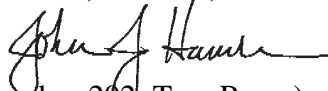


CSIS MEMORANDUM

To: CSIS Board of Trustees, Advisers, and Friends

From: John J. Hamre



Date: May 1, 2006 (Number 202. Two Pages)

Re: **Our Iran Dilemma**

This past weekend, CSIS sponsored a major private conference in Germany as part of our efforts to rebuild a working relationship with our European allies. We can't renew the trans-Atlantic partnership based only on nostalgia for the past. It must be grounded on a shared willingness to tackle problems we collectively face in the future. I shouldn't have been surprised that Iran featured so prominently in almost all of our discussions. But what emerged was a disturbing dilemma.

This was a very solid group of American and European diplomatic, political, and business leaders. There was no significant disagreement that we face a serious problem with Iran and that we need to work together on it. But there was a disturbing dilemma that emerged from our discussions.

The American government has said that it is "totally unacceptable" for Iran to develop nuclear weapons or the knowledge to make them. This implies we will go to war if we have to. Herein lies the rub.

I am convinced the Administration is proceeding very cautiously and is not on a conveyor belt to war. But European allies are not so certain. We had an extended discussion about the possibility of economic sanctions. And one thoughtful European said "you have to understand that to Europeans, the threat of sanctions is just seen as a formula for failure, which then justifies war action by America."

I had not fully appreciated the dilemma facing the Administration. The Administration has largely kept a measured tone in its public statements, but has proceeded with detailed planning as a quiet demonstration of resolve. When the subject of economic sanctions comes up in the American political context, it is almost always treated as a "second best" solution to a problem, even though it might be the best we can hope for. But for Europeans, it is seen as a staging ground to justify military action. So sanctions for America is a step back and sanctions for Europeans is a step too far.

In the play *Hamlet*, Shakespeare put into Hamlet's mouth words of irony that his mother so quickly married after the death of her husband, Hamlet's father: "The funeral bak'd meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables." That is what we now face in Iran. We are trying to approach the Iran problem in a very different way, but to Europe it looks like Iraq all over again.

The logic of the situation suggests that the President needs to be patient and very consultative if we are to have any success on a unified approach to Iran. The Europeans (and these were all very good friends of America) harbored deep suspicions that there is a

secret plan to go to war with Iran. I honestly don't think that is the case. But they suspect it, which makes the burdens of coordination much greater.

Successful sanctions will not only need to be carefully crafted—they will also take time to build, implement, and take effect. The Administration cannot argue for sanctions, therefore, while at the same time saying that the situation with Iran is urgent. If it does, it merely confirms European suspicions that “failed” sanctions will be used as a pretext to move forward with a military option.

Ultimately, we need to get our head around the sense of time and urgency. I think the popular prevailing sentiment here in Washington policy circles is that this is an urgent problem and time is running out. In a conversation with my colleague Tony Cordesman this morning, he argued that right now, in the very early stages of the Iranian nuclear weapons program, there are no good key chokepoint targets to attack. At this nascent stage of development, infrastructure is small, dispersed and easily reassembled. Later on, if the Iranians do proceed with a weapons program, they will necessarily have to commit to major facilities which are more likely to be bottlenecks. So rushing to conflict now may actually be counterproductive because there are not sufficient crucial targets where military action can make a difference.

This does give us time to think this through and develop an international consensus on paths of action. We are in the very early stages of this standoff, and it does not make sense to rush the crisis when the primary implication of haste is to narrow our own flexibility for action.

As always, I value your feedback. Please drop me a note at JHamre@csis.org

END