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CONFERENCE
PROCEEDINGS



Coping with Iran

Confrontation, Containment,
or Engagement?

A Conference Report

James Dobbins, Sarah Harting, Dalia Dassa Kaye

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited



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CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Discussions throughout the one-day conference "Coping with Iran: Confrontation, Containment, or Engagement?" broached a number of key issues, including internal leadership and societal dynamics within Iran, Iran's relationship with other regional actors, the implications of a nuclear-armed Iran or a military strike against Iran, and the various policy options available to address key issues such as Iran's nuclear capabilities, instability in Iraq, and terrorism. Many participants argued at the conference that some degree of both containment and engagement was the best policy approach toward Iran and that a use-of-force option was neither imminent nor desirable. There was a general sense that UN sanctions and economic pressure was working in isolating Iran (even if some desired that it work faster). Furthermore, Ambassador R. Nicholas Burns emphasized that the United States is willing to be patient to allow economic and diplomatic efforts to work and stated that there are no imminent deadlines that would cause the U.S. government to pursue a drastic course in its approach toward Iran.

To follow are several other key themes that emerged from the discussions:

- **U.S.-Iranian cooperation is possible, especially on Iraq.** Despite a legacy of nearly 30 years of antipathy and mistrust, previous crises—such as the aftermath of the Afghanistan war—have demonstrated that U.S.-Iranian cooperation is possible when key issues of mutual concern are at stake. Several panelists believed that was the situation today with respect to Iraq and that, without Iranian cooperation, the stabilization of Iraq would prove difficult if not impossible. Some panelists believed that the beginnings of U.S.-Iranian cooperation on Iraq (currently within a multilateral framework) could potentially lead to broader, bilateral negotiations in the future, including on the nuclear question. Still, the level

of mistrust is so high that few expected dramatic breakthroughs in the next 20 months.

- **Iran may be interested in working with the United States and the international community to find a solution to the nuclear issue.** Ambassador Mohammad Javad Zarif emphasized Iranian ambitions to strengthen nonproliferation efforts. Panelists noted that successful negotiations would require establishing an end point agreeable to all parties. Ambassador Zarif suggested renewed efforts for an international consortium, which would provide more transparency of Iran's nuclear program as well as increased international monitoring. He also noted that the paradigm of "mistrust and verify" would govern the nature of a solution on Iran's nuclear file. Ambassador Burns stated that, while Iran did not have the right to become a nuclear-armed country, the United States would allow Iran "exit doors" in negotiations.
- **The UN sanction process and international economic pressure are working.** Over the past several months, U.S. leverage has increased as Iran is further isolated by what one panelist called the "coalition of the reluctant." Many panelists believed that "hanging tough" through diplomatic and economic measures—including strengthening restrictions on European trade with Iran—is producing results, changing Iranian calculations and ultimately behavior, at least in the short term. In the long term, few doubted that Iran—under any type of government—would continue to seek a nuclear weapon capability.
- **Preemption is not imminent.** Even among a group of participants with views from across the political spectrum, no panelist argued that the use-of-force option was imminent or desirable. Many recognized the significant risks and

costs of a military strike and the inability of this option to effectively stop Iran's nuclear program. Given the context of the Iraq war, some also noted that there was little stomach for the force option. Still, several panelists cautioned that escalation with Iran was still possible through inadvertent actions or miscalculations. And some noted that Israel viewed the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran as an existential threat. Despite such concerns, most panelists believed that the sanction process was working and should be given time to work, even if some still preferred to keep the force option on the table. There was no sense of urgency voiced, and some even suggested that the use-of-force clock was slowing for the Israelis as well.

- **Focus is on regime behavior, not regime change.** With the exception of one panelist who argued that the United States should promote regime change in Iran by increasing support for opposition groups from within, most panelists—including Ambassador Burns—focused on changing Iranian behavior, not the Iranian regime. Iran specialists did not believe that there were strong prospects for regime change or revolution in the near term and pointed to the lessons of the Libya model—in which an existing regime can change behavior on issues of importance to the West (e.g., nuclear capabilities and terrorism) without a fundamental shift in the nature of the regime. But some also noted that, in the long term, U.S. support for democratization and human rights could serve U.S. interests.
- **A nuclear-armed Iran can be expected to be more dangerous and aggressive than a non-nuclear-armed Iran.** Just as in the case of Pakistan, a nuclear-armed Iran is likely to demonstrate riskier and more assertive behavior (particularly in areas such as terrorism) and significantly increase the risk of escalation. Still, some analysts argued

that Iranian behavior as a nuclear state will largely depend on the nature of the leadership. Individuals like Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are more likely to exercise prudence and will not necessarily be spoiling for a fight, while successors to Khamenei are unknown. Most experts also agreed that maintaining a stable deterrence relationship with Iran would prove far more difficult than did the U.S.-Soviet experience.

- **Engagement and containment options were ultimately preferred to confrontation.** Several analysts argued for immediate and direct U.S. engagement with Iran. But other analysts did not view engagement and containment of Iran (through the development of a regional Sunni alliance with tacit support from Israel) as mutually exclusive policy options and suggested that the United States pursue both in tandem. Just as in the case of U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War, the United States can negotiate with Iran and, at the same time, develop a containment structure to curtail the growth of Iranian power and influence in the region.