Year of Decision: U.S. Policy toward Iran in 2013

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Brief Analysis

On February 7, 2013, James F. Jeffrey and Thomas Pickering addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ambassador Jeffrey, a former assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor, is author of the new Institute study Moving to Decision: U.S. Policy toward Iran **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-to-decision-u.s.-policy-toward-iran)** *. Ambassador Pickering served in numerous key posts at home and abroad over a five-decade career, including undersecretary of state for political affairs. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

JAMES F. JEFFREY

The move to decision on Iran is the most pressing and dangerous issue on the U.S. and international agenda in 2013. The year ahead will largely define the longstanding struggle between Washington and Tehran, and the considerable stakes involved make it absolutely crucial that a swift and decisive resolution be achieved. Regardless of the outcome of the nuclear issue, however, Iran will continue to present a long-term challenge to the United States because of clashing ideologies, conflicting foreign policy goals, and Iran's claim to regional hegemony.

There are four likely outcomes to the nuclear issue: a unilateral Iranian decision to halt or dramatically slow its progress toward a nuclear weapon; a negotiated outcome, whether through the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) or bilateral negotiations; a military strike, as threatened by President Obama and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu; and an explicit or implicit shift to containment, indicating that Washington would be prepared to coexist with a nuclear-armed Iran.

The most effective resolution would be a negotiated outcome -- to achieve it, Washington will need to take preliminary steps on several fronts. A serious compromise needs to be put on the table, including an offer to suspend crippling oil sanctions in return for specific, verifiable Iranian steps to eliminate any nuclear breakout capabilities. Equally significant is establishing a credible military threat, given that Tehran has been willing to endure increasing economic pressure in order to continue its nuclear program. The regime is unlikely to concede anything during negotiations if it does not believe that Washington will actually follow through on such threats.

Although specific public redlines are often unpalatable, the Obama administration must clarify internally when it would take military steps, and these intentions must be made clear to the Iranians.

In the same vein, the military option requires a credible negotiating complement, as seen in the early 1990s with Iraq. To legitimize military action against Saddam Hussein's regime, Washington had to prove that all other options had been exhausted. Similarly, the only way to set the predicate for military action against Iran is to show the regime and the international community that everything has been tried, and that Washington has left Tehran with a way out. Failure to do so would undermine the legitimacy of any strikes.

It is also important to understand that curtailing Iran's nuclear progress will not by itself alter the regime's regional agenda -- nuclear ambitions are but an extension of Tehran's wider aspirations toward hegemony in the Middle East. Unfortunately, none of the longer-term proposals for addressing that issue seem feasible at the moment (e.g., regime change by internal or external means; a shift in Tehran's views on the Supreme Leader and succession; a "grand deal" between Washington, Iran, and the international community).

One lesson to be learned from past interactions with Tehran (or lack thereof) is that when the United States proactively opposes Iranian aggression in the Middle East, the regime relents, but when Washington offers a more passive response, Iranian aggression increases. With respect to Syria, for example, it cannot be assumed that Bashar al-Assad will fall at all, let alone quickly, without active U.S. engagement. If the Assad regime does in fact survive, Iran would become increasingly emboldened, with potentially disastrous consequences for the United States and its allies and interests in the Middle East.

Denuding U.S. forces in the region to enable a pivot to Asia is also risky. Nowhere else in the world is America more likely to deploy forces than in the Persian Gulf in opposition to Iran, and nowhere else is it of utmost importance that any potential confrontation be won decisively in the next five to ten years than with the Islamic Republic.

Going forward, Washington must discriminate between Iranian behaviors it considers unacceptable -- such as support for terrorism, hegemonic ambitions, and progress toward nuclear weapons -- and those it can tolerate. U.S. officials could open the door for negotiations by making clear to Tehran that they do not seek regime change; the first step in that regard would be to let Iran know that Washington respects it as a nation-state and not a transnational revolutionary movement.

Finally, disorganization within the U.S. government and a "go it alone" mentality have accounted for many of Washington's internal difficulties in responding to the Iranian challenge. To alleviate this problem, all cabinet-level officials must be in constant and complete coordination, devoid of routine bureaucratic obstacles. In addition, the appointment of a senior subcabinet official whose sole responsibility is Iran (or, alternatively, a small group of officials in constant coordination) could allow the administration to reorganize bureaucratically in preparation for this year of decision.

THOMAS PICKERING

Discussions of containment policy typically imply accepting the Islamic Republic as an inevitable nuclear power and using deterrence to deal with a nuclear-armed Iran. Yet such an outcome would be disastrous for U.S. nonproliferation policy, which is based on the notion that fewer nuclear states means less chance of miscalculated use. If Iran attains a nuclear weapon, other regional powers would likely follow suit -- clearly an undesirable outcome for the international community.

At the other end of the spectrum, using military means in the short term to guarantee prevention would entail a vast use of force -- essentially an unofficial, semipermanent occupation of Iran. This is not a viable path, particularly since other diplomatic possibilities have not yet been exhausted.

Similarly, sanctions, while effective, are not sufficient by themselves. They must be intertwined with negotiations -- as Washington and its allies increase the pressure, cohesive and meaningful talks with equivalent concessions should follow suit. Some have argued that negotiations should expand to a "big for big" format, but decades of mistrust between the United States and Iran make smaller deals more practical. Such an approach would have to focus on ending Iran's most problematic enrichment activity: processing uranium to the 20 percent threshold, which makes the leap to weapons-grade material much easier. Instead, the regime could limit itself to 5 percent enrichment, and under strict supervision by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The intelligence community widely believes that although Iran has not yet decided to make a nuclear weapon, it is still moving to acquire all the necessary capabilities in case it chooses that path. Accordingly, Washington will need to obtain a concrete Iranian commitment to convert its stocks of readily upgradeable gaseous uranium into metallic fuel elements, which pose significantly less of a threat. A serious inspection system would need to be implemented in order to monitor these requirements. In return, the Iranians would expect the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions. They would also likely ask for acknowledgement that they have the right to continue their civil enrichment program, whether for supposed use in cancer treatment or to safeguard against a potential Russian decision to cease fueling the Bushehr reactor.

Thus far, President Obama has been frustrated at the lack of progress in response to his openness toward the Iranian regime, and his new cabinet has an obligation to help him solidify a negotiating position that improves the situation. If the Iranians continue to reject U.S. positions that seemingly respond to some of their demands, then the administration should begin applying other pressures. These steps should be taken sooner rather than later so that the parties can move toward a mutually acceptable conclusion.

Washington must also keep in mind that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has the last word on all matters in Iran, and that negotiations will go only as far as he allows them to go. In years past, he issued a fatwa condemning nuclear weapons -- Washington could take advantage of this fact by drafting a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the fatwa. This could be a small step toward boosting Khamenei's international profile while simultaneously pressuring Iran to follow its own religious decree.

To be sure, regime change remains an attractive alternative on paper, and some in Washington view it as an insurance policy. Historically, however, regime change has not been a successful option for the United States, and internal attempts at toppling Iran's leadership have thus far been crushed by Stalinesque suppression, including the 2009 uprising. Despite such failures and Washington's limited influence in Iranian domestic affairs, U.S. policy should be to demonstratively support popular democratic movements.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Guive Rosen. ❖

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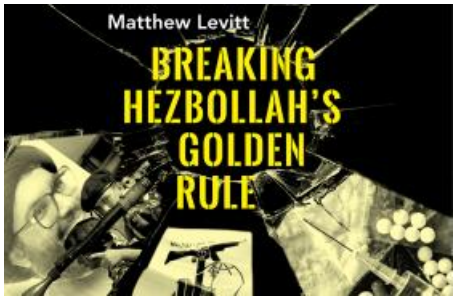

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