

IRAN: NIGHTMARE OR HYSTERIA?

A deep and enduring economic crisis and Arab revolutions are more than enough to worry about. Like buses, big crises tend to come along in bunches. Iran's nuclear programme is the touch paper that could ignite the Middle East powder keg – for decades now the world's number one threat to global security. This coming Autumn could be crunch time. In the worst case, a military conflict with Iran could converge with the other two crises to produce some dreadful combined impacts across the globe.

Hopefully, Iran will desist from continuing with her military nuclear programme and provide sufficient proof of this to stay military attack by Israel and - possibly - America. Some commentators reckon the chances of an Israeli and/or American attack are 50-50. This seems high, we should be wary of the voices of exaggeration in every camp. That said, the policy community are extremely worried and, unlike the Euro zone crisis, the inevitable moment of truth cannot be delayed much further.

The slow-burning fuse is close to the end. International policy towards Iran has not worked so far, and 'war by other means' – including Stuxnet and assassination delaying tactics – are running out; in any event they cannot solve the fundamental issue. We are now into the final phase of intense diplomatic activity. Tough sanctions are biting and the hope is that Iran acts rationally and soon - convincingly enough - to meet international demands. Mounting military pressure and rhetoric, of course, are hallmarks of intense diplomacy at times such as these. Nevertheless, as carrier battle groups and other forces from outside the region move closer to Iran and the Gulf, the risks increase that miscalculation, rogue action by irregular military elements - or a simple accident - triggers an out-of-control chain reaction.

We must shed Anglo-Saxon mindsets. Wishful thinking about potential containment of a nuclear weapon capable Iran, or waiting for an Iranian Spring is fruitless. It is the mindset of Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli cabinet that counts. It is irrelevant for us to dwell on some middle eastern version of the Cold War and adapted concept of mutually assured destruction. The Israelis will not countenance it. Iran has never recognised Israel, and has said in many ways and on many occasions that Israel must be destroyed. Netanyahu and plenty of others fear Israel faces a second holocaust.

It is very difficult to get into the Iranian mindset – Ahmadinajad and the Supreme Leader, of course, think very differently. The Iranian leadership is split three ways - including the Republican Guard. The other two worry that the egocentric president could be bought off during international negotiations. For the international community, an Iranian siege mentality is a fluid and dangerous basis for confident negotiation. We have insufficient understanding of Iran's internal dynamics. Too much is lost in translation, Iranians are very proud and do not respond well to overbearing treatment. Notwithstanding its repeated flouting of the NPT, and other international agreements, we should ratchet-back pariah status rhetoric and negotiate with full respect.

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President Obama and America are in a truly difficult position, made worse in an election year. He has said that 'he has Israel's back', that he does not bluff, and that Iran will not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons. This represents a significant hardening of US policy. It rules out a policy of containment based upon US extended nuclear guarantee of the sort that covers South Korea and Japan from North Korean nuclear weapons.

American decision makers have every desire to avoid yet another military engagement in the Middle East, for obvious reasons. A nuclear proliferation free-for-all there poses a much greater risk to global peace than does nuclear North Korea or Pakistan. A unilateral Israeli attack would likely have disastrous wider consequences - unlike previous attacks against Iraqi and Syrian facilities - and might only achieve a delay of a few years. A key question is: are US and Israeli red lines converging or diverging following Obama's change of policy?

Some commentators believe that the consequences of an attack on Iran might not be as dreadful as others portray – reprisals and retribution, oil disruption and price spike, mobilisation of the Arab street, Islamist fundamentalists and extremists, and global recession. Who knows? Either way, we should assume the worst and go every extra mile to avoid conflict.

What should we be doing that we are not already doing? We should ensure that evidence – not intelligence – drives decision-making and world opinion. We must convincingly demonstrate every conceivable effort to avoid military action. We must be more flexible, do the homework, and challenge siren voices especially in America. Russia and China do not want Iran to possess nuclear weapons. We should search for agreement, accepting some Iranian latent nuclear capability, and enshrine United Nations Security Council action to prevent any nation in the Gulf region from acquiring nuclear weapons. Diplomatic efforts need more momentum. Appointing former President Clinton as special envoy would be a smart move. UK could appoint a former PM as its envoy too.

It is quite possible to permit Iranian civilian nuclear development with modern day safeguards and inspection regimes. The issue is about stopping short of nuclear weapon production. Ideally Iran should be like Japan or Brazil – capable but some years from manufacturing weapons. For Iran, for Israel, and for the rest of the world it comes down to timescale and assured transparency. We should and must be able to present this approach as a viable alternative to military action.

This crisis has elements of both nightmare and hysteria. It really should be resolved peacefully. But there is no guarantee. Behind the scenes we should plan 'just in case' because military action could trigger a nasty chain reaction and, not least, new scale of protest and civil disorder almost anywhere.

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