

IRAN WORKSHOP

18 May 2006

Dr. H. Todd Kauderer, Moderator

Dr. Michael J. Deane, Author

Ms. Margaret A. Harlow, Author

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENTS OFFICE

NATIONAL SECURITY ANALYSIS DEPARTMENT

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY • APPLIED PHYSICS LABORATORY

11100 Johns Hopkins Road, Laurel, Maryland 20723-6099

ABOUT THE SPONSOR

The Strategic Assessments Office (SAO), sponsor of the the Geopolitical Assessments Series, is located in the National Security Analysis Department of The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory (JHU/APL). The SAO's charter is to conduct broad-ranging analyses and assessments at both the national security strategy and policy levels. This includes examining national security strategy, external threats, operational concepts, and technology trends and systems that may affect the US warfighter. Additionally, the SAO assists US decision-makers as they address vital issues that will define future national security postures, needs, and capabilities. Recent SAO studies can be found on the web at <http://www.jhuapl.edu/areas/warfare/papers.asp>.

The JHU/APL (<http://www.jhuapl.edu>) is a not-for-profit center for engineering, research and development principally supporting the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. The JHU/APL is one division of The Johns Hopkins University.

ABOUT THE GEOPOLITICAL ASSESSMENTS SERIES

The Geopolitical Assessments Series seeks to explore those nation states and areas of the world that are of special national security importance to the United States. The nature of future competitions and conflicts and the future security environment that affects the United States and its allies are highly dependent upon the behavior of states and how their peoples perceive various issues that affect them both internally and externally. To this end, the workshops seek to examine a state's current leadership and population, how and why they think as they do, their history and the lens through which they look at issues, issues that they are currently facing, and the possibility for future competition and conflict with the United States.

In conducting the workshops, Panel Members principally from academia and sometimes from the military, government, and industry are brought together for a one- or two-day moderated discussion session. SAO personnel lead the discussion through a series of questions posed to the panel. In addition to documenting verbal discussions, the workshop provides computer software for off-line anonymous discussions among Panel Members and workshop observers.

DISCLAIMER

This report reflects the personal views of the panel discussants. The opinions presented herein are intended to identify and explore a broad range of ideas and issues. The report and its findings do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University (JHU), the JHU Applied Physics Laboratory (JHU/APL), its sponsors, or any other public or private organization.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Questions or comments concerning this report should be addressed to Dr. Michael J. Deane at 240-228-7642 or michael.deane@jhuapl.edu.

INTRODUCTION

IRAN WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES AND CONDUCT

The Iran Workshop was held at the JHU/APL on May 18, 2006. It was prompted by the increasing public rhetoric concerning Iran's stated intentions to pursue nuclear technologies, including the development of nuclear weapons. The objectives of the Iran Workshop were to develop a better understanding of:

- The major drivers behind Iranian domestic, foreign, military, and nuclear policies;
- The nature of the current US–Iranian relationship;
- Alternative US strategies toward Iran and their impact on US–Iranian relations, and
- The consequences, positive and negative, of potential US political and military actions.

The ten experts, who made up the Panel Members, were drawn from academia and industry. Individual members had unique experience and expertise in Iranian and Middle Eastern affairs, international law, and military operations. As a group, the Panel Members brought new perspectives, challenging insights, and “out of the box” thinking that are not always readily available.

The morning discussions focused on domestic and foreign developments in Iran, loosely divided into four central issues:

- Iranian Domestic Policy
- Iranian Foreign Policy
- Iranian General Military Policy
- Iranian Nuclear Policy

Building on the insights of the morning's discussions, the afternoon session identified and assessed the potential positive and negative consequences of five select US policy options, namely:

- Political Isolation and Economic Sanctions
- Continuing Multilateral Diplomacy
- Direct US Engagement
- Focused (Limited in Objective, Short in Duration) US Military Action
- General (More Comprehensive, Longer-Term) US Military Action

IRAN IN PERSPECTIVE

Since the ouster of the US-supported Shah by the Islamic revolution in 1979, the United States and Iran have had a tense relationship that has impacted the position of both states throughout the Middle East. After several ebbs and flows, the relationship again became tense in the post-2001 time frame as a result of two major factors:

- Increased US military presence in the Persian Gulf as part of the Second Gulf War and
- Expanding Iranian influence in Middle East events, aided by Iran's pursuit of a nuclear capability.

In 2006, statements by public officials and opinion-making elites in both countries were beginning to espouse very hard-line and antagonistic positions. Yet, the rhetoric on both sides suggested that neither had a good understanding of the other's basic motivations and intentions. Each of the opposing parties assumed the "evil" nature of the other side, making in-depth analysis of the other's actions irrelevant. The US leadership was strongly split on the correct policy to adopt: some argued for intensified diplomacy, while others pushed for military action.

In this context, an objective assessment of Iranian domestic and international motivations and objectives was deemed to be critical for future US decision-making. Special attention was given to Iranian efforts and intentions in developing a nuclear capability, as well as the popular support for civilian and/or military applications. Finally, the Panel Members were tasked with assessing a broad range of US policy options toward a "nuclear Iran."

PANEL MEMBERS

The ten Panel Members of the Iran Workshop were drawn from academia and industry. All were highly prestigious members of their particular community, selected to provide our observers and staff with new perspectives and "out-of-the-box" thinking that may not always be available to our guests and staff. The names of the Panel Members have been purposely omitted from this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLICY

President Ahmadinejad is a product of the 1979 Revolution and represents the dominant viewpoint of neither "official" Iran nor the general populace. His bombastic rhetoric, almost always immediately followed by more sober and responsible statements from more authoritative officials, is intended primarily to generate nationalistic feelings and consolidate his domestic position.

Given no external actions to inflame nationalist pride, it is likely Ahmadinejad will have his freedom of action curtailed by the religious leadership of Iran within the next two years, as was the fate of the previous presidents.

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Iran acknowledges that it has no true friends. Friends, as well as such clients as Hezbollah, are accepted as temporary and expedient relationships, which rise and fall with international circumstances.

The Iranians view the rise of the Shiite majority to power in Iraq as a mixed phenomenon. On the one hand, it eliminates Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated threat to Iran. On the other hand, a powerful and well-armed Iraq could pose not only a long-term military threat but also a fundamental leadership competition between Arab and Persian Shiites.

IRANIAN GENERAL MILITARY POLICY

Overt US actions taken to preclude Iranian acquisition of nuclear technology, even nuclear weapons, would be very counterproductive.

Any military action against Iran, limited or general, will result in a significant amplification of anti-US and Western sentiment, will solidify Ahmadinejad's hold on the presidency, will ensure full public support for nuclear technology to include nuclear weapons, and will almost certainly fuel a significant Islamic backlash.

IRANIAN NUCLEAR POLICY

The Iranian leadership regards a nuclear capability as essential to Iranian international prestige, and the populace views the acquisition of nuclear technology as a matter of pride.

The general populace is solidly behind acquisition of nuclear technology for energy generation but does not believe that nuclear weapons are critical to government survival and, therefore, is not generally in favor of nuclear weapons.

Replacing the current government would not eliminate Iran's intention to acquire nuclear technology.

US POLICIES AND OPTIONS

External attempts to achieve Iranian political isolation and/or impose further economic sanctions would have minimal effect in changing Iranian policies and behavior.

Diplomatic effort should be undertaken to establish the groundwork for positive future relations in the event Iran does obtain nuclear weapons.

The Panel Members listed the following as examples of practical actions that might help in de-escalating tensions and moderating Iran's hostility toward the West.

- A public diplomacy program—led by Middle Eastern states, such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—which focuses attention on the dangers of a regional arms race; the complexities, costs, and difficulties of nuclear security and control; the need for expert safeguards; and the benefits of regional nuclear cooperation;
- Reestablishment of cooperative ventures with US and European companies, similar to those that existed in the 1970s;
- A proposal, similar to the US–North Korean Agreed Framework, to assist Iran in the development of a light-water reactor (LWR) capability and infrastructure under IAEA supervision and safeguards; and
- The re-opening of the US embassy in Tehran.

DISCUSSION FORMAT

The workshop centered around a free-wheeling give-and-take among the Panel Members on the issues of interest. There were no formal presentations. In addition to oral discussions, each Panel Member was provided with an individual laptop computer running groupware that permitted supplementary comments on oral discussions and/or the development of side-bar issues. Both forms of input were encouraged in order to capture the widest documentation of Panel Member opinions possible. In all instances, Panel Members' oral remarks and typed comments were documented on a non-attribution basis.

Because of the complexity of the issues covered, two ground rules were established. First, the discussions were oriented toward higher-level insights, observations, and assessments. The discussions were not intended as an exercise in data-gathering. Second, discussants were asked to express their views and assessments in terms of "the most likely" and "the least likely." While this may have minimized the nuances of some difficult issues, it tended to avoid less useful "on the one hand and on the other hand" observations.

The Moderator opened each of the topics for discussion with a brief introduction to focus the thrust of the exchange. In addition, the Panel Members were presented with a set of potential "Initial Issues for Discussion," which were intended to provoke, but not direct or delimit, the discussions. The majority of the time was then given to panel discussions. At the end of each topic discussion, a few minutes were given to questions from the in-house and invited observers.

The morning discussions concentrated on reviewing the state of Iran today, its domestic issues and problems, its foreign policy goals, the political dynamics within Iran and, ultimately, Iran's reasons for pursuit of a nuclear capability. The afternoon was spent considering Iranian reactions to strategies the United States might theoretically employ to dissuade or deter Iran's nuclear ambitions.

DETAILED DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING IRAN

IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLICY

Initial Issues for Discussion

What are the key drivers in Iranian domestic development over the next five years?

To what extent does the Islamic leadership represent the majority of Iranians? To what extent does general populace influence leadership decision-making?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

The Iranian system is sufficiently adaptable and flexible to sustain itself. Its strength is a self-regulating "natural synchronization" capability, which adjusts Iranian policies and actions in the domestic, foreign, and military spheres. Regime change from domestic forces is highly unlikely.

In present-day Iran, revolutionary fervor has run its course. Nationalism is resurgent and strong. The major "rallying force," stoked by President Ahmadinejad, is shifting from religion and ideology to nationalism, national pride, and national power.

President Ahmadinejad is a product of the 1979 Revolution and represents the dominant viewpoint of neither "official" Iran nor the general populace.

Iran is investing heavily to develop and achieve self-sufficiency to alleviate current and future US sanction and embargo options.

IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Initial Issues for Discussion

What are the key drivers in Iranian foreign policy?

Whom does Iran view as its major long-term allies? What makes them friends?

From an Iranian perspective, what are the major issues of concern in the region?

Would the emergence of consolidated Shiite crescent push Iran to a more/less aggressive posture?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

Both the Iranian people and their leaders view Iran as the historical and modern-day leader of the countries in the region. Iranian nuclear capabilities are viewed not as a tool of regional domination, but rather as a factor in Iran's international prestige. However, Iranian nationalism is undermining Iranian influence and inclusion in the Arab Middle East.

Iran acknowledges that it has no true friends. Friends, as well as such clients as Hezbollah, are accepted as temporary and expedient relationships, which rise and fall with international circumstances.

Iran does not view the United States as its only concern. Recent events in Pakistan, along with regular massacres of Shiites by the majority Sunnis, have amplified Iran's fears about a Sunni fundamentalist overthrow of the secular, but nuclear-armed, Musharraf government. In addition, Iran may believe that the current unrest in its eastern provinces by Baluch tribesmen may be secretly backed by the Pakistani Intelligence Service (ISI) and possibly be receiving training and support from Al Qaeda elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Coupled with these concerns, recent anti-government bombings in the Arab provinces of Iran along the Iraq border, denounced by Tehran as supported by the British, have heightened fears about non-Persian populations and outside support.

The Iranians view the rise of the Shiite majority to power in Iraq as a mixed phenomenon. On the one hand, it eliminates Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated threat to Iran. On the other hand, a powerful and well-armed Iraq could pose not only a long-term military threat but also a fundamental leadership competition between Arab and Persian Shiites.

IRANIAN GENERAL MILITARY POLICY

Initial Issues for Discussion

Is Iran developing its military power for defensive or offensive purposes?

Whom does the Iran government perceive to be its primary military opponents?

Would the Military support the current government in a significant armed conflict with the United States? In an armed conflict with a unified international coalition?

Would the general populace support the current government in a prolonged conflict with the United States?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

The essential frame of reference and information filter for the Iranian senior generation is the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988.

Based on a realistic assessment of the region and US advantages, Iran is not attempting to produce a power projection capability for offensive military action. However, given

a hypothetical situation in which Iran possessed a major military capability relative to its neighbors, the prospect of an Iranian action, under the protection of a nuclear umbrella, is deemed more likely.

Iranian military development is aimed at an asymmetric capability for creating havoc in any conflict with the US or a Coalition.

IRANIAN NUCLEAR POLICY

Initial Issues for Discussion

What are the key factors that are pushing Iran to develop a nuclear capability?

What elements in the Iranian government are the major advocates of Iranian nuclear weapons development?

Is the Iranian government irreversibly committed to the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons?

How strong is the support of non-government groups and the general populace for nuclear development?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

The general populace is solidly behind acquisition of nuclear technology for energy generation but is not generally in favor of nuclear weapons. Acquiring a nuclear energy capability is a nationally unifying factor, supported by all classes and all political factions.

Replacing the current government would not eliminate Iran's intention to acquire nuclear technology.

The general populace does not believe that nuclear weapons are critical to government survival. However, the general populace has a sense that a nuclear capability would enhance Iranian security, deterrence, prestige, and influence. The fact that the United States is willing to deal with North Korea, solely because North Korea has a nuclear capability, is not lost on the Iranian leadership and populace.

The US anti-nuclear position is solidifying national opinion in favor of nuclear development, even among those otherwise opposed to the current government. US opposition gives legitimacy to a regime that many Iranians consider illegitimate.

DETAILED DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING US POLICIES AND OPTIONS

POLITICAL ISOLATION AND ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

Initial Issues for Discussion

Would political isolation or economic sanctions produce a positive change in Iranian policy?

What specific types of economic sanctions are most likely to bring about positive changes in Iranian policy and actions related to nuclear weapons development?

What impact would successful economic sanctions have on popular support of the current government?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

Based on previous experiences since the 1979 Revolution, external attempts to achieve Iranian political isolation and/or impose further economic sanctions would have minimal effect in changing Iranian policies and behavior.

In real terms, the viability of either carrots or sticks is very limited.

CONTINUING MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY AND DIRECT US ENGAGEMENT

Initial Issues for Discussion

Is the Iranian government seriously seeking to reach an acceptable agreement in current negotiations with the EU-3? Is Iran likely to reach an acceptable agreement in current negotiations with the EU-3?

Is direct US engagement mandatory or detrimental to reaching an acceptable agreement?

Would US–Iranian relations improve if the United States ceased all counternuclear activities and demands?

Would US–Iranian relations improve if the United States offered to assist Iran in the development of a peaceful nuclear capability similar to the US–Korean Agreed Framework?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

In the near term, multilateral diplomacy by the EU-3 (Great Britain, France, and Germany) is probably a necessary, though insufficient and probably unsuccessful, phase. For the present, the Iranians view the Europeans as the lesser of evils in negotiations.

In the long term, the EU-3 are very unlikely to achieve a moderation of Iranian nuclear ambitions. While the Europeans have some economic interests in Iran, they have less influence and leverage today, as compared to the Khatemi period.

Ultimately, to achieve progress in a follow-on phase, the United States will have to participate directly in bilateral or multilateral negotiations.

The optimum time for US involvement is after the “failure” of EU-3 diplomacy but before Iran actually begins production of a nuclear capability.

Compromise and/or domestic regime change are very unlikely once the government acquires a nuclear capability.

FOCUSED OR GENERAL MILITARY ACTION

Initial Issues for Discussion

Definition: Focused Military Action refers to activities that are relatively limited in purpose, constrained in objectives, and short in duration.

Definition: General Military Action refers to activities that are relatively comprehensive in purpose and objectives and longer-term in duration and impact.

What actions would the Iranian government most likely take in response to a military action focused on and targeted selectively against Iranian nuclear facilities?

What actions would the Iranian government most likely take in response to a general military action to destroy the Iranian nuclear weapons program?

Key Points from Panel Discussions

The Panel Members strongly asserted that *any* military action against Iran, limited or general, would result in a significant amplification of anti-US and Western sentiment, solidify Ahmadinejad's hold on the presidency, ensure full public support for nuclear technology to include nuclear weapons, and almost certainly fuel an Islamic backlash of significant proportions.

The Panel Members agreed that Iran would employ asymmetric and terrorist measures, rather than conventional warfare, in response to either a focused or general military action.

The Panel Members assessed that a focused military action on military or economic targets, the seizure of disputed islands in the Persian Gulf, or the capture of Iranian oil terminals would serve to spur development of Iranian nuclear weapons.

While the Panel Members were split on the effect on the development of nuclear weapons of several non-invasive actions against Iran, such as an economic blockade, cyber attacks against military targets, and cyber attacks against economic targets, they generally agreed that a weapons embargo or closure of the Straits of Hormuz against Iranian commerce would likely spur development of nuclear weapons.

FINAL PANEL OBSERVATIONS

Panel Members generally agreed that Iran would develop a nuclear capability and would likely use this capability to develop nuclear weapons. They dismissed either military actions or sanctions as effective means of curtailing the Iranian nuclear weapons program. On the contrary, they proposed that the US leadership should accept the fact of a nuclear-armed Iran and focus on improving relations with a nuclear-armed Iran.

The Panel Members listed the following as examples of practical actions that might help to deescalate tensions and moderate Iran's hostility toward the West.

- A public diplomacy program—led by Middle Eastern states, such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia—which focuses attention on the dangers of a regional arms race; the complexities, costs, and difficulties of nuclear security and control; the need for expert safeguards; and the benefits of regional nuclear cooperation;
- Reestablishment of cooperative ventures with US and European companies, similar to those that existed in the 1970s;
- A proposal, similar to the US–North Korean Agreed Framework, to assist Iran in the development of a light-water reactor (LWR) capability and infrastructure under IAEA supervision and safeguards; and
- The re-opening of the US embassy in Tehran.

