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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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The U.S. and Iran After the NIE

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The release of the National Intelligence Estimate regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities, intentions, and policies created shock waves as well as sighs of relief in Washington and elsewhere. The assessment that Iran stopped its weapons program in 2003, and that its declared enrichment program cannot be converted as easily or as quickly as assumed for use in a military program, immediately brought into question the notion that Iran's nuclear program needs to be dealt with immediately and only through coercive mechanisms. Amid a notable amount of "spinning" the NIE's conclusions, a slew of questions are in play regarding if and how the U.S. should alter its hard-edged policies toward the Islamic Republic.

A consensus seems to have developed that the report has taken the military option off the table and made the sanctions process at play in the U.N. Security Council more difficult to pursue effectively. These dynamics gave longstanding proponents of direct and unconditional dialogue with Iran new opportunity to re-state their case.¹ Calls for such negotiations also came from surprising new corners. In the words of Robert Kagan, co-founder of the hawkish Project for the New American Century, "it is hard to see what other policy options are available. This is the hand that has been dealt. The Bush administration needs to be smart and creative enough to play it well."²

The Bush Spin

The call for direct and unconditioned talks was not a lasting one as it became clear that the Bush administration has no intention of changing policy. Instead, it declared

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that the NIE's assessment of Tehran as a rational player operating on a cost-benefit analysis confirms the policy of coercive diplomacy—i.e., escalating Security Council sanctions and financial restrictions by the coalition of the willing against Iran, along with the poison pill offer of talks only on the condition that Iran stop its nuclear enrichment activities first.

In the words of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, “while we must keep all our options open, the United States and the international community must continue—and intensify—our economic, financial, and diplomatic pressures on Iran to suspend enrichment and to agree to verifiable arrangements that can prevent that country from resuming its nuclear weapons program at a moment's notice—at the whim of its most militant leaders.”³

The pretense that nothing has changed is just that: a pretense. The NIE did change everything. In light of the assessment, any reference to Iran as an imminent threat simply reminds everyone of false allegations about Iraq's WMD programs and the disastrous consequences for American foreign policy of those exaggerations. In addition, the mere fact of the military option being taken off the table has effectively killed Bush's Iran policy, since that option was always the Damocles sword relied upon to convince the Europeans and Russians to play the sanctions game.

Having lost this important instrument, the Bush administration's spin of the NIE has ended up being either incoherent or inconsistent. In fact, the attempts at spin draw upon any type of argument that would simply confirm the current policy of isolating Iran. In some cases, they have included a re-calibration of the perceived threat from Tehran, heightening it and describing it in terms that go beyond Iran's nuclear program. Secretary Gates did this by questioning the basic argument made in the NIE about Tehran's rationality in its decision-making process. Ignoring elements of NIE that undermine charges of irrationality on Tehran's part and argues for a “credible” acknowledgment of Iran's desire “to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence,” Gates states, “Everywhere you turn, it is the policy of Iran to foment instability and chaos, no matter the strategic value or the cost in the blood of innocents—Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. There can be little doubt that their destabilizing foreign policies are a threat to the interests of the United States, to the interests of every country in the Middle East, and to the interests of all countries within the range of the ballistic missiles Iran is developing.”

In this sense, it is not Iran's “weapons-related nuclear program,”⁴ that is at the core of concern but Iran's penchant for engaging in activities that are devoid of strategic value, fomenting instability and chaos. It is this tendency that makes Iran dangerous and unpredictable at any given moment, with or without nuclear weapons. And it is this rejection of strategic thinking on the part of Iranian leaders that takes away the need for Gates to give evidential or even logical support to the accusation that are hurled against Tehran even if those accusations—such as fomenting violence against Iran-friendly governments of Iraq and Afghanistan—do not make sense.

This line of argument obviously goes against the grain of Gates' other argument about the NIE confirming the success of international pressure because Tehran's cost-benefit analysis led to abandoning its presumed weapons program in 2003. But in the same speech Gates insists on the continuation of sanctions-oriented policies aimed at isolating Iran that have been tried since 2006 without impact on Iran's behavior (either in stopping uranium enrichment or limiting Iran's presumed penchant for creating instability). Somehow we are expected to believe that the irrational or ideological Iran will respond to failed policies of the past and there is really no need to entertain the possibility of approaching Iran in a different way.

Gates' speech signals that a coherent policy about Iran is neither desired nor possible in this administration. Not having the ability to confront Tehran directly or change its policies through coercive means, the Bush team sees its best option as the status quo policy of trying to keep Iran in limbo economically and politically. This is not because of the belief that the policy will work and Iran will finally “give in.” Even if the current policy

was initiated on that basis, after two years of ineffectiveness and resultant hardening of Iran's stance such an expectation is no longer reasonable. Instead, acting as though the NIE has changed nothing is the best way to sustain policies pursued at the tactical and not strategic level.

Search for Coherence

However, this is not something that Henry Kissinger can do. He understands the impact the 2007 NIE report has had.⁵ Focusing on the enrichment side of the report, he suggests that the report actually confirms the 2003 report that stated with confidence that Iran was actively pursuing nuclear weapons by holding that Iran "may be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon by the end of 2009 and, with increasing confidence, more warheads by the period 2010 to 2015." He then goes on to argue, "If my analysis is correct, we could be witnessing not a halt of the Iranian weapons program—as the NIE asserts—but a subtle, ultimately more dangerous, version of it that will phase in the warhead when fissile material production has matured."

But in strategic terms, even a more dangerous version of Iran should not be the issue. "We do not need to tranquilize ourselves to the danger in order to pursue a more peaceful world," Kissinger argues. "A coherent strategy toward Iran is not a partisan issue" and requires a "specific vision linking assurances for Iran's security and respect for its identity with an Iranian foreign policy compatible with the existing order in the Middle East." But that specific vision must also contemplate an alternative strategy "should Iran, in the end, choose ideology over reconciliation."

The key of course is "the existing order in the Middle East." Left unsaid is the reality that the existing order of the Middle East is still in flux and it is precisely the nature of the U.S.-Iran relationship that will shape that order at least in the near future.

This is because the Iran containment policy that was initiated by the Clinton administration came to an inauspicious end with the American misadventures in Iraq. Tehran, with or without a nuclear program, became an "immediate" challenge to the United States the day cracks were deepened in the wall created around it through various defense alliance and economic prohibitions. Iran was already developing closer relationships with northern neighbors and Turkey but the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq opened borders that made the idea of containing Iran no longer sustainable. The attempted turn from containment to isolation (or roll back), with the implicit and sometimes explicit object of changing the Iranian regime or its nature, has also been declared dead with the publication of the NIE. So it is here that for Kissinger the need for "a specific vision" that attempts to address the nature of the relationship between the United States and Iran becomes paramount.

It is noteworthy that the Iranian leadership, at least its hawkish wing, understands the American strategic predicament as well. Since the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, various Iranian leaders have tried to improve the U.S.-Iran relationship in ways that would reduce American animosity

toward Iran and at the same time allow the Iranian leadership to pursue its political aspirations, which essentially revolve around maintaining the existing Islamic order and enhancing Iran's regional influence.

They have failed repeatedly—for different reasons, but failed nevertheless. Despite disagreement on a number of issues (including Israel's policies toward the Occupied Territories), the Iranian leadership does see Iran as having many shared interests with the United States and, as it showed in the case of Afghanistan and even to some extent in Iraq, is ready to act on those interests in ways that are helpful to the United States as well. But Iran's raucous and contentious domestic politics and, more importantly, the independence-oriented aspirations of its popular revolution simply do not allow a realignment of Iranian foreign policy along the lines dictated by the interests of the United States alone.

Instead, banking on American misadventures in the region, Iran's leaders are once again trying to refashion Iran's relationship with the U.S. to include, in the words of Kissinger, "assurances for Iran's security and respect for its identity." In recent months, it has even raised the stakes for the U.S. through its increasingly close relationship with Russia, a country with which Iran has had a troubled and ambivalent history because of Russia's untrustworthiness and geographical proximity. The Russia card is in fact something that Iran has tried to play here and there over many years to reshape its relationship with various Western powers, and it remains potent given Russia's geopolitical resurgence.

Today, Tehran is possibly stirring a return of strategic thinking to American foreign policy, even if the lethargic Bush administration is unlikely to take up the challenge. But the reduction of the Iran question to "the bomb" and "chaos" misses the basic question that is implicit in the NIE report, and that which Bush's successor has to face regarding Iran: If the regionally ascendant Islamic Iran, with or without an actual bomb, is here to stay, would U.S. interests in the region be better served through a friendlier, even if not trouble-free relationship with it, or further antagonism that pushes Iran to act as a spoiler in the region and look for tactical and strategic alliances to the East to counter the American belligerence?

article footnotes

1 Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "How to Defuse Iran?" *The New York Times*, 11 December 2007. Also see Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh, "The Costs of Containing Iran." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008.

2 Robert Kagan, "Time to Talk to Iran." *Washington Post*, 5 December 2007.

3 Robert Gates, "Manama Dialogue." <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1201>.

4 This is an interesting shift of language that is used by Matthias Küntzel that reiterates the military objectives of Iran's enrichment program. Matthias Küntzel "What 'International Pressure'? The Fantasy World of Iran NIE." *World Politics Review*, 18 December 2007.

5 Henry Kissinger, "Misreading the Iran Report." *Washington Post*, 13 December 2007.



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