

## **To Bomb or not to Bomb: Is that the Only Question?**

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In September 2007 Michael Ledeen, the well-known hard-line conservative, published a book entitled *The Iranian Time Bomb*. The press release, available on the American Enterprise Institute's website, begins with the following statement: "Iran declared war on the United States in early 1979, when the shah was overthrown and the revolutionary regime of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power." From this starting point Ledeen's book continues by emphasising the consistent Iranian involvement in Middle East terrorism, including close Iran-Al Qaeda ties and Tehran's violent meddling in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response the only sensible option for the United States is to link up with discontented elements inside Iran, push for a "democratic revolution", and secure a "peaceful regime change". Otherwise Washington will have to "bomb Iran" or face the impending reality of a nuclear-armed "theocratic fascist regime."<sup>1</sup>

Ledeen's position is interesting. The 'bomb Iran' mantra of the Republican hard right rarely has much nuance to it, but for Ledeen the point is that the US has never been able to develop a comprehensive approach towards an antagonistic Tehran. The answer lies in the anti-Soviet strategy developed under Reagan: The deliberate posturing of military strength and technological superiority to force negotiations, and the pursuit of universal values (Freedom, Democracy) coupled with overt and covert support for dissident movements to foster regime change (at least in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe). The difference with the 1980s is the genuine willingness to negotiate. The Soviet Union could be made to feel vulnerable, but it was not under direct threat from US military action, *Dr. Strangelove* aside. Iran, however, is a different sized 'competitor', making the margins of possible US action wider, and the temptation for something 'surgical' all the more stronger. Yet even here Reagan offers an example. Ledeen, as a consultant to the National Security Council, himself played a direct role in the Iran-Contra affair, which was geared not just towards selling weapons and freeing hostages but also to building some back-channel connections and cooling off mutual hostility. Some form of political dialogue was achieved outside of diplomatic relations because certain

senior Iranians themselves wanted to normalise the situation.<sup>2</sup> A ‘comprehensive approach’ clearly sometimes requires one section of the government to do exactly the opposite to what the other sections are doing and saying, but then comprehensiveness, one presumes, is determined on a ‘need-to-know’ basis. The point is whether the USA in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century can once again credibly project a universal benevolent message around which to mobilise its own forces and those of its allies. Bush’s ‘you are either with us or with the terrorists’ is just not sufficiently motivating.

During recent weeks an opening seems to have appeared that could offer new opportunities. The pro-bomb faction among the Republican hawks (including Ledeen) was dealt a blow on 3 December, with the release of a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iranian nuclear ambitions. Stating from the outset that it is “an extensive reexamination of the issues in the May 2005 assessment” (which claimed that Iran was developing nuclear weapons), the Estimate continued by declaring that it “does not assume that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons... We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program.” Iran is clearly keeping all options open, but there was no strong evidence that as of mid-2007 that it had re-started its development programme. These are no idle conclusions. NIE’s are compiled by the National Intelligence Council, a body designed to bridge the intelligence and policy-making communities and provide the most up-to-date information on critical issues of national security. The signs are strong that by issuing this declaration now, the intelligence community is avoiding any further politicisation of its judgements as occurred to justify the attack on Iraq.

But the NIE offers more than just a line in the sand which the hawks should not cross. The assessment of the 2003 halt to weapons development suggests that Iran was reacting to international pressure and was unwilling to defy criticism from abroad. In other words, a careful combination of sticks and carrots could be used to alter the course of Tehran’s policies. The unclassified version of the report says the following:

This, in turn, suggests that some combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, *along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways*, might – if perceived by Iran’s leaders as credible – prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear weapons program. It is difficult to specify what such a combination might be.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is difficult, but this is a remarkable statement in the context of the sabre-rattling rhetoric directed at Tehran over the past few years. We know from Seymour Hersh – admittedly not an unbiased source, but second-to-none in terms of top-level connections – that planning for a military attack on Iran has proceeded a long way in the last two years, and the still-suspect Israeli air raid into Syria in September was widely perceived as a dry-run for the impending Real Thing.<sup>4</sup> Now we have the US intelligence community lining up behind an effort to satisfy *Iranian* security concerns as a means to de-escalate tensions.

This is no isolated incident either. On 26 November Robert Gates, Rumsfeld's successor at Defense, gave a speech at Kansas State University. Gates did not attend to promote the interests of his department alone, but instead spoke in a most un-Rumsfeldian manner of the need “to make the case for strengthening our capacity to use ‘soft’ power and for better integrating it with ‘hard’ power”. Declaring that the civilian tools of government need a serious upgrade, Gates continued: “Public relations was invented in the United States, yet we are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals.”<sup>5</sup> It is quite a while since a Secretary of Defense spoke up for the needs of the State Department, but with State's foreign affairs budget of \$36bn being less than what the Pentagon spends on health care, it had to happen eventually. It was not the US military that won the Cold War, Gates emphasised, but the US military in combination with a whole host of non-military capabilities and institutions.

Gates' standpoint was an echo of a longer report issued earlier in the same month by the independent Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS). Entitled ‘A Smarter, More Secure America,’ the report was a product of the Commission on Smart Power, a CSIS study group.<sup>6</sup> A key Commission member is Joseph Nye, the originator of the ‘soft power’ concept. Proving that Hegel and Marx had a point with their thesis-antithesis-synthesis sequence, Nye now defines ‘smart power’ as “the ability to combine your hard power – coercion – with your ability to get what you want through attraction, which is soft power.”<sup>7</sup> The report picked up some serious attention in Washington for its obvious aim to lay the basis for a post-Bush foreign policy - One that takes into account the interests of others, recognises the need to bolster and maintain credible international organisations, and respects international legal norms. Once again, as with the Iraq Study Group report at the end of 2006, the advocates of

this stance represent a large bipartisan chunk of policy-making Washington. In contrast to a year ago, though, it looks like the impending presidential election and the definite change of personnel in the White House are now giving these kinds of views more credibility and purpose.

Where does this point in relation to US relations with Iran? Funnily enough, Ledeen's desire for a comprehensive strategy is part of the equation. The question is how far regime change will remain on the agenda. Since 2005 there have been moves by the US to formulate a strategy towards Tehran, but the bottom line has always been the de facto refusal to grant the Islamic regime legitimacy and re-instate diplomatic relations. As a result, instead of being used to normalise relations, all contacts have been used, either overtly or covertly, to promote regime change. In January 2006 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice outlined her vision for the future outlook of the State Department. It was termed Transformational Diplomacy: "To work with our many partners around the world to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people – and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system."<sup>8</sup> The approach required a shift of resources from traditional allies (i.e. Europe, Japan) to new ideological battlegrounds in Asia and the Near East, and a regional focus that would aim to deploy a US diplomatic and public diplomacy presence that looks beyond the limitations of nation-states and bilateral relations. It also laid direct emphasis on the promotion of democracy worldwide, something that Rice made clear in subsequent testimony on the Hill.<sup>9</sup> The first fruits of this approach in relation to Iran came to light in March 2006, with an unclassified State Department cable entitled 'Recruiting the Next Generation of Iran Experts: New Opportunities in Washington, Dubai and Europe'.<sup>10</sup> The cable announced the formation of an Office of Iranian Affairs to coordinate a network of 'outreach posts' for political/economic reporting, the most significant being the Regional Presence Office in Dubai, UAE, designed to connect with the Iranian people and "promote freedom and democracy in Iran." Around the same time, \$85m in emergency funding was earmarked for the promotion of democracy in Iran, including support for dissidents and exiles groups, 24-hour radio and television broadcasting, increasing internet gateways, and study opportunities for Iranians to go to the US.

There are plenty of pro-democracy, anti-Islamic fundamentalist groups inside Iran, and the political situation there is unstable enough for there still to be some hope that they can shift the political pendulum in a more Western-orientated direction. But telegraphing the fact that

they are tools in a policy aimed at regime change placed potential allies of the US in an impossible situation. It turned those demanding human rights and free speech into no more than acolytes and agents of the enemy power. In the words of the Iranian Nobel Peace Prizewinner and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi said, “whoever speaks about democracy in Iran will be accused of having been paid by the United States.”<sup>11</sup> As with Iraq, the influence of hard-line exile groups was affecting Washington’s thinking, to the detriment of their countrymen still inside Iran. What is more, the efforts to engage with Iranians and bring them to the United States via cultural diplomacy initiatives and exchange programmes have stumbled up against the US security state. Visa requirements and the implicit branding of all Iranians as suspect by the Department of Homeland Security’s staff has led to delays, humiliations, frustrations, and above all a disastrous negative image of the United States. “It is fair to say,” writes a recent commentator, “that security procedures make it much more difficult and expensive for sponsored exchange programs to keep up with the demands made on them to promote better connections and understanding with the Islamic world.”<sup>12</sup> These kinds of programmes only work successfully if they are run according to a sense of openness, not paranoia. But the general policy environment has to allow this.

In short, the international environment is not being managed well enough to give any chance of success for the Transformational Diplomacy approach in Iran. Successful diplomacy relies on mutual recognition of the status of all parties involved, a recognition tinged with respect for the others’ interests and capabilities. Instead, US policies towards Iran have effectively gone in the other direction. As one source succinctly puts it, “if it is true that public opinion in Arab and Muslim countries responds more to policies than to public diplomacy, it is clear that successful public diplomacy will not be able to change minds dramatically in the presence of strong opposition to policy.”<sup>13</sup> Rice’s Transformational Diplomacy is, in the case of Iran, little more than the strategy of pre-emption applied to the field of diplomacy and public diplomacy. It was inevitable that the State Department would eventually adapt its purpose to the strident tones of the National Security Strategies of 2002 and 2006, and she duly delivered (more ‘behave or we will democratise you’ instead of ‘behave or we will bomb you’). But the whole approach is flawed. The world is indeed changing, but in ways that require a very different application of US power than has been the case over the past five years. The example of North Korea is instructive in this sense: Multilateral dialogue, strong input from China (with Russian acquiescence), and a basic deal based on the practical mutual interest of all parties. Now that we are in the tail-end of the Bush era, it can only be hoped that the recent NIE and

the CSIS Smart Power report point towards a new appreciation of how the US should operate in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Ledeen's thesis is clearly laid out in his testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, 8 March 2007, available at <[http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.all,pubID.24022/pub\\_detail.asp](http://www.aei.org/publications/filter.all,pubID.24022/pub_detail.asp)> (12 November 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Ledeen, *Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Scribners, 1988), p. 139; John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> 'Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,' National Intelligence Estimate, November 2007 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup> See Hersh, 'The Iran Plans,' *The New Yorker*, 17 April 2006, and 'Shifting Targets,' *The New Yorker*, 8 October 2007; 'Was Israeli Raid a Dry-Run for Attack on Iran?' *Observer*, 16 September 2007, available at <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/world/story/0,,2170188,00.html>

<sup>5</sup> Speech available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid+1199>

<sup>6</sup> Report available at [http://www.csis.org/component/option,com\\_csis\\_pubs/task,view/id,4156/type,1/](http://www.csis.org/component/option,com_csis_pubs/task,view/id,4156/type,1/)

<sup>7</sup> 'US Foreign Policy Commission Touts need for 'Smart Power',' *World Politics Review*, 12 November 2007, available at <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=1338>

<sup>8</sup> Fact Sheet, Department of State, available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59339.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Keith Porter, 'What is "Transformational Diplomacy"?', available at <http://usforeignpolicy.about.com/od/usstatedepartment/a/transformdiplo.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Cable available via <http://thinkprogress.org/2006/03/01/iran-doc/>

<sup>11</sup> W. Fisher, 'Buying Democracy in Iran,' 16 June 2006, available at [http://www.tompaine.com/buying\\_democracy\\_in\\_iran.php](http://www.tompaine.com/buying_democracy_in_iran.php)

<sup>12</sup> B. Ballow, 'Academic and Professional Exchanges with the Islamic World: An Undervalued Tool,' in W. Rugh (ed.), *Engaging the Arab and Muslim Worlds through Public Diplomacy* (Washington DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004), p. 120.

<sup>13</sup> E. Djerejian, *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for US Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, (Washington DC, 2003), p. 66.