

## "A Major Reversal? The NIE Report on Iran"

The Director of National Intelligence of the United States released on December 3 a declassified version of a report, called a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), concerning Iran and nuclear weapons. The *New York Times* headlined it as a "major reversal." It "reversed" a previous NIE made in 2005. It signaled a shift in official U.S. policy. In 2005, the NIE "assess(ed) with high confidence that Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons." In 2007, the NIE "judge(d) with high confidence that in fall 2003, Teheran halted its nuclear weapons program."

Most of the press and public analysis of this report presumes that this assessment was made by the Director of National Intelligence and that it is being read by the Bush administration and the Congress who are only now taking it into account. Some have even called it a "coup" against Bush and/or Cheney and the neo-cons. I do not believe this sequence for a moment. I assume that the assessment has already been discussed within the Bush administration. After all, the report is said to have been written as much as a year ago. I believe that the report is the outcome of the discussion within the Bush administration, which made the decision with the knowledge and assent of George W. Bush that the report should be released to the public. The report will not lead to a reversal. It signals that the reversal has already occurred.

What may we infer from this? We can infer that the long ongoing debate between the faction that favored immediate military action against Iran (Cheney and his friends, the Israeli government and their friends) has lost out to the much larger faction that, for various reasons, thought such military action unwise. I am not surprised at this outcome, since I have long been arguing that the anti-immediate war faction was much stronger within the U.S. administration than the Cheney faction, particularly since the anti-immediate war faction includes the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

What will happen now in relation to Iran? Probably nothing very much. Russia, China, and Germany were already dragging their feet very obviously on further sanctions against Iran. There are unlikely to be further sanctions. Iran has persisted in its argument that it has the right to continue the development of its uranium enrichment program, while at the same time freezing its nuclear weapons development program. It will continue to do this for the time being.

The basic fact that we should always keep in mind is that the present U.S. administration has a full plate - maintaining its presence in Iraq, maintaining its presence in Afghanistan, and worrying about the very real possibility of the breakdown of order in Pakistan. Even George W. Bush can appreciate that Iran's possible development of nuclear weapons a decade from now cannot displace these other concerns as a priority.

The United States will no doubt keep up a verbal facade of criticism of Iran. See the President's public comments about the report. This rhetoric is similar to the verbal facade of favoring the creation of a Palestinian state by the end of 2008. But nobody is paying very much attention - not even the presidential candidates in the United States (of either party). These statements are just that - verbal facades. Bush is falling into a weary pattern of attempting face-saving as he lives out what will no doubt be an unhappy last year in office.

In the meantime, every one else around the world is thinking of what they should be doing in the Middle East after 2009, with most probably a Democratic president in office in the United States. It should seem obvious to them all that, at the moment, the one stable state in the Middle East is Iran. Iran to be sure has its internal conflicts and the Ahmadinejad faction may well lose the next elections. But Iran - an oil power, a Shia power, a military and demographic power in the region - is a major actor that has to be taken into account. Countries will prefer to have Iran on their side than against them. Iran is not going to go away.

Iran has over time made several offers to the United States of a deal, proposing that they work together on Iraq and other issues. The Bush administration wouldn't even acknowledge the gesture. It is now probably too late for the United States to make such a deal - but it is not too late for China or Russia or even western Europe. It is not even too late for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the two countries whose collapse would really unhinge the region in ways that would make the Iraq fiasco seem a petty annoyance.

Actually at this point I have the feeling that Condoleezza Rice and Robert Gates understand all this better than Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, but maybe not. In any case, I have the sense that the NIE assessment is an elegant way of saying: the Bush doctrine, *Requiescat in pace!*

by Immanuel Wallerstein