

US sends the wrong messages to Iran

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The US media are inundated with reports that the recent United Nations resolution imposing sanctions on North Korea is meant as a “lesson” for Iran, and the United States’ ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, has warned Tehran that it could face similar “international isolation” if it follows Pyongyang’s path toward nuclear proliferation.

Thus a Wall Street Journal editorial titled “The arms-control illusion” glosses over any distinctions between Iran and North

Korea and accuses Tehran of following the same path of signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), “only to pursue its own secret bomb-building effort”. Another editorial in the Christian Science Monitor, “The think-twice sanctions on North Korea”, states: “The UN sanctions approved Saturday against North Korea won’t really roll back its nuclear program. Yes, they partly punish the North for its atomic test and may block bomb exports. But the real target is likely Iran and others eyeing the bomb.” An editorial in The Economist, on the other hand, claims that Iran and North Korea are “bent” on the “destruction” of the non-proliferation regime.

After one week, major powers cannot agree on UN measures to punish Iran over its nuclear program. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said there was “widespread agreement, although not total agreement”, among the US, France and Britain on a proposed resolution that would pressure Iran to halt nuclear-fuel work, including enriching uranium. The US wants initial sanctions to target Iranian activities related to its suspected weapons program – which Tehran denies.

Indeed, there is no evidence that Iran is proliferating, that it deserves the same punishment as North Korea. This is a point emphasized by the Iranian leadership, as well as others, including the former chief UN weapons inspector, Scott Ritter, at a recent talk sponsored by the Nation Institute in New York, also featuring veteran investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, who has written extensively on the United States’ plans for military strikes on Iran.

According to Ritter, whose new book Target Iran is a powerful jab at the Bush administration’s Iran policy, if the US bombed Iran’s nuclear facilities today, there would be “no environmental damage” because Iran’s facilities are mostly concrete buildings and rudimentary equipment with little actual nuclear material involved. “That is the whole insanity of this thing. Iran has no nuclear-weapons program and its enrichment program is at the lab scale,” said Ritter. He added that the United States’ Iran policy was pushed by a nexus of Washington’s neo-conservatives and Israel’s right-wing Likud politicians who have a “faith-based” rather than a “fact-based” approach with regard to Iran, that is, the Israelis have adopted the wrong policy toward Iran by deluding themselves into believing that Iran is proliferating nuclear weapons and is at the advanced stages of this process.

Dangerous consequences What if there is a military strike on Iran? According to both Ritter and Hersh, the consequences could be dire and even catastrophic. Ritter, who has visited Iran in the recent past, is convinced that Iran is prepared to inflict pain on the US and its allies in the region in response to any such military strike, inviting more punishing blows by the US. These might include the use of “usable nuclear weapons” sanctioned by President George W Bush’s nuclear doctrine and the idea of “preemption”.

One scenario entertained by Ritter is that in a multi-pronged offensive against Iran, some US forces infiltrating Iranian territory might be trapped, in which case the US might resort to small, tactical nuclear weapons to get them out of harm’s way and to bring Iran to its knees. The present limitations of the US military imposed by its overstretch around the world make the notion of “usable nukes” more plausible from the point of view of the US and, in Ritter’s words, this is the ultimate danger. This is because if Iran is ever nuked, “You can bet at some future time, at least one US city will be knocked out. So take your pick, which city: San Francisco, Chicago, New York?”

Even short of such a nightmare scenario, Ritter is convinced that the US and world economies would be hit hard as a result of a US war on Iran. First, it could prompt Tehran to impose an oil embargo on the United States, perhaps followed by a similar “sympathy embargo” by Tehran-friendly Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, thus depriving the world of some 4.5 million barrels of oil a day. “American taxpayers will be hit in the pocket immediately, and perhaps then they will seriously question the sanity of Bush’s policies,” said Ritter.

Compared with Ritter, who is adamant that the Bush administration will launch its planned strike on Iran in the near future, Hersh sounded more cautious without, however, disagreeing with the gist of Ritter’s analysis. “The danger is that the Bush people believe what they say,” said Hersh.

And now the Bush team has convinced itself that there is a lesson for Iran from the UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea, irrespective of the stark contrasts and dissimilarities between the two cases. Unlike North Korea, Iran has neither exited the NPT nor expelled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, nor has it embraced nuclear weapons. Moreover, unlike North Korea’s one-man Stalinist dictatorship, Iran is ruled by an Islamist democracy with competing factions pushing for alternative nuclear policies.

Even IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei has called for dialogue with North Korea and Iran, saying that sanctions are not the answer. “We need ... to bite the bullet and find the way to talk to them [North Koreans], to talk to the Iranians, to talk to all other adversaries because without dialogue we are not moving forward.

“I don’t think sanctions work as a penalty,” he said, in reference to sanctions imposed after Pyongyang’s nuclear test. “We have to move away from the idea that dialogue is a reward; dialogue is an essential tool to change behavior,” the IAEA director general said. Of course, there are certain similarities in the geostrategic predicaments of Iran and North Korea. Both are faced with the formidable power of the US in their vicinity. The Eisenhower carrier group (aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower and its accompanying strike force of cruiser, destroyer and attack submarine) has slipped into the Persian Gulf amid reports of a mission for a possible strike on Iran. This alone explains Tehran’s decision to place the blame for North Korea’s nuclear test on the United States’ “bullying”. But given Iran’s formal commitments against

nuclear proliferation, one would have expected a more nuanced approach that would have reinforced those policy commitments.

Alas, Iran is seemingly drawing its own lessons from the North Korea situation, that is, the ceaseless manipulation of UN machinery by “the hegemonic powers”, to paraphrase President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. That is not exactly what Bolton had hoped for, but was perfectly foreseeable had Bolton paid more attention to the dissimilarities between North Korea and his next target for sanctions, Iran – for example, Iran’s shared interest with the US in maintaining the new status quo in Iraq.

Indeed, Iran and the US have much to gain by cooperating with respect to the escalating crisis of authority in Iraq. A new study commissioned by the US Congress urges the United States to turn to Iran and Syria with respect to Iraq. Yet this timely call will likely be buried in the coming weeks and months by the mutual hostilities generated over the nuclear row.

A careful disentangling of nuclear and non-nuclear – that is, regional – issues by both sides is necessary, as difficult as it may be. Equally necessary is to differentiate regional and relatively “out of area” issues, such as Lebanon, which ranks as a second-order priority for Iran’s foreign policy. Overlooking this, Robert Hunter, a former top US diplomat, in an article titled “Averting war with Iran”, asserts that the recent war in Lebanon solidified the United States’ hostility toward Iran while simultaneously making it harder for the US to start a war with Iran in light of Hezbollah’s proven capability to strike at Israel.

Meanwhile, Bush’s recruitment of former secretary of state James Baker and the Iraq Study Group to help with Middle East and Iran policy is a welcome step forward that could be the harbinger of more positive developments on the US-Iran front. In turn, this may require a healthy pause before the US makes its move at the Security Council with respect to sanctions on Iran, thus giving dialogue a more realistic chance.

Need for a healthy pause According to the latest statement by Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, Mohammad Ali Hosseini, Iran is willing to discuss “temporary suspension” of the nuclear-fuel cycle “under just conditions”. Iran has made a renewed effort to resurrect the nuclear talks, receiving timely backing from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who has explicitly stated that there is no IAEA finding that Iran’s nuclear program represents a threat to world peace and security.

Relatedly, Ali Larijani, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, shed much light on the status of Iran-European Union talks in a recent interview with Mehr News Agency. Larijani claims that after four lengthy meetings with Javier Solana, the EU’s foreign-policy chief, important achievements were reached. These were with respect to Iran’s guarantees of non-diversion (to military objectives). Yet Larijani has been surprised that Solana is now singing a much more pessimistic note.

According to Larijani, the North Korea crisis has been exploited by the West to create “artificial comparisons” with Iran in order to press ahead with sanctions on Tehran. In that case, Larijani warns, Iran’s response will be “measured and appropriate”. He cites recent legislation in Iran’s parliament (majlis) that calls for the suspension of Iran’s cooperation with the IAEA in the event of UN sanctions.

As for Iran’s recent proposal for a French-led consortium to produce nuclear fuel, Larijani has expressed surprise that France’s name was invoked, insisting that Iran had no particular

preference as to who should lead any such multinational consortium.

Another key point conveyed by Larijani and other top Iranian officials is the futility of the “carrot and stick” approach. But that is unlikely to modify Washington’s old habit, now being taken up to the next level by the US naval maneuvers in the Persian Gulf, specifically earmarked as a “warning” to Iran, per the admission of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice while in Moscow.

By enlarging the shadow of war on the eve of Security Council action against Iran, the US aims to solicit a more favorable response from Tehran. Yet this is a dangerous proposition that, ultimately, may not be worth the risk of, at a minimum, poisoning the well of dialogue.

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