

Channeling "Nixon Goes to China" in the Middle East

Written by Greg R. Lawson

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GREG R. LAWSON, APR 2 2010

The balance of power between Sunni and Shia has shifted since the 2003 Iraq War. A bold, "Nixon goes to China" moment with Iran could reset the balance in the region and allow the US to recalibrate its Middle East strategy.

While the famous "unclenched" fist President Obama offered to Iran has yet to be reciprocated, seeking a geopolitical compromise with Iran is rapidly becoming a necessity. However, such a potential agreement must also encompass the wider Shia population within the Greater Middle East. The Shia, though overall a minority in the Middle East, make up majorities in Iran and Iraq. Even though they comprise less than twenty percent of the population in Saudi Arabia, they tend to reside in areas of high oil concentration. This enables them to exert influence disproportionate to their numbers.

This means that as the balance of power between Sunni and Shia shifts with the ousting of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the relative rise of Iran, the US should be willing to shift its focus on who plays the great stabilizer role for global oil prices. However, since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the US has had a Sunni-centric approach to the region that has hobbled its diplomatic flexibility.

Any accommodation with Iran with respect to its nuclear program, though perceived by many as heretical, should be rigorously examined.

For this to happen, a change in focus must take place. Despite fears of Iran's pending nuclearization killing the non-proliferation regime, the truth is that it is already dead. Attempting to block nations from developing nuclear capabilities on an ad hoc basis will squander scarce resources and not guarantee success, thus making such efforts of doubtful long-term utility.

As it pertains to Iran, it is important stop clinging to ineffectual policy options such as economic sanctions. Few expect these to be effective even if they could clear the myriad of hurdles that keep bottling them up at the United Nations. Rather, the entire endeavor looks more like a subterfuge designed to give the appearance of meaningful action in the actual absence of such action.

It is also extremely unrealistic to assume that military force will permanently stop nuclear progress absent an actual invasion of the country and an intrusive inspection regime being imposed. Given the limited flexibility of ground forces available to the US at the moment, not to mention possible domestic political backlash for unleashing a third regional war, the option of invasion seems off the table for the foreseeable future. What is left as an option appears to be, as unsatisfying as it is for many, a re-embracing of deterrence.

Iran, contrary to many assertions, is likely to take a strong deterrent stance seriously, though it will need to be quite explicit and quite harsh to be effective. If a line is drawn on what is unacceptable, any crossing of that line must not yield "discussions", "negotiations", or "processes." Such a crossing, for example an attack on Israel, must be made existentially catastrophic so that it won't seriously be contemplated.

Naturally, the development of these "lines" is much easier said than done, however, it seems reasonable to assume several key lines would involve:

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- No attacks on Israel either overtly or covertly through the use of proxies such as Hezbollah or Hamas
- No attacks of Arab neighbors either overtly or covertly through the use of proxies such as Hezbollah or Hamas
- No distribution of nuclear material to third parties whether state or non-state based.

Should an aggressive sense of deterrence be established psychologically where the concept actually resides, then a "deal" can be possible allowing Iran a certain degree of security within well defined limits. The regime can be assured that no external forces or externally supported internal forces will overthrow it. It may even be possible to envision allowing it to openly develop nuclear power (and even a limited weapon) capability. Other economic incentives can also be included, especially the option of facilitating oil refining, a particular weakness in present day Iran.

Conceptually, this is no more shocking an idea than having the arch-anti-Communist Richard Nixon work with Mao in order to balance the Soviet Union. That Nixon-Kissinger policy of triangulation is generally considered to have paid handsome dividends. While this diplomatic gambit would be different in many ways, it would operate similarly by opening the door to flexible diplomacy in the region.

If the US and Iran can come to some terms, the ability to tilt between the Sunni Saudi regime and the Shia ascendancy in Iran and Iraq will be possible. Additionally, this flexibility will have to be taken into consideration by a resurgent Turkey which currently appears as though it is attempting to regain influence within the region.

Today the US is stuck trying to contain Iran without the military flexibility to be serious, thus looking a bit like a paper tiger. Tomorrow, it could seize the geopolitical initiative by being the decisive weight on the scale of Sunni-Shia relations. Both would be forced to cultivate relations with the US in order to maintain its support.

Obviously, for this to work the US must allay the most pressing fears of present allies in the region, notably Israel whose immediate security concerns regarding Iran are far more immediate and proximate than those of the US. The US's stance on deterrence must be clear enough that Israel understands that any attack upon it by Iran would be answered with the most aggressive of responses. To further compensate, missile defense cooperation with Israel will probably have to be quickened and made even more robust than it already is. Additionally, the US should be careful in pushing an unrealistic settlement in the Israel-Palestinian Peace Process. It is difficult to conceive of Israel willingly accepting a nuclear armed Iran while also accepting concessions that could put militants within even easier striking distance of major metropolitan areas than already exists.

Finally, current signs of enhanced missile defense and other technology trade with Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and others should be made permanent and expedited.

In order to avoid losing ground in a geopolitically pivotal region of the world, the US must be bold. Today, Iran and the increasingly confident Shia of the Middle East are playing a central role in shaping what the region will look like a generation from now. The US must be able to adapt to the shifting sands and not cling rigidly to yesteryear's policy prescriptions.

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