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Iran: Challenges for US Intelligence and Policy

By Robert Jervis

Synopsis

Dealing with Iran and its nuclear programmes challenges the skill and ingenuity of American intelligence and policymakers. Crafting a successful policy requires understanding Iran, but such judgments are politically as well as intellectually difficult.

Commentary

NO ISSUE is receiving more attention in American intelligence and policy-making circles than Iran, particularly its nuclear programme. One can argue that this is foolish - that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be a great menace to American core interests, and that there are more serious threats that face the United States.

But right or wrong, Iran is at the top of the American agenda, and intelligence on both technical and political questions are at the centre of discussion.

Why intelligence is hard

Casual observers and many political leaders have high expectations for intelligence, thinking that it should be the norm to get other countries right. But this sunny view is not correct when we are dealing with adversaries who are out to fool us, and, of course, it is these countries that are most likely to be threatening. Even with advanced technology, there is no reason to expect the seekers to have major advantages over the hidiers, especially because when information sources are highly limited, deception can be effective. This is particularly true when the image the deceiver seeks to project fits with the perceiver's general beliefs and expectations.

In a solid relationship, partners do not expect deception. In international politics, they usually do. While this makes deception easier to detect, it can also lead to the discounting of valid information. This is one of the reasons for the intelligence failure over Iraq. The CIA knew that it was seeing relatively few signs of WMD programmes, but explained this as the result of Iraq's extensive programme of denial and deception.

Most countries and their leaderships are complicated and hard to understand, and the most disturbing aspect of the intelligence failure in Iraq is that these (incorrect) judgments made a great deal more sense than did the truth. Saddam's views are hard to unravel after the fact and would have been almost impossible to have grasped with the sort of evidence that even the best intelligence service might have been able to provide.

Links between intelligence and policy

While popular opinion often sees international politics like a game of poker, a better analogy is to the Japanese short story and film *Rashomon*, in which each participant sees the situation very differently. But it is even worse than this because policymakers and even intelligence officials often fail to realise this.

The most important question intelligence needs to address is one that is closely linked to policy, and this creates difficulties beyond the formidable intellectual ones that it entails. Put most simply, what are Iran's motives for seeking, if not nuclear weapons, at least a threshold capacity for producing them? Is Iran driven by the desire to dominate its neighbours, support radical groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, drive the US out of the region, and coerce if not destroy Israel? Or is it primarily motivated by fear of the US and the desire to make the state and the regime secure?

In the former case, the US has little choice other than to follow a firm policy of containment, if not prevention or even regime change. Measures of conciliation will deserve the epithet "appeasement" because they will be worse than ineffective. But if Iran's motives are largely defensive, then conciliation is in fact the best policy and belligerence on the part of the West is the problem, not the solution. Iran then would need to be reassured rather than, or at least in addition to, threatened.

So this question must—or at least should be—at the centre of intelligence analysis. It is extraordinarily difficult to answer, however, in part because it turns not only on analysis of the other state, but also of the US. That is, to see the other side as largely defensive and seeking security is to imply that it fears the US and believes that American policies have been not only hostile but aggressive.

One bright spot

There is one bright spot in this picture, however. Unlike many other cases, what the US wants to prevent is something that Iran says that it is pledged not to do. Under both of its Supreme Leaders, Iran has foresworn nuclear weapons. The majority of observers are skeptical, and of course this is at the root of the conflict. But Iran's declared policy might provide an excellent starting place for negotiations.

While the West would like Iran to stop all uranium enrichment, what it cares most about is that Iran not get, or get too close to, nuclear weapons. So "all" Iran has to do is to agree to arrangements that would reassure the world that it is living up to its policy. It goes without saying that this is difficult, but if Iran is sincere it really is easier than the task of much bargaining that centers on each side trying to change the other's objectives and behaviour.

Here we and Iran "merely" have to develop methods and procedures that would allow Iran to show that it is not developing nuclear weapons. The West and Iran want the same thing and should be able to work together toward this end.

Robert Jervis is Adlai E Stevenson Professor of International Politics, Department of Political Science and School of Public and International Affairs, Columbia University. He is also a non-visiting fellow of the United States Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.