

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

First Steps With Iran

THE SOURCE: "The Republic and the Rahbar" by Gary Sick, in *The National Interest*, Jan.-Feb. 2009.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S proposal to open a diplomatic dialogue with Iran, despite the initial lukewarm response of Iran's leaders, could signal a momentous change in what Gary Sick calls "the poisonous domestic political climates in both Tehran and Washington." But, Sick cautions, "Iran is neither the most dangerous nor the most pressing problem to be faced by the new administration" in the region. That dubious distinction goes to the wobbling nations of Pakistan and Afghanistan; the ongoing war in those two states already carries the unsettling possibility that a stockpile of nuclear weapons could fall into the wrong hands.

Bucking the conventional wisdom about Iran, Sick describes the country as merely "a midlevel power with a largely unpopular and dysfunctional government headed by a firebrand populist president with limited power."

While Sick acknowledges that Iran's influence in the region has grown tremendously in the past seven years, he believes that has

mostly come about as an unintended consequence of U.S. actions. In 2001, the United States attacked and dispersed Iran's worst enemy to the east, the Taliban, and then in 2003 it brought down Iran's worst enemy



Ahmadinejad's baiting of Israel and America masks his limited power and unpopularity in Iran.

to the west, Saddam Hussein, which led to the creation of a friendly majority-Shia government in Baghdad.

What of Iran's development of nuclear technology? Sick calls that threat "overblown," basing his assessment on the fact that the country has only a single, non-functioning nuclear power plant, even though it commenced

its nuclear program in the mid-1980s. "According to U.S. intelligence," Sick reports, "Iran terminated its tabletop experiments with nuclear weaponization in 2003, after Saddam was defeated and the Iraqi threat to Iran was eliminated." The International Atomic Energy Agency continues to monitor and inspect the 6,000 low-capacity centrifuges Iran possesses, and even though the country produces low-grade uranium, its leaders publicly declare nuclear arms to be anti-Islamic. Although the IAEA remains suspicious of Tehran's nuclear intentions, it "has found no credible evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iran," says Sick.

Even if the conventional wisdom about the danger Iran poses is right, the time will never be better for Washington to engage with Tehran, argues Sick, a senior research scholar at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. Ahmadinejad is expected to face a serious challenge when he runs for reelection in June, and talking with the United States can only improve his shaky position. During his time in office, Ahmadinejad's practice of handing out "liberal quantities of cash and funding for public projects" has drained funds from Iran's coffers, already depleted by falling oil prices. His erratic policies have also "isolated Iran internationally, driven away foreign investment, and tempted external

military intervention.” He has largely ignored the Rahbar (Supreme Leader), Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who will have a major say in who is permitted to run against Ahmadinejad in the upcoming election.

Sick believes that the Obama administration should reaffirm a tenet of the U.S.–Iran Algiers Accords of 1981, that the U.S. will not “intervene, directly or indirectly, politically or militarily, in Iran’s internal affairs,” an assurance that would greatly ease tensions between the two countries. It should also get behind a proposal floated during the Bush administration to establish an interest section in Tehran, “in effect a consular office in Iran staffed by U.S. diplomats.” Neither of these gestures “will resolve the major differences between the United States and Iran concerning [Iran’s] nuclear program, its military support for organizations like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and its opposition to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement.”

Those issues are unlikely to be resolved before Iran’s presidential election anyway. But Iran can fill a vital role in “maintaining stability and calm during a period of transition,” Sick says, as the Obama administration begins to draw down troop levels in Iraq while increasing them in Afghanistan. (The current schedule calls for U.S. forces to leave Iraqi cities and suburbs by the end of June of this year, and for all combat forces to be out of the country by August 2010.) By taking small

diplomatic steps now, the United States can lay the groundwork for Iran to play a responsible role in regional politics, Sick believes.

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Magnifying American Power

THE SOURCE: “Reshaping the World Order” by Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, in *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2009.

THE INSTITUTIONS THAT GOVERN international relations, from the United Nations Security Council to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, are about as well suited to their tasks as a 1950s Philco TV would be to screening the next Olympics. Dartmouth political scientists Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth call the architecture of the world’s international institutions a “relic” of the mid-20th century, out of sync with today’s challenges of rising nations, terrorism, financial instability, and global warming.

In a 2007 speech, Barack Obama himself named two of the agencies that critics think most urgently need reform, the United Nations and the World Bank. The UN Security Council, for example, is led by a different one of 15 nations every month, with important decisions subject to the absolute veto of any one of the five winners of World War II. The World Bank, which helps developing countries, always has a president from the United States.

America, far and away the

richest and most powerful country in the world, has the means to lead needed reforms, and strong motives to do so. “Overall, international institutions channel the United States’ power and enhance its security,” argue Brooks and Wohlforth. Such institutions can perform tasks—think inspecting nuclear facilities, gathering intelligence about Islamic terrorism, or enforcing free-trade rules—that would be much harder for the United States to do alone. Even building coalitions of the willing is an inefficient approach to national security, the authors say, because each potential partner must be recruited with a different set of carrots and sticks.

The Bush administration’s unilateralism hurt American prestige, but the damage can be reversed, Brooks and Wohlforth believe. Even some nations that oppose the United States think that its “leadership is natural under the circumstances or the best that can be expected.”

In fact, the Bush administration was a “strikingly successful” international leader when it put its mind to it. For instance, it pushed through the Proliferation Security Initiative, a framework for interdicting weapons of mass destruction at sea, on land, and in the air. Designed to give the U.S. Navy more latitude to stop ships that might be carrying weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation initiative was sold successfully as a “global effort” even though it tended to benefit the Americans more than anybody else.