

Conference Reports

U.S. Policy toward Iran

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Vital and Forbidding Challenges

On May 11, 2006, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs R. Nicholas Burns delivered the Michael Stein Address on U.S. Middle East Policy at The Washington Institute's annual Soref Symposium. Following is a full transcript of his remarks.

I want to present to you some thoughts about the way we should look at modern Iran, the threat it poses to the United States, what we can do as Americans to confront that threat, and what your government is doing and should be doing along those lines. And I want to leave plenty of time for a discussion, because I always find, and I am sure you find, that the best part of an evening like this is the interplay of discussion, and I welcome that very much.

First a point about the administration of President Bush and Vice President Cheney and the work of Secretary Rice as we confront the world. I served with Ambassador Dennis Ross for many, many years. Both of us served in the Reagan administration. When I was serving in Jerusalem as the American consulate general, I had a lot to do with Dennis, who used to come to visit. And we served together in the administration of President George H. W. Bush, and also in President Clinton's administration.

And it is striking to me to reflect back on those days and what concerned American policymakers and where issues ranked on the agenda versus today. I spent the last eight years -- before coming back a year ago to take this job -- in Europe as ambassador to NATO, and before then, ambassador to Greece. And I thought the world after those eight years was all about Europe. And I came back to Washington. And I saw an administration, and I think a city, and a Congress, focused in a very different direction as we looked around the world.

Europe is important and is always going to be important, indeed vital to the United States, because that is where so many of our allies are, in NATO and in the European Union. But if you think about it this way, if you ten years ago today would have asked Warren Christopher, then our secretary of state, his day would have been filled with appointments with Europeans. And his agenda was focused on the end of the Cold War, of course, and the wars in the Balkans, our successful intervention in Bosnia a few months before that time, and, looking ahead, the incipient crisis in Kosovo.

And if you fast forward from ten years ago to today, you look at Secretary Condoleezza Rice's schedule, it is filled with appointments and issues and individuals that are all about the greater Middle East. Because American national interests now are focused on that region, because that is where our interests are at stake. And that is where the truly vital and forbidding challenges are to American security.

You think about the agenda we have in the greater Middle East that President Bush has articulated over the last five years. We have the war in Iraq and the aftermath of that war, and our attempt, and our mission, which is to support the Iraqi government, particularly this new Iraqi government, that is just now taking office, to help it stand up, to help it represent itself in the world, to deal with the security challenges at home, to ask our friends in the Arab world to support this government financially and politically, and to [tell] our friends all around the world -- and I see a fair number of diplomats from European countries and South Asian countries here -- it is now time to stand up and support that Iraqi government. And as the president has made abundantly clear, we are going to stay in Iraq, and we are going to complete the job that he has asked us to do, and that we all know we have to do to defend American interests in that part of the world.

Add to that the fact that we have a major obligation to continue to be the best possible friend we can be to the state of Israel, and to help Israel negotiate now with a very difficult partner in the Palestinian Authority, and to help to make sure that the United States is doing what it has to do to support the Palestinian people through the provision of humanitarian and economic aid but not through Hamas, and not to do it in such a way that in any way, shape, or form could build up Hamas. And that is an important obligation that Secretary Rice was working on just this week in New York when she met with her Quartet partners at the Security Council.

And if you think about our broader objectives, we have a generational challenge, and that is to help plant the seeds of democracy and of reform and of human rights throughout the Arab world and throughout the Middle East. None of us are filled with illusions that that job is easy. In fact, it is quite difficult. But all of us understand that as Americans, we have to represent our core beliefs in our foreign policy, and one must do that not just in select

parts of the world, like Europe, but in parts of the world where those beliefs are often under challenge. But because we know they are right and correct, we have that obligation and we have that historic opportunity to try to represent democracy and freedom and human rights on a regional basis. And that is what President Bush said in his second inaugural address, and that is what he has given us a charge to do.

I also just wanted to say because we have the deputy chief of mission, Ambassador Jassal of India here, we have new strategic opportunities in the world looking a little bit further east. And I think one of the largest and most important strategic objectives of the president's foreign policy is to seek this new strategic partnership with India. The president was there six weeks ago. He has articulated a vision of a global partnership between our two countries. We have put in a very important civil nuclear agreement before the Congress, and Ambassador Jassal and I have spent a lot of our personal time in the last six weeks looking at that issue and urging the Congress to approve this. But we have a major opportunity for the United States to reinforce our strategic position in South Asia through our new partnership with India, and of course through our continuing friendship and support for Pakistan as it wages its very difficult war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

I could go on and talk about all that we are doing in East Asia, which of course is fundamentally vital to our interests -- the newfound American interest as a national security concern in looking at Africa, the problems of Darfur, for example. But I just wanted to say at the beginning of this, we look at the problem of Iran and the challenge of Iran through a different prism in American foreign policy, a focus that is very much centered on the part of the world where our ally and friend, Israel, and our friends and partners, Egypt and Saudi Arabia and other countries, live. And it's important I think to draw this larger framework around that regional policy. Right now there is no greater challenge to the United States than to confront this unique threat from the Iranian government, and particularly from the new and radical regime of President Ahmadinezhad.

We think of it in three ways. There is the challenge that Iran is developing, without any question, a nuclear weapons capability that if it succeeds in that venture will be a direct challenge to all of what we are talking about that we need to accomplish in the Middle East, to our security and the security of our friends and allies in the greater Middle East region.

There is the challenge of terrorism, and a lot of us who have served in the U.S. government since the late '70s and early '80s remember that it was Iran that unleashed this wave of terrorism against the United States beginning in the early 1980s in Lebanon. And it has not ceased since; Iran continues to be the central banker of many of the major terrorist groups that are directly confronting our country, our soldiers, our diplomats, and our citizens, as well as Israel, Lebanon, and other countries that want to live in peace in the Middle East.

And finally, there is the challenge of democracy or the lack of democracy and freedom in Iran itself, and the need for the United States and our European allies and other countries to be engaged as best we can in a very difficult environment to help support those in Iran who believe that the future of Iran should be a democratic future.

This is a quite daunting agenda [for] a country with which we have the most unusual relationship in the world. It is the only country with which we effectively have no communications. We haven't had an embassy in Iran. We haven't had any military officials in Iran since 1979, 1980. And you all know why. There are very few American citizens living or working in Iran. It is a country with which we have been out of touch for twenty-five years, for a quarter of a century. And so imagine trying to craft, as the Reagan administration did and every administration since, a policy toward this country with which we have this unique relationship -- no effective communication.

We start with the nuclear issue. And we start with the proposition that it is absolutely contrary to American interests to see Iran acquire a nuclear weapons capability. And we are determined, as the vice president has said, and as the president has said, to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. And what we have decided to do, what we've tried to do over the last year, is to construct a major international coalition that would unite around that objective, and that would send a unified and clear message to the Iranian government that it has got to suspend its current enrichment programs at Natanz. It has to return to negotiations with the European Union 3 countries, and it has to abide by the obligations that it itself has asserted it should abide by but does not: of the IAEA and of the United Nations Security Council.

Until fourteen months ago, the United States had been very far removed from the international diplomacy concerning Iran. After President Bush's trip to NATO and to Germany in February of 2005, after his discussions with the French and German and British leadership, he became convinced that we had to put our diplomatic weight behind these negotiations -- not that we would be directly involved, not that we would be at the table, but that we would try to help, as best we could, Germany and the United Kingdom and France to negotiate effectively with the Iranian government. And from March 11, 2005, until August of 2005, we did so. I was given the opportunity by Secretary Rice to be the liaison with the European 3. I made eleven trips to Europe in a six-month time span to try to help them invigorate their negotiating position and to support what they were trying to do with the Iranian government.

But then a fundamental event occurred: the elections in Iran, the inauguration on August 4 of last summer of President Ahmadinezhad, and the fact that he and his government then unilaterally walked out of those negotiations and left the European 3 after two-and-a-half years with an inclusive set of discussions. And so in the autumn of last year, we decided that we could not stop our efforts to try to achieve a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. We began to talk to the Russian government, the Chinese government, the Indian government, and others about forming a major coalition that would have two objectives: to isolate the Iranians diplomatically on this issue, and to begin to use much more effectively the institutions of the International Atomic Energy Agency and of the United Nations Security Council to place that kind of direct pressure on the Iranian

government. And that is what we did.

The Russian government stood up in October of last year and offered Iran an exit strategy, a large exit door. They said that the international community could not abide the maintenance or expansion of nuclear fuel cycle activities in the territory of Iran, enrichment and reprocessing, because that might lead to the production and the scientific and technological capacity of Iran to produce fissile material and nuclear warheads. But Russia said, "We'll supply fuel for civil nuclear reactors. And so we'll give the Iranians what they say they want -- what is the stated objective of Iranian policy on the nuclear issue, a peaceful nuclear power -- but will deny [them] the sensitive aspects of the fuel cycle, which we believe we should not give to that country."

We thought that was a generous proposal, one that made sense. And President Bush on a trip to Asia in November of last [year] said he supported the Russian initiative. It was a way out for the Iranian government. It was a way to climb down from this impossible position that [Ahmadinezhad] had taken, that [Iran] would drive straight through and over the international redlines established by the IAEA and the UN and achieve an enrichment capability. But Iran did not take it.

And then that started this latest phase of the diplomatic process: the concentration of Russian, Chinese, European, and American influence to band together to take Iran to the IAEA, where it was twice rebuked for having overridden all of its obligations. I should say that India joined us in both of those votes. And it was a very courageous step by Prime Minister Singh. He was the first leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-77, to step outside that movement and to directly criticize and put the weight of his country behind the work of the United States and Europe and Russia and China. And in the IAEA in February, and in the United Nations Security Council on March 29, Iran has twice been specifically rebuked for having violated its international understandings.

But what has happened? Iran has not responded to the votes in Vienna or the votes in New York. Iran appears not to be listening to what the international community is saying. And so we have determined that of course you have to raise the level of diplomacy and raise the costs to Iran of this kind of behavior. And so our European allies last week introduced a Chapter 7 resolution at the United Nations Security Council. Secretary Rice was in New York earlier this week for talks with her Russian, Chinese, and European counterparts. And unfortunately, we were not able to secure the agreement of Russia and China to support that Chapter 7 resolution.

Now this is a very ordinary resolution. This is not a radical resolution. It does not provide for sanctions against Iran. And it does not provide for the use of force against Iran. In fact, it simply asks the members of the Security Council to restate in the Security Council under Chapter 7 what they have already agreed to and voted upon in the IAEA: Iran should suspend what it is doing, return to negotiations, and play by the rules. And so our position is we are not going to give up on that effort to effectively rebuke Iran through a Chapter 7 resolution. And you will see Ambassador Bolton, who has been very effective on this issue in New York, continue his efforts to get this Chapter 7 resolution passed, we hope in the next few weeks.

At the same time, we have agreed with the Chinese and Russian and European governments that we will develop a package of negative incentives and positive incentives that will be offered by the Europeans to the Iranian government as another exit door, as another way out of this crisis. And we expect that package to be assembled in the next week to ten days. And I think it will encompass the following initiatives. You will likely see a repeat or a variation of the offer that Russia made: that Iran of course, as President Bush has said, has the right to civil nuclear power, but not to the fuel cycle. So the international community will step forward once again to say to the Iranians, "If it's civil nuclear power you want, we can all provide that for you, but under international supervision, and not give you the possibility of access to enrichment and reprocessing technologies."

And there may be other economic and technological incentives for the Iranian people in that package. Secretary Rice insisted in the meeting on Monday night, and we will continue to insist, that there will be a second part of that package. And the package cannot be whole until both halves are joined together. And that is a section that will involve penalties and sanctions against the Iranian government if it does not choose the exit door of the positive incentive package.

In other words, if we can all agree on this in the next two weeks, the Permanent Five of the United Nations Security Council, Iran will be offered a way forward, but it will be asked to choose: "Are you going to cease and desist from your enrichment activities? If you do, there is a way forward. And if you do not, there will be a sanctions regime imposed by the UN Security Council." That is the package we would like to agree to. It has not yet been fully agreed. It needs to be assembled, and there will be a final discussion of the current five countries to agree that this is the way forward.

But our view in Washington is that both are important. And while you offer the hand of peace to Iran, you also have to let the Iranians know that the costs are going to rise for the fact that they have not responded to either the IAEA or the UN Security Council. Our president and our vice president and our secretary of state and our secretary of defense have been completely united in what we say to the Iranians. We say that as we try to negotiate a termination of its nuclear weapons program that all options are on the table. And all options are on the table. And we also say that we are trying very hard to follow a diplomatic path and to use diplomacy as a tactic to achieve that end. And you will not see us quit the diplomatic path easily.

I have been surprised -- maybe I shouldn't be surprised -- by some of the public reaction and press reaction over the last couple of days. There are a lot of people saying the real problem is that the United States won't sit down with Iran and talk to Iran directly. We say to that, we didn't create this nuclear problem and crisis with Iran. We weren't the country that chose to override the combined will of the international community. And the problem is

not the absence of regular diplomatic contact between the United States and Iran. The problem is, directly, the behavior of the government of Iran.

Other people say that diplomacy is too hard and that it cannot work, and that the Security Council is taking too long. Anybody who knows multilateral diplomacy -- and I spent four years at NATO practicing multilateral diplomacy -- knows that it does take time. It is often frustrating. And you often have to jump through lots of hoops to get to the place where you want to be. We have not given up on diplomacy. We have not given up on the proposition that the combined weight of the international community [could] convince the Iranians to reassess the cost-benefit of what they are doing in the nuclear field. And we are determined to use every ounce of our energy and vitality to see that diplomatic play through to the end.

But the Iranians have to know, and other members of the Security Council have to know, that we cannot be captive to endless discussions in the Security Council, and we will not allow ourselves to be captive to endless discussions there. If at the end of the day we feel that there is no chance of using the Security Council, multilateral diplomacy, to achieve this purpose, there will be the opportunity for the United States to associate itself with like-minded countries to create a sanctions regime, targeted sanctions against Iran, and to raise the costs on our own. And we are determined to keep both of those opportunities alive. As you can see, we have been working nonstop for fourteen months to try to get the attention of the Iranian government and use diplomacy as a tool, and we have not given up on that prospect.

I would also like to say that we as a country cannot forget one of the other major grievances that we have with Iran, and that is the terrorism issue. We do not forget what happened in Beirut to our embassy and to our Marine barracks in 1983, or to Colonel Higgins, who was serving with the UN forces in southern Lebanon in 1985. And we certainly do not forget, and I believe Dennis and I were together that day, what happened at Khobar Towers outside of Dhahran, because we were there just several hours after the blast with Secretary Christopher and saw what happened to over 30 Americans who were killed and to 300 American military officers who ended up in the hospital.

We know that Iran and the Iranian intelligence services continue to be the one central organization in the Middle East that funds and directs several of the major Middle East terrorist groups, including Hizballah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. And we ask our European friends and our friends all around the world not just to focus on the nuclear issue, but to focus on this central issue of direct Iranian support for terrorism, which is a threat to our ally, Israel, and a threat to Americans as well.

Finally, some people say that, given the nature of this radical, dictatorial regime in Tehran, there is not much one can do, or a country can do, or the world can do, to promote democracy and freedom and justice inside Iran. And, fortunately, our president does not agree with that. And he has asked the Congress to help underwrite a major program to make sure that we are supporting as best we can those people in Iran and nongovernmental organizations and those people outside Iran who want to see democracy be part of the future of Iran.

We want to see an expansion in the ability of Iranians to travel to the United States and to study in our country. There may be less than 2,000 Iranians studying here, versus 200,000 thirty-five years ago. And there is no question that as we focus on the short and medium term in our policy, we have also got to have our vision on the long term and care about what Iranians think about us and what our relationship will be like twenty to twenty-five years from now. And one of the ways you can do that is to increase societal contacts through student exchanges. So the president and Secretary Rice have asked Congress for a supplemental appropriation of \$75 million -- it is really seed money; it is not a great sum of money -- to help begin to underwrite those programs and also to expand our ability as a government to broadcast twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, our Persian-language, Farsi-language TV and radio stations into Iran itself. Because there is no question that those without access to the internet in Iran are not getting a fair and balanced view of what is happening in the world, to coin a phrase.

The last thing I wanted to mention is this: if you think about the estrangement between our two countries over the last quarter of a century, you will understand [that] we have skipped an entire generation of American diplomats and American military officers who have not been asked to serve there, to learn Farsi, to become experts in Iranian history and culture and politics. And when Secretary Rice arrived at the State Department a little over a year ago, she was focused on the question of Iran, and she looked around and said, "Well, where are my troops? What's my apparatus in this department?" And it turned out that there were exactly two people focusing on Iran full time a year ago today in the Department of State. Secretary Rice said, "We've got to do something about that." And so we have now [created] an Iran desk that is a desk to its own, that is fundamentally and solely responsible for following events in that country and being intelligent and sophisticated in interpreting events in that country.

And we decided that since it is not possible for us to establish a diplomatic mission in Tehran for obvious reasons, we would do the next best thing: we are establishing an American diplomatic presence in Dubai inside our consulate, and we call it "Dubai Station." For those of us who began our careers focusing on the Soviet Union, our inspiration was Riga Station. During the time between 1919 and 1933 when we did not have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, we established a station in Riga, which was a window into the Soviet Union. We sent in 1928 a young diplomat named George Kennan to Riga Station, where he helped to perfect his Russian language and his understanding of the Soviet Union.

And we do not have the possibility to be inside Iran these days, but we have the possibility to devote a considerable number of people to serve in Dubai and to focus on Iran and to make sure that we know everything

we can from that perch. And in addition to that, we have told the Congress that we are going to set up a number of positions in consulates and embassies all around that region that will be solely responsible for following events in Iran, talking to Iranian exiles, and increasing our ability to understand that country.

I would say the Department of Defense has made probably even greater efforts over the last five or six years in training its officer corps to understand this country. Dov Zakheim knows that because he was part of this. And the Department of State now is stepping up to match what our other sister agencies in the U.S. government have done to increase the ability of our government to be intelligent in discerning the internal affairs and foreign policy of the Iranian government.

This is clearly a generational challenge for us. Iran is a strong state. If you look at the speeches of President Ahmadinezhad or of Ali Larijani, the secretary of the Iranian national security council, this particular Iranian government aspires to be the most powerful state in the Middle East, the most influential, and it is certainly trying to expand its influence as we speak throughout the Middle East. And we talked to our good friends in the Gulf, and neighbors beyond, and there is a great deal of concern about this latest trend in Iranian foreign policy. And we are as determined to resist an expansion of Iranian influence on a regional basis as we are absolutely determined to prevent it from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, and determined to confront it as it poses this terrorist threat to the United States.

I wanted to give you just those simple and admittedly quite general views of about how we view the Iranian challenge, and assure you that we are focused on it quite intently. And I would say that I hope that you have some confidence that we have designed a strategy to cope with this threat, but we are going to need your support and your understanding as we proceed.

I will say to this audience, because I know we have some distinguished Israelis in attendance, we have had over the last several months two occasions to have very thorough discussions with the Israeli government, including just yesterday at the State Department, concerning all aspects of this Iranian challenge. And we are heartened that the Israeli government sees things pretty much as we do in terms of the serious nature of this threat. And you all know what President Bush said about the defense of Israel when Ahmadinezhad three or four times made the outrageous remark that Israel should be wiped off the map of the world. It is an extraordinary thing that in this day and age any leader -- given the way that politicians and diplomats talk these days -- would make such an absurd and blatant threat against a member state of the United Nations and a friend of the United States.

We take what the Iranian government says seriously. We listen to what it says, and we will certainly hold that government accountable for its actions as well as its words.

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