

On the Edge of a Razor Blade



As regards the Iranian nuclear programme which allegedly is at the very core of the US/Iran contender, this is effectively a non-issue. As long as Iran does not move to develop and field nuclear weapons, which both the IAEA and US intelligence agencies agree is currently not the case, the US has no real

The first steps in a truly fundamental shift involving when not the ultimate goals of the US policy in the Greater Middle East then certainly the strategy towards achieving them, with the sudden realisation that an uncompromising belligerent stance towards Teheran serves no real useful purpose – or an elaborate *ruse de guerre*, a deceptive manoeuvre aimed at providing some sort of a fig leaf to cover the war machinery in full motion, and thus gain international acceptance for a full-scale attack against Iran that has already been decided upon?

President Bush's move – one must be careful not to speak in terms of "US administration" here – in authorising a senior US diplomat to participate in the so-called P5+1 international talks in Geneva over the Iranian nuclear stand-off, and even more so in hinting at the possibility of resuming diplomatic relations with Tehran after nearly 30 years, can be read in both directions. And, of course, irrespective of the US President's true goals, for this move to really lead to the radical change for better in the whole Middle East strategic scenario it at least potentially underpins it would depend on the Iranian reactions, as well as several other influencing factors.

For once in a while I would tend to be an optimist at least as regards the first question in this puzzle, and assess the US move as a sincere – albeit necessarily tentative and cautious at this stage – olive branch being offered to Tehran. I would certainly not pretend to read President Bush's mind, but there are two exceedingly powerful pointers at this being indeed the case: the horrified silence by Israel, and the bitterly ferocious reaction by the neocon circles that are still pushing for war. For ex-UN ambassador John Bolton, now effectively acting as Vice-President Dick Cheney's mouthpiece, to say "This is a complete capitulation... This is further evidence of the administration's complete intellectual collapse" tends to rule out any notion of a nefarious plot.

It thus seems reasonably safe to assume that the State and Defense Departments have at least temporarily won the day over the warmongers, and have convinced President Bush to *really* put "all the options on the table" and give diplomacy a serious chance. The fact that this shift does most certainly not come from a desire for peace or a sober appraisal of the likely regional and global consequences of an attack against Iran, being rather due to the current precarious state of affairs in both Iraq and Afghanistan making such an attack a very doubtful proposition, is totally irrelevant in foreign policy terms.

Indeed, some sort of mutual understanding when not rapprochement with Iran would make eminent sense for the US, under this or any conceivable future administration. Such a shift would not imply any significant change in the

long-term goals the Bush administration has been relentlessly pursuing in the region and which will of necessity be maintained by the new White House – to put this in simple terms, dominance and control of the sources of oil – but rather in the means to get there, with a revised classification of friendly, hostile and uncommitted but useful local actors. Condi Rice's comment to the effect that "the United States has no permanent enemies" was right on the spot, even though in her paraphrase she prudishly left out the second part of Lord Palmerston's original sentence ("nations have no permanent allies or friends, just permanent interests").

In particular, Iran would have an exceedingly important role to play as the United States' Middle East strategy shifts from running two wars at the same time and contemplating a third one, towards a more sustainable scheme of patching out the situation in Iraq, even at the cost of accepting a less than ideal outcome there, in order to re-focus on an increasingly problematic Afghanistan. Even beyond President Bush's mandate, both presidential candidates have already effectively indicated that such a shift would be amongst the priorities of their future administration. Point is, quickly coming to achieve some sort of stability in Iraq and then hopefully bring Operation "Enduring Freedom" to a satisfactory outcome is but impossible while Iran remains a powerful hostile regional actor. Thus, if Iran cannot be coerced or militarily destroyed, then it must somehow be brought in.

As regards Iran, for all of their bombastic rhetoric about the "Great Satan" and the like it is patently obvious that they would dream nothing better than coming to an accommodation with the US and hopefully restoring the country to more or less the same position it had under the late Shah. Despite the current high oil prices, the Iranian regime is confronting a mounting economic and social crisis that has been further compounded by the economic sanctions, and which poses a far more serious threat to the regime's survival than all the US calls for "regime change". Iran desperately needs renewed access to foreign investment through the international financial system – and it is thus little surprise that it has recently gone to considerable length to please the US in strategic terms. Despite the continued accusation from Washington to the effect that Tehran is arming and training anti-US insurgents in Iraq, it is an open secret that the recent US/Iraqi government forces' offensive against the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was only successful thanks to heavy Iranian pressure on Sadr to instruct his men not to resist and lay down their arms. A similar cooperative attitude by Teheran as regards the situation in Afghanistan would be extremely useful.

reason to feel threatened, or perceive a challenge to its interests, by a non-hostile Iran mastering uranium enrichment know-how that *could* eventually also be used for a nuclear weapons programme. Indeed, a pre/pseudo-nuclear Iran would do wonders in enabling the US to keep leveraging the perpetual hostility between Shia and Sunni Muslims, further compounded by the deep rivalry and mutual suspicion between Arabs and Persians. Concessions in that direction are thus perfectly conceivable, as long as these are placed in the framework of a more comprehensive agreement.

But in a highly unpleasant paradox, the very perception of President Bush having deliberately made a conciliatory gesture toward Iran entails its own serious risks, and perhaps makes war more rather than less likely. While a possible rapprochement or at least a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* would not entail any really damaging strategic compromise for either the US or Iran, as discussed above, at the same time it would cut straight across the interests and goals of other powerful actors, who in the past have grown accustomed to rely on the US Administration's prompt and uncompromising support. Israel would be left high and dry, and even though Iran would doubtlessly have to cut support to Hamas and Hezbollah as part of any deal (in itself a very important gain for Israel), Tel Aviv would be forced into an unpalatable reassessment of its entire strategic posture as well as, perhaps even more serious, accepting a downgrading of its current importance as a regional US ally. And, the neocons in the US will see the last possible window of opportunity for implementing their messianic vision of a "new Middle East" being slammed shut.

The possible reactions by these forces, and the countermeasures they might wish to implement to restore a situation more in line with their ideas, are a matter for some concern. Thus, the perception of being trapped in a "lose-lose" situation might conceivably provide an additional incentive towards an Israeli desperate decision to launch a pre-emptive attack, with the deliberate aim of attractive an Iranian reaction that in turn would bring the US into the conflict. And, one might have reason to ponder on the implications of Zbigniew Brzezinski's warning to Congress about "a terrorist act in the US blamed on Iran" as the possible triggering fuze for a conflict.


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