



Talking about Talks to Buy Time

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Colaboraciones n° 1080

July 11, 2006

Judging by reports from half a dozen capitals, lots of people seem to be negotiating with lots of people about future talks between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council plus Germany.

Talking about talks is an old tactic used whenever adversaries run out of ideas about their next move. The assumption is that while the two sides are talking about talks neither would do anything to jeopardise the possibility of holding "real talks" later on.

Sometimes one side or the other uses the tactic to buy time. Talking-about-talks could also be used as substitute for policy. This is what happened in the case of North Korea.

The United States and its regional allies, South Korea and Japan, have never succeeded in developing a coherent policy for dealing with North Korea.

Initially all three had one objective: Containing the Pyongyang regime. By the mid-1990s, however, it had become clear that North Korea had broken out of its box and was developing a nuclear capacity that would affect the balance of power in the Far East.

Suddenly, the US and its allies decided that preventing Pyongyang from getting the bomb should be their prime objective. That led to talk-about-talks, a process that was halted when North Korea decided to accelerate its nuclear build-up.

One advantage of talking-about-talks is that, if it continues long

enough, it could bore the public and shift its attention away.

In the case of North Korea the fog created by years of talking-about-talks created a murky landscape in which it is no longer clear whether or not Pyongyang actually has the bomb and, if it does, what it might do with it.

The way things are shaping up it seems that we may be heading towards a North-Korean situation with regard to Iran.

The current talks about talks are likely to continue until the G-8 summit in Saint Petersburg next month.

The summit will then propose a new framework for more talks about talks that could take months.

Because the Bush administration has fixed no deadlines for Tehran to accept or reject the latest deal on offer, the Islamic Republic would have many opportunities for prolonging the process until it becomes policy.

Protagonists

There is reason to believe that some of the other protagonists might also want that to happen. Why shouldn't the Bush administration kick this particular can down the road until 2008, leaving it for the next president to deal with?

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice must have studied the history of Iran-US relations since 1979.

Thus, she must know that four successive American administrations, Democrat and Republican, met with disaster dealing with the Islamic Republic.

They tried everything, from appeasing the mullahs to actually using force against them. In the end, however, they all failed either to kill the Islamic Republic or to turn it into a friend.

As for the Europeans, plus Russia and China, it is obvious that they have no interest in seeing the Islamic Republic abandon its anti-American strategy that has enabled them to dominate the Iranian market and enjoy privileged access to Iranian energy resources.

As for regime change in Iran, why should the Europeans, plus Russia and China, help create a pro-American regime in Tehran a regime which, at best, would turn them into bridesmaids to the US bride?

For all those reasons, the US and its supposed partners in the 5+1 group that is to say the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany might be tempted to try the North Korean formula for dealing with the Islamic Republic.

The trouble is that Iran is not North Korea. The most important reason why Iran could not be handled like North Korea pertains to the respective global ambitions of the regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang.

Until the mid-1960s, the leadership in Pyongyang still harboured some hope of one day annexing South Korea and reunifying the peninsula under the banner of Kim Il-sung.

In the past three or four decades, however, the gap, in terms of prosperity and freedom, between North and South Korea has widened to the point that not even the maddest ideologues in Pyongyang dream of imposing their brand of Communism on the south.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the adoption of the capitalist system by China, have also signalled that, were it to launch a war of conquest against the south, North Korea would find itself alone.

All this means that the North Korean regime is acting more out of fear than hegemonic dreams.

The Islamic Republic, however, feels that it is riding on the crest of history.

It sees itself as a rising power at a time the status quo powers of the West, plus Russia, are facing demographic decline and a weakening of the will to fight.

While North Korea is a lone wolf, the Islamic Republic considers itself as the bellwether of 1.3 billion Muslims, majorities in 57 states, and has the ambition of creating an Islamic "power-bloc" under its leadership.

All this means that while North Korea, no matter how big its real or imagined nuclear arsenal, can be ignored, Iran cannot.

Sooner or later the US, indeed, all other outside and local powers, would have to stop dancing around the Iranian issue and shape real policies for dealing with a regime which, if not included into the global system, could develop into the most dangerous source of instability, even war, in one of the world's most sensitive regions.

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