



PolicyWatch 1972

New U.S. Tone on Iran

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August 16, 2012

U.S. statements about Iran have become more consistent and tough since early March, but the impact of this shift remains unclear.

Earlier this week, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Joint Chiefs chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey continued a months-long pattern of tougher U.S. statements about Iran. To be sure, both were still uncomfortable about the prospect of an Israeli strike when addressing reporters on August 14 -- Dempsey noted that such a move would only "delay, not destroy, Iran's nuclear capabilities," while Panetta stated "there is room to continue to negotiate." Yet neither repeated their pre-March warnings about the potential negative consequences of an attack. In fact, Panetta emphasized that it is up to Israel to decide whether or not to strike.

SHIFT SINCE MARCH

Until early March, U.S. officials speaking about Iran tended to include warnings about the risks of resorting to force. On February 5, President Obama stated, "Any kind of additional military activity inside the Gulf is disruptive and has a big effect on us. It could have a big effect on oil prices. We've still got troops in Afghanistan, which borders Iran." Three days earlier, Dempsey had argued that "a conflict with Iran would be really destabilizing, and I'm not just talking from the security perspective. It would be economically destabilizing...I personally believe that we should be in the business of deterring as the first priority." Most striking was Panetta's December 2 warning: "At best [a military attack] might postpone [Iran from getting a bomb] maybe one, possibly two years...Of greater concern to me are the unintended consequences." In his view, these consequences included increasing the risk of "retaliation from Iran," allowing an isolated regime "to suddenly reestablish itself," ushering in "severe economic consequences," and sparking "an escalation that could consume the Middle East in a confrontation."

Another longstanding theme was the notion that diplomacy was the sole option at the moment, with no indication of what could cause that to change. For instance, when asked

on March 1 whether there were any red lines that Iran must not cross, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton replied, "It's probably smarter for us to be pressing on the sanctions and the negotiations."

Yet this message shifted following Obama's March 4 speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's annual conference, delivered a few days after his telling interview with the *Atlantic*. Since then, three themes from his remarks have shown up repeatedly in statements by top U.S. officials:

1. U.S. policy is prevention, not containment.
2. Israel has the right to do what it thinks is essential.
3. The time for diplomacy is limited.

Yet none of these themes appeared in official statements prior to March. Even more striking is that another theme has disappeared: no senior officials, not even on background, appear to have repeated the earlier warnings about the risks of striking Iran.

On March 25, Obama told reporters, "I believe there is a window of time to solve this diplomatically, but that window is closing." He repeated that theme in a prepared speech the next day at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul: "There is time to solve this diplomatically. It is always my preference to solve these issues diplomatically. But time is short." On May 8, Vice President Biden used an even tougher formulation: "The window has not closed in terms of the ability of the Israelis if they choose on their own to act militarily...But diplomacy backed by serious, serious sanctions and pressure -- on that score the window is closing in the near term."

Panetta has also struck a different chord since March. Although he has continued to urge caution about using force, he no longer dwells on the many risks. Instead, he now cites the reasons why force may be necessary: "This is about making very clear that they are never going to be able to get an atomic weapon...We have options that we are prepared to implement to ensure that that does not happen." He has also gone out of his way to avoid criticizing bellicose Israeli statements, as in his July 30 response to questions about Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's harsh words on Iran: "We respect [Israel's] sovereignty and their ability to make decisions with regard to their own security." Moreover, his statements have become remarkably uniform, using roughly the same wording on July 30, August 1, and August 14.

Meanwhile, top media outlets no longer focus on the U.S. military leadership's opposition to preemption, instead reporting on preparations for a potential conflict. The U.S. Navy has stepped up its activities in the Persian Gulf of late, maintaining a near-continuous presence with two aircraft carrier battle groups and making additional preparations for Iranian naval guerrilla war. It would have been only natural for military officers speaking about such activity to add warnings about why a war is undesirable, but their remarks have instead focused on how the Navy must be ready for conflict if it comes. Adding to the tougher tone has been the widely cited *New York Times* and *Washington Post* reporting about U.S. sponsorship (with considerable direct presidential involvement) of the Stuxnet and Flame cyber attacks on Iran.

IMPACT OF THE NEW TONE

Unfortunately, there is little evidence that tougher U.S. statements have had much impact

on Iran's willingness to compromise on its nuclear program. Part of the problem may be the perception that U.S. statements do not necessarily lead to action. The past several U.S. presidents have been quick to describe certain scenarios as "unacceptable," only to do little about them when they came to pass. Given Washington's reactions to nuclear tests by North Korea, Pakistan, and India, Iranian leaders may well believe that harsh U.S. rhetoric about prevention and closing diplomatic windows does not reflect what the United States will actually do.

Nor is it clear how much U.S. statements have influenced the Israeli debate about unilateral preemption. A key consideration in that debate is how much weight Israel should give to Washington's security assurances. U.S. policymakers often fail to appreciate how deeply Israelis mistrust the notion of relying on foreign security guarantees. A formative experience for Israeli security doctrine came at a time of great need in June 1967, when President Lyndon Johnson refused to honor his predecessor's explicit, written pledge guaranteeing security of navigation through the Straits of Tiran -- a firm promise that had been central to Israel's agreement to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in 1957. That episode reinforced the state's founding principle: that the Jewish people can never rely on others to protect them. For many Israelis, this principle is the single most important guide to foreign policy.

Washington's shift in tone does appear to have affected U.S. domestic politics, however -- for the most part, Democrats and Republicans no longer show much difference when it comes to Iran policy. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney's July 29 Jerusalem speech essentially repeated Obama's toughest themes on the subject. And on August 9, the Senate and House gave near-unanimous approval to the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act, the latest law aimed at toughening sanctions on Tehran (the handful of nay votes in the House came from the two political extremes, including libertarian Ron Paul and far-leftist Dennis Kucinich).

Despite that near-consensus at home, it is difficult to send a tough message abroad during an election campaign, when a certain skepticism is warranted about whether presidential statements are aimed at the home audience rather than accurately reflecting what policy will be after the election. One way to address this problem is for the administration to ask its nervous allies (Israel and the Gulf monarchies) what U.S. steps would best allay their concerns about Washington following through. Policymakers should also remain disciplined about staying on message -- nine tough statements plus one off-the-cuff equivocation equals an ambiguous policy, not a "90 percent tough" one. That said, perhaps the most productive approach until November is for Washington to concentrate on steps that can slow Iran's nuclear progress, be it through unacknowledged actions or vigorous sanctions enforcement.

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