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USADI Commentary

The Making of a Sound Iran Policy

There is no secret that successive American administrations have been bedeviled on how to formulate a sound policy toward Iran's ruling theocratic dictatorship - the first of its kind in the modern times.

A range of policies from unilateral concession to containment have been tested to crack this policy conundrum. They have been either ineffective or simply backfired, resulting in a more impudent Tehran.

Unfortunately, the Iranian people have paid the heaviest price for these misguided approaches, which only served to prolong the brutal, corrupt, and dysfunctional rule of the mullahs. In the meantime, the security challenges posed by Tehran only became more perilous.

Until the revelations on Iran's secret nuclear weapons program in August 2002, the prevailing thought in the West was that although Tehran posed a security challenge to the regional and global order, it did not represent a clear and present danger. That is no longer the case.

As the two main camps have been sparring over the direction of the much-anticipated policy position of the second Bush administration on Iran, they are in almost total agreement on the need to deal with Iran's nuclear weapons program, its support of terrorism and its destabilizing campaign in Iraq.

The policy of "no policy" cannot go on any longer, they correctly argue.

But a review of what's on the table makes it clear that when it comes to substance, no matter which camp prevails in making its case, the US would still end up suffering from an Iran policy paralysis.

The engagement camp, which despite the repeated failure of this policy in all its variations over the past two decades, still presses for a new round of engagement, has nothing to build its case on except the other camp's failure to make a realistic argument to support its "regime change" proposal.

In a nutshell, the engagement advocates' main argument is that although Tehran is immensely unpopular and loathed by Iranians, it is well-entrenched due in large part to the lack of an organized opposition. And with the military option out of the question, the argument goes, the only chance for success is engagement based on package of carrots and sticks. Tehran welcomes this line of reasoning since it is fully aware that there won't be any meaningful sticks.

The other camp correctly dismisses the argument for engagement and sees the removal of this regime as the only way to resolve the major national security challenges Tehran poses. It, however, fails to articulate how this regime change would come about. To be sure, the Iraqi-style invasion of Iran does not constitute a viable solution. There are some in this camp who vaguely talk about the regime change from within Iran by the Iranian people but offer no concrete ideas on how a US policy would work to support this goal. Nor do they outline how the anti-regime democracy movement inside Iran could be helped politically and diplomatically in a constructive, meaningful and realistic way.

The fact is that engagement or military invasion is not the answer. The only viable policy toward Iran would be one which at its core recognizes that only a change of regime in Iran should be achieved by relying on the Iranian people and organized opposition that has been challenging the regime for the past quarter century.

This policy should also articulate the practical means by which the United States would throw its diplomatic and economic weight behind the democracy movement and the democratic opposition in Iran. Washington's support if done in a serious, transparent, and meaningful manner is not going to be a "kiss of death" for the opposition as some experts fear.

That said, this support must by necessity include reaching out to anti-fundamentalist Iranian opposition groups who have been fighting for a secular and representative government in Iran.

As Washington is grasping the sheer extent of the destructive and multi-faceted threat Iran poses to the well-being of Iranians and to the security and stability of the region, it should recognize that the call of Iranians for a regime change must be heeded and the door to engagement must be shut.

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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The Chicago Tribune (Editorial)

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The Iranian puzzle

In the summer of 2002, the Bush administration signaled that it had abandoned hope that Iran President Mohammad Khatami and his supporters in parliament could deliver promised democratic reforms. From that point on, President Bush said, the United States would seek to support in any way possible the "Iranian people"--meaning the student protesters who had stormed the streets demanding reform.

At the time, it seemed that the administration was giving up too easily on Khatami. Now that shift in policy appears to have been prophetic. Khatami proved to be an overly cautious politician who reneged on his promises of increased freedom for Iranians.

In recent weeks, Khatami has conceded that he failed to deliver on his democratic reforms, claiming that he surrendered to the will of the country's hard-line theocrats to avoid riots and preserve the ruling Islamic establishment. "If I retreated, I retreated against the system I believed in," Khatami said to Tehran University students. "I considered it necessary to save the ruling establishment."

To which some students chanted: "Khatami, Khatami, shame on you!"

Shame, indeed. Saving the ruling establishment is a tragedy for millions of Iranians seeking greater freedoms. These Iranians, many of them under 35, overwhelmingly elected Khatami twice in hopes that he would challenge the tyrannical mullahs, not kowtow to them... So the Bush administration was right on Khatami. But the administration also promised an Iran policy that would foster freedom by supporting the reform-minded students' crusade against the mullahs. There's little evidence the administration has made good on that promise--and if it has, it has not delivered results. That leaves everyone with a quandary: What should the U.S. be doing to destabilize the mullahs and help the democratic movement?...

United Press International

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The Iran dossier

WASHINGTON -- As soon as President George W. Bush brushes the confetti off his lapels and returns to the Oval Office from his second inaugural parade on Jan. 20, he will find a series of "presidential papers" on Iran, requiring his immediate attention, waiting for him... The Iran dossier comprises three aspects: first, the Islamic Republic's pursuit of nuclear weapons technology; second, the United States' accusation that Iran supports terrorism; and third, Iran's involvement in Iraq...

"U.S. policy will have to shift to the policy of supporting democratic opposition to bring about regime change," Alireza Jafarzadeh, president of Strategic Policy Consulting, told United Press International. Barring a change of regime in Iran, Washington should get used to the idea of a nuclear-armed Islamic Republic, as all indications are that Iran is set to follow its desire to join the nuclear club...

Iran's pursuit of its nuclear weapons program is sure to continue despite periodic disclaimers to the contrary by officials in Tehran... Now for the first time since 1979, Iran is seeing new opportunities open up in neighboring Iraq, a country with a majority Shiite population. Faced with this dilemma, the United States has three options.

First, the United States can avoid confrontation and continue to engage Iran in dialogue, hoping that Iran will see logic in diplomacy. This is the European Union's favorite policy. "This option produced a 2004 accord with Iran to freeze some of its nuclear programs that might allow for weapons development," Raymond Tanter, a visiting professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, told UPI. The problem with this option is that it failed to produce concrete results in the past because Iran did not respect prior agreements. "This route is bound to fail," said Tanter, who served on the National Security Council staff and as representative of the secretary of Defense to arms control talks in the Reagan administration...

The second option, Tanter believes, is for Israel or the United States to conduct military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. "But because Iran has hidden, hardened, dispersed, and placed its nuclear facilities in populated areas, military strikes are unlikely to be effective and may lead to escalation and expansion of combat," said Tanter.

This leaves the third option -- and the most logical one -- that of regime change. This option fits in with the hard approach preferred by the neo-cons in the Bush administration. Both Tanter and Jafarzadeh believe the Bush administration will opt for beginning a "process of changing the regime in Tehran" sometime soon after the second inauguration.

There is one minor snag however, and that is the lack of an organized opposition able to help bring about regime change. One of the main opposition groups, the MEK, remains on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. To collude with those opposition forces requires the United States to remove restrictions against Iranian opposition groups, argues Tanter.

Because the MEK and its associate political umbrella organization, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, have "been instrumental in exposing some of Tehran's key nuclear secrets, President Bush is likely to favor lifting the terrorist designation on the MEK in 2005," says Tanter.