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Hands Off Iran!

By Peter Orvetti

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US-Iranian relations are in meltdown. Fears of a U.S. strike against Iran in the last unaccountable days of the Bush presidency -- after John McCain's defeat but before Barack Obama's inauguration -- gave way to a reassuring calm after Obama took office. The new US president made diplomatic overtures to Iran, and kept a cool, careful distance during Iran's summer post-election upheaval. Now, Obama faces new pressure to use force against the Islamic Republic.

Earlier this month, former senators Dan Coats and Chuck Robb, and retired general Charles Wald, said in the Wall Street Journal that Obama needed a "new strategy" for Iran beyond peaceful diplomacy. They said Obama needed to "begin preparations for the use of military options," arguing that "only a credible U.S. military threat can make possible a peaceful solution."

The murmuring about a U.S. attack on Iran is louder this week, after Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy publicly revealed intelligence, dating back to last year, that Iran is constructing a second uranium enrichment facility. Representatives of the US, Britain, China, France, Germany, and Russia will meet with Iranian officials on Thursday, and could issue an ultimatum requiring total access to that facility, as well as other concessions, by the end of 2009. If Iran does not satisfy the six powers, sanctions so crippling that they could be called an act of war would follow. This, in turn, could result in military action.

During his run for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Joe Biden -- who has since become the clearest voice for a U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan within the Obama Administration -- said it best: "War with Iran is not just a bad option. It would be a disaster. We're talking about a country with nearly three times the population of Iraq -- 70 million people -- and infinitely more problems waiting for us if we attack. The regime is unpopular, but it has millions of fervent supporters it will mobilize for war. If you thought going to war with Iraq would be a 'cakewalk' maybe that wouldn't deter you. But if you are a part of the reality-based community, it should."

The notion that the U.S. should -- or even can -- eliminate Iran's nuclear program and "liberate" the country through force betrays ignorance of Iran's current state. Iran has sought nuclear power since before the 1979 revolution, and it has long been a goal of all the major factions within the country. Mir Hossein Mousavi, who became a rallying point for protestors following his defeat by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the questionable June election, played a role in the Iranian nuclear program.

One of the great misconceptions of Iran's summer violence -- colored, perhaps, by American memories of the fall of the Soviet client states in Eastern Europe 20 years ago -- is that the activists were "Western"-style reformers. Cato Institute foreign policy fellow Leon Hadar compares them to another group of demonstrators from 1989. "Many of the former Chinese student activists have become part of a rising Chinese nationalist movement," Hadar warns. "One shouldn't be surprised if the secular democrats protesting against the ayatollahs today transform into fervent Iranian nationalists -- and press for nuclear weapons -- if and when they come to power."

It was not too long ago that an American president enrolled Iran in an "axis of evil". One of the other members of that club has since been invaded by the U.S. Two nations on Iran's borders -- Afghanistan and Iraq -- are brimming with U.S. soldiers. Both the U.S. and Israel have said repeatedly that the use of force against Iran is on the table. Iran is a nation on the defensive, and America's long history of meddling in Iranian affairs has fomented justifiable paranoia. Like the third member of the "axis", North Korea, Iran may see a nuclear deterrent as the only way of holding off aggression.

Foreign Policy magazine's Stephen Walt writes, "If you want to reunite Iran's disaffected population behind the current dictatorship and give Ahmadinejad a real jolt of legitimacy, dropping bombs on their country is a good way to start." Isolating or attacking Iran could simply radicalize the government further and drive it into North Korea-like isolation. It would not stop the nuclear program, only slow it down.

Ivan Eland of the Independent Institute last week wrote that Obama "has shown some good instincts in foreign policy," moving U.S. troops out of Iraq and keeping watch on public opinion about the U.S. in the Muslim world. These instincts led Obama to prefer diplomacy over violence in dealing with Iran. Despite the fresh pressures he faces, Obama should stick with these initial instincts.

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