

The Iran NIE: A Template of Analysis?

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After reading the Iran NIE and many of the related articles, there are a few fundamental issues that have not been raised. Let's begin with the "money quote" used by the New York Times to indicate that Iran has stopped pursuing its nuclear ambitions. The NIE states:

"Our assessment that Iran halted the program in 2003 primarily in response to international pressure 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....."

What I find interesting about this caption is that, 40 years ago, the same sentiments and analysis were used by State Department officials covering nuclear issues. Given the departmental background of those who led the Iranian NIE effort, it is prudent to bring similar works by the US State Department to light.

In declassified reports dating from 1966 to 1974, the US State Department was involved in trying to influence India's nuclear program to head off any pursuit of atomic weapons. The parallels between these messages written roughly forty years ago and the above quoted passages of the Iranian NIE are eerily similar. These State Department messages tried to argue that a cost-benefit analysis clearly demonstrated it was not in India's best interests to pursue nuclear weaponry.[1] They tried to delineate the costs that New Dehli would incur as economically, politically, and militarily prohibitive.[2]

Bottom line: These arguments did not work. India detonated a nuclear device on 18 May 1974 in the Rajasthan Desert. Geo-politically speaking, the Indian Government did not see this decision based in a "cost-benefit" light. There were other factors, including the threat posed by a nuclear armed China, which figured more prominently in the Indian leadership's calculations.

The similarities in the wording of the Iranian NIE passage in question and those State Department messages regarding India's nuclear program beg three essential questions:

- Was the leadership of the NIE team in an analytical rut was in when it drafted this current NIE regarding nuclear issues?
- Was a "cost-benefit" analytical paradigm paramount in the authors' mind when the piece was organized and crafted?
- The cost-benefit argument did not ultimately hold much sway with the Indians. Why do we think the "cost-benefit" paradigm will hold true in the Iranian case?

This brings me to the very next paragraph of the Iranian NIE

"We assess with moderate confidence that convincing the Iranian leadership to forgo the eventual development of nuclear weapons will be difficult given the linkage many within the leadership probably see between nuclear weapons development and Iran's key national security and foreign policy objectives, and given Iran's considerable effort from at least the late 1980s to 2003 to develop such weapons. In our judgment, only an Iranian political decision to abandon a nuclear weapons objective would plausibly keep Iran from eventually producing nuclear weapons-and such a decision is inherently reversible."

These statements clearly address the idea that the political will of the Iranian regime is the ultimate key to their pursuit of nuclear weapons. The regime feels threatened by the US's massive military buildup in the region, the status of Israel's nuclear armaments, and the very existence of Israel. Any one of these political issues could easily trump a "cost-benefit analysis."

Granted we are all sitting on the outside looking in, however, there are solid reasons to be nervous about this estimate. Effective arguments can be made that Ahmadinejad is motivated more by prophesy than he is by a "cost-benefit" analysis.[3] Missing the mark on this estimate allows a leader with messianic tendencies to obtain nuclear weapons. There have been calls made for outside panel to review the NIE.....maybe that is not such a bad idea in this case.

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[1] Reports cited in this piece:

http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/ipn9_1.htm

http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/ipn11_1.htm

http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/ipn12_1.htm

http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB6/ipn19_1.htm

[2] Interestingly enough, there was a quote from one of the documents that stated "Although tailored to the specific Indian problem, we believe that some of the principles enunciated below can be usefully employed in other areas where one or more states have developed significant capability in the nuclear field." This situation is remarkably similar to the issues in the Middle East today.

[3] http://www.americanthinker.com/2007/09/who_is_mahmoud_ahmadinejad_1.html