

Hawkish manoeuvres point to win for U.S. diplomacy

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From Wednesday's Calgary Herald
July 02, 2008

Sometimes trying to figure out the direction of international politics is akin to discerning the future from the flight of pigeons or the shape of the liver in a ritually slaughtered sheep. But recently several events -- shall we call them signs? -- reinforced one another to suggest movement in a single direction.

Let's start with the most obvious. Ten days ago the New York Times and the Times of London both broke front-page stories reporting an earlier exercise by the Israeli Air force (IAF). A hundred or so warplanes had buzzed around the eastern Mediterranean and Greece. The papers helpfully pointed out that the flying times and distances were about the same as those required for an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Moreover, the mix of aircraft -- mostly F-15s and F-16s -- also indicated they were planning to visit Iran via Jordan and Iraq, not the longer northern route over Turkey. That meant it would be a joint strike with the Americans. An anonymous Israeli source confirmed it was a dress rehearsal.

The Iranians replied by saying this was just a psychological exercise. Without giving any reasons why they thought this way, they then declared: the IAF can't carry out such a strike. In fact, the IAF had just demonstrated they could. So the interesting question is: will they?

Both the U.S. and the Israelis have said that an Iran armed with nukes is not acceptable. But how close the Iranians have to get before somebody goes into action against them has never been clear. In any case it is one thing to build a device that explodes under the desert and quite another that is small enough to sit atop a rocket. It is even more difficult to make a miniature nuke strong enough to stand the strains of being fired up and coming back down on target without falling apart.

Even the report of blueprints that may have fallen into Iranian hands on how to do the really hard stuff is not definitive. Anyone can get blueprints to build, say, a B-29 that delivered the 4,000 kilogram A-bomb called "Little Boy" to Hiroshima. But you still have to be able to build the plane. Building a deliverable weapon requires a lot of engineers to decipher the blueprints and a lot more to follow the recipe and put it together.

That is, human skills, not plans are the main requirement to go nuclear. So, if anyone were serious about stopping the Iranians, getting rid of the human capital, not the equipment, would be the highest priority. And that means an attack out of the blue, not a well publicized dress rehearsal. So why the publicity?

The most obvious explanation is that the Iranians got it right: it is an act of psychological warfare against them. Their leadership is divided between those who think President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has done a splendid job handling the Great Satan and those who think he has put Persia in mortal peril. The well publicized possibility of an attack by Israel and helped by the U.S. was aimed at his opponents.

A second front in the psy-war was opened a few days later when the U.S. let the world know they were considering opening a "diplomatic interest section" in Teheran. This is one step short of full recognition. Here the interesting thing is that the Iranians very quickly said they were interested, which means they were expecting the offer because it had already been discussed in back-channel negotiations.

Coming so soon after the dress rehearsal, the Americans were saying: what would you prefer, improved diplomatic relations or a visit by the IAF? That is not a hard choice for Ahmadinejad's foes.

Third, last Thursday North Korea gave the Chinese government documentation describing their nuclear activities. They were quickly rewarded by the U.S., which removed them from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and lifted trade restrictions. That left but one charter-member of the Axis of Evil: Iran.

In announcing the American response to North Korea's actions, U.S. President George W. Bush compared them to those of Libya, a kind of Axis junior member, in 2005. Libya today receives a lot of western investment. And then there is the other junior member, Syria. The same day North Korea was rehabilitated, French officials said Syria was prepared to "reconsider" its relations with Iran as part of its on-going negotiations with Israel over Lebanon.

In short, all the signs point toward a very good week, perhaps a triumph, for American diplomacy.