

Iran and the New National Intelligence Estimate

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Q1: Does the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) mean that Iran is no longer a nuclear danger? Should we drop all sanctions against Iran?

A1: The new NIE reports that Iran ended its secret effort to develop a nuclear device in 2003. Iran, however, continues to develop the technology to enrich uranium and produce plutonium. These would give Iran the basic means to build a nuclear weapon should it turn a nuclear weapons program back on in the future. As a result, Iran's uranium and plutonium programs are still a concern for U.S. security and are still operating in violation of binding UN Security Council resolutions.

That being said, the fact that Iran appears to have voluntarily ended its nuclear weapons program in response to international pressure shows that outside influence can change Iran's behavior. The challenge now for decisionmakers is to find the right balance of influences—both incentives and disincentives—to encourage further positive change in Iran's behavior.

Q2: Does the new NIE make getting international support for sanctions more difficult?

A2: There is already a great deal of skepticism that sanctions alone will lead Iran to end its nuclear programs. The finding that Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003 will further reduce support for tougher sanctions and make it easier for Iran to avoid punishment for defying international nuclear inspectors and for pursuing an enrichment program in violation of three UN Security Council resolutions.

Q3: How long will it be before Iran can build a nuclear weapon?

A3: The NIE contains new estimates on when Iran will become capable of producing enough material for a nuclear weapon, even though there are no conclusive signs Iran will make that decision. The new estimate is that, at the earliest, Iran might be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear device by 2009 but that it is likely to take much longer than that, possibly as late as 2015.

Q4: Is this new NIE another intelligence failure? Is this Iraq all over again?

A4: In fact, the NIE is the opposite of Iraq. We want and need our intelligence community to find exactly this kind of critical information. If we had known that Iraq had ended its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs in the 1990s, the war might never have happened. The fact that our intelligence community can determine with such confidence that Iran's nuclear weapons program ended in 2003 provides the United States with an opportunity to recalibrate its policy toward Iran without the looming threat of a nuclear conflict. The question now is what policymakers will do with that new information.

Q5: How will Iran and its neighbors respond to the NIE?

A5: Iran will trumpet its vindication. The report will deal a serious blow to U.S. credibility in the region. After attesting to the presence of an Iranian weapons program two years ago and now asserting that such an assessment was never accurate, Gulf states will interpret U.S. intelligence not only as unreliable, but also unstable.

Q6: What does the NIE mean for the Bush administration's Iran policy?

A6: The NIE takes the urgency out of the international community's need to deal with Iran, and it will have the effect of undermining calls for international unity. This is ironic, because the thrust of the NIE is that it was precisely collective international action that caused Iran to discontinue its program in 2003.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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