

Worry about Pakistan, not Iran

Pak-Fov Rel. 27/07/04.

VIEW

The hullabaloo about Iran has all the earmarks of a domestic American campaign gambit. No one wants to talk about Pakistan, which is our real worry. But Iran, a country that we cannot realistically consider attacking, is a political pawn

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WASHINGTON HAS disclosed a nugget of uncorroborated intelligence extracted from a detainee: Iran granted free passage to Al Qaeda terrorists before the Sept 11, 2001 attacks. This, combined with long-simmering concern over the Islamic Republic's nuclear capabilities and intentions, has put Iran back on the neoconservative front burner.

But why Iran and not Pakistan? Iran may or may not have allowed terrorists to transit its territory. But Pakistan's borderlands are unquestionably teeming with Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters whom the Pakistani Army cannot dislodge without provoking local rebellion.

Iran may or may not have nuclear weapons in mind. But Pakistan has openly tested atom bombs, and as late as Feb. 2003 President Pervez Musharraf saw fit to laud Abdul Qadeer Khan, the architect not only of Pakistan's bomb, but also of an international black market in nuclear technology: "Allah Almighty answered the nation's prayers, had mercy on our situation and made a miracle happen. In walked a giant of a man ... Abdul Qadeer Khan, the man who would give Pakistan a nuclear capability single-handedly."

Those sounding the alarm about Iran might respond that the ongoing conflict between reformists and hard-liners makes the Islamic Republic unstable and unpredictable. But the number of massacres and terrorist outrages in Pakistan puts political unrest in Iran in the shade. Musharraf has twice escaped assassination by narrow margins. As for Iran's hard-liners, none exhibit the Taliban-style militancy of some of the active political figures in Pakistan.

Iran is a modern country with a young, well-educated, politically aware and generally liberal population. According to surveys by Iranian sociologists, three-quarters of the nation thinks Iran should seek cordial relations with the United States. Pakistan, on the other hand, teeters on the edge of becoming a failed state; and its hundreds of religious schools, which flourish because the state educational system is inadequate, are well known for their advocacy of jihad against the West.

Why, then, is Iran tripping alarms in policy circles? Three reasons: First, Pakistan is governed by a pro-American general who is in no rush to restore civilian rule, while Iran is closer to being a functioning democracy. Second, Pakistan is a threat primarily to India, while Iran is considered a threat to Israel. (Neither threatens the United States.) And third, Iran was included in President George W Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech and Pakistan wasn't.

It might be supposed that the Bush administration's espousal of democratic transition in the Muslim world would look with kinder eyes on Iran, where free elections did bring a reformist government to power, even though hard-liners successfully stymied its major reforms. But in reality the Bush foreign policy ardently prefers predictable military dictators to unpredictable elected governments, as

have most other American administrations since the 1950s. Complaints may be raised about Musharraf's reluctance to share power, but Washington is confident in his determination (as long as he is alive) to suppress terrorism and support the United States, even though most Pakistani citizens hold decidedly more anti-American views. As usual, political shortsightedness leads the US to prefer autocrats to democrats.

The question of Iran endangering Israel similarly evokes knee-jerk reflexes in Washington. If Iran's nuclear program does culminate in a nuclear weapons capability,

and if it's rocket program does produce a credible means of delivering those weapons within a 1,600-kilometer radius, Israel's security might indeed be at risk. But this would only be likely if Iran has a plausible reason to violate the world's 60-year taboo on nuclear war, and only if Iran were willing, in the process, to sacrifice one of Islam's holy cities and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians on whose behalf they would presumably be acting.

In actuality, the most likely use for Iranian nukes vis-a-vis Israel would be as bargaining chips in negotiations to limit Israel's strategically absurd nuclear arsenal.

This leaves the Axis of Evil. Bush does not normally back away from anything he says, however misguided. He declared Iran a part of the Axis of Evil in 2002, so it still is. Yet the prospect of initiating a war against Iran, which would be the net outcome of even an Israeli or American surgical strike against its nuclear facilities, is highly improbable. The 130,000 troops who have valiantly been trying, with woefully inadequate leadership and planning, to bring order to Iraq are in no condition to add to their duties the occupation of a country three times more populous. Nor is the world oil market in any shape to absorb an indefinite cessation of Iranian exports.

The hullabaloo about Iran, therefore, has all the earmarks of a domestic American campaign gambit. No one wants to talk about Pakistan, which is our real worry. But Iran, a country that we cannot realistically consider attacking, is a political pawn. Bush's minions firmly stand by his Axis of Evil rhetoric and challenge Democratic Party candidate John Kerry to respond. If Kerry should agree, it would look like support for the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive warfare. If he should disagree, he would look he's soft on the Axis of Evil.

During a presidential campaign, partisan policy manipulation is to be expected, but it's just politics. And in the meantime, who is paying proper attention to Pakistan?

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