

When The Knight Is Worse Than The Dragon

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When the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in November stated that Iran had suspended its Nuclear Weapons program, people all over the United States were jubilant. What were they happy about? I'll give you a hint: It wasn't that Iran had been successfully "deterred" from developing a nuclear weapon. The majority likely didn't even entirely believe the report, finding it impossible to think that public opinion and political aftermath from the Iraqi intelligence debacle didn't have an effect on the conclusion. Even if they did, the now lame duck President was quick to point out, that very same morning, that the NIE did not completely vindicate Iran; It did not reveal that Natanz was actually one giant botanical garden full of colorful flowers, singing butterflies and happy children. The report that was declassified stated, "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program"ⁱ then proceeded to discuss Iran's past efforts to make a nuclear weapon. It then stated with "low confidence" that Iran had probably imported some weapons fissible material, projected with "moderate to high confidence" that Iran was keeping the nuclear option open, and ended on the cheery note that, "We assess with high confidence that Iran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity eventually to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so."

Those of us without secret clearances could have come to similar conclusions just from information in the press about suspicious nuclear experimentation not related to civilian power generation, Iran not yet actually having any civilian nuclear-power reactors to burn the Iranian Uranium (the ones the Russians produced will be burning exclusively Russian fuel), and an Iranian opposition group having to alert IAEA inspectors about the, until then, secret uranium-enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy-water reactor that produces plutonium at Arak.ⁱⁱ As the consensus of American Intelligence Agencies stated, Iran clearly has the potential to develop a nuclear weapon.

So, if the masses weren't celebrating that Iran's nuclear program had been halted, what were they happy about? The answer: They were happy that the report had effectively impeded our stalwart Commander in Chief from dealing with the issue of a nuclear Iran. Sanctions and military might have been the two hallmarks of this administration's approach towards foreign policy. The NIE report called into serious question the logic under-pinning the UN Sanctions that have been levied on Iran and caused support for a third round of such measures to fall apart. The report also makes it very difficult for the White House to go launch any large scale military actions against Iran, a possibility which has always been officially remote yet very feared among circles of public opinion, before Bush leaves office.

Iran's Nuclear program is a serious issue. Just last week the IAEA released a public report that stated Iran was still not fully cooperating with them, and was carrying out experiments that could lead towards the development of nuclear weapons. Those who believe in Nuclear non-proliferation want to see this issue dealt with, but Bush is not the man to do it. His two main projects, Iraq and the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan,

have spoiled (at least for the time being) the American appetite for foreign adventures, making his talk of “leaving all options on the table” unpalatable to the American public. In addition, the constant stream of anti-Iranian rhetoric from the White House and this administration leading the charge on sanctions which are not yielding (nor ever historically have) results leaves Bush politically bankrupt of capital for any diplomatic undertakings.

As bad as a Nuclear Iran might be, the masses seem to think that Bush dealing with the problem could prove to be even worse. Anything Bush does or tries to do in regard to Iran will either be, or be perceived as, threatening. Thus, anything they do will lead to deadlock at the best, but they are capable of doing much worse. The entire administration is tainted in this regard. The world needs either a country with more political capital to take the lead, or the United States needs a new leader who can meet Iran at the negotiation table without the albatross that Bush, and everyone associated with the administration, carry.

As for the first option: two rounds of sanctions have cleared the Security Council; since we have been able to accomplish nothing else in the United Nations since invading Iraq, this would strongly suggest that there is international interest in addressing the issue. Yet, no other country seems willing or able to take the lead in this effort. As for the second... it is an election year. The Global Village now has but to wait until its maleficly quixotic defender is vanquished by the sands of time, and a more worthy successor takes up his tarnished mantle.

ⁱ National Intelligence Estimate: Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities, November 2007. http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf. All references to the contents of the report are from this source.

ⁱⁱ “Briefing: Iran’s nuclear programme”, *The Economist*, February 2nd-8th, 2008.