

Contending with Iran's Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities

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Articles & Testimony

This week, the U.S. intelligence community released to Capitol Hill the unclassified key judgments of its latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran's nuclear intentions and capabilities. The new estimate opens with the startling judgment that Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003, which is sure to dominate the discourse to follow. It shouldn't.

The estimate's more significant conclusion is that the most likely tool to successfully alter Iran's nuclear calculus is targeted political and economic pressure, not military action.

According to the estimate, Iran's decision to halt its nuclear weapons program in 2003 was "in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran's previously undeclared nuclear work." (Though it provides no more detail about this scrutiny and pressure, it was around this time that the United States and other governments exposed the A.Q. Kahn network and its international nuclear weapons material black market). The key judgments conclude that the intelligence community's "assessment that the [nuclear weapons] program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue that we judged previously."

The declassification of these key judgments suggests the Bush administration intends to pursue non-military tools. Some might say that the NIE shows that sanctions are not needed. That is hardly the case; the U.N. Security Council and IAEA concern has always been about Iran's enrichment facilities, not about a weaponization program. In fact, what the NIE shows is that carrots and sticks work. The estimate concludes Iran might be convinced to extend the halt to its nuclear weapons program with "some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways."

The declassified key judgments are sure to spark fierce debate over the nature of the nuclear threat posed by Iran. But on the pressing issue of how to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions the intelligence assessment is clear: financial and political sanctions can be effective.

Evidence suggests Iran is indeed vulnerable to outside influence and, unlike the blanket sanctions applied against Iraq under Saddam Hussein, today's sanctions are both targeted and graduated. First, the sanctions are aimed only at those regime elements specifically engaged in illicit conduct (such as banks engaged in deceptive financial practices, nuclear proliferation front companies, the Revolutionary Guards and Qods Force). Second, they are applied in phases in order to demonstrate that their purpose is not simply to punish Iran but to encourage a change in behavior. Should that behavior not change, additional targeted and graduated sanctions must be implemented for the threat of sanctions to remain credible.

It is perhaps ironic that the new NIE was released on the same day that European and American diplomats announced in Paris that China now supports further international sanctions targeting Iran. In the wake of disappointing reports from both the IAEA and European Union on Iran's nuclear program, China's support for targeted measures focused on Iranian banks, as well as travel restrictions on key individuals, means a third U.N. Security Council resolution is possible before the new year.

Until recently, China maintained it preferred diplomacy over sanctions. But in fact sanctions do not undermine diplomacy, they create leverage for diplomacy. With China now indicating support for multilateral sanctions, there is good reason to hope that smart sanctions may yet create diplomatic leverage.

Iran poses a proliferation threat whether it maintains an active nuclear weapons program or merely produces fissile material in a civilian program that could be quickly weaponized at a later date. Should financial and political pressure fail to create sufficient diplomatic leverage, policymakers could eventually be left with the unenviable task of deciding between using military force or tolerating a nuclear Iran. That possibility should give us all pause. The assessment that non-military pressure may yet prevail should give us hope.

Matthew Levitt, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for intelligence and analysis, directs the [Stein Program on Terrorism, Intelligence and Policy](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Terrorism%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3F3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Terrorism%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3F3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPrograms>) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of [Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265>) (Yale, 2006). ❖

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