

Column one: Bush's inevitable showdown

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It is impossible to guess the consequences of the approaching showdown between the US and Iran. But if the events of the past week are any guide, the future does not look promising.

President George W. Bush asserted Wednesday that the deal the State Department achieved with North Korea in the six-party talks "will bring us closer to a Korea Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons." But it is hard to see how this is so.

Reached seven months after North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile and four months after it conducted an underground nuclear test, the accord makes no mention of Pyongyang's nuclear or missile arsenals. Indeed all it does is pay North Korea handsomely for a promise that within 60 days it will temporarily seal its nuclear installation at Yongbyon. For this promise, the Americans agreed to supply the North with 50,000 pounds of heavy fuel oil; conduct direct talks with the North Koreans towards the normalization of diplomatic ties; and cancel banking sanctions that have effectively barred the North Koreans from international capital markets.

The last US payoff is the kicker. In 2006 the US Treasury took action against a bank in Macau that was laundering North Korean counterfeit dollars. That action was the first truly effective step the US has taken toward destabilizing Kim Jung Il's Stalinist regime.

Kim understands that the only way he can remain in power is to force the international community to subsidize his tyranny. The only way he can get foreign powers to do that is by using nuclear blackmail. By removing its banking sanctions, the US effectively destroyed its only effective bargaining chip against North Korea and so ensured that Kim's brinkmanship will continue. In light of this, as former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton's noted, the message the US sent by acceding to the agreement is that "if you hold out long enough and wear down the State Department negotiators, eventually you will get rewarded."

Aside from capitulating to North Korea, this week the US took an initial step towards accepting Hamas as a legitimate actor. The unity deal between Fatah and Hamas negotiated under the aegis of the supposedly moderate Saudi King Abdullah is a stunning rebuke of US Palestinian policy. By effectively demoting the Fatah to the status of junior partner to Hamas, the agreement is a slap on the face to the Bush administration which for the past four years has based its Palestinian policy on its blind faith in Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Since 2003 the administration has put all its eggs in Abbas's basket. No amount of evidence of Fatah's direct involvement in terrorism against Israel could convince Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to change their view that Abbas is a "moderate" who is willing to make peace with Israel.

The US has showered him with money, arms and legitimacy and forced Israel to do the same. And in Mecca last weekend, Abbas showed that he has played Bush for a fool. Not only did he agree not to fight against

Hamas or disarm it. By accepting an agreement which does not include recognition of Israel's right to exist, Abbas demonstrated that there is no significant difference between Fatah and Hamas in terms of their commitment to bring about Israel's destruction.

Yet as with North Korea, here too, the Bush administration has chosen to pretend that in failing it has succeeded. Rather than distance herself from Abbas, Rice insists on going ahead with the scheduled three-way summit with Abbas and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Monday.

It is possible that there is more here than meets the eye. It is possible for instance that the US is willing to take a few hits in order to clear its deck of nuisances so that it can concentrate on the greatest danger to global security. Perhaps the Bush administration is appeasing North Korea by buying it off and appeasing the Arabs and Europeans by being nice to the Palestinians in order to buy time to deal with Iran.

But if this is the game that the Americans are playing, it is a dangerous one. In the first instance, there is no assurance that their concessions will buy them any time at all. The North Koreans have already disavowed their supposed pledge to seal the Yangbyon installation and allow free access to international inspectors. Similarly, by meeting with Abbas next week, Rice may be opening the US to Palestinian extortion.

Thursday Abbas announced that he is postponing the public address that he was supposed to give describing the unity deal with Hamas until after the summit with Olmert and Rice. In so doing, he is paving the way for a post-summit public denunciation of the US and Israel which will seal his agreement to subordinate himself and Fatah to Hamas.

BUT ASSUMING that the US is in fact playing for time, and assuming that it gets the time it seeks, it is far from clear that it will use that time wisely.

Today positive and negative indicators regarding the nature and outcome of a US confrontation with Iran run together and so forecasting the likely form and outcome of the contest is all but impossible.

On the one hand, the US is beginning to openly target Iranian agents and assets in Iraq. This limited move has been enough to unnerve Iranian leaders who apparently fear that it is but the first step towards an all-out American offensive against Iran.

Their fears are also raised by the US naval buildup in the Persian Gulf, the Iraqi government's announcement that it is sealing its borders with Iran and Syria and the build-up of NATO forces near the Afghan border with Iran.

Economically, the pressure that the US has been exerting on European and Asian oil companies to curtail their operations in Iran is beginning to pay off. Tuesday *The New York Times* reported that the Iranian economy, which is completely dependent on oil and gas exports, is beginning to show signs of distress. Without foreign assistance, the Iranians cannot long maintain their current export rate or develop their reserve capacity. This shortfall will force the regime to curtail government subsidies of gas and oil prices and so encourage civil unrest.

The regime's fear of unrest grows by the day as the regime itself shows increased signs of disintegration. With the supreme leader Ali Khamenei reportedly suffering from the late stages of cancer, Iran expert Michael Ledeen reported this week that factional fighting for succession between forces loyal to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and forces loyal to former president and leader of the powerful Guardians Council Hashemi Rafsanjani is gaining momentum. The succession battle has engulfed the ayatollahs who are themselves turning

against one another.

Furthermore, according to the *Iran Press Service*, the attack in Baluchistan that killed a dozen Revolutionary Guards troops on Tuesday was only one of many violent attacks against regime targets to have occurred in recent days. If the US and its allies act wisely, there is every reason to believe that they could successfully foment a revolution that would bring down the regime.

Yet it is far from clear that the US is interested in bringing down the regime. This week Oklahoma Senator Tom Coburn released a report on US Farsi language broadcasting into Iran. From an analysis of those broadcasts, Coburn reached the disturbing conclusion that far from working to advance the US's stated aim of overthrowing the regime, these US taxpayer-funded broadcasts "undermine US policy on Iran, often even supporting the propaganda of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Needless to say, this is not the sort of behavior one would expect from the US if the administration was seriously pursuing the overthrow of the mullahs or planning a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Then there is the leaked EU report that admits that its negotiations to date have had no impact on Iran's nuclear weapons plans and that any future negotiations will likewise have no impact on Iran's nuclear ambitions or activities. While it is possible to view this as an admission of failure which could pave the way to European support for a US-led military campaign against Iran's nuclear installations, it is more likely that the EU will decide that in light of the ineffectiveness of their negotiations with the Iranians to date that they have no choice but to continue with them.

Indeed, this week Switzerland took it upon itself to offer the Iranians yet another package of concessions in exchange for their agreement to hold discussions. If Iran, as its press agencies have indicated, agrees to negotiate with the Europeans, it could very likely buy itself some time at the US's expense.

For both Bush and Rice made it clear this week that they do still cling to the fantasy that diplomacy can carry the day with Iran. While touting her deal with North Korea on Tuesday, Rice said it should be viewed "as a message to Iran that the international community is able to bring together its resources, and that strong diplomacy has achieved results."

YET WHETHER or not the US is planning for a confrontation with Iran and whether or not its deal with North Korea and its continued tolerance for Abbas is aimed at preparing the ground for a confrontation with the mullahs, that confrontation will occur.

As the regime becomes less stable, the mullahs are becoming more extreme. They are ratcheting up their suppression of regime opponents throughout the country. There is little reason to doubt that they will seek to divert their people's attention from their failures by inciting hostilities against the US in Iraq or against Israel in Lebanon, Syria or the Palestinian Authority and expediting their nuclear program. Indeed, the Iranians have ample means at their disposal to initiate the confrontation with the US on a battleground most convenient to them.

Whether the US arrives at its showdown with Iran from a position of weakness or strength, willingly or unwillingly, there is no doubt that the confrontation is approaching. And the difference between initiating the confrontation and allowing Iran to initiate it with a nuclear first strike is not a trivial question. It will make a difference of millions of lives. The question of the hour is therefore whether the little time left before the war is being used wisely.

And here is the great failure. By sending a message of weakness now, in order to purchase maneuvering time that may not be obtained, the US this week has accelerated rather than distanced the moment of truth while doing nothing to build support or increase its chances of triumph when the inevitable occurs.



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