

What to do with Iran?

It seems that Iran will miss the new deadline for suspending its nuclear program. The chief of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mr. ElBaradei, is pessimistic about the prospect of an agreement before the next meeting of the UN Security Council. The US and other European powers are contemplating a response to Teheran's defiance of the UN ultimatum, which may amount to punitive financial and political measures. However, given the Russian and Chinese reservations over the US plan for a tough response against Iran, it will be difficult to achieve unanimity. On top of that, Israel, which conceives Iran's nuclear program as real threat to its existence, may consider preemptive military strikes against its nuclear facilities. Teheran, on the other hand, insists that its nuclear enrichment program is meant for peaceful purposes and that it does not intend to develop nuclear weapons.

This short article raises two points: Firstly, it focuses on Professor Abbas Amanant's line of argumentation to claim that Iran's bid for power has deep roots that both the US and its allies need to understand before making any decisions. Secondly, it points out the positions of James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton (the co-chairs of the Iraq Study Group Report) that the best way for the US to diffuse the crisis is to engage Iran constructively. Neither UN sanctions nor Israeli preemptive strikes are capable of dealing readily with this crisis. A viable solution could come only through dialogue and constructive engagement.

Iran's quest for power is very old. In May 2006, Abbas Amanant, Professor of History at Yale University, wrote to the *New York Times* that 'we tend to forget that Iran's insistence on its sovereign right to develop nuclear power is in effect a national pursuit for empowerment, a pursuit informed by at least two centuries of military aggression, domestic meddling, skullduggery and, not least, technological denial by the West.' Unless international leaders understand the deep roots of that country's bid for sovereignty and power, Amanant suggested, they will not be in a position to deal with the ongoing crisis over Iran's nuclear program. The British and Russian

intervention and exploitation of Iran's natural resources in the late 19th and early 20th century, the CIA-sponsored coup in the 1950s and the US-British opposition to Iran's oil nationalization movement made an indelible mark on the collective memory of the people of Iran. That memory fuels today's debate and provides fertile ground for a nationalistic rhetoric. Iranian leaders believe that the West opposes the economic development of their country and its progress in general. So long as these sorts of perceptions prevail across Iran, there is little leeway, if any, for communication and compromise.

The US-led war in Iraq made things worse. The signal sent to Iran was that it may be the next target of the so-called war on terror and on the rogue states that sponsor terrorist organizations. The post-war situation, however, gave Teheran an unexpected strategic advantage. The US failure to stabilize the country and to install a viable regime sparked a sectarian war among Shia and Sunni factions. It comes as no surprise that Iran is capable of playing a crucial role in either the diffusion or the deterioration of civil conflict in Iraq. Due to Teheran's long-standing ties to many Iraqi Shia leaders, many of whom emerged as key figures, Iran has obtained leverage in Iraq. Iran provides political support to Shia parties and non-governmental organizations (mainly religious ones), and there are allegations that it provides military, financial support and training to Shiite factions. The US government accused Iran for supplying ammunition and explosive devices to groups that take hostile actions against American forces. Iran refuses the US allegations that it nourishes sectarian hostilities and says that it has every interest in a stable Iraq with which it can do business. Teheran, however, promotes the establishment of a shia-dominated Iraq, something which opposes the US plans for the development of a balanced political and administrative relationship between the three major communities of Iraq (the Shia, the Sunnis and the Kurds).

Paradoxically, Iran is the only neighbor of Iraq which is capable of helping the US to control the Iraqi crisis and avoid an all-out civil war. This is a conclusion drawn by several politicians and scholars across the globe. A statement signed by former foreign ministers Madeleine Albright of

the United States, Joschka Fischer of Germany, Jozias van Aartsen of the Netherlands, Bronislaw Geremek of Poland, Hubert Védrine of France and Lydia Polfer of Luxembourg in April 2006 urged President Bush to talk to Iran. In January 2007, CNN's chief international correspondent Christine Amanpour interviewed a senior Iranian government official who told her that the religious and the political leadership of the country would not reject dialogue with the US. The Iranian President's letter to the US President last June and a second one to the American people in November 2006 signaled his willingness to talk with the Americans. However, the pompous tone of these letters and Ahmadinejad's continuous assaults against the US President widened the gap instead of bridging it.

Baker and Hamilton made a serious point when they suggested that, given the ability of Iran to influence events within Iraq and its interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq, the US should try to engage that country constructively. Perhaps such an engagement could be premised on mutually acceptable principles. On the one hand, Iran should assure the US that it respects Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity; that it takes all necessary measures to stop the flow of arms and foreign militias to Iraq; that it will encourage national reconciliation among the communities of Iraq; and that it supports the principles of Quartet's initiative for the resolution of the Middle East issue. On the other hand, the US should assure Teheran that it does not intend to change the political regime in Iran or help others to do so; that it recognizes the right of Iran to develop a peaceful nuclear program; and that it is ready to discuss compensation in security and economic benefits in return for abandonment of plans for nuclear armaments. "Focusing on regime change as the road to denuclearization", Henry Kissinger wrote to the *Washington Post* in May 2006, "confuses the issue". The US has a lesson to learn from the policy it followed in the case of North Korea and the reasons why its commitment to a peaceful resolution and its collaboration with other countries bore fruit. In the case of Iran, the use of force is not an option for the US or Israel.

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