

USA'S SOFT WAR AGAINST IRAN

# When media is weapon, perception is target

SAIMUM PARVEZ

FOR the last few decades, Iran has been making headlines in global media for its defiant standing against western powers on a number of issues. It is suspected by western powers that Iran is running its clandestine nuclear program for military purpose but the US officials are yet to find any solution. They have tried bullying the current conservative regime, spent million dollars to bring about a moderate government, but all these steps brought anything but success. Many thought that the issue of imposing sanctions can be discussed in UN Security Council in coming months, but still, Iran can sleep well on its expensive and lucrative 'energy' pillow as Security Council members like China and Russia are becoming more dependent on Iranian energy. The last resort, military attack on Iran, can be too costly for the USA. If you know Iran and its unique Persian culture, you should better prepare for a united Iranian population before launching any kind of attack on their soil. Whether it is surgical or otherwise, an air strike will inflame the Iranian nationalism and people will rally around the green flag and placards with Ahmadinejad's smiling picture. And you can bet, the US Generals don't want to see that.

It seems that it is not the Generals but the hackers and journalists, who are the new soldiers, fighting a new kind of war against Iran. Covertly, USA is using delicate technological or cyber warfare to disrupt and undermine nuclear establishments of Iran. It is interesting that this cyber ventures began during the Bush era but accelerated under Obama. Even Iran admitted that its nuclear program has been hampered due to some unknown reasons. Overly, USA is funding billions of dollars for radio, television, internet and satellite based broadcasting

popular among the tech loving youths of Iran. These funding programs also aim to assist pro-democracy groups, public diplomacy initiatives and cultural and educational fellowships. This notion of using techniques of psychological operation, termed as 'soft war' is the preferred choice of many political experts to transform the image of Uncle Sam from foe to friend in order to topple the existing Islamic Republic system through popular uprisings.

The current regime of Iran is also well aware of and prepared for the ongoing soft war. The regime is taking counter measures to fight this unusual battle. Islamic Development Organization of Iran sees the soft war as 'any kind of psychological warfare action and media propaganda which targets the society and induces the opposite side to accept the failure without making any military conflict. The subversion, internet war, creation of radio-television networks and spreading the rumors are the important forms of soft war. This war intends to weaken the intellect and thought of the given society and also causes the socio-political order to be annihilated via the media propaganda'. The soft war is not a new phenomenon. This concept was designed and used in the period of cold war by a collaboration of political scientists and officials of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Pentagon. According to them, one of the prominent causes behind the collapse of the Soviet Union was the success of the US in her efficiency to control the global media.

Apart from using the media, USA is trying to disrupt Iran's nuclear program by using new tools. A serious computer worm, called Stuxnet, is designed and used to sabotage the nuclear plant of Iran. According to the Seattle Times, published on September 26, 2010, the time stamp on the Stuxnet virus reveals that it was created in



Photo: VOA-PNN free service in Iran through iphone

January 2010. It means that not Bush, but under the supervision of Obama's administration, this cyber weapon was unleashed. According to Computer World magazine, Stuxnet is, "a piece of malware so devious in its use of unpatched vulnerabilities, so sophisticated in its multipronged approach, that the security researchers who tore it apart believe it may be the work of state-backed professionals." It is also suspected that Israel was behind the production of the worm along with professionals of USA to sabotage or to take control the operating system for

Bushehr nuclear reactor of Iran (Trevor Butterworth, 'The War against Iran Has Already Started'). If Stuxnet is really as dangerous as it is suspected, then it can change the course of warfare. Just think that without firing any shot, and without even launching a single missile, a war can be won. It can also make the contemporary warfare obsolete and old-fashioned.

Beside cyber war, USA has started its soft war with another strategic weapon- media. For years, western powers have been trying to infiltrate Iran's local media. It is not an easy task to do

as Iran's domestic media is heavily fortified by censorship; even satellite dishes are illegal there. The U.S. government is running two broadcast services from outside Iran: Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Farda. Farda also runs an extensive Persian-language website (Greg Bruno, 'The Media Landscape in Iran'). In addition to PNN and Radio Farda's core TV and radio services, they maintain two websites with extensive contents. They also transmit local, international and U.S.-focused programming via blogs, Twitter feeds and news alerts to mobile phones; upload videos to YouTube; and manage dynamic Facebook pages. (Robert McMahon, 'U.S.-funded media and the "softwar" in Iran').

Younger generation of Iran likes to spend time browsing social media. Beside twitter and facebook users, there are many active bloggers in Iran. Media experts say that Iran has one of the world's most active blogospheres. Iranian government estimates place Internet users at 23 million, while more than 53 million cell phones are in use. Iranian's love of technology and internet made it a lucrative ground for USA to campaign and continue the soft war. To reach the Iranians, PNN launched a new application for Apple's iPhone and the Android/Google phone that provides news updates and allows users to send links to VOA stories through Facebook, Twitter and e-mail in Persian language. VOA has created an "app" for Apple's iPhone and Android/Google phone that allows Iranians to upload videos from their phones directly to VOA's Persian News Network (PNN) (US international broadcasting: is anybody listening?, Report of Committee on Foreign Relations). By using this technology anyone can upload any videos of demonstration, protests or any other incidents that Iranian

regime may possibly hide. With this device any Iranian can be a contributor of PNN. However, ensuring authenticity and neutrality are major challenges for this type of 'crowd source' journalism.

Iran government is not sitting idly knowing all these initiatives and huge funding of US's international broadcasting. They have taken several steps to create blockade on the way of intended psychological motivation of USA. The regime is trying to counter US efforts by jamming broadcasts, blocking websites and infiltrating Facebook accounts. Iranian administration is also spending a considerable amount of money to train people for monitoring various websites and also for writing pro-regime comments in social media and blogs. On the other hand, in order to avoid jamming, Persian News Network is currently using 7 frequencies on 6 different satellites. The use of various technologies by the US authority and the Iranian efforts to neutralize those attempts has indeed become an interesting 'cat and mouse' game to watch.

After the upheaval of the Iran's presidential election in June 2009, government enforced control on the major domestic media. It is alleged that 40 journalists were arrested within the first month of the election (Greg Bruno, 'The Media Landscape in Iran'). Both the BBC and VOA were included on a list of "subversive" organizations while Iranians were banned to contact with them. When the US funded Radio Farda broadcasted a program on the case of Sakin-eh Mohammadi Ashtiani, who was sentenced to death by stoning for committing alleged adultery, the current regime of Iran decided to take tougher position on the foreign based broadcasting stations.

Though many are optimistic about the US funded international broadcasting, it is really a big question whether Iranians

will be influenced by these motivational initiatives. One can cite that this type of soft war brought success for USA at the time of cold war, but this time it is a different scenario. It is very difficult for USA to understand the cultural and psychological impact of their broadcasting on their Iranian audience. It's true that similar programs were successful in the former USSR and in other socialist societies in inspiring civil societies to welcome western democracy; but contemporary Iran is a different case altogether. None can convincingly suggest that the Iranian people do really want to hear from the western world, whereas in the former USSR of the late 80s, it was evident that an eager audience was willing to follow the capitalist path.

Whether USA can or cannot win this soft war, one thing is very clear. In this era of technology, it is really impossible to control the flow of information. Social networks and new media have turned everyone into a 'media'. Images of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan, during the upheaval following the June 2009 election in Iran, can be an example of this type of citizen journalism. These images were recorded in a cell phone and were distributed across the world in moments. Though journalism experts say that the so-called new media cannot replace traditional forms of reporting and a limited number - roughly one-third - of Iranians have access to the Internet, it is true that flow of information and connection with the outer world cannot be blocked. Now, by using new media, Iranian population can get access to various options; the decision to choose is up to them. And the success of 'soft war' will depend on the level of its influence on that decision-making process.

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## China-US relations show signs of strain



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THE bilateral relationship between the US and China is complicated and multifaceted. The relationship touches on a wide range of areas, such as security, economic policy and bilateral and multilateral issues. Economically the US and China have become intertwined. China is the second largest US trading partner. It also has the second largest holder of US securities and largest holder of Treasury bonds.

The Obama administration was definitely very China friendly in the first year. A major reason is America's need for China to continue to buy US Treasury bond in the midst of the economic meltdown in America.

Barack Obama, keen to avoid displeasing the Chinese, declined to meet the Dalai Lama shortly before the US president's own debut in Beijing, where he too extolled the range of common interests shared by the two powers.

There is a view in America's Republican Party that Obama gave in too much to China in some of the early negotiations like his visit to China during the first year of his office. He spent four days and three nights in Beijing and Shanghai.

Washington insiders cannot expect America to negotiate from a position of strength like during President Clinton years, because China is just so much stronger now economically and politically. China's

recent success comes from its status as the world's leading creditor nation.

As history as shown, power flows to where money is and that is playing out again in China today. Now that Washington has perceived China to be the other super power of the world in future, it would be hard for the US to put pressure on China.

America has a problem now where the Chinese leadership also has to satisfy and listen to the growing mid-

dle class that is more nationalistic and confident than ever. So, as Washington is pressing President Obama to get more out of China, the Chinese population is also pressuring the Politburo to not give any concession to the US.

Mr Obama approved a \$6 billion arms sale to Taiwan. The divergence of opinion on the military sale to Taiwan stems from how the West and China sees Taiwan. Most Westerners believe

that Taiwan is a separate sovereign entity that should only rejoin China if it wishes to do so. Therefore, Americans see these military sales as fulfilling the Taiwan Relation Act by providing Taiwan with additional defensive deterrent.

The weapons themselves are very advanced, but they are defensive in nature and are not going to change the military balance across the straits. The best hope for Taiwan is still to make peace with China and maintaining strong relationship with America.

Most Chinese people believe that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China that no other country should interfere with. Therefore, any sale to Taiwan is looked as containing Chinese power, violating its sovereignty and interfering with its internal affairs.

To the Chinese, the US president appears to have reneged on promises in 2009 November's joint statement of the two countries during President Obama's visit to China to concentrate on mutual interest and ignore intractable differences.

Mrs Clinton has berated China for creating a new "information curtain" on the internet to rival the Iron Curtain of the Cold War era, and stoutly supporting Google in its dispute with the Chinese authorities over hacking and censorship.

China's leaders detect deliberate provocations from the Obama administration. They believe the Google row early this year could have been limited to a trade issue but the White House chose to maximise its political impact.

In private and public, China bitterly accuses US of engineering the award in October of the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, in an effort to undermine its government.

Washington's options from here are limited. China holds most of America's \$12.4 trillion debt and American consumers are hooked on cheap Chinese products. Beijing's growing strength seems to reflect a belief that the US needs China more right now than the other way around.

Observers say Washington has little leverage over Chinese policies. A lot of America has not caught up with the fact that China now can say no more often. They argue that Chinese leaders are considering how to balance its interest in supporting North Korea with the interest in preventing more accidents or another nuclear test in the Korean Peninsula.

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## S.Korean army chief quits amid N.Korea tensions

SOUTH Korea's army chief resigned Tuesday, reportedly over a property investment, at a time of high tensions with North Korea following its deadly artillery attack last month. A defence ministry spokesman told AFP that General Hwang Eui-Don's resignation had been accepted but gave no details. The presidential office also declined to say why Hwang quit.

Yonhap news agency said the general, who was named to his current post in June, had become embroiled in a controversy over capital gains through a property investment. "General Hwang offered to retire following media reports about his property investment, because he judged it was inappropriate for him to stay in the post at a time when he has to lead reform of the army," it quoted an unidentified defence ministry official as saying.

The resignation is a further blow to the South's military, which was widely criticised for its perceived feeble response to the North's bombardment of an island near the disputed Yellow Sea border on November 23.

Defence minister Kim Tae-Young resigned after the shelling, which killed four people including two civilians. It was the first attack on a civilian area in the South since the 1950-53 war and sparked a regional crisis.

The South fired 80 artillery rounds at the North's artillery batteries in response but did not call in air strikes. The military has said it will use air power next time.

The bombardment was launched less than two weeks after the North disclosed an apparently operational uranium enrichment plant to visiting US experts.

It said the operation was intended to fuel a nuclear power plant. But senior US and other officials fear it could be reconfigured to produce weapons-grade uranium, to augment the North's current plutonium stockpile.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, at a meeting Monday with his visiting North Korean counterpart Pak Ui-Chun, "expressed his deep concern about information about the industrial uranium enrichment capability", Moscow's foreign ministry said.

Lavrov urged North Korea to comply with UN Security Council resolutions banning such activities, and called for a resumption of six-party talks aimed at negotiating an end to the North's nuclear programmes.

Russia is one of the six countries involved in the stalled talks alongside the two Koreas, China, Japan and the United States.

China, the North's sole major ally, has called for a new meeting of six-party envoys to resolve the latest crisis.

But the United States, Japan and South Korea have responded coolly, saying a return to negotiations at this point could reward the North's aggression.

They want China, which has failed publicly to condemn its ally for the island attack, to take a tougher line with the North. US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg is to visit Beijing this week to press for stronger action.

As part of a flurry of regional diplomacy, South Korea's chief nuclear envoy is scheduled to visit Russia for talks.

And New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson will visit North Korea from December 16 to 20, on what is billed as a private trip, to try to calm tensions.

The North, for its part, Tuesday repeated assertions that its new programme is peaceful.

"The business of peacefully developing nuclear energy and using it is happening in our country, in line with the international trend," said ruling communist party newspaper Rodong Sinmun.

"Peaceful nuclear activity is a sovereign right of all nations."

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