

The US vs Iran — and whither Pakistan?

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Last January in Islamabad I was chatting about the A Q Khan nuclear proliferation scandal with my friends Zahyd Hamead and Hassan Iqbal. "All those countries are in the axis of evil," Hassan pointed out.

"This is really significant, I think," said Zahyd. "I personally think Pakistan's goose is cooked. They're going to dismantle Pakistan without firing a shot. He is a national hero. He could have anything for the taking in Pakistan. Why would he sell nuclear materials to North Korea and Iran? They offered him probably billions."

I stayed a few days in Rawalpindi as a guest at Hassan Iqbal's home and watched President Musharraf's press conference with Hassan and his parents.

"Last two weeks there was a wedding," said Hassan's mother. "Qadeer Khan was there. I was so anxious to go and meet him."

I was learning how delicate A Q Khan's national hero status made the matter for Musharraf. "Qadeer Khan is a hero for the whole Muslim world," a friend in Lahore had told me. "Bush is blackmailing Musharraf."

One of my Beaconhouse National University students expressed widespread sentiments: "Even if he smuggled the technology to Islamic countries, I don't think it's bad. Because the Islamic world needs to be a bit more stronger."

"Do you think this is a major crisis for Musharraf?" I asked Hassan.

"Oh yes," he said. "He is the man of crisis."

"Every year he has crisis," Hassan's mother said cheerfully. "Two years before, Taliban crisis. Then last year, Iraq crisis. Now this Qadeer Khan crisis."

Nearly another year on, another crisis is brewing - or rather, the same old crisis is coming back to bite us all. Here is what Thomas Powers, resident writer on intelligence matters for *The New York Review of Books*, wrote in that august periodical's December 16 issue:

"The question of whom we are fighting, awkward now, will become critical if the elections scheduled for January fail to establish a government Iraqis accept as legitimate. The result of that will be the very thing Rumsfeld derided as preposterous at the outset of the war - a quagmire of the unwinnable sort the United States last experienced in Vietnam, where we spent a decade trying to defend a government that couldn't defend itself. ...



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"The administration's reluctance to recognise the Iraqi resistance as largely homegrown pushes it to exaggerate the role of foreign terrorists, to blame anti-American feeling on meddlers from abroad, to accuse Syria and Iran of sponsoring or harbouring terrorists, and to threaten both with a regime change as part of a broader strategy of 'draining the swamp' of Islamic and terrorist extremism throughout the

Middle East. ...

"We are on the verge of entering new territory here. I think we should take careful note of official American remarks about Iran and Syria, but Iran especially; to my ear they closely echo what the administration was saying about Iraq beginning early in 2002. ... Bush ran for reelection as a man who means what he says, and he says he will not tolerate governments that sponsor terror, or the prospect of Iran with a bomb."

The lead article in the December *Atlantic Monthly*, "Will Iran Be Next?" was a report on a war game: policy experts from US think tanks posited and analysed scenarios in which the Bush administration and the regime in Teheran might drift or force each other into military confrontation. The participants' comments, as reported by James Fallows, are sobering.

"This is a paranoid regime," said Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution. "Even if the development of the Caucasus airfields ... even if it weren't about them, they would assume it was about them. So that in and of itself will likely provoke a response. The Iranians are not inert targets! If they started to think we were moving in the direction of a military move against them, they would start fighting us right away."

Speaking of paranoid regimes, former IAEA chief nuclear-weapons inspector David Kay said that the "signal traits" of the Bush administration - "a small group of key decision-makers, no fundamental challenge of prevailing views" - would persist in Bush's second term. "It is a function of the way the President thinks, operates, declares his policy ahead of time," Kay said. "It is inherent in the nature of George Bush, and therefore inherent in the system."

"Unlike Saddam Hussein's Iraq, a threatened Iran would have many ways to harm America and its interests," Fallows concluded. "... If it thought that the US goal was to install a wholly new regime, rather than to change the current regime's behaviour, it would have no incentive for restraint."

In which case whither Pakistan - and whither us all?