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HITTING FIRST: PREVENTIVE FORCE IN U.S. SECURITY POLICY

Implications of Major Findings for U.S. Iran Policy

In discussing *Hitting First*, former Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research Thomas Hughes observes, “Iran’s new prominence as a possible target for American-Israeli first strikes makes all this particularly prescient and timely.”

1. **The flawed national security strategy that “legitimized” preventive war against Iraq is still intact, despite the policy failures of Operation Iraqi Freedom.** The National Security Strategy of 2006 explicitly reaffirms the U.S. commitment to preventive force, while cosmetic reforms of the Intelligence Community have downplayed the underlying causes of the Iraq prewar intelligence failure, such as inadequate HUMINT and cherry-picking of the intelligence product by political elites.
2. **“All options are on the table” is code for the United States asserting the right to strike Iran preventively without demonstrating an imminent threat.** Washington’s apparent commitment to maximum diplomatic flexibility is illusory – U.S. officials also stipulate “security assurances are not on the table” because “Iran is a troublemaker in the international system.” This combination of positions increases the likelihood of preventive war.
3. **Iran’s defense policies are driven by legitimate security concerns.** In 1953, the United States conspired with Britain in Operation Ajax, a covert use of preventive force to overthrow Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. This precedent helps to explain why Iranian political leaders seek security assurances that the United States will not stage unprovoked attacks against Iran.
4. **The utility of limited preventive strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities is constrained by countermeasures.** Iran has learned the lesson of Osiraq, dispersing and burying its nuclear assets, thus rendering them much less vulnerable to limited strikes by U.S. and Israeli standoff weapons.
5. **A limited preventive strike would likely strengthen the current Iranian regime,** not “humiliate the religious leadership and lead the public to rise up and overthrow the government.” Reza Pahlavi, whose father was installed as the Shah of Iran, said in March 2006 that a military strike against Iran “will rally nationalistic sentiments which will work to the regime’s advantage, and consequently, give the theocracy a much longer lease on life.”
6. **A 2005 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran’s nuclear capability forecast the earliest date that Iran could develop a nuclear weapon to be “early to mid-next decade.”** A replay of the Iraq prewar intelligence failure might involve advocates of preventive war against Iran challenging this consensus assessment by infusing selective and unofficial intelligence into the policy-making process.