CAN THE NIE HELP EVADE A US-IRAN WAR?

The NIE report that was released on December 3 regarding Iran’s nuclear program will obviously be greeted with a sigh of relief by many who have been worried about the U.S. hardliners’ push for military action against Iran.

The report judges with high confidence that Iran currently does not have a nuclear weapons program. It further states its lack of knowledge about Iran’s intent to develop nuclear weapons. Also, while it judges with moderate confidence that “Iran would be technically capable of producing enough HEU [highly enriched uranium] sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame,” it goes on to say “agencies recognize the possibility that this capability many not be attained until after 2015.”

Finally the report judges with high confidence that Iran will not be technically capable of producing and reprocessing enough plutonium (presumably via the planned heavy water reactor in Arak) for a weapon before about 2015.

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These conclusions should undermine any legitimacy the idea of military action has had in the United States. At the same time, they should be seen as part and parcel of the debate that has been going on in the United States between promoters of coercive diplomacy and military action. In fact, the report’s conclusions can be easily interpreted as coming down on the side of the current policy of the Bush Administration, which is coercive diplomacy.

The NIE judges with “high confidence that until fall 2003, Iranian military entities were working under government direction to develop nuclear weapons” and goes on to say, “our assessment that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously.”

These conclusions led the national security adviser Stephen Hadley to say that report “suggests the President has the right strategy...for that strategy to succeed, the international community has to turn up the pressure on Iran – with diplomatic isolation, United Nations Sanctions, and with other financial pressure.” This view was further buttressed by President Bush in his news conference on December 4.

This propitious convergence between NIE conclusions and the Bush Administration’s current policy exactly at a time when many people have been questioning the futility of continuing that policy and have called for direct and unconditional talks with Iran seems, to say the least, questionable.

It could be argued that all the talk about military action against Iran in recent years has been mostly about limiting the
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Public dialogue about Iran in the United States. By raising the specter of military action, the Bush Administration has been rather successful, at least until recently, in limiting the debate about Iran to two options: coercive diplomacy (sanctions) or military action. What these two options have in common is a determination not to engage with Iran directly without preconditions (i.e. without Iran’s suspension its enrichment program before talks begin). Tehran’s recent cooperation with the IAEA and its continued lack of response to the sanctions regime (in its variety of forms) has been pushing people of a variety of people to think in terms of the need for direct talks.

In short, the fact that this NIE can so easily become an instrument in support of the Bush Administration’s current policy raises many questions about the timing and content of the report. This is why it is important to point out that the Administration’s interpretation is not the only way of reading the report as it does contain a couple of important paragraphs that can be used by supporters of direct and unconditional talks with Iran. It states:

Our assessment that Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressures indicates Tehran’s decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs.

Coercive diplomacy, rather that diplomacy period, will continue to be the Bush Administration’s preferred option. It is important to insist that the just released NIE has another option embedded within it that those inter-ested in a less confrontational approach to Iran can and should endorse.

This, in turn, suggest that some combination of threats of intensified international security and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways, might – if perceived by Iran’s leaders as credible – prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program... We assess with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult... In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons.

It is noteworthy that the policy recommendations mentioned here focus on Iran’s weapons program and not the declared program under supervision via NPT’s safeguards agreement. This can be taken as an implied attempted shift away from halting Iran’s enrichment program to the country’s potential weapons program (through verification and intrusive inspections).

The reference to Iran’s cost-benefit approach as well as the requirement of taking into account Iran’s concerns regarding “security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways” can also be seen as an acknowledgment of Iran’s legitimate concerns and objectives in the region that can only be negotiated over in direct and unconditional talks.

Finally, the same can be said about the argument that Iran’s nuclear weapons can only be permanently halted politically. It can be argued that only direct and unconditional talks will be “perceived by Iran’s leaders as credible” and will prompt Iran to take that political decision.

It seems highly unlikely that the Bush Administration will read the NIE in this way. Coercive diplomacy, rather that diplomacy period, will continue to be the Bush Administration’s preferred option. It is important to insist that the just released NIE has another option embedded within it that those interested in a less confrontational approach to Iran can and should endorse.

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