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Statement of Nicholas Burns
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Chairman Kerry, Senator Lugar and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today on United States policy toward Iran.

I have testified to this committee in the past as a government official. This is my first appearance as a private citizen and thus the views that follow are entirely my own.

In many ways, I fear that the United States is on a collision course with the government of Iran. How we counter the multiple threats that Iran poses to our most important interests in the Middle East is surely one of our highest policy objectives. But, whether we can find a way to communicate more effectively with the government of Iran and to agree to negotiations on the issues that divide us is another important goal. This twin test of American effectiveness with Iran will be an early and central concern for the Obama Administration.

Consider the following ways in which American ambitions clash with those of the government of Iran:

--The Iranian leadership seeks a more powerful and perhaps even dominant role in the Middle East. In nearly every arena, it poses the major challenge to America's own power in the region. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons future is a direct threat to Israel and our Arab partners. Its intrusion into the politics of Lebanon has been unhelpful and often destructive. Its opposition to a two-state solution between the Palestinians and Israel is a significant impediment to progress on that overarching priority;

--As the U.S. has sought to blunt and defeat the terrorist threat in the Middle East, we have found that Iran is the principal funder and even director of some of the most violent groups that sponsor terrorism in the region—Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and some of the Shia militant groups in Iraq;

--Iran is an influential neighbor of the two countries where we are at war—Afghanistan and Iraq. It sometimes uses that influence in ways that are directly contrary to American interests. Is it possible to find common ground with Iran as we seek to promote stability in both countries?

Everywhere we look in the greater Middle East, Iran often plays a negative and troublesome role. As this region is now, along with South Asia, the most critically vital for American foreign policy, it is essential for the U.S. to fashion a more effective strategy toward Iran. For three decades, Iran and the U.S. have been isolated from each other and we presently have no real ability to communicate effectively. This is surely a situation we should not wish to see continue.

I therefore believe the Obama Administration has been correct in undertaking a full review of the present poor state of relations

between our two countries. The time has come for new and more creative thinking so that we might as a country defend where we must against Iran's more pernicious influence in the world but also find a way to engage its government and people where and when we can.

With this in mind, I suggest three guideposts for American policy that may help to frame this issue for Congress.

First, given the lethal nature of Iran's challenge to the United States, we must respond to it with seriousness of purpose, toughness and strength. One of our highest long-term priorities should be to maintain America's leading role in the Middle East and to deflect Iran's own ambitions.

Second, we need to recognize that the thirty-year deep freeze in our relations with Tehran has resulted in an extraordinary situation—we know precious little about the very government and country that looms so large as a negative influence on all that is most important to us in the Middle East. Isolating Iran, resisting any contacts between our governments and threatening regime change have not resulted in positive changes to its behavior on issues critical to our security. In the absence of diplomatic relations and the lack of a substantial American business or journalistic presence in Iran, we have no real basis to understand its government, society and people. It does not serve American interests for this deep freeze to continue.

Third, I therefore support a policy of strength but also realism and engagement with the government of Iran. We need to be firm in defending Israel and the interests of the Arab states uneasy with Iran's rise to power. We should continue to oppose Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. But, we should do so while simultaneously opening a dialogue with the Iranian government and people to test whether progress is possible through peaceful means.

Such a dialogue is most important on the most serious issue that divides us with Tehran—its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Some continue to argue that the only way to halt Iran’s accelerating nuclear research effort is through American or Israeli air strikes. But, there is no convincing scenario where such use of military force would work effectively to end the Iranian nuclear program. Even worse, air strikes would undoubtedly lead Iran to hit back asymmetrically against us in Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider region, especially through its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas. This reminds us of Churchill’s maxim that, once a war starts, it is impossible to know how it will end. An America that is already waging two difficult and bloody wars should be wary of unleashing a third. Choosing military power at this stage would surely be precipitous and unwise.

That leaves diplomacy as the most plausible way to blunt Iran’s nuclear ambitions. I have some familiarity with the difficulties and tradeoffs of a diplomatic approach. For three full years, between 2005 to early 2008, I served as the point person on Iran for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. We worked hard to find a path to the negotiating table with Iran.

In June 2006, we launched the most serious and ambitious American attempt since the Iranian revolution of 1978 to establish meaningful discussions with Iranian officials. Along with Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany, we offered Iran negotiations on nuclear and other issues. We were determined to begin talks with Iran and expected that negotiations would take place. Unfortunately, Iran rejected over the next two years repeated offers by the U.S. and its partners for talks. Iran walked away and missed a rare opportunity to pursue a better relationship with the United States.

Since then, Iran has accelerated its nuclear research efforts despite three United Nations Security Council sanctions resolutions. As you stated in your March 3 hearing on Iran, Mr. Chairman, the recent IAEA report indicates that Iran has expanded significantly the number of operational centrifuges at its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Iran has also continued construction of the Arak reactor. These developments and its ballistic missile tests all point to a future nuclear capability that could cause further instability and pose another risk to peace in the Middle East and beyond.

How should the new American government led by President Barack Obama respond to this open challenge? While I am not in a position to know what our government will ultimately do, I am frankly encouraged by the initial statements of the President and his team to take the offensive against Iran through strong and active diplomacy. In this sense, I believe we are fortunate, indeed, that President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have asked Ambassador Dennis Ross to coordinate our policy toward Iran. He is one of the most skillful and experienced public servants in our country and one of our foremost experts on the problems of the Middle East.

I think the Obama administration has made the right decisions on Iran in its first months in office. President Obama's new and positive appeal to Moslems worldwide, his video message to the Iranian people, his invitation for Iran to attend the UN conference on Afghanistan and his pledge that the U.S. will now participate in the P-5 nuclear talks with Iran, have all put us back on the diplomatic offensive with the Iranian regime. The absence of a clear Iranian government response to these steps is telling—accustomed to keeping the U.S. off balance in recent years, the Iranian leadership appears to not know how to respond to these more positive American initiatives. That is not an insignificant accomplishment at this early stage of the new administration.

Unfortunately, many in the Moslem world saw the United States, incorrectly, as the aggressor in the conflict with Iran in past years. They believed the U.S. was unwilling to meet with Iranian officials. They criticized the U.S. and its P-5 partners for imposing a condition on talks—the prior suspension of Iran’s enrichment activities.

With the benefit of twenty-twenty hindsight, it would have been more effective in 2006-2007 if we had offered unconditional talks. Such an offer would have deprived Tehran of the excuse it used subsequently to some effect that such a conditional offer was unacceptable and unworthy of a true breaking of the ice between our two countries. And, the fact that there were no diplomatic contacts with Iran whatsoever during my three years as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs was a reflection of the limitations of our approach.

In my judgment, President Obama has put the U.S. in a stronger position as he considers how best to proceed with Iran. He has taken a different path with the Iranians, showing openness and respect to the people of Iran and offering to have U.S. diplomats participate routinely in the P-5 talks with Iran for the first time without conditions.

The work ahead, however, will be even more challenging. The key question now is how to frame negotiations with Iran so that they have the strongest possibility of delivering the outcome we should want to have—engagement but with a resulting decision by the Iranian leadership to slow and stop altogether its pursuit of nuclear weapons and to accept intrusive international oversight of all of its activities.

As Senator Lugar mentioned in your March hearings, Iran is not in a strong international position as these talks begin. The decline in the world price of oil, the UN sanctions and the Ahmadinejad

government's disastrous economic policies have all contributed to weakening Iran in the last year. Its transparent aim to become nuclear capable has caused nearly all its neighbors to seek its isolation. The new Iranian government to be elected in June may have to reconsider the type of offer most likely to be made by the international community—expanded economic ties and a return of Iran to the community of nations in return for a halt to its nuclear efforts.

While agreeing to negotiations, President Obama should not want to go hat in hand to the Iranians. As you stated in the March 3 hearings, Mr. Chairman, we must negotiate with Iran from a position of strength. President Obama would be wise to set a limited timetable for talks. He should make clear that the U.S. and others would walk away and impose much tougher financial and economic sanctions if progress in the negotiations is not made in a reasonable period. This would prevent Iran from running out the clock until they become nuclear capable.

It will be crucial that the President agree on the automaticity of these sanctions with the P-5 countries, especially Russia and China, in advance of talks. China has violated the spirit of the UN sanctions by becoming Iran's leading trade partner at the same time that our European allies have begun to withdraw from Iranian markets. Russia sells Iran arms and is helping Iran to construct its first nuclear reactor. If the U.S. is to break with past policy by meeting Iran halfway at the negotiating table, then it is only reasonable that our P-5 partners, most especially China and Russia, pledge to join us in draconian sanctions on Iran should the talks break down.

Most importantly, the President should renew his campaign position that all options will remain on the table. This marriage of diplomacy with the threat of force is essential, in my view, to convince Tehran it needs to make a difficult choice and soon.

Without this threat, I doubt Iran's leaders would take the talks seriously. The Iranian leadership wants more than anything else security guarantees from the U.S. We should not give them such guarantees until they have met our core aims. This does not mean that the U.S. should default to the use of force if diplomacy and new sanctions fail. And, as I have said in this statement, it is in our overriding national interest to resolve our differences with Iran peacefully. Let us hope that will be possible.

Any negotiations with Iran will likely be frustrating with only a modest probability of success. So, why does President Obama's diplomatic approach now make sense for the U.S.?

First, it may be the only way we will ever know if there is a chance for a peaceful outcome in our long-running feud with Iran. Before contemplating the use of force, it is in our clear interest to see if we can avoid war by peaceful means. Diplomacy's great promise is that one can never predict where discussions will lead once they are begun. Certainly, it would be unconscionable to start a war with Iran without having first given negotiations a serious and sustained effort.

Second, a negotiation may now be the most effective way to slow down Iran's nuclear progress. One of the first tactical aims of a negotiation should be to prevail upon Iran to freeze its nuclear research as the talks proceed. Otherwise, Iran may steam ahead unimpeded.

Third, negotiations would serve to isolate Iran even further internationally and put it on the defensive. An unconditional offer deprives Iran's leaders of the excuse not to negotiate. Our sitting down with Iranian leaders brings another advantage—it will significantly undercut Iran's ability to posture as the leader of the anti-American front among the radical governments and movements of the Middle East.

Finally, we will be no worse off if we try diplomacy and fail. In fact, we might be stronger internationally. Having made a good faith effort at diplomacy, the U.S. would be in a far stronger position to convince Russia and China and other countries to join us in tougher sanctions. It would not be in their interest to see President Obama left only with the military option. I also believe we would be more credible around the world if countries saw that we had tried in good faith to resolve the crisis peacefully.

A diplomatic opening to Iran will require patience on the part of Americans. Progress is unlikely to be made in the early stages. As Karim Sadjadpour testified to this committee in March, there will certainly be those in Iran who seek through intemperate statements to derail the process. There will undoubtedly be criticism by some in the U.S. that diplomacy is naïve or even appeasement. We would do well to ignore these all too predictable attacks and to give President Obama the time and flexibility he will need to sustain a complicated and difficult diplomatic negotiation with Iran.

Ultimately, Mr. Chairman, conflict with Iran is neither inevitable nor desirable. A first, serious negotiation with Iran in three decades makes much more sense for the U.S. than risking the awful calculus of war. Having placed too much of the burden in recent years on our military to sort out the most difficult global security challenges, Americans need to have greater faith in our diplomatic power to resolve crises. This is such a crisis. It is the right place to begin anew with Iran.

Mr. Chairman, once negotiations begin, we should not limit them to the nuclear issue. As we did with North Korea, our government should use the vehicle of multilateral talks to enable our own bilateral discussions on the margins. There are many issues to discuss with Iran. We need to find a way to convince the Iranian

leadership that it is in its interest that Iraq emerge united and stronger as America brings home our troops. And, we know that Iranian interests would be served by greater stability in Afghanistan and the weakening of the current Taliban offensive. These issues and the dramatic struggle for stability and peace in Lebanon are all reason for us to begin a wide-ranging discussion with the Iranian leadership in the months ahead.

I have one final suggestion for the committee, Mr. Chairman. We should also want to have a much more open and diverse relationship with the Iranian people. One of the great ironies of America's position in the Middle East is that the Iranian people demonstrate consistently in opinion polls their high regard for the United States. While the pace and nature of our talks with the Iranian government are difficult to predict, it is a much more certain bet that opening up channels to the people of Iran will benefit both of our countries for the long-term.

It is also almost certain that an eventual normalization of relations with Iran and a peace between our governments—and those should be our most important long-term ambitions—will take some time. We have every reason to build bridges to the people of Iran in the meantime. Our Iranian-American community in the United States is evidence enough of the richness, energy and talent of the Iranian people. We should have as primary objectives bringing thousands of Iranian students to study in our universities. We should want our religious leaders of all faiths to continue the interfaith dialogues that have begun tentatively in recent years. I hope it will be possible for members of Congress and journalists to travel to Iran in much greater numbers in the coming months and years. Greater openness between us and more frequent people-to-people contacts will serve us and the cause of peace well as President Obama negotiates the trickier shoals of government to government diplomacy in the period ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today.