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'HEAD-ON CONFLICT WITH IRAN'

On 1 February 2007, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was President Carter's National Security Adviser, warned of the risk of a 'head-on conflict with Iran' when he testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

'Your hearings come at a critical juncture in the US war of choice in Iraq ... It is time for the White House to come to terms with two central realities:

1. The war in Iraq is a historic, strategic, and moral calamity. Undertaken under false assumptions, it is undermining America's global legitimacy. Its collateral civilian casualties as well as some abuses are tarnishing America's moral credentials. Driven by Manichean impulses and imperial hubris, it is intensifying regional instability.

2. Only a political strategy that is historically relevant rather than reminiscent of colonial tutelage can provide the needed framework for a tolerable resolution of both the war in Iraq and the intensifying regional tensions.

If the United States continues to be bogged down in a protracted bloody involvement in Iraq, the final destination on this downhill track is likely to be a head-on conflict with Iran and with much of the world of Islam at large. A plausible scenario for a military collision with Iran involves Iraqi failure to meet the benchmarks; followed by accusations of Iranian responsibility for the failure; then by some provocation in Iraq or a terrorist act in the United States blamed on Iran; culminating in a "defensive" US military action against Iran that plunges a lonely America into a spreading and deepening quagmire eventually ranging across Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

A mythical historical narrative to justify the case for such a protracted and potentially expanding war is already being articulated. Initially justified by false claims about WMDs in Iraq, the war is now being redefined as the "decisive ideological struggle" of our time, reminiscent of the earlier collisions with Nazism and Stalinism. In that context, Islamist extremism and al Qaeda are presented as the equivalents of the threat posed by Nazi Germany and then Soviet Russia, and 9/11 as the equivalent of the Pearl Harbor attack which precipitated America's involvement in World War Two.

This simplistic and demagogic narrative overlooks the fact that Nazism was based on the military power of the industrially most advanced European state; and

that Stalinism was able to mobilise not only the resources of the victorious and militarily powerful Soviet Union but also had worldwide appeal through its Marxist doctrine. In contrast, most Muslims are not embracing Islamic fundamentalism; al Qaeda is an isolated fundamentalist Islamist aberration; most Iraqis are engaged in strife because the American occupation of Iraq destroyed the Iraqi state; while Iran – though gaining in regional influence – is itself politically divided, economically and militarily weak. To argue that America is already at war in the region with a wider Islamic threat, of which Iran is the epicentre, is to promote a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Deplorably, the Administration's foreign policy in the Middle East region has lately relied almost entirely on such sloganeering. Vague and inflammatory talk about "a new strategic context" which is based on "clarity" and which prompts "the birth pangs of a new Middle East" is breeding intensifying anti-Americanism and is increasing the danger of a long-term collision between the United States and the Islamic world. Those in charge of US diplomacy have also adopted a posture of moralistic self-ostracism towards Iran strongly reminiscent of John Foster Dulles' attitude of the early 1950s toward Chinese Communist leaders (resulting among other things in the well-known episode of the refused handshake). It took some two decades and a half before another Republican president was finally able to undo that legacy.

One should note here also that practically no country in the world shares the Manichean delusions that the Administration so passionately articulates. The result is growing political isolation of, and pervasive popular antagonism toward the US global posture.

It is obvious by now that the American national interest calls for a significant change of direction. There is in fact a dominant consensus in favour of a change: American public opinion now holds that the war was a mistake; that it should not be escalated, that a regional political process should be explored; and that an Israeli-Palestinian accommodation is an essential element of the needed policy alteration and should be actively pursued. It is noteworthy that profound reservations regarding the Administration's policy have been voiced by a number of leading Republicans. One need only invoke here the expressed views of the much admired President Gerald Ford, former Secretary of State James Baker, former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and several leading Republican senators, John Warner, Chuck Hagel, and Gordon Smith among others.

The urgent need today is for a strategy that seeks to create a political framework for a resolution of the problems posed both by the US occupation of Iraq and by the ensuing civil and sectarian conflict. Ending the occupation and shaping a regional security dialogue should be the mutually reinforcing goals of such a strategy, but both goals will take time and require a genuinely serious US commitment.

The quest for a political solution for the growing chaos in Iraq should involve four steps:

1. The United States should reaffirm explicitly and unambiguously its

determination to leave Iraq in a reasonably short period of time.

Ambiguity regarding the duration of the occupation in fact encourages unwillingness to compromise and intensifies the on-going civil strife. Moreover, such a public declaration is needed to allay fears in the Middle East of a new and enduring American imperial hegemony. Right or wrong, many view the establishment of such a hegemony as the primary reason for the American intervention in a region only recently free of colonial domination. That perception should be discredited from the highest US level. Perhaps the US Congress could do so by a joint resolution.

2. The United States should announce that it is undertaking talks with the Iraqi leaders to jointly set with them a date by which US military disengagement should be completed, and the resulting setting of such a date should be announced as a joint decision. In the meantime, the US should avoid military escalation.

It is necessary to engage all Iraqi leaders – including those who do not reside within “the Green Zone” – in a serious discussion regarding the proposed and jointly defined date for US military disengagement because the very dialogue itself will help identify the authentic Iraqi leaders with the self-confidence and capacity to stand on their own legs without US military protection. Only Iraqi leaders who can exercise real power beyond “the Green Zone” can eventually reach a genuine Iraqi accommodation. The painful reality is that much of the current Iraqi regime, characterised by the Bush administration as “representative of the Iraqi people”, defines itself largely by its physical location: the four square miles-large US fortress within Baghdad, protected by a wall in places 15 feet thick, manned by heavily armed US military, popularly known as “the Green Zone.”

3. The United States should issue jointly with appropriate Iraqi leaders, or perhaps let the Iraqi leaders issue, an invitation to all neighbours of Iraq (and perhaps some other Muslim countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Pakistan) to engage in a dialogue regarding how best to enhance stability in Iraq in conjunction with US military disengagement and to participate eventually in a conference regarding regional stability.

The United States and the Iraqi leadership need to engage Iraq’s neighbours in serious discussion regarding the region’s security problems, but such discussions cannot be undertaken while the US is perceived as an occupier for an indefinite duration. Iran and Syria have no reason to help the United States consolidate a permanent regional hegemony. It is ironic, however, that both Iran and Syria have lately called for a regional dialogue, exploiting thereby the self-defeating character of the largely passive – and mainly sloganeering – US diplomacy.

A serious regional dialogue, promoted directly or indirectly by the United States, could be buttressed at some point by a wider circle of consultations involving other powers with a stake in the region’s stability, such as the European Union, China, Japan, India, and Russia. Members of this Committee might consider exploring informally with the states mentioned their potential interest in such a wider dialogue.

4. Concurrently, the United States should activate a credible and energetic effort to finally reach an Israeli-Palestinian peace, making it clear in the process as to what the basic parameters of such a final accommodation ought to involve.

The United States needs to convince the region that the US is committed both to Israel's enduring security and to fairness for the Palestinians who have waited for more than forty years now for their own separate state. Only an external and activist intervention can promote the long-delayed settlement for the record shows that the Israelis and the Palestinians will never do so on their own. Without such a settlement, both nationalist and fundamentalist passions in the region will in the longer run doom any Arab regime which is perceived as supportive of US regional hegemony.

After World War Two, the United States prevailed in the defence of democracy in Europe because it successfully pursued a long-term political strategy of uniting its friends and dividing its enemies, of soberly deterring aggression without initiating hostilities, all the while also exploring the possibility of negotiated arrangements. Today, America's global leadership is being tested in the Middle East. A similarly wise strategy of genuinely constructive political engagement is now urgently needed.

It is also time for the Congress to assert itself.

The President of the United States and Secretary of State would restore some of their lost lustre by making some combination of James Baker, Lee Hamilton, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Brent Scowcroft co-Middle East Envoys to help take this penultimate quagmire we are in in a direction that might start a virtuous cycle of possibilities rather than the disaster that is unfolding.'