

The Can't-Win Kids

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Dec 12, 2007

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The National Intelligence Estimate on Iran presents an interesting paradox: Though almost certainly the product of rigorous assessment and questioning, it may actually leave us less secure over time. How can such an improved product of spycraft have such a negative effect? It can when it frames the issue mistakenly and is not combined with statecraft.

I don't question the assumptions or analysis in the NIE, or for that matter, its main conclusion. I accept that the Iranians suspended their covert nuclear weapons program in 2003. But I am afraid that misses the point.

Weaponizing is not the issue, developing fissionable materials is. Because compared with producing fissionable material, which makes up the core of nuclear bombs, weaponizing it is neither particularly difficult nor expensive.

In other words, the hard part of becoming a nuclear power is enriching uranium or separating out plutonium. And guess what? Iran is going full-speed ahead on both. With over 3,300 operating centrifuges for spinning uranium gases at its facility at Natanz (and more centrifuges on the way) and the building of a heavy water plant for plutonium separation at Arak, the Iranians will be able to master both by 2010 at the latest.

Perhaps that's why, in 2005, former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani told a visiting group of American experts, including George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment, that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons research.

According to Perkovich, Rafsanjani said: "Look, as long as we can enrich uranium and master the fuel cycle, we don't need anything else. Our neighbors will be able to draw the proper conclusions."

Maybe, as Rafsanjani was suggesting, the Iranians will be satisfied only to foster the appearance of having nuclear weapons without actually producing them; for Rafsanjani, so long as Iran's neighbors assume it has nuclear weapons, they'll become responsive to Iran's wishes. But can we count on Iran's maintaining such a posture indefinitely? And even if we could, what would the Middle East look like if Iran gained far greater coercive leverage over all its neighbors? Wouldn't oil production policies be used to separate us from our allies or further manipulate the world's economy? Wouldn't we face a region increasingly hostile to our interests? Wouldn't we see the prospect of Arab-Israeli peace diminish as Iran worked to weaken, isolate, and demoralize the Jewish state? And to avoid being at the mercy of Iran, wouldn't the Saudis decide to go nuclear -- and wouldn't that impel the Egyptians to do the same?

The point is that even the image of Iran as a nuclear power carries with it very dangerous consequences, including that the Middle East might become a nuclear-armed region. It is not an accident that the British, the French, and the Germans have sought to get the Iranians to stop their nuclear program. Similarly, it is not an accident that two U.N. Security Council resolutions have imposed limited sanctions on Iran to get it to stop its enrichment efforts.

Consider the irony that the sanctions resolutions adopted by the Security Council were not about Iran's covert nuclear arms program. The Russians, among others, have not believed that the Iranians had one. Instead, the international community in these resolutions was making it clear that it saw Iran's enrichment program -- and its rejection of offers of light water reactors for purely civil nuclear purposes -- as indicators that Iran intended to develop a nuclear weapons capability at some point.

While nothing theoretically has changed, the NIE has created a new story line. It framed the issue differently and shifted the attention away from enrichment to the weapons program. Well, if the weapons program has been halted, can't we relax? Certainly, that is the conclusion that the Chinese are drawing, given their mercantilist approach to Iran and foreign policy in general. They are now saying there is not a need for another sanctions resolution against Iran. The Russians, too, are joining them, no doubt reflecting, at least in part, Putin's desire to demonstrate in the Middle East and on the international stage that Russia is an alternative to America.

If nothing else, this means that it will be far harder to get an additional sanctions resolution in the UN any time soon. We could always seek to go outside the Security Council for sanctions. The European Union, Japan, and South Korea are all attractive options since they're far more important to Iran's economic well-being. But here again, the NIE has made that harder. None of the countries in Europe or Asia can appear to be tougher toward Iran than the United States, particularly given the highly negative perceptions of the Bush administration in these places. It matters little that President Bush is still urging pressure on Iran -- his intelligence agencies have created the impression that Iran is not a near-term threat.

Once again, one sees irony. The subtext of the NIE is that the Iranian leadership makes its decisions on a "cost-benefit approach" -- and that the nuclear weapons program "probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure." But the way the NIE has framed the issue, it will now be harder to apply the very pressure it concludes worked in 2003.

One can criticize the intelligence community for framing the NIE around the wrong issue, but the intelligence community was not responsible for the public roll-out of its estimate. President Bush and those around him made the decision to publicize it -- after all, NIEs are not typically publicized. No doubt, the president and his advisors understood that once the NIE was briefed to the congressional oversight committees on the Hill that its findings would leak, and they wanted to get out in front of the leaks.

Fair enough. Unfortunately, their presentation was not only poor in terms of framing, but also because it blindsided our allies. The British, French, and Germans have led the diplomatic efforts at the U.N. and in the E.U. on Iran; it was important for them not to be exposed on this issue since each country's population holds such grave doubts about anything the Bush Administration portrays as threat. How could we not go to them in advance of the release of the NIE, explain the key judgments, and work out a common public approach? Had there been such coordination on the public message, it is hard to believe that the public presentation of the findings would not have been better presented -- leaving all of us better positioned today.

Sadly, it's now easier for Iran to proceed unimpeded with its nuclear plans. It is far less likely to face the economic (or potentially military) pressures that in 2003 might have persuaded those in the Iranian leadership that the costs of developing their nuclear capabilities were too high. Who in the Iranian elite will argue that or oppose Ahmadinejad's approach to nukes now? No doubt, that is not what the authors of the NIE sought, but here poor statecraft has

trumped our improved efforts at spycraft.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270>).

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