

May 2007

**Kepper Pickard (SM '07, MIT)**, student in Belfer Center Director Graham Allison's spring semester 2007 Kennedy School class – Central Challenges in American Foreign Policy – submitted the following memo for a class assignment. The assignment was to develop “options” for the President to consider in dealing with Iran that “best protect and advance American national interests.”

TO: Deputy Secretary of State Negroponte  
FROM: XXX  
DATE: February 26, 2007  
RE: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO IRANIAN NUCLEAR WEAPONS PROGRAM

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**ISSUE:** Iran continues its uranium enrichment program and, without further action, may be less than one year away from producing enough HEU to build a nuclear weapon. Therefore, time and Iranian technical capability are our critical variables. **Any course of action, with respect to Iran, must serve to halt or delay its weapons fuel production capability in the near term.**

**US NATIONAL INTERESTS:** This administration must take a rapid, coordinated political, diplomatic, and military approach to the Iranian problem in order to:

- Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of regionally destabilizing nuclear weapons. (Vital)
- Ensure US allies' survival and their active cooperation with the US. (Vital)
- Ensure the viability and stability of major global systems. (Energy resources) (Vital)
- Prevent, deter, and reduce the threat of the use of WMDs anywhere. (Extremely Important)
- Prevent regional proliferation of WMD and delivery systems. (Extremely Important)
- Prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon in important regions, especially the Persian Gulf. (Extremely Important)

**OBJECTIVES:** Near-term US objectives must focus on limiting Iranian ability to create the necessary elements of a nuclear weapon. We are severely constrained by limited time until they have those elements and an ever-increasing Iranian technological capability.

NEAR-TERM:

- Prevent or delay Iranian HEU production. (Time)
- Prevent Iranian acquisition of completed WMD or weapons-grade fissile material. (Time)
- Eliminate further international technical assistance to Iranian nuclear program. (Capability)

LONG-TERM:

- Dissuade Iran from hegemonic regional aspirations.
- Avoid a regionally (and potentially globally) destabilizing WMD arms race.

**DISCUSSION:** A nuclear-armed Iran threatens the survival and strategic position of key regional allies and significantly alters the strategic flexibility of the United States in the Middle East.

Ideally, we should work to avoid direct US military action against Iran while leveraging their interests to suspend or halt enrichment operations. Unfortunately, Iran is both financially and politically insulated from the US, severely degrading our response options. *Direct US leverage over Iran is almost strictly limited to military options.* Furthermore, the regime's domestic and international position has strengthened.

- Domestically, rising oil prices have helped ease the negative economic effects of unilateral US sanctions and left Tehran with money to rebuild civilian infrastructure, modernize its military, and invest vast sums in its nuclear program.
- Regionally, the US military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have eliminated enemies on the borders of Iran. Hezbollah has become the major political actor in Lebanon. The resurgence of the Iraqi Shi'a majority provides a natural ally to Tehran and further serves as a conveyor of Iranian political influence. This expanded Iranian regional influence greatly concerns the moderate Sunni Arab nations that have significant and marginalized Shi'a minority populations. A nuclear-armed Iran could incite a regional nuclear arms race.
- In the wider international domain, the ability of Iran to foster bi-lateral relations (including exchanges of nuclear technical assistance for resource concessions) with China and Russia will make it extremely difficult (though not impossible) for the US to leverage established international organizations, specifically the UNSC, to authorize any pre-emptive action against the Iranian nuclear program. For this reason, it is critical that we work with these nations on this crisis.
- Iran's historic ties to and support for terrorist organizations, combined with the Iranian government's vitriolic rhetoric towards US allies and the US, makes any Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons a grave proliferation concern.

**The challenge of any US strategy will be to regain political and diplomatic leverage and**

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminates known enrichment facilities.</li> <li>• May delay HEU production by up to 5 years.</li> <li>• Does not require much lead-time.</li> <li>• Within current Israeli capabilities.</li> <li>• Israel willing to bear political and military cost of operation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not eliminate Iranian technical knowledge</li> <li>• Politically dangerous: will inflame Muslims and regional nations.</li> <li>• "One-shot deal": any failure would require follow-on US military action.</li> <li>• Will harden Iranians against future negotiations.</li> <li>• Does not account for parallel, covert facilities or externally acquired HEU.</li> </ul>

**initiative in order to prevent the destabilizing influence of a nuclear Iran.**

**THE OPTIONS**

**Option 1: Plausible Deniability.** (67% chance of success, within 2 mos)

This option would grant tacit approval to Israel to plan and execute air strikes on Iranian enrichment facilities (specifically Natanz and Isfahan). Think of this as buying time...at a cost. This is a limited option that will only delay Iranian HEU production by destroying known, current enrichment facilities as a "set back" to the Iranian program, not destroy any latent capability for future production. We would limit our involvement to not forcibly preventing Israeli aircraft from utilizing Iraqi airspace. The US would not directly participate in the attacks and would maintain a hands-off approach to Israeli conduct of the raid.

**Option 2: Big Stick Diplomacy.** (50% chance of success, within 1 year)

In this option, the US, with the Western Powers, would take charge of negotiations, but reserve the threat of pre-emptive action against Iranian nuclear infrastructure for failure to comply with IAEA demands to suspend enrichment operations. The US commits itself to diligently and faithfully negotiate with all interested parties, but sets red lines as a trip wire for further action. The US will take no pre-emptive action unless Iran: 1) stops cooperating with the IAEA inspectors; 2) continues HEU facility construction (specifically, centrifuges); 3) takes steps to acquire weapons grade fissile

material. This option places the onus on Iran to prove peaceful purposes to its nuclear ambitions and holds them to their NNPT responsibilities, while allowing the US freedom of pre-emption.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard line may mean more control over outcome and timing</li> <li>• Allows US to maintain unity of action and command of process</li> <li>• Forces burden of outcome on Iran</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not much maneuvering room for negotiation.</li> <li>• Almost no support from Russian, China.</li> <li>• Risks rapid escalation...”Brinkmanship”</li> <li>• Limited follow-up ability</li> </ul>

**Option 3: Comprehensive Negotiation** (67% chance of success, within 1 year)

This option utilizes the EU, Russia, and China’s political and economic resources to counteract the lack of US diplomatic leverage, with respect to Iran, in an effort to produce a near-term win and a long-term solution. The idea here is that you must give something to get something. The US would take pre-emption off of the table by offering a conditional security guarantee in exchange for verifiable suspension of uranium enrichment. Our main effort would include organizing five party negotiations (US, EU, China, Russia, Iran) to set conditions for Iranian acquiescence to UNSCR 1737. Although Russia and China resist increasing pressure on Iran, the US must emphasize and convince them of the global security risk a nuclear Iran presents. In an effort to demonstrate our credibility, we would additionally indicate that progress in reaching a permanent settlement could result in opportunities for advancements in bi-lateral US-Iran relations, up to and including diplomatic recognition and normalization.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most likely to gain international support.</li> <li>• Familiar framework. (North Korea)</li> <li>• Provides room for negotiation.</li> <li>• Addresses Iranian security concerns.</li> <li>• Best chance for a long-term solution.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Severely limits fallback options, should strategy fail (no time left).</li> <li>• May be portrayed as weakness...risks appearance of “nuclear blackmail.”</li> <li>• Gives Iran opportunity to stall for time.</li> <li>• Politically difficult in US. May be characterized as appeasement.</li> </ul>

**RECOMMENDATION: Comprehensive Negotiation**

A nuclear Iran is both an extremely destabilizing regional influence and serves as a significant proliferation danger. The near-term is critical, but accomplishing a concurrent long-term solution is worth the political capital that will likely be expended on this effort. We must work to ensure that Iran and our partner negotiators recognize that non-proliferation is a vital interest to all parties.

**IMPLEMENTATION:**

- Secretary Rice should immediately call for the Five Party Conference to convene in either London or Moscow within two weeks to begin baseline negotiation strategy.
- The President should authorize Secretary Rice to make clear to Iran that a US security guarantee will immediately follow verifiable Iranian halting of uranium enrichment.
- In a show of good faith to Iran, Secretary Gates should posture US forces in the Persian Gulf in a clearly de-escalatory nature, especially naval and air forces.

- A Positive Iranian response includes immediate halting of enrichment processes to include uranium centrifuge operation, construction, and design; IAEA inspectors must be granted unfettered access into any and all Iranian nuclear facilities.
- A negative Iranian response includes any undue delay in either response or negotiations; refusal of access to IAEA inspectors,
- In response to a positive Iranian reply the US will agree not to attack or provoke attack from Iran. Unilateral economic sanctions instituted after the initial failure of Iran to abide by UNSCR 1737 will be rescinded. US to provide technical assistance for civilian reactors.

**FALL BACK:**

Should the Iranian government fail to provide a positive response, than the US would be backed against a wall with respect to time before Iran has the fissile material to build a nuclear device. In that case, the US should proceed with expedited Big Stick Diplomacy accompanied by an ultimatum. The goal of any strikes must be to set back the Iranian nuclear program by at least five years.