Strategic Options for Iran: Balancing Pressure with Diplomacy

Michael Van Dusen:
Good afternoon. I'm Mike Van Dusen, executive vice president of the Wilson Center, and I want a hearty welcome to all of you to be here today. As you know, the Wilson Center was chartered by the Congress as the official memorial to our 28th president. It is the nation's key non-partisan policy forum for tackling global issues through independent research, open dialogue, leading to actionable ideas for the Congress, the administration, and the broader policy community.

We're here today for the launch of the third report, I believe, of the Iran Project. And I'll be turning it over in one minute to the director of the Iran Project, but for the Center I would like to commend the Iran Project for their work. And I think that this third report, which seeks to juxtapose pressure and diplomacy in the right mix, is extraordinarily important, and we're very happy to be the launch for the third report as we were for the first report.

Today's session will be moderated by Ambassador Carla Hills, and the panelists are Ambassador Jim Dobbins, Ambassador Tom Pickering, and Dr. Walsh from MIT. And I want to turn over the podium to Ambassador Bill Luers who is a former scholar at the Wilson Center, and, again, thank you all for coming. I look forward to hearing this event.

William Luers:
I'm many former things, but one of the things I am today is trying to introduce a program which most of you know about by now. The Iran Project has been around for -- in various formulations for about 10 years, 12 years. Right after 2001 we started this and some of the original people are here and many of you know what we've been trying to do over

campaign and our Hill campaign and all of the work we're doing. And the Iran Strategy Group, which Joel heads, is remarkable support for everything we try to do. And then I must mention Stephen Heintz, who is head of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and it was Stephen and I who began this some 12 years ago, and he's been my partner and supporter ever since. And, Stephen, good to have you here.

I've got to mention, also, Iris, my colleague. The game that we have in the office is I think up all the things I can think up and then she figures out if she can get them all done in one day and she does. She's a marvelous partner and, Iris, I've got to say here, I don't know where we'd be on any of these reports if we didn't have you. And Sally sitting next to her, who is Sally Donnelly [spelled phonetically], who came on to introduce us to many of the military people we have, and she's a real force in this city. Sally, thank you for coming.

In the group we have today, I'd like to say Dobbins keeps us practical, Walsh keeps us accurate, and Pickering keeps us wise. That's sort of where they will come out in this discussion, I hope. And the process we have in drafting these papers is very complex. I think I've drafted a paper and then four months later it has nothing really to do with what I started. And we have a rich interchange, and of the 35 people who signed it this time, I'd say 20 of them were actively involved in the process of writing the paper, including footnotes. It's a rich process, unusual in the sense that most of the people -- all of the people who sign it basically agree with our approach; centrist, balanced, not taking anything off the table, but determined to find a peaceful and diplomatic solution to this problem.

The paper which you have here you'll pick up afterward. There is one copy for each of you. The -- Iris and I couldn't carry enough down so all of you'd be able to take five home with you. It's on our website and I think it's up here -- is the website indicated anywhere? It was going to be indicated. It's theiranproject.org, and you can find a PDF of it on that website, and we have a Twitter, which is IranProject2013. So, with that, let me say to --

Male Speaker:
That's a lot of tweeting.

[laughter]

William Luers:
Yeah, yeah. Let me thank Carla for coming. Carla has been with us from the very beginning. She brings prestige, knowledge, experience, and a lot of willingness to be helpful whenever she can, and she agreed, after twisting her arm, to join us today and I'm delighted to have you here, Carla. Thank you. So, you're in charge.

Carla Hills:
Thank you so much. Well, let me add my welcome to this really very important occasion. I hope you all get a copy of the strategic options dealing with balancing the pressure with diplomacy. It's a front-and-center issue. People that have signed the report have studied it and thought about the options. I have here a letter that just came in from Senator Dianne Feinstein, and she's a thoughtful person. She writes, "I believe this report provides a path forward for the United States in dealing with Iran. The authors, who are members of The Iran Project, have spent years studying this issue and have once again provided objective and balanced analyses on one of the most pressing national security issues facing our country." It should come as no surprise that this report has been endorsed by a distinguished group of former senior U.S. officials, and I commend The Iran Project for their efforts. It will prove to be a valuable addition to the discussion both inside and outside the government on Iran.

And I want you to hear from our three panelists who are wise, accurate, and practical, as Ambassador Luers has

Next to him is Dr. Jim Walsh, research associate at MIT, Security Studies Program. Before coming to MIT he was the executive director managing the ADAM project, Harvard University/J.F. Kennedy School for Government, and visiting scholar at the Center for Global Security at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. And he has taught at both Harvard and at MIT, where he earned his PhD.

And last, but certainly not least, Ambassador Jim Dobbins, director of RAND's International Security and Defense Policy Center. He served as assistant secretary for Europe, special advisor to the president on the Balkans, ambassador to the Euro community, and his numerous crisis management assignments include Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, representing the United States at the Bonn Convention, where it established the Afghan government.

Each panelist will speak for approximately five or six minutes, and if we have time we'll return to the panelists for a remark. If I've used up all the time for their presentations we will go directly to the audience and I'll give you the rules for how we will proceed in the question and answer stage when we get there, but let me first turn to Ambassador Tom Pickering, who will give us an overview of the report.

Thomas Pickering:
Thank you, Carla, first for chairing and allowing your arm to be twisted to be with us today. It means a great deal to all of us. Thank you, Bill, for all of the perspiration and inspiration that you brought to the project and to this, the third report. Each one has been better and each one, I hasten to add, has been better because your draft has always been better so --

[laughter]

-- it has not disappeared. Stephen Heintz, thank you very much for your support, for your backing, and indeed for your wise and trenchant advice. And Bill Miller, thank you for your own deep personal involvement in Iran and the knowledge that you bring, obviously, to this particular project.

This is a report which is different from our other two. It provides advice and recommendations, something that we approached with care and trepidation but we are now ready

and to Tom, and I'm sure that there's a place in hell for her --

[laughter]

-- that I've reserved to let her know how much I appreciated that.

On a more serious note, I want to go beyond the thanks to the Wilson Center and say to all of you, as someone who lives in Boston, that this has been a difficult couple of days but we in Boston appreciate all that we've seen coming out of Washington -- emails, Facebook posts, other forms of support and sympathy -- and that means a great deal to us.

Let me also say that I express my sympathies to my friends in Iran who now, for the second time in a couple of weeks, faced a deadly earthquake. And perhaps out of these tragedies that we both have shared we will find a way to get past our differences.

Let's talk about some of those differences. I've been charged with talking about the nuclear piece. I'm going to do two things really quickly. First, I just am going to skim what the report says. The report does not focus on nuclear in a big way, but I want to at least highlight what it says, and then I want to step back and put that in a broader context because we do have a P5+1 process. We have meetings in Kazakhstan, so one might rightly ask what is it that we're asking for if we're asking for diplomacy when diplomacy is already happening? So let me a7Brc?e bot] aanto: ghiesP <<limits ort20upport and sympathy anreser,s. 6 >>20133 To

There is a broader and deeper problem, and that broader and

And so we would like to see diplomacy have as much importance as sanctions; people talking about diplomacy as much as they talk about sanctions; and putting the resources of the President and the imprimatur of the President dictating to the bureaucracy that they want to get this done. I mean, I talk to a lot of State Department people, friends; they want a deal. Of course they want a deal. You know, there are Iranians who want a deal. But left to its own devices, the bureaucracy is not going to do the political risk-taking on this of all sensitive topics that is required. So if the bureaucracy is going to get off first base, it's going to have to be told to run, and that's not going to happen until the President of the United States takes this on as an issue for himself. And I think the difference between having incremental talks that are incredibly difficult and end in stalemate and return back to the cycle of sanction and no talk and sanction, no talk -- the difference between that and something that's successful will be a focus on diplomacy and a presidential ownership of this issue in ways that we have not yet seen. So let me pause there and --

Carla Hills:
Thank you, Jim.

James Walsh:
-- pass it on to Jim.

Carla Hills:
Let us go to Ambassador Jim Dobbins, who will discuss how we might strengthen the diplomatic track.

James Dobbins:
Thank you, Carla. Well, you know, the nuclear negotiations are essentially about how far short of a nuclear weapons capability to stop Iran. And, of course, the longer they go on the closer they get to that capability and the harder it becomes to rein them back. There've been times in the past where, had we taken the deal that was available, they would have stopped well short of where they are today. And so I think it's -- I think one can argue that the earlier we can get a deal, the better the deal is likely to be. I'd also argue that the sooner we can get beyond the nuclear issue the quicker we can get on to a lot of other issues that we have with Iran that are increasingly important, where Iran is playing, in general, an extremely unhelpful role and where it might be persuaded to play a

the United States was discredited in part by reason of the fact that the United States ignored those overtures, and it was replaced by a harder-line president and the U.S.-Iranian relationship deteriorated significantly.

Now, there is a statement that elections have consequences. Iranian elections aren’t free and fair. The Iranians aren’t offered a full panoply of choices, but they are offered a panoply of meaningful choices in those elections. One of the startling things about Iranian elections is that

are discrete negotiating possibilities. The principal one that remains dividing us, I believe, is the extent of sanctions relief. And my hope is that we have the wisdom, the good sense, and indeed the negotiating persistence to address that question very particularly and move on, as Jim Walsh says, to something that can, over a period of time, show in fact that the kind of outline that I put in my opening talk can be achieved.

Carla Hills:
Thank you. Let me just ask Jim Walsh how much time do we have to pursue the negotiations in light of the installation and the use of the new IR2M centrifuge?

James Walsh:
That's a terrific question. So, you know, how much time do we have? Well, I think the first thing -- the first way to answer that question is to say where we are right now, and so I follow the leadership here of the director of National Intelligence and his repeated public testimony over these past several years, including this year. And the way he describes it is that Iran currently has a rudimentary nuclear capability. In other words, they can build a centrifuge. If you can build a centrifuge you can enrich uranium. If you can enrich uranium, if you're determined, you can make a nuclear weapon. But the DNI goes on to say that while there's nothing technical inhibiting that, they have not yet made a political decision to build the bomb. And that's the crucial line. As someone who studies nuclear weapons decision-making, trying to understand why some countries that start end up as nuclear weapons states while many others start down that path but do not become nuclear weapons states, that's the critical line, the line of the political decision to say, "Yes, we want a bomb, we're going to make it job one, we're going to get it done."

Now, the DNI has gone on to say that Iran had a nuclear weapons program in the late 1990s, but that program was put to a halt in 2003. There may be some unstructured activities that have continued, but what experts would call a structured nuclear weapons program desisted in 2003. So this is the space right now. This is the space where diplomacy can matter. And I think, looking forward -- you know, I think you're absolutely right. You know, both sides, as I said, have found a way for -- in search of tactical clubs with which to beat the other side to gain

leverage. They've -- both sides have sought that, and the result is we've gone down and down and down in terms of this relationship and in terms of the status of the program.

So, there are two things on the horizon. One is advanced centrifuges. They have installed quite a number. There are news reports today that they've installed a number in Natanz. It's not clear that they work. You know, these are IR2s that have been promised for many, many years -- big claims about them, claims unfilled, so we still don't know whether they work, but if they do work this will improve their efficiency with respect to producing enriched uranium. And, you know, in about a year -- 14 months, a year-and-a-half -- the Arak plutonium reactor could very well come online, which would represent a second independent path towards reducing bomb-related material, if they were to start that reactor and complete, which they are not now working on, but if they were to restart and work on reprocessing then they would have both an enrichment path and a reprocessing path.

My own guess, and it is only a guess, is that this business with the IR2s is all about trying to improve their leverage, and so I think we need to stop playing the tactical leverage game and actually have a negotiation, or we're going to find that these little levers become new obstacles. That's what the 20-percent was all about. There was no -- what are we all consumed about as non-proliferation professionals, those of us who are? 20 percent, 20 percent, we've got to stop the 20 -- 20 percent didn't exist as an issue, but because this thing went on and on, because people kicked the ball down the field, were reluctant to take the political risk, were reluctant to say yes when yes was a possibility, that's how we got to 20 percent, because the Tehran research reactor was going to wind down without fuel and after a failed negotiation in 2009 the Iranians said, "Well, we'll produce our own." And that put us in a whole new world, a world of difficulty and complexity. So we need to stop creating new obstacles for ourselves and we need to be able to work and be serious about diplomacy or we're going to face some of these problems that you allude to.

Carla Hills:
Thank you. Jim Dobbins, you've been in some tough negotiations. Tell me, Jim Walsh says we've gone down and

minute bilateral with Wendy Sherman at the P5+1, so how do you overcome that? Thanks.

Thomas Pickering:
Let me just take a first whack at it. Obama ownership -- the answer is do you want another war in the Middle East? And I think it's very clear nobody does, and President Obama's made that clear. I would just say, on Syria, a very hard case, but I think Jim is right that whatever happens in Syria there will be an Iranian quotient to how to deal with that, and I think that's important. So on bilaterals, I wouldn't think you need to appoint a new negotiator. The negotiations can proceed in the context of the P5+1. I think what's interesting is that some months ago we started out with just a few bilaterals. I think it was China and maybe Germany. Now Britain and France have been added. Maybe inexorably there will come that magic day when Mr. Jalili and Wendy Sherman will actually do more than ask each other for talks.

James Dobbins:
Well, you know, negotiations and diplomatic contacts don't always produce agreement, but they always produce information, and information always improves policy. So I think talking to the Iranians about Syria, even if in the end we don't agree, would be superior to not talking to them at all, because I think we would have a better understanding of what they're about. They'd have a better understanding of what we're about. There might be some commonalities on the fringes of our positions. And so, I mean, I think generically I'm simply opposed to the idea that one should withhold communication as a pressure device.

Thomas Pickering:
Could I just add to what Jim says? We have made it a practice from time immemorial to punish people we don't like by not according them the pleasure of talking with us.

[laughter]

And it has been a constant effort to shoot ourselves in both feet.

Carla Hills:

Jim, did you want to add something? I thought you did. Another question. Yes, in the back there, third row from the back? Your name and affiliation?

Bruce Laingen:
I'm Bruce Laingen, a former hostage in Tehran. I speak, in a sense, for that group. I know there's at least one of my colleagues here. But I think I can speak for all of them in saying let's have an end to incrementalism and let's get on with the job and get off the dime. That's my plea on their behalf, if you will. I notice that the new Secretary of State spoke yesterday about the new deal in Pyongyang, indicating that we're prepared to have discussions with them directly. If we can have discussions with the new leadership in Pyongyang, surely we can find some way to have direct discussions with a now old regime in Tehran. I don't -- I never fail to say that among the hostages I think I was the last to board the airplane leaving Tehran to go to freedom. I said to the top hostage-taker at the time, "I look forward to the day when your country and mine can again have a normal diplomatic relationship." Surely there must be a way to do that. There must be a way to find -- or to talk directly.
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Nancy Gallagher:
Hi, I'm Nancy Gallagher from the University of Maryland, and a week from Monday we're going to be releasing a report here on media coverage of Iran. And one of the themes that we've noted over and over in both the U.S. and the U.K. coverage is basically portraying the negotiations as an opportunity -- the first step in the negotiations as an opportunity to test whether Iran is actually serious. And I don't think in the coverage we ever saw the reverse question; i.e., you know, what is Iran looking for as a test of American seriousness about negotiation. So I wanted to ask each of you if you were to recommend one step that the president could take in the next couple of months to demonstrate in a way that would really resonate with the Iranians American seriousness in making the diplomatic piece of the overall equation of equal importance, what would that step be?

Carla Hills:
All right. Do you want to start?

James Walsh:
Sure. I'll leave the diplomacy to the professionals. I will say, though, just briefly in comment, that one of the things I see is that, for both sides, neither -- understandably, no state wants to negotiate when it sees itself in a position of weakness. Right? You don't want to negotiate when you're weak. And then the cycle turns and a country finds -- one of the countries finds that it's in the driver's seat, that it's in a stronger position, and having arrived at that stronger position, the inclination is to drive your advantage, pursue your advantage, press ahead. So the result is, when you don't negotiate when you're weak and you don't negotiate when you're strong, you don't negotiate. And I -- going back to what I said before about breaking the cycle, you know, this will sound crazy, but I -- you know, could we not do something around these earthquakes other than issuing statements of regret and sympathy? You know, are there not other ways to demonstrate to the Iranian people in a palpable way that we have empathy for their position? Now that sounds like a lot of, you know, mush and not very hard-nosed for a nuclear guy, but it's, again, becwhough.13 To'

psychological circle -- the vicious circle we're in. And so I -- you know, I'd like it to be -- in addition to whatever these gentlemen recommend, I'd like there to be something like that that is dramatic and speaks directly to the Iranians.

Carla Hills:
Jim, you mentioned that you'd have the negotiations anyway because you think that you'd get information, but direct yourself to the question.

James Dobbins:
Well, I think -- you know, I mean, I think that if you're talking about something that the President might do, it would be to put the nuclear negotiations in the context of a broader perspective of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement and eventual cooperation, not to abandon the insistence that the nuclear negotiations are the first test of that relationship and the most immediate task for the two sides, but then to speak in a way that opens a broader perspective of a relationship based on mutual respect, a certain set of principles. And I think that, you know, depending on exactly how that was phrased, that could send the kind of signal that you're talking about.

Carla Hills:
Tom, you have a view?

Thomas Pickering:
Yeah. I would say this. On page 11 of the executive summary we list what Iran wants, what the U.S. wants, and what they both want. I think, secondly, it's important for us, perhaps, to test the Iranian interest in a negotiation by saying to the Iranians that "we are going to stop some activity which you have objected to for a short period of time, a definitive period of time," as a way to encourage forward movement on the negotiations. Secondly, 30 years ago John F. Kennedy gave a speech in which he outlined to the R

linked in a program that clearly indicated -- that is, Jim and I -- Jim Walsh and I have said the President has taken a personal interest and has directed this process, would be in my view the kind of signals that would help move this on the needle so that the pressure track and the negotiating track are a little more equal.

Carla Hills:
Okay. We have a question down in front. Here. Your name and affiliation?

Andrew Pierre:
Andrew Pierre, Global Insight. I'm going to direct this question to Ambassador Pickering. When Netanyahu was at the United Nations, I guess it was last September, drawing his red line really principally related to the 20-percent issue, that seemed rather a difficult time in terms of the Israeli input. When President Obama was in Tel Aviv there seemed to be a softening, particularly on the part of the Israelis, in terms of taking a broader approach, and I wish the Israeli public really understood the point that Jim Walsh very importantly made about the fact that consistently the American intelligence community does not believe that they've worked on weaponization, something which somehow people don't recognize. But my question is about Israel. Are we finding -- are we in a situation now -- we have a bit more flexibility, which means the United States can be a bit more independent of Israel, if I can put it that way, and forward-leaning, and does this not suggest that we could make some progress which might have been difficult six months or a year ago, given the politics of the Middle East and Israel in particular?

Thomas Pickering:
Well, thank you, Andrew. I've had a certain association with Israel over the years and so let me speak on the basis of that. My sense has been all along that Prime Minister Netanyahu would like the U.S. to do the job, and liking the U.S to do the job and thinking militarily means that he also in some ways has to give us the running room to do the job in the negotiating context. And over a period of a time, and I think particularly with his inept and maybe inapt speech at the General Assembly last year, there crept into there a notion that there was a new Israeli timeline. And I think that was helpful, and I gave him credit for that, despite the fact that the bomb and the Red Line and all the other pieces took the headlines. I believe that he

Thomas Pickering:
John, it's another very interesting question. My feeling is that we have had such a sense of mesmerization about the nuclear issue that, even at fairly senior levels in Iran, one has had from moderate Iranians the word back that, yes, they're prepared to address that with us. We haven't seen the kind of action we would like to see, but nevertheless they have said that.

My own view, and I think it's reflected in the report, is that there should be an opportunity to move as well to the other issues, as each side sees the benefit of doing so. I would not, however, like to enter into a process in which every issue was on the table and we got into what the Israelis call a giant schlep, which means that we talk forever and we get nowhere. The problem, of course, is on the other side, as Jim Walsh points out: we have now narrowed the ball -- the process down to where we talk but get nowhere, as well. So it is very hard to dissect these. To some extent, the point the report makes is that the President makes it clear that he wants an agreement and is prepared to move. And he lays out his roadmap for that, or his approach, much of which I think is now already on the table, and uses that as a way to test the Iranians to see, in fact, if they're prepared to go. Now, if they want to talk about a wider number of issues, I think we should be in agreement to try to do so, but we should do so on the basis that it isn't going to be something that is going to consume years and get nowhere. I think we have to be very careful about that and we have to talk about it.

I also think that, as I said at the beginning, the report makes clear we need something of an understanding by both sides at high levels, what Jim would call mining for information, as to how they see themselves in the region and the future. To some extent, that kind of a discussion, even if it is divisive, can at least begin to build a sense of understanding of what we're dealing with, and I think we lack that.

John, you were a hostage. You've been through this. You know what it's like. You have a great attachment to Iran. I admire it. I think that in many ways there are very few people like you and Bruce around who understand Iran well enough and can give us the kind of advice to help us move ahead. Thirty-three years of mistrust and misunderstanding

is essentially the hallmark of a tragedy, and we have to find a way to overcome it. And so the ability to engage and ability to engage freely on a wide range of subjects within the constraints of trying to make some progress I think is the way in which the diplomacy ought to be conducted.

Carla Hills:
I'm going to call on Jim Walsh and then Jim Dobbins to either address that or any other closing remarks in just a minute-and-a-half for each.

James Walsh:
Thank you, madam chairman. I want to take these last two questions and bring them back to where this paper begins. So we had a question about Israel; is there more running room there? And I think the answer is yes, but, you know, this is a difficult, risky political project to navigate this with our friend and ally Israel. There was no mention of Saudi Arabia. You know, that's another pillar here that makes it a risky and difficult subject. I think John is right. We've -- everyone's boxed themselves in on the nuclear issue. In other words, this is not a problem that the bureaucracy is going to solve by itself. This is not a problem that will be self-resolving, that there will be proposals made, proposals accepted, because it is too hard. The only way this hard stuff will get done is if the President of the United States makes it his issue. Absent that, we're going to continue to do what we've done over and over again, only it will get worse. So, for the very reasons that these gentlemen cite, it will require affirmative -- not timid, not accepting, but affirmative effort with diplomacy in a way that's dedicated that we have not yet seen so far.

Carla Hills:
Thank you. Jim?

James Dobbins:
I've got nothing to add.

Carla Hills:
Well, we've got one minute. We don't' -- 59 seconds. Can you do it in about 40 seconds?

Male Speaker:
It's got to be a 10-second question.

Carla Hills:
Yes.

Male Speaker:
Nick Cossar from [unintelligible]. Ambassador --

Carla Hills:
Which?

Male Speaker:
-- Pickering, the question about removing some things from the table that Iran dislikes -- in 2009 and 2010 especially, a lot of funding for groups that were documenting human rights abuse. Did it help or not? And another question for Mr. Walsh: were you worried about the earthquake in Bushehr or not?

Thomas Pickering:
I would say, no, it would not necessarily help. I think there are other things that would help more.

Carla Hills:
Okay.

James Walsh:
I worry about all earthquakes, especially ones near nuclear power plants.

Carla Hills:
There you go. Well, I think that we finished. We have 12 seconds and that will give me enough time to thank our very distinguished panelists, the Woodrow Wilsr n:Cntier,and tTj T* (theos tha