

No Nixon-to-China Moment Here

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Articles & Testimony

When officials from the Obama administration, along with other members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany, sit down with their Iranian counterparts to discuss Iran's nuclear program, the mood in the room may get a little uncomfortable. Iran has been busted setting up a second uranium enrichment plant in clear violation of its international obligations, and its diplomats, such as nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, have a tendency to lash out when cornered.

Astonishingly, however, writing in the New York Times this week, former National Security Council staffers Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett suggest that Iran is the victim here. They accuse even the pro-engagement Obama of failing to reach out sufficiently to Tehran, and urge Washington to "seek a strategic realignment with Iran as thoroughgoing as that effected by Nixon with China." Put bluntly, this is a delusion.

One problem with the Leveretts' analysis is that Iran has a vibrant opposition with its own views on U.S. engagement efforts. Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi vigorously argues that the international community should refuse to deal with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, since he stole the June presidential election. Noted dissident Akbar Ganji, in a petition signed by such notables as Noam Chomsky and Jurgen Habermas, argued that when Ahmadinejad visited the United Nations he should have been arrested for crimes against humanity.

For the United States to align itself with such a government would be to kick the opposition in the teeth. The Islamic Republic has shown that it is neither Islamic nor a republic -- in the elegant phrasing of Iran's respected "dissident ayatollah," Ali Montazeri. And now it is running scared. The regime is afraid to kill protesters, since doing so only inflames the opposition. At the September 19 Quds Day protests, it did not even arrest them, aware of how socially explosive the accusations of retaliatory prison rape have been. In contrast, protesters were bold enough to stand next to Ahmadinejad and shout "resign, resign" when he was interviewed on state television. When a repressive regime is too afraid to kill or silence those brave enough to stand up to it, it does not bode well for that regime.

Rather than do as the Leveretts suggest and embrace Ahmadinejad, the United States must align itself with the rising alternative to the president and his thugs. Jimmy Carter once toasted the shah for running "an island of stability" a year before his overthrow. Barack Obama should not make the same mistake of presuming the ruling power will remain in control.

Certainly, the Iranian people want a strategic alignment with the United States. But is that possible under the Islamic Republic as is? Two governments with profound differences, such as the United States and Iran, can cooperate closely if they both face a common greater enemy. A common threat in Germany brought Britain and the Soviet Union together during World War II. Similarly, the Soviet threat spurred a U.S.-China strategic realignment during the Cold War -- which the Leveretts hold up as a model for U.S.-Iran relations. That same Soviet threat was the basis for the U.S. offer for a strategic realignment with Iran, made by President Ronald Reagan in sending national-security advisor Robert McFarlane to Tehran an oft-forgotten part of the Iran-contra affair.

But what is the common threat faced by the United States and Iran today? Al Qaeda is not a plausible candidate,

given that the Islamic Republic has for years played footsie with the terrorist group, providing al Qaeda in Iraq with its most lethal weapons, for instance. Tactical cooperation against al Qaeda when Iran sees a momentary advantage is the best the United States can expect.

The Leveretts further argue that Iran's leaders do not think that the United States has been serious about rapprochement. That is true, but not for the reasons the Leveretts cite. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei -- whose title accurately portrays his seniority over Ahmadinejad -- has spent 20 years warning that the greatest threat to the Islamic Republic is Western culture, which could provoke women, youth, and intellectuals to stage a velvet revolution. That is why the Islamic Republic repeatedly jails foreign journalists and academics, and airing their show trials on state television. For instance, in 2008 it aired a TV show "exposing" how former President George W. Bush and George Soros met weekly to plot the Islamic Republic's overthrow. Still, the Leveretts somehow argue that the barrier to improved relations is that the Obama administration has not done enough to reassure the Islamic Republic of its good intentions.

Since the June election, Khamenei, the leaders of the Revolutionary Guards and government prosecutors at the show trials of dissidents have concentrated on the foreign role in provoking demonstrations. They have repeatedly described the post-election unrest as prove that the West's real goal is a "soft overthrow" of the Islamic Republic. Given their conviction that the West constitutes a mortal threat to their regime, the prospects are poor that they will accept that the West will abandon its aims just for a nuclear deal. Indeed, Khamenei has often said that if the nuclear issue were settled, the West would move on to other reasons to advance a velvet revolution.

So a strategic realignment is improbable. But would such an arrangement even be desirable? The United States has long-standing friendships and alliances with countries suspicious of or hostile to Iran: Saudi Arabia, the smaller Gulf states, and Egypt, to name a few. A U.S.-Iran strategic relationship could improve security in the region only if those states acquiesced to it. But such a U.S.-Iran relationship seems more likely to lead Saudi Arabia, if not some others, to conclude that they must develop powerful means to defend themselves -- to start their own nuclear programs.

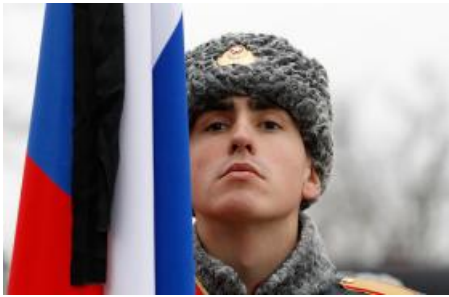
Then there is Israel. The Leveretts say the United States should settle for an Iran working toward the peaceful resolution of regional conflicts. Fair enough. But at present, Iran spending hundreds of millions of dollars every year to promote terrorist movements devoted to "resistance" -- that is, to carrying out terrorist attacks with the explicit aim of eliminating the state of Israel. If the United States makes a strategic realignment with such a government, why would Israel go along? Do the Leveretts think that a tense and suspicious U.S.-Israel relationship will serve U.S. interests and promote regional stability?

U.S. friends in the region have reason to be suspicious of the Islamic Republic. Iran wants a greater role in the region than its neighbors want it to have, and revolutionary Iran is using force to achieve that aim, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, or the pursuit of a nuclear program. The United States, as a status quo power, has little interest in helping Iran upset the regional status quo. In short, even if it were possible -- which it is not -- a U.S.-Iran strategic realignment would be undesirable.

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