

US-Iran: The Changing Dynamics and the Likelihood of a Conflict

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Abstract

Washington-Tehran relations have come to occupy centrestage in the recent months given the United States' current preoccupation with the Middle East. The US-Iran association can be traced back to 1953, when the CIA organised a coup to oust the elected government of Mohammed Mossadeq. Since then, the US has never really disengaged itself from the one of the most strategically important Middle East nations. This paper attempts to identify current US concerns regarding Iran and explores the possibility of a US offensive against Iran similar to that in Iraq. The US-Iran relations have the potential of transforming into better, long-lasting ties provided the US takes into account some critical issues.

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With the war in Iraq still not over even after the capture of Saddam Hussein, and Afghanistan's reconstruction on the agenda, the United States seems to be in a flux in the Middle East. The neo-conservatives (neocons) dominating the White House are pro-Empire heavyweight intellectuals. Their apparent belief is that the United States has to be instrumental in bringing about a permanent worldwide revolution. These neocons also favour pro-interventionist wars for defeating forces of chaos, and champion democratic transformation in the Middle East.¹

According to a *New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, a neo-conservatives' formulation — chiefly by Richard Perle and Douglas Feith — it is Iran that the US will target next.² The January 29, 2002 State of the Union Address by the US President, had only reinforced this when President Bush branded Iran as part of 'an axis of evil arming to threaten the peace of the world'. Subsequently, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice summed up the US Administration's position on Iran:

"Iran's direct support of regional and global terrorism and its aggressive efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, belie

any good intentions it displayed in the days after the world's worst terrorist attacks in history.”³

Background

Iran, the largest country in the Gulf with the longest coastline, is situated in a region where the US has the predominant military presence and is likely to remain so in the years to come. This has brought the two countries closer with several shared, as well as conflicting interests. Notwithstanding the apparent proximity, Washington has often meddled in Iranian politics, thereby making the Iranian people skeptical of its intentions.

The 1953 coup, allegedly organised by the CIA for displacing the elected government of Mohammed Mossadeq with the dictatorship of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, displayed Iran's strategic significance and the US interest therein. Since then, Washington has never really washed its hands off Iran. The ongoing turbulence of the relationship can be traced back to the 1979 Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The revolution was aimed not only at the US but also at the Shah who was believed to be a stooge of the Americans.⁴

This paper attempts to analyse the probable concerns of the Bush Administration regarding Iran and tries to evaluate the possibility of a US offensive on Iran on the lines of Iraq.

Reasons Behind Increasing US Concern Over Iran

A number of factors have led to increasing concerns within the US and the international community over Iran.

- *Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs)*: In a report released on January 30, 2001, the CIA found that “Iran remains one of the most active countries seeking to acquire technology from abroad — primarily from Russia, China and North Korea — that can be used to develop WMDs”.⁵ “In doing so,” the report said, “Tehran is attempting to develop a domestic capability to produce various types of weapons — chemical, biological and nuclear — and their delivery systems.”⁵ This has created concerns in the comity of nations and especially in the US. It is further feared that the Iran-backed Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, which is believed to have close ties with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Hamas, might acquire the Iranian WMDs.⁵
- *Nuclear Capability*: The US and Europe are united in their

opposition to a nuclear Iran. The US is pressurising Iran to accept expanded international inspections, by using a policy of confrontation and threats. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) though failing to accuse Tehran directly of violating the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), concluded that, “some of the information [provided by Iran] was in contrast to that previously provided by Iran” to the IAEA.⁶ In June 2003, Iran had claimed that its nuclear technology was indigenous. But according to the IAEA, Iran has admitted to importing equipment from abroad. In June 2003 only, Iran tested its uranium centrifuges with inert gas, which might have been substituted for banned uranium.⁶

Further, with Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan’s confession in early 2004 regarding Pakistan’s proliferation to other countries, the Iranian government has now acknowledged its possession of a design for a far more advanced high-speed centrifuge, called ‘Pak-2’⁷, to enrich uranium.⁸

Iran’s nuclear ambition is not a new development. As far back as December 3, 2001, Seymour Hersh had stated in *The New Yorker*; that in 1995, Iran and Russia had, “signed an US\$ 800 million contract under which the Russians would help install a powerful reactor [at Bushehr], to [be] run by a Russian-Iranian team.”⁹ He had further stated: “Iran’s most important nuclear production facilities are not at Bushehr... but scattered throughout the country, at clandestine sites, under military control.”⁹ It has also been learnt “from sensitive sources [in the late 1990s] that Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, who directed the Pakistani nuclear programme from the 1970s until his retirement, made at least one secret visit to an Iranian nuclear facility. American officials believe that, “though he did not bring actual materials with him to Iran, he certainly shared his hands-on experience in bomb-making”⁹ with Iran.

The Israeli factor has also contributed to Iran’s nuclear ambition¹⁰ that is indirectly fomenting Iran’s fundamentalists opposed to any kind of Western influence (read US). Israel’s patrolling of the Persian Gulf waters with nuclear subs is only strengthening the Iranian hardliners and its nuclear programme. As a result the moderates in Iran, who otherwise champion the denuclearisation of the Middle East,¹¹ are gradually getting suppressed.

- *Iran’s support to the Lebanon-based terrorist group Hezbollah and its possible influence on Iraq*¹²: The Hezbollah was instrumental in driving the US peacekeeping troops out from Lebanon in the early 1980s,

following the Israeli intervention. It is feared that it may resort to the same strategy in Iraq in the near future. In fact, Iran's National Security Adviser Hassan Rowhani had even publicly warned in March 2003 that there would be no "happy ending" to the occupation of Iraq.¹³ As a result, Washington is suspecting that Iran might be promoting anti-American demonstrations or other challenges to US authority in an effort to exert influence in post-war Iraq.¹⁴ Since the Iranian government has many supporters in southern Iraq, particularly Shiite Muslims — who see themselves philosophically aligned with the Shiite government in Tehran and who were at one point of time brutally repressed by Saddam Hussein in Iraq — the Iranian influence on Iraq cannot be altogether ruled out and the US fears are not entirely unfounded.

- *Conflicting interests:* The US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on ABC's *This Week* in early February 2001, "we have any number of reports that Iran has been permissive and allowed transit through their country of Al Qaida".¹⁵

Despite Iran's support to the US campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which included Iran giving safe passage to humanitarian aid, agreeing to conduct search-and-rescue operations if American pilots were downed in Iranian territory, and using its influence to secure the Northern Alliance's cooperation, the US and Afghan officials say that apart from humanitarian aid, Iran has also sent weapons, and money to Western Afghanistan in a bid to exert influence and challenge the US-backed government in Kabul, which Iran might view as a potential threat to its long-term interests in the region.¹⁵

US Offensive Against Iran: Likely Deterrents

After devoting relatively little attention to the possibility and problems of democracy in the Middle East for decades, US foreign policy has, in the past year, elevated the issue to a position of central importance. But the formulation of a new policy by President Bush called 'a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East' in November 2003, seems merely pretentious.

While deliberating on the merits of turning the Middle East into a democracy, Washington is reluctant to do so elsewhere as is evident from its engagement of Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan (in the year 2002, the Bush

Administration, in return for a military base in Uzbekistan, offered US \$ 500 million to a government that, according to the State Department, uses torture as a routine investigation technique and whose President has killed opponents with boiling water)¹⁸ and General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. The key decision-makers in the White House need to realise that selective wars of ‘liberation’ are likely to be counter-productive and would alienate Washington’s friends and allies. Consolidating democracy appears to be a tenuous excuse for bringing the entire Middle East under US influence. The larger question of a probable US attack on Iran, however, will depend upon the outcomes of several other events of far-reaching significance. Some of these events and their possible outcomes have been discussed below.

- *Does Iran genuinely desire to assert its hegemony from Morocco to Pakistan, as visualised by the Israeli scholar, Israel Shahak, in his book, Open Secrets?* While Iran definitely believes that it has a natural influence through out the region, USA refers to this influence and associated actions as ‘meddling’.¹⁷ Iran’s quest to be a regional hegemon will not be accepted by Washington, since Iran’s policies and efforts run counter to US interests in the Middle East, especially its nuclear ambition.¹⁷ But if Iran does assert itself in the region, the possibility of a war similar to the recent one waged by the US against Iraq cannot be ruled out.
- *Given Iran’s common border with Russia, would the US be ready to come eye-ball to eye-ball with Russia?* Given Russia’s nuclear capabilities and President Vladimir Putin’s present focus on economic reform and integration, as well as seeking US support for foreign investment,¹⁸ Washington is unlikely to risk a confrontation with it.
- *How credible is the American fear of Iran building its nuclear bombs?* Hashemi Rafsanjani’s declaration, ‘If one day, this Islamic World is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists’ strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything’¹⁹ threatens USA’s pre-eminent position in the Middle East, as well as its long-time ally, Israel. The Iranian doctrine that nuclear weapons will serve not only as deterrents, but also for pursuing ideological goals seems quite dangerous.¹⁹
- *How strategically important is Iran for the US to risk a war against it? To what extent will the Israel factor play a role in Washington’s decision to declare war against Iran?* Iran definitely features high on the list of US priorities given its third-largest oil reserves and its comparatively

liberal society. But after the somewhat counter-productive campaign in Iraq, such repetition of follies appears doubtful, particularly with the US presidential elections due in 2004. However, one cannot rule out the possibility altogether.

Israel is one of the most important countries in the shaping of US-Iran relations. Washington can never forego its strategic attachment to the Israeli component of US interests in the Middle East. This is a fundamental reality that Iran fails to recognise. Iran's rejection of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is a negation of the strategic alliance between the United States and Israel. The US is determined to ensure that Iran's nuclear build-up does not create further volatility in the region — a concern shared by Israel too. In a testimony to the US-Israeli Joint Parliamentary Committee in September 2003, the State Department official Paula De Sutter stated that the impact of a nuclear-armed Iran in an already volatile region could not be underestimated. As President Bush had made clear, that cannot be allowed to happen.²⁰ However, this does not mean that Israel will be able to lobby effectively in the US and motivate it radically against Iran. The Israel lobby in the US is largely isolated and incapable of exerting significant pressure. There is also an opinion within the American policy-making fraternity, which feels that "Israel lobby distorts US foreign policy in a number of ways."²¹

- *Can the reactor at Bushehr turn into a flashpoint threatening peace and security of the world?* For the Iranians, Bushehr is a symbol of their legal right to develop nuclear energy and of their potential to become a great regional power. For the Americans, it is an ominous sign of Iran's determination to build nuclear weapons and a threat to American national security.²² The Americans believe that the reactor can prove dangerous because it will bring hundreds, perhaps thousands of Russian experts to Iran who can help in assembling nuclear bombs.²² However, few believe that Bushehr can actually turn into a nuclear flashpoint since it is a civilian nuclear power plant meant for peaceful purposes. However, the discovery of Natanz, a gaseous centrifuge, Arak, the heavy water production plant and the Centre for Nuclear Research (a secret laboratory at Tehran) can raise serious concerns regarding its nuclear weapons programme.²³
- *Will it be a miscalculation on the part of Washington to expect Iran to fall like Iraq?* Iran is different from Iraq in several respects. Unlike Iraq, Iran has a more participative political system with political inter-

mediaries between the leadership and the population.²⁴ The common man in Iran enjoys the right to defy the state in contrast to any other Middle Eastern state. According to some experts, it is also the most liberal Muslim society.²⁵ Besides, the Iranians are far more prepared to defy foreign rule than any other country in the Middle East. ‘Occupation’ and ‘foreign occupation’ in particular can mobilise Iranians across the political spectrum and resurrect historical memories dating back to the Mossadeq era.²⁶

- *Since Iran is a NPT signatory, how will Washington enforce the NPT regime here?* While the report released by the Board of Governors of the IAEA after their meeting in Vienna on November 26, 2003 on Iran’s nuclear programme holds Iran guilty of enriching uranium and separating plutonium in undeclared facilities,²⁷ “Draft Iran Nuclear Resolution”, November 25, 2003 at it clearly decides against the reference of Iran’s nuclear programme to the United Nations Security Council.²⁸ This is a distinct vindication of Iran’s nuclear policy. However, the IAEA inspectors have also found traces of enriched uranium at two of Iran’s nuclear sites and catalogued a consistent pattern of deceit about its nuclear activities.²⁹ Will the Bush Administration force its European allies to take the initiative to cut off Iran’s final cycle? The French President, Jacques Chirac had made it clear in his remarks to the G-8 summit in November 2003 that Washington once again, as it had in North Korea and Iraq, would have to handle the struggle to enforce the NPT regime alone in Iran.³⁰

US Offensive Against Iran: Likely Incitements

In the light of the issues mentioned in the previous section, the possibility of an US attack on Iran seems quite remote. But to completely discount it, however, will not be prudent. After all, international relations are often guided by impulse — the recent attack on Iraq was quite unexpected given the economic difficulties being faced by the USA — and sometimes by the reigning national interest.

Iran Agrees to IAEA Inspections

Iran, under pressure, and probably for the sops offered by the USA and the European Commission, agreed to the Vienna-based IAEA inspection and even planned to suspend its uranium enrichment programme in November 2003.³¹ This is definitely a win-win situation for Washington. But with this

decision, Russia can also now proceed with the construction of the Islamic state's first nuclear power plant³¹ (if one is already not built). How the US views such a development is, of course, a different issue.

Iran's agreeing to inspections raises one fundamental question — why this sudden turnaround by Tehran? It could be because it has become wary of Washington's handling of Iraq. Since it already has the know-how and the required raw material, it might be buying time. Moreover, it is also aware that the IAEA inspectors, who till now have not been able to unearth any WMDs in Iraq, will find none in Iran.

Possible Decrease in the Influence of the Neocons

Though it is too early to predict that the neocons and the Right-wing 'hawks' are losing influence, nevertheless, it seems that the neocons, who are the main force influencing President Bush, are gradually losing clout. It is also being recognised that the "neocons" policy of unilateral pre-emption in Iraq has resulted in the loss of significant international support."³²

The resignation of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, J.D.Crouch II,³³ can be seen as an indication of the softening of the harder edges of the White House's controversial policies. J.D.Crouch II, along with many other neocons, was responsible for promoting military pre-eminence as a post-Cold War strategy for the US.

Apart from Crouch's resignation, there are other indications demonstrating that the 'Administration's pragmatists' are beginning 'to be in charge' now.³³ Testifying before the Congress, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage affirmed that though Washington was not seeking 'regime change' in Iran, it expected to engage it in a dialogue over its nuclear programme and other issues.³³ In another significant development, a protégé of Richard Perle, Douglas Feith (Under-secretary of Defense for Policy who reports directly to Deputy Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Pentagon Chief Donald Rumsfeld) is yet another hardliner on foreign policy. His Office of Special Plans (OSP) has been rendered defunct and there are hints that Feith has seen his authority dwindle since the first half of October 2003, when National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice announced a new inter-agency Iraq Stabilisation Group (ISG) headed by her.³⁴

While none of these developments by themselves would warrant the conclusion that the 'hawks' are in decline, it will not be erroneous to state at

this juncture that the US Administration is trying to be more flexible in its foreign policy dealings.

Upcoming Presidential Elections and the Debacles in Afghanistan and Iraq

With the US presidential elections slated for 2004, it is likely that President Bush will refrain from precipitating another crisis after the limited success of his offensives in Afghanistan and Iraq. Two years after the ouster of the Taliban regime, senior Taliban and Al Qaida leaders still remain elusive, and security remains precarious in Afghanistan. While a constitutional process is underway, the establishment of democratic institutions in the country is yet to be realised.³⁵

President Bush's unilateral advance in Iraq has led to loss of vast American resources and many American (refer Table-1) and Iraqi lives. He went ahead with the advance assuming that toppling the Saddam Hussein regime will make the world safer and stable and the Middle East a more democratic region. However, the declining domestic support for President Bush's policies does not appear to vindicate his stand (refer Table-2). As can be observed from Table-2, American public opinion in favour of President Bush's hardlines on Iraq touched an all-time low in October 2003.

Table-1: US Troop Fatalities*

	All Kinds	Hospital Incidents	Non-Hospital Incidents
May	40	9	31
June	29	15	14
July	47	35	12
August	36	14	22
September	26	13	13
October	43	33	10
November	60	58	2
Total (Nov. 17)	281	177	104

*Up to May 1, 2003, Operation Iraqi Freedom caused 138 American troop fatalities. Of those, 114 were the result of hostile action, and 24 the result of non-hostile action. There were 22 American fatalities in April. Of those, 10 were the result of hostile action and 12 the result of non-hostile action, <http://www.brook.edu/fp/saban/iraq/chartshtm#chart1>

Table-2: Percentage of people who Approve Bush's Handling of Iraq Situation*

Month of 2003	Percentage
January	54
March	71
April	76
July	60
August	57
September	51
October	47
November	N/A

* "USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll," *USA Today*, November 7, 2003; 1,007 adults interviewed. Margin of error +/- 3 per cent, <http://www.brook.edu/fp/saban/iraq/chartshtm#chart1>

There is mounting pressure on the Bush Administration to withdraw troops from Iraq. It is now believed that withdrawing from Iraq by July 1, 2004 will mean that President Bush and the Republicans can go into the 2004 US election campaign showing that the forces have returned or are returning.³⁵

Internal Dynamics of Iranian Politics

Iran's internal political dynamics render US policy of 'regime change' in Iran an improbable proposition given its quest for transformation. Two processes of change are underway in Iran, both of which are extremely important to US interests. The first is domestic. A reform movement is taking shape wherein a new generation of Iranian scholars and intellectuals are questioning the present political system. The concept of clerical rule is being challenged with the clerics being asked to return to the mosques.³⁶ An upshot of this reform is that Iran has taken some strides towards democracy in the last decade. People's participation in the electoral process, right upto the level of the local village council, has been quite impressive.³⁷ The general public appears to be politically quite aware and interested in their specific Iranian identity, which according to Ali M. Ansari is increasingly defined against the Arabs and Islam.³⁸

The sabotage of the February 2004 parliamentary elections by the hard-line Guardian Council is a temporary reversal. It definitely has overshadowed a timely, low-key effort by the Bush Administration to reopen contacts with

Iran's leaders but it will be a mistake on the part of Washington to ignore the Iranian youth, who will gain power in some form and remove the conservative clerics from the mainstream in the near future.³⁹

The second process underway is the emergence of a new form of nationalism in Iranian foreign policy in place of the old nationalism, which was largely doctrinated and inward-looking. Iran now increasingly believes that it has to co-exist with the rest of the world.⁴⁰ This is something the US needs to appreciate. Instead of considering it necessary to impose a 'regime change' in Iran, it should facilitate an internal transformation, which is showing distinct signs of strengthening.

The Iranian youth can be a driving force behind this 'change'. They can set an agenda for transformation, focusing on economic development, cultural diversity and political transparency. The constructive participation of the Iranian youth in the ongoing societal transformation will provide the means for taking Iran's current transitional phase (in the country's long and linear historical struggle with despotism and monarchism) to the desired end of an institutionalised Iran.⁴¹

International Support for Fighting Against Iran

The Iraq campaign projected how the US President single-handedly launched a revolution in American foreign policy and redefined America's engagement of the world.⁴² It is being presently assumed by Washington's policy-makers that it is better 'going it alone' than 'we are going it with others'. [Thus] "It is a revolution that abandons the partnership of allies and the importance of institutions and even international law as a guiding precept of American foreign policy".⁴²

The ongoing offensive by the Iraqis against the American occupying forces rejects the impression that the people of Iraq wanted an alien power to 'liberate' them from the tyranny of President Saddam Hussein. In fact, the recent developments create doubts regarding the US progress in rebuilding the country.

The US approach in Iraq has gained it little international support, which could have helped in easing its burden (the US desperately had longed for such international assistance in order to reduce its own casualties in Iraq). It has only earned increased resentment and resistance not only in Iraq, but also in the whole international community, which refuses to cooperate with it in Iraq.

Conclusion

While the United States of America has been keen on bringing Iran to task on account of its ongoing covert nuclear programme (this is actually the short-term goal with the larger idea being to gradually draw the Middle East into its own sphere of influence), it appears to have overlooked certain other key issues like that of the proliferation nexus between Iran and Pakistan. With this revelation, it appears that Washington has overlooked Pakistan's nuclear programme all this while and Islamabad definitely should have featured in President Bush's 'axis of evil' countries.

Military alliance, multilateral and bilateral, hitherto central to diplomacy and national security strategy of the United States for more than fifty years,⁴³ has been relegated to the background. The US now seems to be inclined towards ending such alliances as far as dealing with crisis situations is concerned and prefers to go it alone. The war against Iraq is a case in point. While this could continue to be a guiding force in its policy towards Iran, other factors can act as deterrents.

It is quite evident that the Iraq war has not been a success on the lines anticipated by the White House before it launched the offensive. While September 11, 2001 exposed the vulnerability of the US, and led to a trans-atlantic solidarity towards the US cause, the Iraq war has resulted in dissent and opposition against American foreign policy-making. The public opinion polls show President Bush losing support to the extent that the President along with his neo-conservative coterie are changing course and are trying to be more flexible in their approach. In such a scenario, with the presidential elections drawing near, it is unlikely that the present Administration would risk another war with Iran. With Iran apparently succumbing to American pressure, it is only advisable that the Administration projects the development as a victory for American policy. This, coupled with the return of American soldiers from Iraq, can help President Bush into primacy once again, making his second victory a possibility.

The capture of Saddam Hussein by the US forces changes the nature of future Iraqi leadership because the Shiites who are in the majority will have the final say in the destiny of US-Iraq relations. No doubt Tehran will watch this development very closely, as the balance of power in the Middle East has shifted to Israel. Therefore, the future of US-Iran relations is in for a very

interesting phase. Eventually, the US presidential election and its aftermath will shape the course of the relationship.

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