

Imposing idiot sanctions on Iran is a direct route to war

Britain has no interest in bullying Iran over nuclear proliferation. The very trap that led to Iraq and Afghanistan looms again

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What is the difference between Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran? The answer, future historians may relate, is none. At the dawn of the 21st century, all three states were ruled by nasty undemocratic regimes to which America and its allies took exception. Antagonism began with hectoring ostracism. This led to economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and bloodcurdling threats of “other measures”. Finally a pretext was drummed up for military intervention, for bombing, invasion, occupation and appalling destruction.

Will Iran really be on this list? At present the west, covered in blood and expense, is trying to leave Iraq and Afghanistan, yet at the same time it stumbles into an identical trap in Iran.

The casus belli is the same. There is a declared ongoing threat and this is inextricably linked to a “humanitarian” need for regime change. In Afghanistan the trigger was the harbouring of Osama bin Laden. In Iraq it was a tenuous claim that Saddam possessed a nuclear capability and was preparing to use missiles against western targets.

In Iran similar claims are being made about nuclear enrichment. There is the same stumbling UN involvement, the same histrionic spin and the same regime abuse. There are the same threats to increase economic sanctions and the same sabre-rattling about “no option being off the table”. Childish tit-for-tat diplomacy sees [yachtsmen arrested](#) and cultural exchanges impeded. The rhetorical slither to confrontation is seen on every side.

But Iran is wholly different from Iraq or Afghanistan. It is a big, semi-modern state of 80 million people, compared with 20 million each for Iraq and Afghanistan. Bombers can lay waste to Kabul and Baghdad. Doing likewise to Tehran, a city the size of London, should be unthinkable. Iran’s politics may be unstable but its national pride is fierce. To challenge it would be disastrous, a final sign that western democrats can no longer contain the globalised moral arrogance shown by their leaders.

Iran’s government clearly intends a nuclear capability beyond what is considered acceptable by the International Atomic Energy Agency. A clique within the ruling coalition would like to go further and join the nuclear weapons club. Since the non-proliferation treaty failed to disarm India, Pakistan or Israel, many Iranians cannot see why they are different. If Britain requires a nuclear deterrent, why not Iran?

It is still moot how far Tehran has gone down this road. Interventionists cry that “the

ayatollahs” are on the brink of “nuclear breakout”, like North Korea. Last week’s announcement that Iran would build 10 [enrichment plants](#) was clearly meant as [a snub to the IAEA](#). Those averse to intervention retort that such ambitions are meaningless, but show how absurd it is to think that foreign lectures can moderate Iran’s stance.

Intelligence from Iran indicates a fragmented leadership. The government has not stabilised after the summer’s [fraudulent elections](#). The president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is under siege from assembly democrats on one hand and the crypto-warlords of the Revolutionary Guard on the other. In this life-or-death struggle, the country’s nuclear strength is a distraction, a bauble, like the Olympic games to the Labour government. Ahmadinejad will not bow to western pressure and meekly surrender nuclear enrichment.

At this point the interventionists reach wearily for their favourite whip – tighter economic sanctions. Two decades of sanctions did not bring Saddam to his knees. They enriched him, ruined Iraq’s middle class, drove opposition into exile and entrenched a siege economy. The same happened with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The idea that sanctions will dismantle Natanz, crush the Revolutionary Guards and drive Ahmadinejad to respect the outcome of the summer election is barmy.

Sanctions are idiot diplomacy. They are the last gasp of the “something must be done” brigade, before surrendering to the military/industrial complex and going to war. Bred in the ideological bone to intervene in the affairs of other states, these people cannot admit that sometimes nothing can be done, or that anything done might make matters worse. Yet more sanctions are the proclaimed policy of [David Miliband](#). Only Moscow and Beijing protest that sanctions do more harm than good.

Sanctions will not stop Iran developing nuclear weapons. But so what? Such weapons have become useless. While it is just arguable that they prevented an east-west war in the second half of the last century, in every other theatre they are ineffective, even in tactical form. Their possession by one side or other made no difference in Korea, Vietnam, the Falklands, Lebanon, India-China, Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Gaza. They are useless in the new wars of separatism and insurgency.

Terrorism theorists love constructing “madman” scenarios, usually involving Islamists with black hoods and staring eyes. None has come remotely near fruition. Anything in life is possible but diplomacy has to measure probabilities. If Iran actually decides to build and test a bomb, nothing will stop it doing so.

The west has a problem. Iran is flagrantly defying the IAEA, and thus the UN. But then so did Pakistan and India. A policy of confrontation only confirms the view of Iranian extremists, that the Christian west is set on a path to intervention and that everyone, even innocent sailors, is part of the struggle.

If Iran’s moderates lose out to the extremists and the country does go nuclear, some responsibility must rest on ham-fisted western policymakers. But if so, the best bet is to treat Iran like Pakistan, to encourage trade and contact and hope to inculcate the disciplines that have gone with membership of the nuclear club – so far successfully.

Either way, Iran is not Britain’s responsibility. It does not threaten Britain, nor can Britain bully it into doing what Britain likes, whether it is honouring a local election result or adhering to the details of non-proliferation. Iran certainly has a capacity to encourage

terrorism and destabilise its region. But no British interest lies in making this more likely by threatening sanctions and, when they do not work, being trapped into “more serious measures”.

This week [Chilcot is exposing the shambles of Iraq](#), and Obama is digging a deeper hole in Afghanistan. Surely history cannot repeat itself a second time.

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