

Nezavisimaya Gazeta (published in the Russian, Moscow 16 Feb 2006)
see: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2006-02-16/2_kartblansh.html
[Note: the *NG* version omitted 4 passages, as noted in the text]

NEW YORK

“Iran— Options beyond “heads-we-win-tails-you-lose”

By Thomas J. Raleigh

[BEGIN OMITTED (italics)

""Let us never negotiate out of fear,
but let us never fear to negotiate."
-John F. Kennedy END OMITTED]

The United States is stumbling towards disaster in its search for an adequate response to Iran’s truculent insistence on restarting its nuclear programs. Though lacking on both Iraq and the broader war against Al-Qaeda, a bipartisan consensus appears to be forming in the case of Iran. Regrettably, it is an artificial consensus based on an oversimplification of the threat, an erroneous contention that diplomatic efforts are either exhausted or futile, and the premature conclusion that the U.S. has little choice but to pursue a “military solution” in Iran-- an option whose oxymoronic name is the least of its drawbacks.

Motivated at least in part by the upcoming fall elections, and a related competitive desire to appear decisive, and strong on defense, both the Bush Administration and congressional leaders, engaging in a debate that is both superficial and all too public, are doing things that are most unhelpful; they are exaggerating the threat that posed by Iran, ignoring the profound consequences that would come on the heels of a military strike by the U.S. or Israel, and demonstrating a stunning lack of imaginative thinking in developing a full range of options and courses of action to respond to present and projected Iranian capabilities. Only cool heads, clear thinking, and a modicum of restraint might avert miscalculation and catastrophe in the Persian Gulf.

In defining and describing the threat, we need not hyperbole and alarm, but rather precision and clarity. According to media reports and official statements by the Bush Administration, Iran is still five to ten years away from developing a nuclear device and the means to deliver it. If these reports are accurate, the threat posed by Iran to Israel, the West, and the United States can still best be described as emerging, and not grave or imminent.

Nevertheless, people are not comfortable with a nuclear-capable, Hamas and Hezbollah-supporting Iran, particularly in light of the alarming and disturbing statements recently made by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad-- to include those that call for the destruction of Israel. However, such incomprehensible and despicable utterances, targeted to certain domestic audiences, are likely little more than bombast and bluster-- not unlike Nikita Khrushchev’s boast decades ago to “bury” us. [BEGIN OMITTED We now know Khrushchev’s remark was poorly and inaccurately translated; interestingly, so too were some of Ahmadinejad’s recent bellicose statements. END OMITTED]

All the same, a combination of factors – a reasonable desire to prevent nuclear proliferation, an Iranian regime that is far from transparent and reliable, and a leader that says some wacky and disturbing things – is causing some usually steady people, like Senator John McCain, to paint a picture that is excessively gloomy and ominous. Said McCain recently, “there is only one thing worse than ... exercising a military option (against Iran). That is a nuclear-armed Iran.”

[BEGIN OMITTED Embracing binary brinkmanship the likes of which has not been seen since John Foster Dulles walked the halls of Foggy Bottom, END OMITTED]
Washington policy-makers and politicians seem to be suggesting the only possible course of action is a heads-we-win-tails-you-lose approach that can have only two possible outcomes; Iran’s complete capitulation on the issue of nuclear development, or the complete destruction of Iranian nuclear facilities by a military strike.

McCain, and other hawks, avoid a discussion of the consequences of such an operation. Unlike the Israeli raid that destroyed the Iraqi reactor at Osirak in 1981, a massive air campaign would be required to destroy not only two dozen nuclear research sites, but also Iranian fighter bases, command and control centers, air defense units, and – to preempt Iranian retaliation directed at U.S. bases in the region, and possibly Israel – rocket sites.

The threat posed by even a nuclear-armed Iran does not outweigh the apoplectic reaction, in Iran, and in the Arab-Muslim world, that would come in response to such a military strike. Bombing Iran would have disastrous consequences; it would further radicalize that country, inflame the Middle East, and set off a chain of events that might end with Islamic fundamentalists seizing power in nuclear-capable Pakistan.

Though it possess unsurpassed military capabilities, in the case of Iran, the United State ought to pursue a multi-dimensional, situational, and incremental approach that would defuse tensions, promote greater regional security, enhance U.S. international prestige, and protect Israel. The U.S. might adopt some combination of the following diplomatic, military, and economic measures;

- declare, unequivocally and categorically, that the United States will never strike Iran first with nuclear weapons; renounce the previous U.S. goal of regime change in Iran.
- offer to normalize U.S.–Iranian relations; propose the swift reestablishment of reciprocal diplomatic presences in Washington and Iran; suggest a summit meeting, perhaps in Egypt or another third country, in the near future.
- endorse President Vladimir Putin’s offer to enrich Iran’s uranium in Russia under Russian control.
- pursue a public diplomacy campaign that targets Iranian (and Arab) moderates and reformers; suggest that Iran’s continued pursuit of nuclear weapons is a costly undertaking that will do little to enhance her own security; support the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people; affirm U.S. support for Israel and U.S. desire to help the parties reach an agreement that will bring a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Palestinians; broaden contacts opportunities between Americans and Iranians.

- announce U.S. preparedness to deploy and operate a robust, fully-integrated theater missile defense system to Israel should Iran continue to pursue nuclear research that is anything less than fully transparent and non-military.
- explore the additional long-term deployment of a boost-phase missile intercept system by the U.S. along the Iraq-Iran border once such a system is deemed reliable, and if Iraq acquiesces.
- advise Iran that certain behaviors, to include a rejection of international monitoring, may result in targeted sanctions, to include those that would prohibit Iran from importing a wide range of dual-use technologies; couch a rejection of an oil boycott as an option that we will not pursue – at present - due to the hardship it would bring to the Iranian people.

Though some of these measures and steps might appear extraordinary, counterintuitive, even radical, the fact remains that diplomacy, especially in times of crisis, carries with it an intrinsic necessity to compromise.

[BEGIN OMITTED Instead of comparing the current predicament involving Iran with Munich in 1938, a more apt and instructive comparison would be the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Though the popular version (in the U.S. at least) of those tense days in October is that John Kennedy stared down Nikita Khrushchev, and the Russian blinked, the reality was much more nuanced. Though there was an important military component in Kennedy’s response – a naval blockade of Cuba and full nuclear alert – JFK at the same time offered Khrushchev not one, but two significant face-saving measures; a public declaration that the United States would not invade Cuba, and a private assurance that the U.S. would swiftly withdraw its intermediate-range Jupiter rockets from Turkey. END OMITTED]

Someone might wish to convince President Bush, and certain members of Congress - soon - that strength can often be found in restraint; that compromise does not always constitute appeasement; and that there is a bit more to diplomacy than “Do what we say or we’ll (probably) bomb the hell out of you.”

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