran's motivations to acquire and develop nuclear capability reveals a deep concern about national security within a regional and international context that has grown more hostile and dangerous to the Islamic regime since the revolution in 1979. Put differently, Iranian strategists feel threatened by the growing non-conventional capabilities of several of their neighbors as well as the deployment of American troops next to their borders on almost all directions.⁴ The lesson that the Iranians have learned from their own experience and that of other countries is that conventional weapons probably would not suffice to ensure their national security and deter potential attacks. Instead, chemical, biological, and nuclear capabilities and the means to deliver them will prevent the country's potential and real enemies from threatening core Iranian national interests.

Turkey is located on the north western borders of Iran. Despite overall good relations between Ankara and Tehran there are fundamental differences in their domestic and foreign policy orientations with clear implications on their national security. While Turkey is a staunch believer in secularism and the Turkish army stands firm to prevent religious penetration of Turkish public life and policy, the Iranian regime's legitimacy is based on its adherence to the Islamic principles and tenets. In short, Turkey is a secular state, while Iran is a religious theocracy. In addition, Turkey is a traditional ally of the United States, and a member of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and, since the mid-1990s, has forged a military and economic alliance with Israel. Both the United States and Israel are Iran's sworn enemies. Finally, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Turkey and Iran have pursued competing economic and political strategies in Central Asia.⁵ Despite these basic differences, these two Muslim, non-Arab Middle Eastern states have established good relations and avoided any serious military confrontation. Furthermore, Iran greatly appreciated Turkey's refusal to allow American troops to use its military bases to attack Iraq in the 2003 war. Still, a Turkish military threat to Iran cannot be ruled out. Ankara features in Tehran's national security calculus.

Russia is located to the north of Iran. Historically, the Soviet Union/Russia has always posed a threat to the stability and territorial integrity of Iran. In the last two centuries, Iran has lost substantial territory to the Soviet Union/Russia.⁶ During the Cold War the Pahlavi regime strongly resisted Soviet attempts to penetrate the Middle

East and promote communism. Since the early 1990s Russia has become one of the closest allies Iran has. Indeed, Russia has helped Iran to build its conventional and non-conventional capabilities.⁷ Nevertheless, Moscow and Tehran have taken opposite stands on basic issues. Russia is a main trade partner to Israel and has special relations with the Jewish state due to the approximately one million Soviet Jews who immigrated to Israel. Besides, Russia and Iran pursue competing policies in the Caspian Sea.⁸ The two nations disagree on the legal status of the Caspian and the pipeline routes. These disagreements can threaten the current cooperative relations between Moscow and Tehran.

An Iranian non-conventional capability can serve as a deterrent against potential Israeli attacks. In response, senior Israeli military officials and politicians have been explicit about the need to quash Iran's WMD facilities, particularly the nuclear ones.

Pakistan, a nuclear power, is on the eastern borders of Iran. The great majority of Iranians are Shi'ia and Pakistan is one of the largest Sunni countries. Until September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Iran and Pakistan took opposite sides in the civil war in neighboring Afghanistan. Islamabad supported the Taliban, an extremist Sunni movement, while Tehran supported the Northern Alliance, a group of opposition groups including the Afghani Shi'ias. Meanwhile, Pakistan is a close ally to the United States and Iran established close economic and military cooperation with India, Pakistan's main rival.

On the southern borders Iran shares the Persian Gulf with the Arab Gulf monarchies. Since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 Iran and its Arab neighbors have come close and signed several agreements to consolidate their cooperation.⁹ Despite this Arab-Iranian rapprochement there are basic problems beneath the surface. Most of these Arab Gulf states have large Shi'ia minorities which have not been completely assimilated. Most of Arab Gulf rulers have forged strong defense links with the United States. They see the United States as their main defender against external threats and allowed American troops and facilities in their countries. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait supported Iraq in its war with Iran and have bought some of the most sophisticated weapon systems in the world. Their military spending is less restrained by financial and political pressure than Iran. Finally, Iran has a standing territorial dispute with the United Arab Emirates, supported by the other Gulf monarchies, over three islands—the Greater Tunb, the Lesser Tunb and Abu Mussa.

Since the early 1990s Iran has had good relations with most of these neighbors—Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, and the Arab Gulf states. A military threat from these countries to the Islamic Republic is unlikely in the near future. Still, deterioration of relations cannot be ruled out. Iranian strategists include these potential adversaries in drawing their national security plans.¹⁰ More immediate threats, however, come

from three sources: Israel, the United States, and Iraq. The conflicts with these three countries are considered the main reasons for Iran to build non-conventional arsenal since the mid-1970s.¹¹

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Tehran and Tel Aviv have seen each other as sworn enemies. Iran, even under the Shah, opposed the Israeli nuclear asymmetry in the Middle East and Israel's refusal to sign the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Accordingly, the Pahlavi regime sought to establish its own nuclear program and called for the creation of a Middle East Nuclear Free Zone (MENFZ).¹² The leaders of the Islamic regime in Tehran perceive Israel as having the most extensive chemical, biological, and nuclear arsenal in the Middle East as well as a formidable conventional force, which has the reputation of being one of the most combat-effective forces in the world. Within this context, an Iranian non-conventional capability can serve as a deterrent against potential Israeli attacks. In response, senior Israeli military officials and politicians have been explicit about the need to quash Iran's WMD facilities, particularly the nuclear ones.¹³ These Israeli threats are credible for three reasons: A) Israel's pre-emptive attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981 serves as a precedent; B) Israel's capability to carry out long-range attacks has substantially enhanced in the last several years. Since the late 1990s Israel has acquired a number of cruise-missile-capable diesel submarines and further developed its extended-range Jericho missiles; C) As a result of growing military cooperation with Turkey, Israel effectively has a presence on the Turkish border with Iran; it reportedly operates intelligence-collection facilities there, and Israeli reconnaissance or strike aircraft could over-fly Turkey en route to Iran.¹⁴

In the post–Cold War environment, there is no other superpower to balance the United States. This unchecked sole superpower has been very suspicious of Iran's intentions and nuclear program.

These threats and counter-threats made by Iranian and Israeli officials have substantially heightened tension between the two countries. A direct military confrontation between Tehran and Tel Aviv is likely to take place under one of two scenarios.¹⁵ First is an Israeli pre-emptive attack against Iran's nuclear facility. Second, a large-scale terrorist attack against Israeli or Jewish targets carried out by the Lebanese guerrilla Hizbollah (Party of God), or other Palestinian organizations, and sponsored by Iran. These two potential scenarios for direct military confrontation between Iran and Israel are, however, unlikely. Rhetoric aside, the two countries have no specific or direct dispute with each other.¹⁶ Still, they will remain highly concerned about each other's conventional and non-conventional military capabilities.

Iran has had hostile relations with the United States since the monarchical regime was overthrown in 1979. Since then, the Islamic Republic has held an almost paranoid and conspiratorial view of the United States' role and action in the Middle

East and has seen almost every U.S. initiative as a direct or indirect assault on Iran's national interests.¹⁷ Indeed, confronting the United States is one of the few remaining legitimizing symbols for the Islamic Republic. Iran's strategic stand on the international system has further worsened since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower. In the post-Cold War environment, there is no other superpower to balance the United States. This unchecked sole superpower has been very suspicious of Iran's intentions and nuclear program.

Iranian officials accuse the United States of pursuing a policy of “selective proliferation” by saying nothing about Israel’s nuclear capability, which is not a signatory to the NPT, while harshly criticizing and imposing sanctions on Iran, which signed the NPT.

Since the early 2000s, the mutual suspicion between the United States and Iran has been heightened. In October 2001, American troops were deployed to Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban regime. Less than two years later, March 2003, American troops were deployed in Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein regime. Despite the fact that both the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were Iran's sworn enemies, the American military presence on Iran's eastern and western borders (as well as in the Arab Gulf states on the southern borders and in Central Asia on the northern borders) is a matter of great alarm and concern to the regime in Tehran.¹⁸ In short, since the early 2000s Iran has been encircled by American troops from almost all directions. Tehran's sense of encirclement feeds into its fear and suspicion of Washington's intentions toward the Islamic regime. In the aftermath of the 2003 war in Iraq, many Iranian officials and intellectuals have expressed their concern that their country would be the next on President Bush's list of regime change.¹⁹

For a long time Iran, along with some Arab states, has argued that there is a double standard in U.S. policy concerning the nonproliferation regime. Iranian officials accuse the United States of pursuing a policy of “selective proliferation” by saying nothing about Israel's nuclear capability, which is not a signatory to the NPT, while harshly criticizing and imposing sanctions on Iran, which signed the NPT.²⁰ The American-led war in Iraq in 2003 has reinforced these Iranian accusations. The war sent a mixed signal to Tehran. On one hand, the United States was not provoked to attack Iraq, rather it was a pre-emptive strike. This clearly suggests that Washington is ready to use its overwhelming might to prevent the proliferation of WMD. On the other hand, the United States' more benign and less confrontational response to North Korea's nuclear activities suggests that acquiring a nuclear device can serve as a deterrent. Some members in the Iranian political/security establishment believe that a nuclear capability is the only guarantor of the nation's independence and the regime's survival. The aim of acquiring such capability would be to deter the United States before it “bullies” the Islamic Republic.²¹

Finally, Iraq probably represents the most salient incentive for Iran's drive to acquire and develop WMD. Most of the Iranian efforts to obtain such capabilities started during the war with Iraq (1980–1988).²² During the war, Iraq launched chemical and ballistic missile attacks on Iranian army and population centers and it has since been revealed that Iraq also had an extensive biological warfare program. Then, Iran's arsenal of these weapons was not match to Iraq's. The existence of a hostile neighboring state with a known chemical and biological capability was an incentive to develop a deterrent in kind.²³ This bloody conflict ended with a cease-fire, which has yet to be formalized into a peace treaty.

Indeed, the underlying reasons for the conflict are deep-rooted and have not been adequately resolved. The two nations still have a territorial dispute over Shatt al-Arab. The demographic structure will always be a factor in shaping their relations. The majority of Iraqis (about 60 percent) are Shi'ia and (40 percent) are Sunni, while more than 90 percent of the Iranians are Shi'ia. This means that Iran will always have the potential to influence the Iraqi domestic policy. Furthermore, the two big and powerful states – Iran and Iraq have their own conflicting ambitions to dominate the rich and small Arab Gulf states.

Iran has developed non-conventional capabilities to deter Iraq.

Given these roots of enmity, Tehran and Baghdad have always been suspicious of each other. This hostility has characterized their relations before Saddam Hussein and is likely to continue in the post-Saddam Iraq. As one analyst put it, "Scenarios of renewed conflict with Iraq are not far-fetched."²⁴ Iran is wary of the uncertainty regarding the post-Saddam Iraq. The Iranians learned an important lesson by comparing their war with Iraq (1980–1988) and the Gulf war (1991). Iraq used chemical weapons (CW) against Iran because the latter could not retaliate in kind. In the Gulf war Iraq did not utilize its WMD because the international coalition had the capability to retaliate in kind. The lesson is for deterrence to operate, the threatening state must be confronted with the certainty of an equivalent response.²⁵ Iran has developed non-conventional capabilities to deter Iraq.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

The most controversial issue regarding Iran's WMD is its nuclear program. Ironically, this program began with the assistance of the United States under the previous Iranian regime. In 1957 Iran signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement with Washington as part of the U.S. Atoms for Peace Program.²⁶ Few years later, Iran arranged to buy a research reactor from the U.S., which began operation in 1967. Washington also sold Tehran a number of hot cell laboratories for handling radioactive materials. In 1974 the Shah established the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and stated that Iran would have nuclear weapons without a doubt very

soon.²⁷ It is important to point out that in this early stage of building Iran's nuclear capability Israel was not the target. Rather, the Pahlavi regime wanted to deter regional powers such as Egypt and Iraq.²⁸

In addition to this assistance from the United States, France and Germany contributed to Iran's nuclear program. They signed several agreements with the Shah to provide Iran with enriched uranium, nuclear reactors and research centers.²⁹ A significant step in building Iran's nuclear capability was the signing of an agreement with the two German firms, Siemens and Kraftwerk Union, to build two nuclear reactors in Bushehr, a port city along the Persian Gulf. Construction of these reactors, which were 80 and 65-70 percent complete, was frozen by Ayatollah Khomeini immediately after the 1979 revolution.³⁰ The Iranian leader considered nuclear weapons (as well as CW and biological weapons) immoral and decided not to seek them. In 1985, Iran decided to restart its nuclear program in an attempt to balance the growing Iraqi non-conventional capabilities. The search for uranium was stepped up and Tehran began offering incentives for exiled Iranian nuclear scientists to return home. Little wonder, Bushehr became a major target for Iraqi raids. The reactors were substantially damaged by Iraqi bombardments.

The United States believes that, despite strong denial, Iran is pursuing efforts to build nuclear weapons.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war Tehran sought to revive its nuclear program and finish the construction of the Bushehr reactors. The opening of Iran's first nuclear engineering center in 1992 can be seen as a sign of these renewed efforts to obtain nuclear knowledge.³¹ Under American pressure German firms refused to resume work on the projects. Iran sought assistance from many other sources including China, India, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. The threat of U.S. sanctions, however, blocked the participation of these potential partners in Iran's nuclear program.³² Finally, in early January 1995, Iran signed a \$800 million deal with Russia to complete the first of the two units at Bushehr. In response to U.S. pressure, Russia later negotiated with Iran a separate agreement stipulating that all spent fuel from the Bushehr reactors would be shipped back to Russia.

The United States believes that, despite strong denial, Iran is pursuing efforts to build nuclear weapons. In June 2003, President Bush bluntly stated that the United States and its allies "will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon in Iran."³³ American officials believe that there is no economic justification for a state that is so rich in oil and gas, like Iran, to build these hugely expensive nuclear fuel cycle facilities. The Iranians respond by confirming that they are interested in nuclear power for peaceful purposes and that it will help free up oil and gas resources for export, thus generating additional hard-currency revenues.³⁴ Furthermore, Iran does not want to fall behind in nuclear industry with its wide ranging applications and that Iranian technicians need to familiarize themselves with this technology. Finally, Iran maintains that as a party to the NPT it has a right to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

In order to ensure that Iran is not trying to develop nuclear weapons and is in compliance with the NPT, the United States, the EU, Russia, and the IAEA have demanded that Iran sign the IAEA Model Safeguards Protocol.³⁵ This document was devised after the discovery of Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons program and contains measures designed to permit IAEA inspection of undeclared nuclear sites as well as the declared sites that are already the subject of the basic IAEA inspection regime.

The debate concerning Iran's nuclear program was intensified in the summer of 2003 with the revelations that traces of bomb-grade uranium had been found at two facilities in Iran. The amount of plutonium at issue is in micrograms-nowhere near what is needed for a warhead. But experts and diplomats said the key point was that the Iranians were developing the techniques to extract much more plutonium.³⁶ In an attempt to defuse the crisis the Europeans applied a "carrot and stick" diplomacy with Iran. In August 2003 the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany sent a letter to Iran urging it to adopt the Safeguards Protocol and to halt its uranium enrichment program. In return, the letter acknowledged Iran's right to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy and raised the possibility of cooperation on technology, without specifically pledging help with a civilian nuclear energy program.³⁷ In October, the three foreign ministers visited Iran and obtained an official endorsement of their proposal. To underline its new cooperation Tehran informed the IAEA that it was ready to sign the Safeguards Protocol and voluntarily suspended its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities.³⁸

Iran's evolving democracy suggests that "engaging" Iran and explaining to the Iranian public the high costs of nuclear proliferation and the gains of compliance with international norms would be an effective approach to prevent the country from developing nuclear weapons.

Finally, in late November 2003 the Board of Governors of the IAEA adopted a resolution that emphasized that in order to restore confidence, Iranian cooperation and transparency will need to be complete and sustained so that the Agency can resolve outstanding issues and, over time, provide and maintain the assurances required by the member states.³⁹ The resolution added that should any further serious Iranian failures come to light, the Board of Governors would meet immediately to consider all options at its disposal, in accordance with the IAEA Statute and Iran's Safeguards Agreement. The resolution did not accuse Iran of violating its obligations under the NPT and stopped short of referring the issue to the UN Security Council. Originally, the United States had pushed for a tougher resolution that would declare Iran in noncompliance with the NPT and would resort it to the Security Council. In that case, Iran would have faced sanctions. Confronted with strong European objections and seeking to maintain a united Western stand, U.S. officials dropped this

demand but called for a trigger mechanism to warn Iran if guilty of further violations of its nonproliferation obligations. The Iranians praised the British, French and German efforts to reach an agreement on the wording of the resolution and announced their intention to further deepen their cooperation with the EU. Iran also pledged to show complete transparency in its future nuclear program. However, in the early 2004 officials in Britain, France, and Germany have viewed the Iranian transparency and cooperation as less than satisfactory.

CONCLUSION

In November 2003 it seems that the crisis over Iran's nuclear program has been contained, at least temporarily. Several preliminary and tentative conclusions can be drawn from this experience. First, no permanent satisfactory solution to the alleged Iranian nuclear proliferation has been reached yet. The future of Iran's nuclear program and, indeed, the overall Iranian strategic planning will be shaped by at least three factors: A) the type of relationship with the United States, confrontational or cooperative; B) the evolving security environment in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, particularly the political orientation of post-Hussein Iraq; C) the outcome of the vigorous power struggle inside Iran between moderates and hard-liners. Second, unlike North Korea and Saddam Hussein Iraq, the other two members in President Bush's axis of evil, most analysts, including Americans, do not see Iran as a pariah state. A major character of Iranian policy is a quasi democracy with a vibrant debate concerning the country's national security and its foreign relations. This evolving democracy suggests that "engaging" Iran and explaining to the Iranian public the high costs of nuclear proliferation and the gains of compliance with international norms would be an effective approach to prevent the country from developing nuclear weapons.

Third, several prominent Iranian leaders have voiced their concerns that nuclear weapons would undermine rather than enhance the country's national security.⁴⁰ Attempts to develop nuclear weapons would increase the chances of pre-emptive attacks by the United States and Israel; would antagonize Iran's neighbors in the Persian Gulf and push them more into closer security arrangements with the United States; and would trigger economic sanctions by the Europeans and Japanese. These are highly undesirable outcomes. Fourth, this internal debate within Iran concerning the country's nuclear program should be supplemented by external pressure. This external pressure, as the recent developments have demonstrated, should be based on two components—threats and incentives. Iran's pledge to cooperate with the IAEA can be explained by both concerns over economic and diplomatic sanctions and promises of technical and trade assistance. Force by itself would have further complicated the question of nuclear proliferation. At the end, the American threats and European incentives seem to complement each other.

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