Preventing an Iraq in Iran

Major General Vinod Saighal, VSM (Retired)

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on Iran has to take off from the situation in the Middle East as it is now. Whichever way the main antagonists i.e. America and the forces that they are fighting see it, to the rest of the world it causes concern. The chances of it spinning out of control are fairly strong, even if the USA were to hand the situation over unconditionally to the United Nations (UN) or to the Iraqis. In order to find a satisfactory way out of the impasse there would appear to be three main pathways. The first would be to follow the shopworn geo-political pathway in which nations follow their own interest regardless of the consequences for the rest of the world. Non-state actors linked to global terrorism have also started emulating this course of action. The second pathway would be for the UN Security Council, acting independently, to get a grip on the situation. The third pathway could be for the collectivity of nations in the region to determine a course that leads to a form of resolution that might bring about a degree of stability to the region as a whole.

In the years since the events of 11 September 2001 two major groupings appear to have suffered considerable setback to their grand designs. The first was the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia axis that was pushing for an extreme form of regressive Islam in regions beyond their shores. Many people blame the US policies for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. It can quite as easily be argued that the pushing of Islamic orthodoxy by its prime movers, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia since 1970s, well before the 'clash of civilisations' theory gained currency, could also be a contributory factor. Regressive Islamic theology taken to the extreme spawned the likes of Al Qaeda, Taliban and like-minded jehadi elements. The latter now seem to have pushed the first movers into the background. These designs met with concerted global action after the Twin Tower bombings and the passing of UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1373. The other major grouping, the Anglo-American alliance, intervened decisively in Afghanistan to

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Major General Vinod Saighal, VSM retired from the Directorate General of Military Training, Army Headquarters.

Excerpted text of the talk delivered at the USI on 10 December 2003.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXIV, No. 555, January-March 2004.

deliver a crushing blow to the Taliban regime with minimal casualties to the coalition forces. Thereafter, seeing that success came easy with the use of high-technology weapons for which their adversaries had no matching weaponry, the Anglo-Americans went on to invade Iraq with equal ease. The post-Iraq victory phase has turned out to be a setback to their designs. Notwithstanding the setbacks, neither grouping is likely to give up its long-term goals. The respective reverses might force them to stop the expansion and even perhaps to recoil temporarily. Both entities are likely to reassess their strategy, bring in the necessary changes, and re-launch their offensives at a time of their choosing, even if it entailed a delay of several years. It would be imprudent for the world not to be alive to the possibility of the threat reemerging from these sources, possibly in a more menacing form.

There are quite a few lesser conflicts around the world. Most of them are not world threatening. On a truly global scale there are only two sets of forces that have developed the capacity and the will – even obduracy, one might say - to actually go for each other's jugular across the world, namely Islamic jehad and its nemesis the USA. The reverse proposition could be equally true, i.e., Islamic jehad is becoming the great spoiler of the US expansionist urge in the Middle East and Central Asia. At present neither side has the capacity to completely checkmate or destroy the other.

Worried by the mayhem resulting from the fundamental conflict of these two irreconcilably antagonistic forces, concerned international groupings are emerging to try and check, in the first instance, the unilateral interventionist urges of the superpower. Outside the UN, which is unable to assert itself, the credible new alignments discernible on the horizon are:-

(a) China, Russia, India conclave.

(b) The Old Europe or the France-Germany- Belgium conclave.

(c) Germany-France-Russia conclave.

There may be other axes in the offing. All of them can be said to have a commonality of purpose, which can succinctly be stated as:-

(a) None of them are anti-USA *per se.*

(b) All of them wish to preserve their bilateral relations with the USA.

(c) The main reason for their coming together is to attempt to curb the expansionist zeal of the USA and to restore global harmony.

(d) All of them would like to see the UN having a greater role in global security.

(e) None of these groupings, individually or collectively, would be in a position to fill the vacuum should there be a catastrophic decline in the US power in the world. Hence, at this juncture, the emphasis remains on tempering rather than demolishing the US power.

A RECAPITULATION OF THE IRAQ SITUATION

The casualties suffered by the US troops on the ground in Iraq are generally being numbered in physical terms i.e. the number of the US soldiers killed in Iraq since victory was declared. In actual fact, the psychological devastation of the young American soldiers serving in Iraq is the greater casualty whose negative effects will be felt by the American civil society for a long time to come.

In military terms the US started losing the battle, in a manner of speaking, when they allowed, post-Iraq intervention, the Islamic fundamentalists and others opposing them to fight the Americans on the ground of their own choosing i.e. in Iraq itself; where the Americans present over a hundred thousand targets to them almost daily. Doubtless, they can reduce the figure exposed to their enemies by a few thousand by digging themselves deeper into the ground or surrounding themselves with more layers of fencing. In the process they loose their freedom of manoeuvre by hunkering down into a ghetto-like mentality, both physical and mental. At the same time while the US troops, who remain the prime target for their enemies, limit themselves to their fortresses or their phalanx-like task forces based around tanks, planes, helicopter gunships and Humvees, those who oppose them have a free run throughout Iraq. Every US soldier killed raises the morale of the Islamic fundamentalists everywhere in the world. Iraq is the tonic, which has allowed them to overcome the demoralisation of their earlier defeats in Afghanistan, Iraq and

elsewhere. As things stand their morale and mobility will increase in direct proportion to the decrease in the US morale and mobility. Although initially the opposition to the US presence might have centred around Saddam Hussein, it is more than likely that other anti-US groupings, better organised, within and outside Iraq might soon eclipse Saddam Hussein-centred opposition on which the US had been concentrating, thereby virtually giving a free hand to those globally organised to hit the US interests.

Taken together, the US policies in Iraq and the situation in Iraq pose the greatest threat to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government forces may be able to target fundamentalist groups opposed to them within Saudi Arabia. The latter have now adequate sanctuaries in Iraq, where they can fall back, refurbish and again sally out, practically at will.

The Bush administration launched its war against Iraq because, additionally, it intended to make the country the new base for long-term military operations in the Gulf region. After the attacks on the US in September 2001, it realised it would have to withdraw troops from Saudi Arabia. It was then that it decided on Iraq as its new long-term base of operation. It could be an important reason why America is so opposed to a quick or complete transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis or the UN. A sovereign Iraq might tell the US to withdraw from the country. As long as America remains an occupying force in Iraq, political stability there is unlikely. Without political stability, Iraq's economic recovery is unlikely as well.

According to Jeffrey D Sachs, the biggest costs in Iraq are not for reconstruction but for the US troops. America is paying an astounding $51 billion per year to station 140,000 troops in the country, a staggering cost of around $360,000 per soldier per year. The US could save itself tens of billions of dollars per year by withdrawing its troops from Iraq. If the US were then to give just a fraction of the financial saving to Iraq in 2004, there would be plenty of incremental revenues to run the Iraqi government and to support the recovery of oil production.[1]

Without going into the nature, necessity, or intensity of the US incursion into the region it can almost be a truism that what happens next would to a large extent be contingent on what the USA does next.

Taking Iraq first, the ground situation being what it is, the US can be said to have the following broad options:-

(a) Continue along the present lines with mid-term corrections, based on its assessment of the situation.

(b) Place the country under the UN Security Council control substantively and unambiguously.

(c) Attempt to get on top of the situation by bigger military deployment and/or more lethal high technology retaliation.

(d) Pull out after suffering unacceptable casualties, leaving the country and the region in bigger chaos.

(e) Any variation of the above.

It would be reasonable to assume that at this point in time the prospects of the USA being able to stabilise the situation to its satisfaction seem remote. In the first flush of a walkover victory after moving into Baghdad, the US policy-makers immediately set about warning Syria and Iran that they could be next. It set alarm bells ringing around the world - both amongst the traditional allies of the USA and those opposed to the US policies. Ipso facto the nations most threatened by the likelihood of further US action have thereafter developed a vested interest in Iraqi instability. Within the region, the countries that had reason to fear the US designs were Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the last named much later in the day after its military had been suitably used for other purposes. Hence it is not difficult to see as to why the potential victims would not be taking the minimal steps to ensure that the US comfort levels in Iraq do not reach the point that would enable the Americans to undertake further operations in their direction.

It must be added here that imperial powers throughout history have seldom, if ever, been dissuaded from their grand designs by temporary setbacks. Hence, a few years or even decades down the line the USA, after having sufficiently recovered from the Iraq misadventure – should it turn out to be so – would again set its sights towards accomplishing its global ambitions, albeit with the alterations necessitated by the passage of time. In like manner Islamic jehad is not likely to moderate its global ambitions either.

The Americans, for obvious reasons, do not like the situation in Iraq to be compared to that in Vietnam, several decades earlier. This is especially the case within the US establishment and the US military. Well-wishers of the USA can understand as to why the comparisons would be odious to them. However, many people outside the USA, who have been looking at the situation far more objectively, make the comparison from an entirely different angle. The differing view of external observers points not so much to the ignominious defeat or the pell-mell pullout by the US forces from Vietnam, as to the handing over of the contested areas i.e. the whole of South Vietnam and later on Cambodia as well, as a result thereof, to their adversary, the North Vietnam regime. As is well known, the communist North Vietnam consolidated its hold comprehensively over both parts of Vietnam after the US was forced to quit.

Something similar could happen in Iraq. Should the Americans be obliged to quit at any stage *in extremis*, forces inimical to the USA and to Western interests could take a stranglehold of large tracts of Iraq. In that case, they too would follow up with the same geo-strategic power play which was the basis for the Anglo-American intervention in Iraq i.e. using Iraq as a launch pad for further consolidation in the Middle East; possibly elsewhere as well. Hence it would be seen that after temporarily pushing out the Islamic fundamentalists from large portions of Afghanistan, the US would seem to have given them a far more solid hold on Iraq, a country with potentially much greater resources than Afghanistan. The fundamentalist Islamists, should they consolidate their grip on Iraq after driving out the Americans, would become almost unstoppable, because they would have salvaged for the Muslim psyche, throughout the Middle East and beyond, a victory that would, in some minds be deemed to be comparable to the victories of Saladin the Magnificent over the crusaders many centuries earlier.

As perceived from Washington, no doubt the Americans are not likely to allow the situation to come to such a sorry pass. In which case, what other options would America have to retrieve the situation. Tragically the lone superpower, the mightiest high-tech warrior on earth, in its enraged-bull state might end up by devastating Iraq, rather than handing it over to their hated opponents.

It becomes the right moment then to encapsulate a few salient aspects of the situation in Iraq as it obtains currently as a prelude to the discussion on Iran. In as far as it relates to the US Army in Iraq, the following aspects need to be further highlighted:-

(a) With the increase in the number of attacks on the occupation forces, on the face of it at least, the hunter has become the hunted. In just a few months the US forces that could earlier roam about confidently over most parts of Iraqi territory are now confined to their ghetto-like fortresses. After each major attack one more ring of steel is added to the perimeter. The US forces remain hemmed in, physically as well as mentally. The psychological stresses that the young minds of the US soldiery are undergoing in their formative years, assailed by the hatred of the unwelcoming populace and the increasing danger to their life and limb will create distress that could last longer than the stresses caused by the Vietnam War. No doubt the situation in Iraq is different; however, the phenomenon is nearly global as far as mounting anti-Americanism is concerned. When these soldiers get back into the mainstream of the US civil society the stresses generated in Iraq and its after-effects will permeate more deeply into the latter's bloodstream than the physical effect of the fatalities suffered in Iraq.

(b) In Iraq as well as in Afghanistan, after the savage effects of the initial high-technology onslaught have died down, the local elements fighting the Americans have found ways to effectively neutralise the high-technology advantage of the latter.

(c) After winning the war in both countries and bringing down the governments that were in power before the attacks; one of the biggest problems that the US forces and their allies face is the need for higher allocations of combat elements for safeguarding the bases and fixed assets of the occupying forces. It leaves less effective combat strength for offensive operations, whose extent and periodicity is thereby curtailed. It is a difficulty that is being faced by the occupation forces with no prospect of immediate relief in sight.

Taken together the points enumerated above indicate a passing of the initiative from one side to the other, or at least a perceptible shift.

Should this trend not be reversed the occupation forces, over a period of time, could suffer losses that become unsustainable. At the very least, these would be difficult to justify in the countries that sent the forces against the protests of a large percentage of the population. Battling it out to the bitter end does not appear to serve any worthwhile purpose.

RECAPITULATION OF THE SITUATION IN THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

In the regional context, the situation obtaining can be summarised as under :-

(a) Increasing hostility to the American intervention in Turkey was manifesting itself much before the blasts that struck Istanbul and stunned Turkey and the world in the third week of November 2003. Turkish peasants had already taken to stoning the American military vehicles. The hostility, which began as opposition to American intervention could, if not checked turn into an all out hostility towards America. It has a bearing on Turkish membership of the European Union (EU).

(b) The stand off between the USA and North Korea is not any nearer resolution.

(c) More and more places around the world are becoming unsafe for the US citizens. The travel warnings for its citizens issued by the US Department of State are increasing with each passing year.

(d) By encouraging suicide bombers based on religious indoctrination, Islam could well be on its way to collective decline, albeit in the longer term.

(e) Iran is light years away from posing a credible military threat to the USA. If so inclined, it could in a decade or so pose a limited threat to the US interests in Asia. Additionally, Iran as presently constituted and in the conditions obtaining in the region would be unlikely to harbour expansionist ambitions. Its rearmament would be limited to protection of its territory and its oil assets.

(f) Re-establishing security in Iraq could become the prime concern of the international community regardless of how the situation has come about.

(g) An English writer (Jeremy Seabrook) described the recent passage of President Bush through London as 'a funeral cortege'.

(h) 'Natofication' of Iraq. Proposal made by Bill Clinton recently in an interview given to Nayan Chanda might not be the answer.[2]

(j) European leaders who backed the USA against the opinion of their people may loose their hold on power i.e. in Italy, Spain and Poland. The division between the Old and New Europe was artificially contrived through astute British diplomacy at the establishment levels of the countries that supported Anglo-American intervention in Iraq. As distinct from this, at the grassroots there was a near total opposition to the intervention throughout Europe.

(k) Conflicting loyalties could emerge in the Muslim populations residing in non-Muslim countries.

(l) Undue focus on the US Presidential elections. The Iraq problem will not go away regardless of who wins the elections.

(m) Faking Iraq Intelligence. Claims made by the global powers based on intelligence inputs would hereafter remain suspect.

(n) If one of the attributes of a superpower is extended global reach, then the only other entity that comes near to attaining that attribute is Islamist fundamentalism.

(o) The debate over the draconian powers that the US government has assumed in the war on terrorism, which includes the ongoing war in Iraq, could become more bitter.

(p) Civil liberties continue to be eroded around the world as a direct outcome of the threat posed by Islamic jehad.

(q) The World Trade Centre (WTC) bomber profile can serve as a false image, if applied across the board for future anticipatory actions. It need not represent the archetype in operations hereafter.

(r) As regards the USA-Europe relations the following points merit attention:-

(i) While Europe is generally at peace within and without, the USA faces security challenges almost everywhere.

(ii) The concept of indivisible US-Europe security is undergoing modification. Far-reaching changes could take place in the not too distant future.

(iii) There are distinct signs that Europe is striving for strategic autonomy from the USA.

(iv) Germany is coming out of its 50 years plus self-restraint to find its feet as well as its voice as a political player on the European and global scene. Again and again it has shown that as opposed to most other countries it cannot be dictated to or pushed. It did not give in when China created a furore over the Dalai Lama; nor did it give in to the US blandishments over Iraq.

(v) Europe and the USA have other fundamental divergences, e.g., over the Kyoto protocol and the International Criminal Court.

(s) For the present, the chances of Iraq under the American occupation becoming like Afghanistan under Russians are remote. The opponents in Iraq, unlike those in Afghanistan, do not have a super power to arm them. They do not have an equivalent of Pakistan from which to mount their attacks.

(t) On the economic aid front, the European Union, which accounts for 20 per cent of the world's wealth, has offered only $250 million for Iraq next year. The American officials have been taken aback by what they view as a minuscule amount. But the political fact of life in Europe is that the Iraq war remains unpopular, and Bush himself is widely disliked.[3]

(u) Iraq is fast becoming the focal point of various types of radical Islamists and other groups fired by their anti-American zeal. Irrespective of improvement or deterioration in the ground situation no amount of troops that either the USA or the UN could muster can prevent these elements from infiltrating into or exfiltrating from Iraq on account of the large and porous frontiers. It means that these groups can come in to take a devastating toll of the US troops and their allies or they can simply come in to regroup and replenish themselves for exfiltrating into Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries that they may wish to destabilise. The biggest worry will remain for the Saudi regime.

(v) Despite the rhetoric, the Syrian response to the Israeli air strike has revealed in all its ugliness the Arab weakness. Most countries in the region are beholden to the US in one form or another. Egypt, the traditional leader, has been living on an annual American subvention of some $2 billion since the Camp David accords came to be implemented and cannot chart out its own course. Others have military protection agreements with the US and can pay only lip-sympathy to the Arab cause.[4]

(w) At a time of growing fundamentalist appeal, Syrian society remains perhaps the most secular and pluralistic among all the multi-religious states of the region, Israel included.[5]

(x) The widespread suspicion remains among Muslims that Iraq is only part of a wider American plan to subvert the faith. The appointment to a senior post in America's anti-terror team of a general quoted as slurring Islam, along with the American administration's apparent approval of an Israeli air strike earlier in October against Syria, tends to reinforce such fears.

(y) The Anglo-American special relationship or entente that endured for a century or more dissolved in the aftermath of the intervention in Iraq. Tony Blair may still win another term, as might George Bush. They may still enjoy a deep personal bond. Notwithstanding these bonds, hardly any British government would be in a position in future to ignore the public sentiment against war in the Middle East. Therefore, even if the Americans were to nurture ambitions for regime change or intervention in Iran in the manner that they did in Iraq they are not likely to receive British military support by way of physical participation in the invasion by British solders.

THE US SITUATION AT THE BEGINNING OF 2004

Charles Krauthammer, in an article in *The New York Times* urged Americans to face up to their 'responsibilities' as the 'undisputed masters of the world'.[6]

Sheela Lee Jackson, Democrat from Texas remarked thus : "my fear is that we may go to the point of changing the culture of America". (Already happening).

The US administrator in Iraq, L Paul Bremer was reduced to

citing tiny Liechtenstein as an example of a country without an army when asked in a *Time* magazine interview whether Iraq would not still need an effective army in order to provide national security and combat the threat of international terrorists, once the coalition hands over power. His precise reply as quoted in *Time*, 24 November 2003 was :

> They'll have an army. *But that is not a necessary attribute of sovereignty*. There are governments all over the world that don't have armies. Liechtenstein comes to mind. (Emphasis added).

The three extrapolations quoted above from recent pronouncements indicate the differences in perception of the US predicament within and outside the USA as well as the anxieties that seep through the statements. The type of thinking that started the US on its 'march to folly' (the title of a book by the well known author Barbara Tuchman) could propel it towards greater follies in the coming years. Because of its military and economic might the pain from misguided US policies spills over to other parts of the world as well.

New US Vulnerabilities

(a) Economic power is much more diffused than at the end of World War II. The US share of global product is about 25 per cent, half the share it had in 1945.

(b) The United States imports about 60 per cent of its oil requirements, up from 30 to 40 per cent during the 1970s.

(c) The US's current account deficit or trade deficit is now immense – well over $400 billion in 2002. It is running at an annual rate of about $500 billion in 2003. In the 1970s, the US ran both deficits and surpluses, both generally less than about $20 billion per year. Consistent trade deficits for more than two decades have turned the US from the largest creditor to the largest debtor country in the world. To gain some perspective on an annual trade deficit rate of $500 billion, this is equal to the entire annual gross domestic product of India at current exchange rates. In a falling stock market, foreigners are less inclined to finance the huge trade deficits that are part of the continuing US economic

binge. The prospects for large inflows of European money to finance the US trade deficit are murky, at best. Foreign investment has been declining, and so has the US dollar. The US foreign debt is growing fast.

(d) US budget surpluses that emerged late in the 1990s have now disappeared in a sea of red ink. Gross US federal debt is now over $6 trillion, or about 60 per cent of GDP, compared to fewer than one trillion dollars and about 33 per cent of GDP in 1980 – a considerable amount of this debt is held by foreigners.

(e) The Euro has now emerged as a credible alternative, and hence a possible competitor, to the dollar. The Euro rose in value by about 20 per cent relative to the dollar in 2002. The Euro-zone is comparable in economic size to the United States. While Germany and France, the largest economies in the Euro-zone, have had low economic growth both tend to run current account surpluses so that they do not need capital imports to sustain domestic consumption.[7]

(f) America is currently engaged in a bold experiment to bring democracy to the Middle East. As it does so, it needs to pay a little more attention to tending the flame of democracy back home.[8]

Seeing the difficult position in which the US finds itself, it might look at other options to retrieve the situation or to lessen the rigours of failed policies. One of the safer or saner options that the Americans could hardly have considered would be for the USA to swallow the bitter pill, so to say, and set course to sup with the devil. The devil in the US eyes, in this case being Iran, which was the third leg of their infamous 'Axis of Evil'.

That is one way of looking at it i.e., being obliged to sup with the devil. However, were the US establishment to hold a less jaundiced view and take a fresh look, free from cherished myths about Iran, they would find it to be a fairly attractive proposition.

OUTCOME IN CASE THE US DECIDES TO INTERVENE UNILATERALLY IN IRAN

Difficulties Likely to be Faced

In the unlikely event of the USA attempting to intervene unilaterally

in Iran, in the manner that it did in Iraq it would find its difficulties compounded by the following developments:-

(a) The EU would act more stoutly to deflect the US action.

(b) This time round a Tony Blair would not be able to engineer a split between what was referred to as Old and New Europe.

(c) The English public would not allow deployment of English troops in Iran to support an American offensive.

(d) France would not stand idly by.

(e) Germany would not allow the use of its bases for offensive action against Iran; similar action can be anticipated from several other European countries bowing to public pressure, possibly Turkey as well.

(f) Russia would not remain a passive bystander.

(g) Short of opposing the USA militarily, India would take all steps necessary to prevent the invasion of Iran.

(h) Rallying of global public opinion to deny access to the US military vessels at ports of call around the world including, possibly, traditional allies like Australia, Canada and the UK.

(j) Condemnation in the UN and other international forums.

(k) Boycotting of the US products.

(l) Many other actions of a similar nature that would make it clear to the US public that the world would not countenance further US unilateralism to invade countries that do not pose a direct threat to the USA.

The tabulation above should bring home to the US public that their country would have to pay dearly for continued flouting of the UN Charter. In any case, as things stand the US may not find the proposition feasible militarily owing to overstretch and the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Iraq was supposed to have been the jump off point for the US forces in the region for expansion in the chosen direction. It is no longer possible for the USA to use it as a base for attacking Iran. Similarly, Afghanistan does not lend itself for an attack on Iran from that direction. Which leaves only Baluchistan in Pakistan as a military

base for the attack on Iran. It is apparently being prepared for such contingencies.

Russian Reaction

The excerpts below give a clearer picture of the Russian perspective where it perceives a threat to its vital interests in Central Asia.

Russia's defence minister said "Force can be used when there is an attempt to limit Russia's access to vital regions of the world, including from an economic or financial point of view," the Interfax news agency quoted Sergei Ivanov as saying during a visit to Reykjavik, Iceland. Ivanov named two other cases in which force could be used: if there was a direct military threat against Russia or if instability in neighbouring former Soviet Republics threatens Russia. Ivanov did not name a specific region in his remarks about economic access.[9] He also said that Russia retains the right to launch pre-emptive military strikes to protect its interests, but he said nuclear weapons would not be used in any such attack. Ivanov did not rule out the use of nuclear weapons altogether, however. He said that Russia would not hesitate to use them "if all other means are exhausted and we have no other way out. We are not going to give that up."[10]

Reference to pre-emptive use of force is a new element in Russia's defence strategy that was absent from the military doctrine adopted in 2000. It sends a clear warning to the US to accept Russia's dominant role in the former Soviet states. The US intrusion into Russia's traditional turf worries Moscow more and more. What began as temporary American military presence in Central Asia endorsed by Russia to facilitate the anti-terror war in Afghanistan, far from winding up, is expanding today. In addition to airbases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the US is helping Kazakhstan set up a naval base on the Caspian Sea close to the Russian border and is seeking to lease three military bases in Tajikistan. The USA in Central Asia, conducts regular war games with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan under NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, and has launched officer training programmes for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

CO-OPTING IRAN FOR STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The earlier part of the discussion centred around the need to prevent a unilateral US or Anglo-US intervention in Iran to bring about what is euphemistically referred to as a regime change, whatever the deeper motivation behind the intervention. It was seen that such a step has become unlikely in the foreseeable future owing to the US predicament in Iraq and Afghanistan – a clear case of over-extension. Proceeding on the basis that the inadvisability of such a step would have become apparent even to the leading votaries of an intervention in Iran, it might be worthwhile examining the possibility of co-opting Iran as the centre point of stability in West Asia, even Central Asia. Appreciating that the Americans and some others might be astounded at such a turn of events, the question that would be foremost in everyone's mind would be 'why Iran?'

Why Iran?

Taking a fresh look at the possibility of co-opting Iran as the centre point of West and Central Asian stability, free of past misgivings, prejudices or bitterness, the main considerations would encompass the following :-

(a) The stability of the Iranian state when juxtaposed against the current or potential instability of the vast majority of its Islamic neighbours.

(b) Its central location, both from the point of view of current or projected hydrocarbon exports from the region as well as the geographical location vis-à-vis the trouble spots of Iraq, Afghanistan and even Pakistan şhould the last-named country not be able to curb the export of terror at some future point in time.

(c) Iran's help could prove invaluable in stabilising the situation in Afghanistan and would become crucial for Iraq's stabilisation.

(d) Iran with its great civilisation and cultural tradition could be the harbinger of a responsible and liberal Muslim society at the heart of the so-called Crescent of Islam.

What the Global Community Would Expect from Iran

For such a situation to come about in the global community, or more importantly the Western world, if it were to shed its past

misgivings, would at a minimum expect the following conditions to obtain:-

(a) Total renunciation by Iran of its nuclear ambitions.

(b) Loosening of the hold of the ruling clergy and greater democratisation with attendant freedoms of the citizens and the press.

(c) Acceptance of the right of Israel to exist as a state.

(d) Cutting off support to militant groups that draw or drew sustenance from Iran.

(e) Other liberalisation measures.

(f) Integration into the global effort for the restoration of peace in the region to a degree that there would be no suspicion of the furtherance of its own agenda in any of the neighbouring states that could cause anxiety to the others.

What Iran could Expect in Return from the Global Community

In return for abjuring its nuclear ambitions and full-scale integration into the global community, the Iranian state could reasonably expect the following from the Western world:-

(a) Non-interference in Iranian affairs.

(b) Lifting of all restrictions against Iran.

(c) Allowing Iran to compete fairly for the energy outflow from Central Asia via Iran.

(d) Access to nuclear technologies for peaceful uses.

(e) Investments in Iran and access to capital on liberal terms.

LOOKING BEYOND

More than the Al Qaeda, Taliban or the products of the *deeni madaris* of Pakistan – it is the Americans who now appear to be fighting with their backs to the wall. Today the US stands more isolated than the Islamists who still enjoy tacit if not overt support in large parts of the Muslim world. America is the most criticised nation in the world. Most of its allies have distanced themselves from

America in its Iraq misadventure. Americans cannot travel freely in many parts of the world. Whichever way one looks at it, the Americans seem to have painted themselves into a corner. They have also pulled down their mental shutters. Any further criticism, well intentioned or otherwise, from friend or foe, is hardly welcome. Largely, it is water off a duck's back.

At the beginning of 2004 further criticism of the USA could become counter productive. Should the situation deteriorate more rapidly for the USA in Iraq or in Afghanistan the repercussions would be felt not only in the USA but in the rest of the world as well. Therefore, the world needs to engage with the USA – with the establishment as well as the civil society – to make the lone superpower change course for ushering in a more humane and rational world order. Should it alter course in the direction indicated, it can resume its leadership role for the best part of the century and beyond. The world would willingly follow America were the nation to return to its true liberal values, rather than the distorted perspective that currently obtains.

End Notes

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3. *The New York Times*. Reproduced in *International Herald Tribune*, 19 September 2003.
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5. Raghav Gupta, 'Bush's rocky road to Damascus', *The Indian Express*, 29 October 2003.
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7. *Science for Democratic Action,* Vol. II, No. 3, June 2003.
8. *The Economist*, 16 August 2003, p. 33.
9. *The Statesman*, 6 October 2003.
10. *USA Today, Colorado Springs,* reproduced in *The Hindustan Times*, 11 October 2003.