

Iran Deal Dooms 'Full-Spectrum Dominance'

The international agreement to ensure that Iran's nuclear energy program stays peaceful is not just a victory for non-proliferation but part of a more realistic realignment of U.S. policy toward the Mideast, finally recognizing the bloody futility of "full-spectrum dominance," writes ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

Comments abound on President Barack Obama's achievement in reaching an agreement with Iran on nuclear issues. For a predictable minority it's not an achievement at all but a terrible setback. Most criticism focuses on the challenge of possible Iranian cheating, which misses the big picture: is Washington itself able to deal with an ascendant Iran, much like the challenge of an ascendant China?

In economic and military terms Iran can't of course hold a candle to China. But its regional role does pose a significant challenge to those who resist the specter of popular *political* change.

The major challenge that Iran poses is not of course really nuclear at all, we've dealt in the past with far "crazier" nuclear totalitarian powers such as Stalin's Russia, Kim Jong Il's North Korea or Mao's China.

Some, not all, elements of the Israeli security establishment may perceive the nuclear threat as serious, primarily because Israel cherishes its position as sole nuclear power in the region. A potentially nuclear Iran down the road also limits U.S. and Israeli ability to act militarily in the region with impunity.

But even that is not Iran's real challenge; that lies in its revolutionary stance and consistent outspoken opposition to U.S. (and Israeli) dominance of power in the Middle East. That kind of stance historically quickly earned one the label of "rogue state" in Washington parlance, a state that resists the U.S.-dominated strategic order.

Iran, however, is probably the most important state since Abdul Nasser's Egypt to have adopted this outspoken and dedicated stance of challenge to American ability to act with impunity in the Middle East. The Iranian seizure of U.S. hostages in 1979 injected an additional strong emotional element into American reactions to Iran. (Most Americans have forgotten that the U.S. and UK had jointly overthrown Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister in 1953, from which democracy in Iran has still not fully recovered.)

Now, some three decades after the Iranian Revolution, Washington has finally acknowledged the extreme problems that its own long-term inability to deal with "rogue" Iran has posed to U.S. policies over the years, affecting Afghanistan, Pakistan, pipeline routing, al-Qa'ida, Iraq, Central Asia, the Gulf, Syria, where a degree of common interests in fact exists.

Washington finally felt compelled to search for some kind of minimal normalization with Tehran. The nuclear issue was the ostensible driver. Far more important however is acknowledgment of the need to deal with the second most important strategic state in the Middle East Turkey being number one.

I have written earlier why Turkey and Iran represent the two most significant states in the Middle East today: their identities rest firmly on long tradition, large populations, large and complex multi-faceted economies (not just energy) and professional skills; their governance is democratic (Turkey) or partially democratic (Iran, where elections and process really matter.) Both countries have long traditions of independent power and exert major soft power, Iran's soft power will grow in this sphere with its films, music, Sufi poetry, tourism, etc.

More important, Iran has achieved a measure of popularity even in the Arab world at the popular level, although not at the governing level, which does feel threatened. Iran's forthright resistance to the American order is widely admired, even if not everybody likes Persians. Iran has always spoken of its revolution not as Shi'ite but as an Islamic revolution, above sectarianism.

Its populist rhetoric and longtime support for Sunni Palestinians among other groups clearly upsets autocratic Arab states, especially those who fear populist change, and those with oppressed and suppressed Shi'a populations, as in Bahrain where they represent a majority, and in Saudi Arabia.

Now Washington has taken the unprecedented step of potentially serious rapprochement with Tehran (yes, there are still significant obstacles to be overcome). But this is the nub: this represents a new U.S. willingness to accept a power in the region that does not sign on to the U.S. strategic framework for the region.

Such a position bluntly challenged decades of U.S. doctrine about its determination to establish global "full-spectrum dominance." The U.S. is finally recognizing after severe setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iran and other failing policies that traditional U.S. hegemony in the Middle East is no longer in the cards. Furthermore, that effort to impose it comes at extremely high cost in blood, treasure, respect and credibility.

This is the signal achievement of President Obama in acknowledging this reality, at least tacitly. (Some would say it represents his signal failure and a U.S. capitulation. But can anyone want another decade and a half of what the U.S., and the region, has been through?)

It has not been simply Iranian long-term resistance that has stymied Washington. The source of the problems and the nature of the enemy in the region do not lend themselves to high-tech power, shock and awe.

Other states have also emerged with ideas of their own (Turkey most prominently among them, which will never be a "faithful American ally" again). Russian and Chinese power in the region, and the growth of the BRICS model suggests outlines of a new international order.

The question is: 1) how capably will Washington learn to manage the transition and deeper implications inherent in this new opening to Iran, recognizing that dealing with prickly and often unresponsive powers in fact does represent the face of the future?

And 2) the agenda for future regional change, with all its inevitable chaos, lies more with the Turkeys and Irans of the world than with sclerotic and reactionary Gulf ruling orders. This is particularly so when we consider the destructive approach of Saudi Arabia in promoting sectarianism and core fundamentalist/takfiri interpretations of Islam.

Of course these Gulf states are economically important and are understandably nervous with this shift of paradigm. They have now been left more on their own to manage internal pressures; certainly they are not subject to serious outside military attack.

Thus a new recognition of the character of the future of the region has dawned in Washington. It is long overdue, but President Obama has taken the first bold, critically important step. For that he deserves much credit, for his insight into the deeper nature of political change to come in the region which Washington cannot control and against which it cannot afford to be arrayed.

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