

Washington's view of Iran

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IF diplomacy fails to find a way out of Iran's nuclear imbroglio, the dispute on the subject could take a serious turn in the coming days. In a recent interview with NBC News, President Bush made it clear that the United States could take military action against Iran if that country was not forthcoming about its suspected nuclear weapons programme.

The European Union troika of Britain, France and Germany finalized an agreement with Iran last November aimed at getting Iran to abandon the manufacture of nuclear fuel that would be further refined to bomb grade. The first deadline for the two sides to come up with a tension-defusing deal, following the "temporary" suspension of Iran's enrichment effort, is March, 2005. But already a controversy has arisen because the Europeans want to make the suspension permanent and would like Tehran to commit itself to abandoning the process completely. Iran has refused to oblige.

In a recent statement, Tehran made it clear that the length of the suspension would not be very long and would be valid for the duration of the negotiations and only on the condition of progress in talks.

At the heart of the dispute are "objective guarantees" about Iran's nuclear intentions. The Europeans point out that once Iran mastered making low-enriched uranium needed for power reactors, it would be in a position to make the highly-enriched uranium needed for the bomb. Therefore, they want Iran entirely out of the nuclear fuel business. In return, they are offering better trade and political relations and help with other nuclear technologies. For its part, Iran is only offering "assurances".

Some analysts believe a combination of threats and offers may deflect Iran from further enrichment process. But that would need concerted pressure from Europe, America and others, including China and Russia. In that case Iran's nuclear transgressions could be reported to the UN Security Council which could impose sanctions against Iran. But Tehran is offering oil and gas contracts to China, Russia and others to persuade them to break ranks with the Europeans and the Americans.

The danger there is that if Iran succeeds in blocking consensus on sanctions in the Security Council, then the Americans may be obliged to resort to debate on military action. On the other hand, the chaos in Iraq and higher oil prices have emboldened the Iranian regime which appears to be confident that it can withstand the US threat.

Interestingly, the Americans and the Europeans view Iran from different angles. As yet, there is no evidence at all that Bush's new foreign policy team will be more proficient at dealing with Iran than with the crisis in Iraq. Also, Iran presents a far more complex challenge than Iraq did as it has already mastered key nuclear military technologies and has long range missiles that may eventually carry warheads.

Washington views Iran as a hostile, terror-sponsoring state, meddling in Iraqi affairs and on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons with which it could target Israel, with whom it has a long history of hostility.

The European view of Iran is more subtle and perhaps closer to reality. Instead of confronting Iran, the European troika of France, Germany and Britain have negotiated a uranium enrichment freeze. The Europeans attach a lot of importance to the competitive and contradictory power structures in the Iranian polity, with increasing competition for a more open society coming from Iran's younger generation.

According to the Europeans, Iran pricks America in Iraq, because it can have, and not because it has, any ambition other than having a friendly neighbour. Interestingly, unlike the Americans, the Europeans take a charita-

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ble view of Tehran's interminable foot-dragging over nuclear inspections and cooperative measures. They ascribe it to defensive strategy which has more to do with national pride than with hostile intentions.

If the European assessment about Iran is correct, it is obvious that the harder the Americans push Iran, the more defiant and dangerous it will become. From this, it follows that if Washington persists in its current policy towards Tehran, then, like Iraq, it has the potential of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. So why are the Americans pushing Iran so hard? Perhaps the most plausible explanation is provided by the problem of Israeli security.

The Israeli Knesset was presented in July with an annual intelligence assessment that said Iran (now that Iraq has been crushed) was the greatest threat to the state. Israeli deputy prime minister Shimon Peres recently stated that the world must mobilize against Iran as "it has become the focal point of all the danger" in the Middle East. The Mossad's chief has told the Knesset's foreign affairs and defence committee that Iran is on the brink of achieving uranium enrichment capability and that by the end of the year it would reach "the point of no return."

In view of the above statements, the Israeli factor cannot be ignored in the case of Iran. The danger is that if it gets the green signal from Washington, Tel Aviv may repeat what it did to Iraq in 1981 when it destroyed Iraq's Osirik reactor near Baghdad. Recently, musing aloud, US Vice-President Dick Cheney said that no matter how patient America remains with Iran, a "twitchy Israel" might be less so. However, leading American conservatives argue that if strikes are deemed necessary, for political and military reasons the United States should undertake them alone.

Going by American press reports it is evident that officials refuse to discuss what they will do if diplomacy fails in the case of Iran. The hard liners, led by Vice-President Dick Cheney, reject any deal with the Iranian theocracy. The more moderate officials say it is not clear whether the religious conservatives in control in Iran are eager to engage with "the Great Satan" either.

Apparently, Washington's war planners have updated their planning for a possible showdown with Iran. The national security bureaucracy has conducted war games and considered other ways the US could respond if efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon fail. However, they describe the efforts as "prudent contingency planning" that should not be interpreted as sabre-rattling. Other officials say that the US and its allies have many options short of military action with which to isolate and punish a government that they believe persists in trying to develop nuclear weapons.

According to the hard liners, only a credible threat, and if necessary, the use of air and special operations attacks against Iran's suspected nuclear facilities will prevent Tehran from acquiring warheads. But the moderates, who are far fewer in the second Bush administration than in the first, argue that if Iran does have a secret weapons programme it is likely to be dispersed and buried in places almost unknown to US intelligence. Also, the potential for Iranian retaliation inside Iraq and elsewhere is so great that there is in effect no military option. But the hard liners argue that the cost of doing nothing may prove too high, and that a minimum of military strikes could at least set back Iran's nuclear programme by several years.

The plea of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) chief for a US-Iran dialogue is the only ray of hope in an otherwise gloomy perspective. IAEA head Mohammed ElBaradei has urged the United States to engage in dialogue with Iran over its nuclear programme. According to him, no permanent solution to Iranian nuclear ambitions is possible without full US engagement. He has emphasized the need to address "Iran's sense of isolation and insecurity" after more than 20 years of economic sanctions imposed on its Islamic government.

Many observers believe that direct talks between the United States and Iran will go a long way in resolving the nuclear issue. But the problem is that after a quarter century of hostile relations, beginning with the toppling of the Shah and the 1979 seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, the US and Iran find themselves caught up in a vicious circle.

Too much of national pride is involved on either side to let them leave the beaten track and explore new ways of solving problems. However, there is not the slightest doubt, as the IAEA chief has hinted, that a dialogue between Washington and Tehran could lead to a deal on the nuclear issue in exchange for a US move to normalize relations with Iran. The coming days are fraught with great opportunities as well as dangers.

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