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Iran and the Next Administration: Policy Challenges

The Honorable John R. Bolton

The topic that we're trying to address is the subject of Iran and looking ahead to the next Administration, so I want to try and focus on the issues that the next Administration is going to face. But I think that necessarily involves looking back a little bit at some of what's happened over the past several years and how we got to that point and to identify some of the things that I think the next President, whoever it turns out to be, has to address, and in a very urgent manner, because the threat posed by Iran's effort to acquire deliverable nuclear weapons capability is an urgent threat for which there's not much room for error.

The first broad area is the question of American intelligence about what Iran is doing: what we know, what we don't know, how we analyze what we know. And this is a subject of considerable importance since many of our friends, and particularly many of our adversaries, invariably say whenever we talk about Iran or North Korea or other would-be proliferators, "Well, how can you be so sure? After all, look how wrong you were on Iraq."

We don't have the time today to go into that subject at length, but certainly it is a fair point for critics of the United States or for policymakers in the United States itself to have a skepticism about what we think we know about any subject, not just proliferation. It also is fair, as the Bush Administration leaves office and some of the particular controversies that surrounded the subject of intelligence fade a little bit, that we have a discussion about American intelligence capabilities: where they're strong and where they're not, where

Talking Points

- We have seen perhaps the perfect storm of intelligence failure concerning Iran, with re-analysis of existing data over and over again because of political imperatives within the intelligence community. The critical question is: When will Iran have what it takes to have a deliverable nuclear weapon?
- Negotiation with Iran is an old idea that has failed. The fact is that the Iranians have benefited enormously from five years of failed European negotiation. They have been given an asset that they couldn't buy for love or money: five years of time.
- It is a deeply unattractive option to consider the use of military force against Iran's nuclear program, but from the Israeli point of view, and from the American point of view, it is far more unattractive to contemplate an Iran with deliverable nuclear weapons.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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they have failed us in recent years and where they can be improved.

I think that's pertinent to Iran for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that you can be very, very worried about Iran's nuclear weapons program without having access to intelligence. I think a fair reading of the many reports over the last five or six years from the International Atomic Energy Agency, the huge amount of information about Iran's effort to acquire mastery over the entire nuclear fuel cycle, is simply consistent with no other alternative explanation for Iran's behavior than that they seek nuclear weapons.

Intelligence Analysis

But I think it's also important to look at not simply the information that's available, but for what follows that in the form of what we call "intelligence analysis." Just in the past couple of years, we've seen in the United States some of the real problems associated with defective analysis within the intelligence community, defective structures within the intelligence community, and defective policy conclusions that flow from all of that.

I think this goes to some very basic questions that we should have more discussion of in public in the next Administration. If you look at the comments that many Members of Congress have made over the past several years—for example, criticizing the Bush Administration for cherry-picking intelligence about Iraq, or some of the more extreme criticisms, such as making up intelligence about Iraq and inferentially cherry-picking or making up intelligence about any other subject, including Iran's program—I think you can see some of the reasons for concern.

You can also see it in the hypocritical and inconsistent approaches many people take to intelligence versus policymaking. On the one hand, you have people who say absolutely there should be a wall of separation between intelligence and policymaking when it suits their purposes to say it but who take a very different attitude when intelligence analysis leaks out of the intelligence community and finds itself being published in the major media, as if intelligence analysis—and particularly National Intelligence Estimates—is like the reports that think tanks issue from time to time. We get everybody together in the intelligence community, they review the most sensitive information that we have, and then we publish it in *The New York Times* because it's a contribution to the national debate.

The fact is that there's always a risk of the politicization of intelligence. There's a risk that policymakers will politicize intelligence, and there's a risk that intelligence analysts will politicize intelligence because it suits their analytical preferences to do so.

I think there's also a misconception about what basic intelligence is. Again, to listen to some Members of Congress, you'd think there's all this information. There's what's reported in the newspapers; there's what's reported in diplomatic cables back from posts around the world; there's speculation; there's what people in the private sector learn; and then there's intelligence, which is carried out on a silver platter as if this is the answer to everything, and if you disagree with a piece of intelligence, somehow you're beyond the pale. Or, more to the point, if you disagree with intelligence analysis that happens to suit a particular Senator or House Member's predilection, you're beyond the pale.

I think that we've seen perhaps the perfect storm of intelligence failure concerning Iran over the years, over and over again: lacking information because we don't have adequate sources inside Iran, reliance on foreign intelligence services, and re-analysis of existing data over and over again because of political imperatives within the intelligence community.

I can't tell you how many times, during my service in government in the Bush 43 Administration, people would troop down from one or another intelligence agency to say, "Okay, we've revised our estimate on when Iran will actually have everything it needs for a nuclear weapon." Sometimes they'd come down and say, "It's longer than the last time that we talked to you." Sometimes they'd come down and say, "It's shorter than the last time we talked to you."

In almost every case, I'd say to them, "Well, I follow this very closely. What new facts have emerged that lead you to this new conclusion?" And all too frequently, the answer was, "Nothing really that you haven't seen, but we've just been thinking

about it again, and we've revised our conclusions accordingly."

I don't think there's any doubt that the National Intelligence Estimate that concluded that Iran had suspended its nuclear weapons program in the fall of 2003 was written reflecting the political biases of its authors. I think that the way it was written, to have a very narrow definition of what amounts to a nuclear weapons program, reflects that. When congressional staff said, "Why did you use that definition of a nuclear weapons program, which was principally weaponization, design, and fabrication?" their response was, "That's the definition the Iranians use." *There's* a compelling reason to accept it!

I think the consequence of publication of the major conclusions of that National Intelligence Estimate, even though done with the acquiescence of the White House, reflects the overt politicization of the intelligence community. It was written in a way that was designed to be leaked if a weakened White House hadn't given its acquiescence, and the fact that the White House was weak and succumbed to it is no justification for the way that report was put together.

In fact, I would go further, and I think this is an issue for the next Administration across the board in the intelligence community: I'm not at all sure that we shouldn't cease the publication of National Intelligence Estimates. I'm not at all sure that the drive for consensus of evaluation within the intelligence community is a sensible way to proceed. Personally, I believe in intellectual competition, and if intelligence agencies have data and have analysis that's persuasive, they ought to be willing to put it out within the community of policymakers—not in *The New York Times* and other publications, but in a classified setting—and let policymakers and other intelligence analysts debate it.

The idea that you can force everything into broad consensus, and the fact that so much time and effort is spent on this as a priority, is very misguided. That's something that obviously goes well beyond Iran, but we're going to see it in particular in Iran because of the critical element in intelligence that most policymakers look at, which is when will Iran have what it takes to have a deliverable nuclear weapon? That's probably the single most important question and one that I don't think we've gotten good answers to over the years.

Diplomacy and Negotiation

The reason that is such an important question relates to the second area I wanted to cover today, which is diplomacy and negotiation with Iran. Looking at intelligence estimates on timing—which are good-faith judgments by people who can disagree over exactly what point it is we really need to worry about in assessing Iran's domestic mastery over the entire nuclear fuel cycle and its weaponization and delivery capability—a lot of people say, "The estimates say we've got two years before Iran has a deliverable nuclear weapon. Two years is forever in the diplomatic world. We're not in any rush. We don't have to feel constrained. We've got plenty of time to continue to explore diplomatic options."

Personally, I do not believe in "just in time" nonproliferation, because if you can imagine that the intelligence estimate is wrong, then Iran or another would-be proliferator has the weapons capability before our estimates indicated, and the entire context of diplomacy—indeed, the entire international geopolitical context—has changed. I think that's especially true as we see a new Administration coming in, whether it's Senator John McCain or Senator Barack Obama, because they will hear over and over again, certainly from the State Department and from many, many commentators, "You've got to give diplomacy a try." Senator Obama himself has said he would sit down with the Iranians without precondition to discuss their nuclear program.

This is a statement about diplomacy that I think warrants considerable attention on several levels. First, negotiation is not a policy. Negotiation is a technique. It's like asking the question, "Do you want to eat with a fork or a spoon?" Well, what are you trying to eat? That's the real question. If you want to eat soup with a fork, it's a little bit of a problem. Whether you use a spoon or a fork or a butter knife or anything else is a matter of technique, and in saying we should have negotiation with Iran, very little has been said about the substance of the negotiation.

This is already advance warning of State Department thinking, which is obsessed with process and

less obsessed with substance. But it goes beyond simply confusing procedures with substance. It goes to a more important point, which is ignoring history in the case of Iran.

We have had five years of negotiation between the EU3—Britain, France, and Germany—and Iran, and it has been understood from the get-go by the Europeans, by the Iranians, and by the State Department that, in effect, the Europeans were speaking for us. And they have made the point from the very first meeting. When the three foreign ministers from Europe—dubbed by Secretary Powell at the time "the three tenors"—all went off to Tehran, the message they carried was you can have a different relationship not just with us, but with the United States if you will give up uranium enrichment.

That has been the position right on through, and if there was any doubt about where we stood on the Europeans as surrogate negotiators for us, that was certainly cleared up in 2006 when Secretary Rice conveyed publicly that we would sit down in public with the Iranians if only they would suspend uranium enrichment, as they had consistently refused to do. In fact, we've even gone beyond that and have sat down in public in Geneva with the Iranians, and they hadn't suspended uranium enrichment.

The idea that the Europeans for five years have actually not been negotiating with Iran, but have simply been informing Iran that if Iran would meet the precondition of giving up uranium enrichment, then they would begin negotiation, is a complete charade, but an important one. What it means is that the Europeans, although saying there was a precondition for real negotiation, in fact were negotiating their little hearts out with the Iranians, providing every carrot they could think of to induce Iran to give up uranium enrichment without ever succeeding in doing so.

What this proves—and I think this is important—is that negotiation with Iran is hardly a new idea. Quite the opposite: It's an old idea—an old idea that has failed—and it demonstrates very graphically a point that is missed by those who say, "Why don't we just negotiate with the Iranians?" Negotiation is no different from any other human activity: It has costs as well as benefits. I don't mean monetary costs; I mean opportunity costs. The fact is that the Iranians have benefited enormously from five years of failed European negotiation. They have been given an asset that they couldn't buy for love or money: They've been given five years of time.

Almost invariably, time works on the side of the would-be proliferators: time that they need to overcome the complex science and technology, the difficulties that they face in building a nuclear program; time that allows them, as in the case of Iran, to perfect the technique of uranium conversion and to perfect the technique of uranium enrichment; as well as time to continue to disperse their nuclear facilities and increase their military defenses around those facilities.

While we have watched the Europeans pretend not to negotiate for five years, the Iranians have gotten five years closer to nuclear weapons, and they are at a point where, within some margin of error, they have mastered the science and technology. They don't have the weapon capability yet, but they will achieve it essentially at a time and a manner of their choosing, and then the calculus will be very different.

So the idea that negotiation can go on forever or that it is an activity that doesn't include costs for the parties to the negotiation is an extraordinary fallacy, but one that too often permeates our views on what negotiation can do. In the case of Iran, I don't think there's any chance that Iran is going to be talked out of its nuclear weapons. There's no price that we can pay that will induce Iran to give up those nuclear weapons, and I think that was clear quite some time ago.

Now, while this chitchatting has been going on, we've been trying sanctions that the Russians have successfully neutered on every occasion we've tried them in the Security Council, to the point where just within the last month we made the suggestion for a fourth sanctions resolution. The Russians flatly rejected it, so instead, because, as I like to say, we never fail in New York—that's what all ambassadors in New York say—they passed a fourth resolution on sanctions that said essentially, "You know those last three resolutions? We really mean them."

I've heard from ambassadors directly from the Arab countries exactly how I feel about that resolution: It was an embarrassment. I don't know what the equivalent to popping champagne corks is in Tehran, but whatever the equivalent is, that's what they were doing when that fourth resolution was passed.

The Military Option

That brings me to the subject that I think should most concern the next President, and that's the use of military force against Iran's program. I once thought the Bush Administration might use military force, a targeted force against Iran's program, and I said that. I believed that because the President said repeatedly, "It is unacceptable for Iran to have nuclear weapons," and I used to say, "The President's a man of his word; if he says it's unacceptable, I think what he means by that is it's unacceptable."

Well, I guess it's unacceptable rhetorically, but it's not going to be unacceptable in operational terms.

I don't think this Administration will use force before it leaves office; I think that option has disappeared. But I think it is an option that is under very active consideration in Israel. I don't believe that they have reached a decision there; I think the condition of their government at this point prevents it until there's greater clarity within the Israeli body politic. I don't know when that will come; I don't know what the new government will look like; but I think the odds are that until the political situation in Israel is clarified, there won't be a clear decision, absent some information on the state of play inside Iran that might force a decision.

I don't think there's any doubt that Israel has the political will to use military force against Iran's program. We know from the bombing of the Osirak reactor outside of Baghdad in 1981 and we know from last September, when Israel destroyed that North Korean reactor being built on the banks of the Euphrates River, that, confronted with the prospect of a nuclear neighbor, a nuclear enemy nearby, Israel won't hesitate to strike.

It is a deeply unattractive option to consider the use of military force against Iran's nuclear program—deeply unattractive. It's risky; it may not succeed fully; it may not succeed at all; there are undoubtedly consequences that Israel would face. But I think from the Israeli point of view, and I think from the American point of view, however deeply unattractive the use of military force is, it is far more unattractive to contemplate an Iran with deliverable nuclear weapons.

So I think it's at least possible that the situation in Israel will clarify itself before the end of this Administration, and I think, certainly after our election, a government in Israel could decide that it's going to need to use military force and might conclude that it would be better to do that prior to the end of the Bush Administration rather than waiting until afterward. It may be that they're not ready or that they haven't accomplished the planning and preparation they need to and that it would stretch out some time into the future. I've heard estimates that people would be willing to contemplate waiting perhaps until the summer of next year before there absolutely had to be a decision on Israel's part whether to use military force, but I don't think anybody should doubt this is a very live option.

How would Iran respond to that? They have threatened all manner of things: closing the Strait of Hormuz, cutting off oil exports. I don't think either of those is going to happen, because I think they do more damage to Iran than they do to the other powers in the region and to the United States. I think the more likely Iranian response is to have Hezbollah attack Israel—Hezbollah, reflecting the failure of Security Council Resolution 1701, probably resupplied and rearmed better than it was before the August 2006 adoption of Resolution 1701, with longer range, perhaps more accurate missiles, and with a real risk, therefore, of causing considerable casualties and damage inside Israel.

That's one of the factors—one of the very hard factors—Israel's decision-makers have to consider in contemplating military force. But again, I think, weighed against the prospect of what they see and what President George W. Bush once described as a nuclear holocaust, that military force is very much at the top of their minds and, therefore, the consequences of the use of military force, if it happens before January 20, or the prospect of it happening afterwards, are things that the next President needs to confront.

What all of this says to me is that the lesson that you have to draw on proliferation by states like Iran is that you can fiddle around for a long time before you see the real consequences, but if you fiddle just a little bit too long, those consequences are going to be dire indeed.

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