

Attacking Iran is Still Completely Nuts

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, AUG 11 2010

Some time ago in April 2006, in what it seems were different times, then British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw remarked that attacking Iran over its alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons under the cloak of a nuclear energy program was “completely nuts”. That remark is widely regarded as the final ‘straw’ that facilitated his removal in a later cabinet reshuffle at the insistence of the Bush administration. Yet, it was a rare moment of honesty and wisdom from an experienced member of the foreign policy elite. Straw had driven the EU-3 negotiation round with Iran, outside of the realm of the Bush administration and in doing so championed a middle ground to the ever-present bipolarity that had come to characterise the Iranian-American standoff on its nuclear ambitions. Such diplomatic gestures, though well intentioned, will fail in the future as they have in the past and are continuing to do so in the present. Why? Because Iran has its sights set on gaining full mastery of the nuclear cycle, not on a deal (no matter how generous it seems) involving a compromise over enriched uranium from a third party, not anything other than full independence in the nuclear process. Iran has continually played the compromise game in a characteristic brinkmanship strategy to scatter attention and play for time, before withdrawing and continuing on its pre-ordained path. Negotiators therefore proceed, and have proceeded, with the false assumption that Iran wishes to negotiate. Similarly, the posture of the Bush administration (and the bulk of the international community) made it continually clear that there was no compromise on its insistence that Iran must not possess full, independent mastery over the nuclear cycle.

Fast forward to the present day, a supposed new era in international politics, inspired by a multilateral and diplomatic American administration, led by a man who appears in every sense to be the opposite of George W. Bush, Barack Obama.

The problem of course is, Iran. That ever present thorn on so many a President's foot, is in danger of revealing Obama as another thinly veiled president of ‘more of the same’ when it comes to foreign policy. It is a quietly observed trend in international politics that foreign policy rarely changes. Rather it slowly evolves. President Truman famously declared that he saw foreign policy residing above the partisan divide. In American politics and the politics of national security, his words have indeed been heeded.

For example, many attribute Ronald Reagan for ramping up American military spending and overturning the decline in strength witnessed in the detente era, which in turn led to the economic strangulation of the Soviet Union as it failed to keep up. In truth, this process was initiated by Jimmy Carter, infuriated by the revolution in Iran and the invasion of Afghanistan. Reagan simply rode the wave and carried it forward (and took credit). Similarly, many attribute President Nixon for creating the ‘twin pillar’ strategy of fortifying the Middle East by building up Saudi Arabia, and especially Iran via advanced weaponry and military training. Yet, this process was already in motion in the final years of the Johnson administration. It is often easy to accredit changes to a change in leader, but this is rarely accurate, and defies the momentum that foreign policy has across administrations.

In Obama's case, he inherited a foreign policy momentum in the Middle East that he has chosen to see through, rather than halt. There have been changes in language and posture, such as the jettisoning of the term ‘war on terror’, yet the general thrust of the Bush legacy in the world remains intact. Nowhere can this be more visible than in the Iran case. It was highly doubtful even to the most faithful in the change camp that Obama would drastically re-appraise the Iraq and Afghanistan situations due to the fact that the situation on the ground in both theatres was far from ‘mission accomplished’, and in any case Congress seems to be doing that for him – but in the case of Iran,

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Obama made visible signs that he was prepared to listen, to 'reach out a hand', towards Iran. Obama made a clear and incontrovertible gesture toward a 180 degree turn in policy. This will certainly go down in history as an early sign of naiveté and perhaps arrogance.

As Iran marches on with its nuclear program, all negotiations have failed, and any possibility of domestic revisionism died when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad 'triumphed' in the allegedly rigged election of 2009, Obama has reverted to the familiar constant left in place prior to his arrival in the Whitehouse of keeping the option to attack Iran 'on the table', as confirmed recently by a high level official. It begs the question of what exactly Obama expected the Iranian leadership to talk to him about as he reached out his hand? After all, he has always maintained the precondition that Iran must negotiate on its nuclear program (a leftover from Bush). Yet, it is clear that this insistence is the very factor that has rallied Iran along, in another episode in its now famous belligerence towards America.

Iran will never negotiate on its nuclear program, something that pre-dates Ahmadinejad's reign and has been a steady goal for the regime. What is less widely known is that whilst Ahmadinejad's predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, was talking of embracing the West in a 'dialogue of civilisations' and appearing to be a reformist character, Iran was engaged in a full scale clandestine nuclear program which reached as far back as the 1980's. Nuclear proliferation is an all around winner for Iran when viewed within the distorted logic of Middle Eastern politics, from an Iranian perspective. Firstly it provides much needed deterrence from attack from the nuclear armed Israel and from the 'Great Satan', America. Secondly, it provides additional strength for the faltering regime, focusing the domestic discourse on the embattled and under siege nation of Iran and redirecting sympathy and loyalty to the leadership. It is via combination of these two factors that the solution-less and reciprocal logic of the entire situation becomes clear. Though, in this case change rather than continuity is looking increasingly unlikely in Washington despite the supposed presence of 'change' in the Whitehouse.

The stark truth is that we simply must accept Iran's nuclear program. This is not a desirable admission, nor is it a triumph for anyone, lest the Iranians themselves who would better receive the funds spent on their own faltering economy. Yet, it must be seen within the deterrence paradigm, and as such, no realistic threat to anyone. If we are to accept that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a rational actor wishing to survive and prosper, then we must accept that it is fully aware that using its nuclear arsenal or placing a bomb into the hands of a terrorist group would be suicide, and its alleged proliferation is therefore a non issue outside of standard concerns when a country goes nuclear. The alternative, when viewed through the increasingly Bush like Obama (when it comes to Iran) is to attack Iran and open up pandora's box in the Middle East. Something that is potentially so toxic that talk of World War Three is not an exaggeration. Similarly, Israel must continue to be restrained from launching an offensive against Iran, for the same reasons. Additionally, attacking Iran would put the domestic reform movement back twenty years as it would embolden support for the regime, as nationalism trumps politics.

There is simply no middle ground to tread. Talk of containment, sanctions etc.. is unhelpful in this case. Iran has been dealt every card in the foreign policy punishment book short of direct force for over thirty years, and has prevailed intact, somehow. A middle ground cannot be possible when both sides insist on mutually exclusive postulates. Iran is a rogue state in every sense of the word, but it is also a rational actor in international politics. Consequently, there are only two options on the table: Either to continue strangling Iran, standing tall and hoping that its internal organic political movement will enlighten or revolutionise the stale, corrupt clerical regime. This option involves the swallowing of American pride and the dampening of the Israeli paranoid infused regional trigger finger; Or, secondly, initiate the end of the Iranian nuclear program by force (most probably outside the bounds of international law). This option involves unleashing potential hell on the region that would make the current fallout from the war on terror look like a picnic. One would hope that the American military is genuinely too fatigued (or perhaps too sensible?) to genuinely push for such a mission, the Obama administration has learned the lessons of miscalculation and arrogance in foreign policy from its predecessor, and the Israeli's don't take the initiative and do something they will regret.

Therefore, in every sense of the word and for every sensible reason 'on the table', attacking Iran in any sense, at any time, remains completely nuts.

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