

The European View on Iran: Fallout from the New U.S. Intelligence Estimate

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Brief Analysis

On December 13, 2007, Neil Crompton, Hans-Peter Hinrichsen, and Nicholas Roche addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Crompton is a political counselor at the British embassy who served until recently as Iran coordinator and head of the Iraq Policy Unit at the British Foreign Office. Dr. Hinrichsen, first secretary for political affairs at the German embassy, has long worked on non-proliferation issues. Mr. Roche is a counselor at the French embassy who has focused extensively on the Iranian nonproliferation file. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

NEIL CROMPTON

Much of the reporting in the United States about the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) has been misleading. The European and international concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions has never been about weaponization, but rather the other elements essential to having nuclear weapons, namely uranium enrichment and missiles. Iran is actively pursuing enrichment, which is the most complicated and time-consuming part of the nuclear program. Also, it proudly displays missiles that are too inaccurate to be useful with conventional warheads.

International concern over Iran's nuclear program is also not based on highly sensitive intelligence material. The concern reflects the activities surrounding the declared program, the fact that Iran concealed that program for eighteen years, and that Iran has not resolved significant questions about its past activities.

There has been some speculation that the NIE will weaken pressure for sanctions. Actually, the NIE could have the opposite effect. There has been much concern in Europe that sanctions will inevitably lead to military action. However, now that the prospects of a military strike have been reduced, there might be more willingness in some countries to pursue more sanctions.

The international consensus that comes from the unity of the Security Council remains a powerful point of pressure on Iran. At the same time as pursuing action at the UN, European countries are actively considering how to step up European Union pressure on Iran. Europe has already gone farther than required by the Security Council: the EU has sanctioned twenty-four entities not named by UN Resolutions 1737 and 1747, and has prohibited some transactions that are not delineated on either resolution. More of this type of action will be taking place in the future.

Reading the political straws in Tehran is a complicated business but in the last few weeks, there has been some sign of discomfort. There has been public and private debate about the direction of the regime, and there seems to be a real nervousness about the sanctions' impact on business. Although some of this debate has diminished because of regime crackdowns, there is still a window of opportunity before the March parliamentary elections.

The challenge is to encourage and exacerbate that debate. The international community needs to raise the stakes through UN and European sanctions and also clarify the significant political and economical benefits of the carrots being offered. The heart of the current international approach is the calculation that the Iranian system as a whole is receptive to a cost-benefit rational -- which is precisely what the NIE found.

HANS-PETER HINRICHSEN

The NIE has not had a significant impact on Germany's policy towards Iran. German policy has never been based on Iran's hidden nuclear program, but on its large enrichment program and the heavy water reactor it is building. That reactor has no civilian use, and it is very instructive to look around the world to see who has such reactors and what have they have done with them.

Considering Iranian behavior is one of the crucial factors when judging whether Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for civilian purposes. Ahmadinezhad's aggressive rhetoric towards Israel gives the international community basis to be concerned about whether Iran's intentions are peaceful -- a test set out by the UN Security Council resolutions.

There is a misconception that there is not enough communication with the Iranians, and a related misconception that the United States is not involved in discussions with the Iranians. In fact, Javier Solana has met repeatedly with the Iranians. He is inaccurately described in the American media as speaking for the Europeans. In fact, he is talking with Iran on behalf of the EU 3 + 3, that is, the United States, Russia, and China, plus Britain, France and Germany. He speaks for all six countries.

The UN sanctions are reflective of world unity on this issue and a clear message needs to be sent to Tehran through another round of sanctions. The EU will take measures to reinforce and complement the UN sanctions so that they can be more effective, and will take care to ensure that its actions do not substitute for or undermine the sanctions.

Sanctions on Iran have so far proven effective. They have induced Tehran to answer some of the open questions with the International Atomic Energy Agency because the sanctions have made business life difficult in Iran. For example, German exports to Iran dropped 7 percent in 2006 and 16 percent in 2007.

NICHOLAS ROCHE

The NIE has made more noise in Washington than in Europe. France's strategy has always been based on certain simple facts, not intelligence judgments.

First, the Iranians have possessed a clandestine nuclear program for eighteen years, procuring technology from the A.Q. Khan network, which is not known for its expertise in electricity production. Second, the Iranians have developed an enrichment program with no foreseeable civilian use. It is worth emphasizing that the Iranians have not mastered the technology for producing fuel rods. Russia, which will provide the fuel for the Bushehr power reactor, will not under any circumstances provide Iran with the information it would need for Iran's fuel to be used in that reactor. This begs the questions, why is Iran enriching uranium, and what will it do with the material?

The appropriate course now is to continue the sanctions and to finalize a third UN resolution. Although at some point it may become necessary to reconsider this strategy, France does not see any particular "red line" that would force a change in approach. That said, there is always room for maneuvering on the current policy, such as on the modalities of negotiation.

Enrichment suspension is the key element to regain confidence in Iran's peaceful intentions. There cannot be negotiations while Iran continues to advance its nuclear program. Without suspension, the ongoing Iranian program would give Iran the capability to build nuclear weapons very quickly.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Hiva Feizi. ❖

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