



The Center for Strategic and International Studies

## **“The United States and Iran: At a Dangerous Crossroads”**

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*Featuring:*

**Senator Chuck Hagel (R-NE)**

Full Text

“Over the last few weeks, the world has witnessed a disturbing series of events.

Martial law declared in Pakistan; state of emergency in Georgia; Turkey threatens to invade Iraq; six members of the Afghan parliament along with scores of others killed in one of Afghanistan’s largest ever suicide attacks; an escalating drumbeat of U.S.-Iran tensions; seventy six U.S. Senators supported a resolution urging the President to designate an entire branch of Iran’s military as a terrorist organization...and the President announced unprecedented unilateral sanctions against Iran’s forces; and, finally, President Bush warned of World War III unless Iran acts to stop its efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability.

These events are one frame of a broad confluence of events occurring in the world today. In the Middle East, Iraq is mired in a deep and dangerous civil war, with dim prospects for national political reconciliation. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict festers and worsens, and intra-Palestinian divisions present a pivotal obstacle, creating uncertain prospects for a U.S.-hosted peace conference. Syria is ostracized and insecure. Lebanon is paralyzed by a devastating political deadlock; Iran casts an unpredictable and ominous shadow over the region; and Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia are trapped in this dangerous net.

Globally, our relations with Russia have sunk to a new post-Cold War low. U.S.-Turkey relations are in tatters over our inability to translate Turkey’s 21st Century Government and objectives into a relationship of mutual interests that has been the case since World War II. The U.S.-India civil nuclear assistance deal has been set back and is now in a state of uncertainty. Afghanistan continues to lose ground...including record-breaking opium production...and Al Qaeda has re-emerged stronger than at any time since it was ousted from Afghanistan six years ago. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan represents the most dangerous zone in the world...and we have little control and limited influence over it. Nuclear armed India casts a wary eye on its nuclear armed neighbor to the west.

And, the price of oil edges close to \$100 per barrel. Record-breaking energy prices and surging demand are reshaping the global geopolitical economic power landscape...from Russia, China and India...to Angola, Nigeria, Venezuela, Norway...and the United States. The world is witnessing a diffusion of power never seen before that will increasingly be the norm for the 21st century.

Events are overtaking governments as they swirl in wild gyrations around us. All too often, we mistakenly try to compartmentalize and isolate events and issues, and do not stop to consider how a series of events are interconnected and impact the world. No nation can affect these events acting alone. Unless nations work to shape, influence and guide the course of global events, events will shape themselves...and the world, leading to an ever more dangerous planet.

The uncontrollable and combustible developments of the past few weeks present the reality of a world at an historic crossroads. This reality has forced some hopeful and positive recent events that can guide us to a new consensus in world affairs. Progress in North Korea as a result of the Group of Six working through a difficult and frustrating diplomatic-economic process appears to be bearing results...Secretary Rice's recent meetings in Turkey to address the future of Iraq with its neighbors...her meetings in the Middle East to establish a bold, breakthrough framework for a Middle East peace conference in the United States...strong and encouraging comments by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas about the prospect for peace...and the leaders of Turkey, France, and Germany here to confer with President Bush on the great challenges of our time. The world is moving toward a consensus of common interests.

We must not squander this moment.

In order to capture this opportunity, our policies, actions and relationships must be grounded by these common interests. In the Middle East, that means an integrated strategic U.S. foreign policy that encompasses all the nations of the region, oil, nonproliferation, political reform and more broadly Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Islamic world and international powers and institutions. One dimensional optics, policies, and blunt, "black or white" rhetoric, like "you're either with us or against us" won't work...haven't worked...and will fall far short of what is expected from American leadership.

As Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann, President of the American Academy of Diplomacy, wrote in his article, "Borderline Insanity: Thinking Big About Afghanistan," in the current edition of *The American Interest*, "beyond the challenge of dealing with multiple actors...is the challenge of integrating the multiple parts. Precisely because every part is difficult for someone, all of the parts need to be brought together as a package, so that commitments can balance and sustain each other." Ambassador Neumann went on to say, "that's the only way to de-fang the terrorist threat incubating in this critical part of the world." Ambassador Neumann has stated the essence of 21st century diplomacy.

The world we live in today is an incredibly complex and interconnected web of many interests...political, security, economic, cultural, religious and societal. A 21st Century frame of reference will be required to address the layers of global challenges that face the six and a half billion citizens of the world. Loose talk of World War III, intimidation, threats, bellicose speeches only heighten the dangers we face in the world. Without offering solutions and building international alliances we only strengthen the hand of those who prey upon and play to a confused, frightened and disorganized world.

Last week I received an e-mail from a friend who is an Australian Vietnam veteran regarding the U.S. and Iran. He wrote, “Fear, I see it in your debates on immigration, trade, Iran and now even your economy. Since when has your great nation and people been afraid? You, like Aussies, have always had a ‘fair crack’ at things, and a ‘fair go for everyone.’ Where is America’s clear voice of sanity? Why are you so afraid to talk to Iran?”

America must not allow itself to become paralyzed by a fear that erodes our self confidence and trust in our Constitution and each other.

The world is living through one of those rare and defining times in history. Our decisions today carry deep implications that will shape the world’s future...similar to the time of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy during the Cold War. The choices that our leaders make over the next few years will frame the structure and set the course for global security well into the new century. Just as was the case after World War II, America must again lead from the strength of common purpose and common interest. Working with allies and through alliances—recognizing this is often frustrating and imperfect—but there is no other option for world leadership. The challenge of Iran will not be successfully met without Russia and China and the world community. The answer to dealing with Iran will not be found in a military operation. The U.S. is currently bogged down in two wars. Our military is terribly overburdened and we are doing great damage to our force structure and readiness capabilities.

In the Middle East of the 21st Century, Iran will be a key center of gravity...and remain a significant regional power. The United States cannot change that reality. America’s strategic thinking and policies for the Middle East must acknowledge the role of Iran today and well into the future.

To acknowledge that reality in no way confuses Iran’s dangerous, destabilizing and threatening behavior in the region. Our differences with Iran are real. Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism and continues to provide material support to Hezbollah and Hamas. The President of Iran publicly threatens Israel’s existence and is attempting to develop the capacity to produce nuclear weapons. Iran has not helped stabilize the current chaos in Iraq and is responsible for weapons and explosives being used against U.S. military forces in Iraq.

Yet, America’s military might alone cannot successfully address these challenges or achieve any level of sustainable stability with Iran. The United States must employ a comprehensive strategy that uses all of its tools of influence within its foreign policy arsenal— political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military.

In the last two years, the United States has worked closely with the permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany, Japan, and other key states as well as the UN Secretary General and the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to pursue a diplomatic strategy regarding Iran’s nuclear program. The UN Security Council has adopted two binding resolutions calling on Iran to fully disclose its nuclear program and come into compliance with its international nuclear obligations.

Offers have been made to Iran by the informal coalition known as the “P-5 + 1” (made up of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council...China, France, Russia, the U.S., the UK...and Germany) to address their nuclear concerns and find ways to build on common interests like trade.

Today, the IAEA will hold its latest round of technical talks with Iran in Vienna based on the agreement between the IAEA and Iran to fully address all nuclear questions by December. The IAEA Board of Governors will be briefed on this process later this month.

I have supported these efforts. Maintaining a cohesive, concentrated and united international front remains an effective and responsible element of a strategic policy toward Iran.

There are differences within our international partnership on Iran. Prospects for further action in the UN Security Council are in question, and we appear increasingly reliant on a single-track effort to expand unilateral financial pressure on Iran outside of the UN Security Council with only a select few of our international partners. Iran's actions, both on its nuclear program and in Iraq, are unchanged. Yesterday, the Iranian President said again that his country's nuclear program is "irreversible." Iran's leaders appear increasingly confident in their position vis-à-vis the United States. And, concerns remain that the United States' real objective in Iran is regime change, not a change in Iran's behavior.

Last month, I wrote President Bush expressing my concerns about the path that we are now on regarding Iran. I told him that unless there is a strategic shift in our policies, I believe the United States will find itself in a dangerous and increasingly isolated position in the coming months. I do not see how the collective actions that we are now taking will produce the results that we seek – on Iran's nuclear program, in Iraq, on the Israel-Palestine issue, or on any issue. If this continues unchanged, countries will grow uncertain over our motives and more unwilling to risk tougher measures against Iran. Our ability to sustain a united international front will weaken, leaving us with limited options.

Vice President Cheney said last month that, "The Iranian regime needs to know that if it stays on its present course, the international community is prepared to impose serious consequences.... We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." But, what confidence should we have in a strategy that, to date, has nothing to show for it?...that has achieved no tangible changes to Iran's nuclear program and actually has seen the Middle East become more dangerous and Iran more defiant? Is the U.S. pursuing a policy that could very well produce a self-fulfilling prophecy of the President's warning of World War III?

The United States must employ wise statecraft to redirect deepening tensions with Iran toward a higher ground of resolution. We are at that crossroads. We must be clear that the United States does not...does not...seek regime change in Iran. There can be no ambiguity on this point. We must be clear that our objections are to the actions and policies of the Iranian government...not the Iranian people...and that improved U.S.-Iran relations are a real possibility and clearly in the interests of the Iranian people, the Middle East and the United States.

In the last year, the President has authorized the U.S. Ambassador in Iraq, Ryan Crocker, to hold narrow and limited-agenda bilateral talks with Iranian officials regarding Iraq and I have supported this effort. Three rounds of talks have been held, with another round scheduled soon.

However, now is the time for the United States to actively pursue an offer of direct, unconditional, and comprehensive talks with Iran. We cannot afford to refuse to consider this strategic choice any longer. We should make clear that everything is on the table – our issues and Iran's...similar to the opportunity that we squandered in 2003 for comprehensive talks with Iran. This should include offering Iran a credible way back in from the fringes of the international community, security guarantees if it is willing to give up nuclear weapons ambitions, as well as other incentives. This will require the day-to-day efforts and presence of a very senior administration official, higher ranking than the American Ambassador to Iraq.

The offer should be made even as we continue other elements of our strategy...working with our allies on multilateral sanctions applying financial pressure...working in the UN Security Council on a third sanctions resolution...and

working in the region to support those Middle East countries who share our concerns with Iran. We should seek to work in concert with Russian President Putin, who traveled to Tehran last month to visit the Supreme Leader of Iran, Grand Ayatollah Khamenei and propose a new initiative to help resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. We should seriously explore the proposal from the Arab Gulf States...announced by Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud... to establish a nuclear consortium to provide any Middle East state with enriched nuclear fuel, including Iran. Initial Iranian reactions could provide an opening for common interests.

Creative approaches like these, rather than war speeches and talk of World War III, would strengthen our ability across the board to deal with Iran. Our friends and allies and international institutions would be more confident to stand with us...not just because of our power...but rather because they trusted our purpose, our words and our actions. It could create a new dynamic in U.S.-Iran relations, in part by incentivizing the Iranians to react to the possibility of better relations with the West...because it is in their interests. We should be prepared that any dialogue with Iran will take time and diplomatic effort, focus and discipline.

Engagement should not be limited to government-to-government contact. We must reach out at all levels. As I called for earlier this year, part of that initiative could be offering to re-open a consulate in Tehran...not formal diplomatic relations...but a Consulate...to help encourage and facilitate people-to-people exchanges. U.S.-Iranian parliamentary exchanges would be beneficial to both sides. All nations of Europe and most of our allies in the Middle East and Asia presently have diplomatic relations with Iran. Like with Cuba, the United States finds itself alone.

By refusing to engage Iran in direct, unconditional and comprehensive talks, we are perpetuating dangerous geopolitical unpredictabilities. Our refusal to recognize Iran's influence does not decrease its influence, but rather increases it. Diplomacy is an essential tool to ratchet down the pressure of conflict, increase the leverage of strength and create dialogue and opportunities to identify common interests.

To be sure, hard choices face the Iranian government as well. Does Tehran want to perpetuate tensions with "the Great Satan" to distract the Iranian people from an increasingly dire and stagnant economic situation and social contradictions and stresses that ultimately point to economic collapse? Will the Iranian government decide that conflict is preferable to a beginning of reconciliation with America and opening to international acceptance? I do not know.

It may be that Iranian President Ahmadinejad wants to take his country into conflict with the United States. He may believe that baiting the United States into striking Iran will allow him to consolidate clear control over the Iranian government, including by undermining the influence of Iran's Supreme Leader.

We must not play the Iranian President's game by allowing ourselves to recklessly ricochet into a conflict that could help unite Iran and the Muslim world behind the very extremists that we should be isolating. Our strategy must be smarter...wiser...and get above the Iranian President. We must demonstrate to the rest of Iran's leaders, the Iranian people, the Middle East and the world that it is an irresponsible Iranian President who could take Iran into conflict...not the United States.

Our strategy must be one focused on direct engagement and diplomacy...backed by the leverage of international pressure, military options, isolation and containment...not unlike the strategies that the United States pursued during the Cold War against the Soviet Union... with Libya that has led to Libya's reintegration into the global community...and as we are doing today through the "Six-Party" process to address the North Korea nuclear issue.

The core tenets of George Kennan's "The Long Telegram" and the strategy of containment remain relevant today. This is how we should have handled Saddam Hussein.

Continued hostile relations between the United States and Iran will have the effect of isolating the United States as countries in the region move around us to address their own national interests.

Inside Iran, there are social strains and serious differences of opinion in a population of sixty-five million where two-thirds are under the age of thirty. Iran's economy is plagued by contradictions, inefficiencies and structural problems. And, there are political divides in Tehran, most notably the fact that one of President Ahmadinejad's key opponents, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, the former President of Iran, is now the Chairman of the Assembly of Experts...the body charged with selecting the next Supreme Leader in Iran, a very powerful position. Our strategy should exploit these differences.

America is the great power – not Iran. Because of that awesome responsibility that comes with great power, we must be more mature in testing the proposition that the United States and Iran can overcome decades of mutual mistrust, suspicion and hostility.

The United States must be wise enough...and patient enough...not to follow the same destructive path on Iran that we did on Iraq. We blundered into Iraq because of flawed intelligence, flawed assumptions, flawed judgments, and questionable intentions.

America and the Middle East face enormous challenges...defining challenges that will shape this region for decades to come. It is not simply Iran and Iraq that we must grapple with now. The Israel-Palestine conflict, with its connections to Lebanon, Syria, Iran and beyond, is also approaching a defining crossroads. The Arab world has renewed its Arab Peace Initiative. Israeli President Olmert and Palestinian President Abbas are attempting to re-establish a basis of trust to launch new peace talks. The U.S. proposed peace conference could be the beginning of a new round of peace process negotiations...moving this deadly problem to a new high ground of hope and action.

But deep questions remain. To succeed, President Bush must become actively invested in the negotiations. In the Middle East, Hamas cannot be simply ignored like before. We must not pursue again a policy premised on an illusory hope that Hamas will collapse through isolation. Nor can Syria be excluded. Serious focus must be given to the "Israel-Syria" track, as part of any peace process.

These are all components of putting into perspective a Middle East 21st Century strategic context for our policies, actions and words. These challenges that confront us now will not simply wait for the next American president. Over the last few years the United States has lost considerable influence and trust in the Middle East and the world...which has undermined the expectations of American leadership in the eyes of world. In Michael Korda's biography of Dwight Eisenhower, "Ike," he writes that Eisenhower warned, "the United States has no business transforming itself into 'an occupying power in a seething Arab world' ...and that if we should ever do so, 'I'm sure we would regret it.'" I wonder what Ike would think of our current predicament in the Middle East.

Lasting solutions in the Middle East lie beyond January 2009. One of the most significant and potentially lasting contributions that this President could leave the United States and the world would be to begin to reverse the dangerous slide of America's global standing and influence. Twenty years ago, sustained, disciplined diplomacy under President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker laid the groundwork for Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic breakthroughs under the Clinton Administration. Today, the Administration must play for the "day after,"

help set up the next phase of peace efforts, and not seek hurried, but unsustainable achievements. Over the next year, this Administration should “tee-up” the next phase of the Middle East peace puzzle. Move as far as realistic, achievable and responsible – but play for the long term...the lasting product...the one with real adhesive to it. This will require addressing Iran.

As a great power, America must understand not just its interests and strengths...but its limitations. With little time, credibility and international capital, the focus must be on what is possible and smart. As David Ignatius wrote in the Washington Post this week in regard to Pakistan, “history suggests that the more we meddle, the more likely we are to get things wrong.”

None of us –in public office today—the Administration, Congress, our Presidential candidates – are fulfilling the requirements of leadership at a crossroads time in history...nor are we absorbing the enormity of the time in which we are living. Neither Republican nor Democratic candidates are speaking to the great challenges of our time...in particular Iran...with depth, strategic thinking and wise words. We are captive to the lowest common denominator of “who can talk the toughest” and who is the “meanest cowboy on the block.” That kind of rhetoric...political as it may be...will only drive the world further away from America and deepen a world crisis...that we may not be able to recover from. At times, the debate is astoundingly uninformed. Before it is over, the American people will be subjected to nearly two years of a media circus surrounding our presidential election where the candidates are reduced to verbal ping pong volleys on the great issues of the day.

Rather than acting like a nation riddled with the insecurities of a schoolyard bully, we ought to carry ourselves with the confidence that should come from the dignity of our heritage...from the experience of our history...and from the strength of our humanity...not from the power of our military.

Since World War II, American leadership has, for the most part, been a stabilizing force for the world, which has been beneficial for our country and the world. It has been wise American leadership that has helped navigate through crises in Berlin, the Suez Canal, Cuba and elsewhere. It is American leadership that created the array of international institutions, alliances, structures and treaties that brought peace and prosperity to most of the world that had been devastated by two world wars.

The world faces challenges and opportunities today that carry with it implications well beyond this moment in time. American leadership is once again being called on at yet another transformational time in history to help set a new course for a rudderless world drifting in a sea of combustible dangers. In engaging Iran, the Middle East and the world we must be wide in our scope, clear in our purpose, measured in our words, strong in our actions, generous in our spirit, humble in our attitude and wise in our course.

The U.S. and Iran find themselves at a historic crossroads. What path we take will affect the future of mankind.”