

Hot heads, what next?

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TALKS between Iran and the P5+1 group - the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany - may take place in Istanbul on April 13 and 14 or any other date in the following days with an objective of seeking a prospective solution to the alleged nuclear program of Iran. Sergei Ryabkov, deputy foreign minister of Russia told the Interfax news agency ten days before the upcoming talks, "There are hotheads who...talk about the possibility of resorting to force." Hotheads are those among the US, Israeli and EU political leaders and policy makers, who are likely to rejoice hot war with Iran. The hot-heads in the US, to satisfy the hotheads in Israel, have clarified their position that Iran would be attacked if it does not agree with their demands.

Against this backdrop, the question that has engrossed the people in general and International Relations (IR) experts in particular is whether Iran will be victim of the western aggression.

There are two strands of thoughts in this regard. The first group of scholars is of the opinion that none of the West or Israel or Iran is capable of warring with Iran because of the discrepancy of national consensus, psychological stimuli and the lack of domestic, regional as well as international recognitions for such a dangerous war. Second, the policy makers and politicians of both the US and Israel have diverge opinions with regard to the strategies, goals and policies of a prospective Western attack on Iran. Third, the West cannot underestimate the Russian and Chinese anti-war postures. Fourth, the devastating experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan wars will undoubtedly prevent the West from engaging in another suffocating shambles of the Iran war. Fifth, US debt burden of 15 trillion dollar and the acute economic crises of Europe may not encourage them to instigate another expensive expedition.

The above arguments may be true if the Western policy is driven by the Rational Actor Model of Graham T. Allison of Harvard. However, the possibility of any Western attack may not be dismissed just before the US presidential election and particularly, such an attack may deem more important in view of the declining the US-Israel relations caused by the Iran issue. This leads to the second group of analysts, who foresee surgical operations or preemptive air-strikes on Iran.

The first and the foremost among their arguments are related to the revitalization of the global grand image of the US and the West. In the beginning of 2012, the Daily Mail, referring to the Israeli intelligentsia, terrified the world by conveying the dreadful news that Iran would come under Western attack in a festive mood before Christmas. Iran has been, since then, continuously threatened with Christmas attack, winter attack, spring attack, Israeli attack or US attack. Iran has responded to these hawks with counter-threats in eloquent and decisive voices. Moreover, couples of the

UN sanctions, the bank restriction of the US, the oil embargo of Europe and the trade threats of the West - none of these steps have been instrumental in stopping Iran's nuclear project. The sheer disgrace out of these frustrating failures may tickle the sleeping tigers in the 'hot heads' of Israel or US to trigger onslaughts on Iran.

The second important reason of a potential Iran war emanates from the fact that the West cannot tolerate any countervailing power in Middle East that may pose challenge to Israel, the West's long-tested ally in the region. The concern, that Iran's rapidly developing nuclear programme will turn it into a nuclear power, will compel them to stand strongly against an egotistical Iran. Such calculation may start the strategy of limited war through surgical attacks in order to



frighten Iran and, upon desired success, the concerted strategy of total war will be declared by the West to dethrone the present Iranian leaders or destroy Iran from the world atlas.

The third reason reflects the impatience of the West. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have both publicly said that the window for dialogue in the standoff over Iran's nuclear program is closing. The mid April talks are seen as the last chance for diplomacy in its showdown with the West. In his interview with the Atlantic news magazine, Obama said that he would command US army to launch military strikes against Iran if dialogue and sanctions failed to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The fourth reason why Obama will choose the option of war is because he might want to cling to people's sentiment in order to win the electoral race on his republican rivals including Mitt Romney. The psyche of American people comprises with self-contradictory elements in that, on one hand, they

chant anti-war slogans and on the other, they long for seeing the pomp of power of their president. Ahead of the upcoming election, he might turn crazy to show the countrymen his military muscles.

I don't think that the option of war is easily achievable, given the changed realities of the regional and global political spectrum. First, the US may have limited success in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. However, it will be quite difficult to survive in the Iran war. The attributes of political leaders, domestic political setting and political culture of Iran are different from those of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iranian politicians are highly popular; their popularity is derived from the grassroots levels. A Maliki or a Karzai may not be available in Iran to serve as Western puppets.

Liberals like Rafsanjani and others are committed to preserving Iranian and Islamic values. The conservatives, even the extremists are not opposed to peaceful coexistence if their relationship with the West is built on mutual respect and cooperation. Mahmood Ahmadinejad, the present Iranian president stands as the moderate Islamist in between these two.

Second, the Western threats could hardly do any harm to Iran. For example, The IMF President has recently acknowledged that Iran has not been expectedly affected by the Western sanctions; rather the West has been suffering a lot. He warned of the virulent economic crisis along with the present economic recession around the globe. Despite embargo, Iran vows to stick to its nuclear projects.

Third, Iran seems to have possessed capability of challenging Western threats. Iran declared on April 2 that it would not be swayed from nuclear 'path' by the series of embargo, sanctions and other restrictions. The foreign ministry spokesman Ramin

Mehmanparast said in an interview with the Fars news agency that Iran considers the threats of war to be a 'psychological' gambit 'to affect the Iranian nation, to lower the support of the people for the Iranian system.'

Fourth, the US threat of war may have been made for two reasons: one, the US attempt to appease Israel and prevent from any immature unilateral Israeli assault on Iran, and two, the US threat to weaken Iran psychologically that might stop her from nuclear program. From the practical point of view, Americans talk of war does not mean they want to attack Iran. For instance, Obama has told to the Atlantic magazine that both Iran and Israel are aware of the definite intention of the US. Through the rhetorical tactics, the US wants to warn Israel of unbearable expenses of Israeli attack and threat Iran about its nuclear ambition. The US position is also understood from Obama's recent secret message through Turkey to Iran that the US would not disturb Iran's peaceful nuclear activities.

Fifth, the underestimate that Iran does not have sophisticated weapons, may not be based on authentic information. For instance, Iran has been ceaselessly threatened by the West for the last forty years since Islamic revolution. However, the West has not decided on aggressive war on Iran. In addition, Iran might be able to equally resist any Israeli attack.

Sixth, the US move to attack Iran would not get support from rising powers. For example, the highest leaders of Brazil, India, China, Russia and South Africa assembled at New Delhi in the Summit conference of BRICS in the last week of March and warned against the plotted Western attack on Iran. The Prime Minister of India urged the US not to attack Iran. BRICS represents a quarter of the world's landmass, over 40 percent of its population, and one-fifth of its GDP, and over 50 percent of recent global economic growth. It is obvious that the emerging global power bloc engulfing the powerful anti-West countries of four continents including Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America may threaten the Western interests and dismantle Western plan for any attack on Iran. About five nuclear countries and two permanent members of the UN Security Council may try to strengthen the new bloc making it a countervailing global resistance force. Therefore, any Iran attack may lead to a regional dangerous war, which eventually will lead to a third World War. The US may not step to this dangerous war and thus, Iran will not be attacked.

In conclusion, it may be said that in view of above realities the US or Israel will not plan for any military assault on Iran. The upcoming Istanbul conference in mid-April might create a framework of agreement and new strategies may be devised in order to prevent Iran from the path of manufacturing nuclear weapons.

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Myanmar and the narrative of democracy

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IS the victory of opposition in by-elections, particularly Aung San Suu Kyi, seriously implying that the military junta of Myanmar, one of the most brutal, oppressive regimes of today's world is going to 'ease its grips' or allow an actual 'political transition' started last year after decades of repression? The narrative says that the mass people of Myanmar are against the military dictatorship. It is being told, Myanmar is no longer an isolated tyranny but a part of widespread rising in which the West's moral integrity is going to be tested also. As the West has been walking a tightrope of contradictory principles, it must support this victory gently. That means the West must not sponsor them but at the same time must act to prevent the repressive regimes from crushing them. This is a complex maneuver. The failure to support the rising will be a betrayal of fundamental moral principles. Leaving aside whether the narrative is accurate, it particularly appeals to Europeans with their ideological preference for 'soft power.' Self-imposed isolation has not only snoozed possible change over a decade- that with more engagement, Myanmar could have opened and risen like Vietnam has. The whole situation not only deprived the world's poorest country but also pushed the government into the arms of neighbours with bigger bankrolls and the worst human rights record.

Historic by-election has given opposition members a greater voice in lawmaking. Whether the minority representation will result in long-term government reform in terms of filibuster-proof control of the parliament or not is the concern from now on. Compared with the futures of Iran and North Korea, Myanmar's people suffer from the combined curse of abundant natural resources and geopolitical proximity to China. Surely this victory of NLD has ignited the spirit of democracy and freedom. But, sadly, Myanmar, wedged between

unscrupulous India and China, ever ready to prop up any form of authoritarian rule as long as their interests are saved, the relevance of Suu Kyi is unpredictable.

Will democracy be a myth for Myanmar?

National League for Democracy led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the Noble laureate did not lose at all by not contesting on November 7 sham election held by the junta in Myanmar but the junta themselves. The people of Myanmar knew that the election was to legalise the dictatorship. It was kleptocracy, not democracy. Myanmar has been ruled by a 'revolutionary' council headed by the general, who nationalized and brought under government control all aspects of society-business, media and production. Real democracy means possibility of losing power, transferring all posts to civilians and returning of refugees who fled Myanmar when the junta had come to power. ASEAN & the China are praising this by-election as a next step

towards democracy. People hope this victory will lead to real democracy but given the junta's history, it does not seem likely. The ability of parliament to make significant changes to any proposed decision of NLD should be watched closely.

The future of crisis ridden Myanmar appears to be full of challenges and difficulties. The political elites of the country have to give priority to good governance, prudent policy making, efficient conflict management in case of ethnic issues and bipartisan-ship in the largest interest of country's secu-

arity. A cease-fire agreement has already been reached with the Shan State Army (South) in eastern Burma, but peace talks with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) have proven to be one of the most difficult, despite an president order for the military to end all offensive operations in last month.

Geo-strategic position

Maintaining the status quo is very much in the interest of Myanmar's neighborhood friends-of-convenience. Undoubtedly, the only "friends" the generals need concern



themselves with. No wonder that the junta can relax while they playfully dawdle with their laughable perversion of democracy. This stance surely makes it easier for China to exploit the resources of the people of Myanmar, India to crack down on its unstable borderlands, and Britain to resume selling weapons to the military; but there is no inkling of the change one can gloss over. Slightly free is still almost entirely oppressed.

Will the realpolitik game be ended up? The military in Myanmar regard themselves as a class apart from their own citizenry.

Government has released its hold on many of its state-owned monopolies, which means that Myanmar's economy has an opportunity to grow competitively on a local level. The retirement of old generals means the arrival of new faces and therefore new ideas in the military, whose hold on Myanmar is still very strong. It is no wonder China supported the election; Myanmar's economy is becoming more and more like China's in nature which means China's investments will not go to waste.

The election itself means little because these changes are inevitable. The victory of Suu Kyi is an epitome of hope for the people of the world who are living under tyrannical commands. Change is on the card in Asia over the next decade as progress escalates and that is when pro-democratic efforts struggling under military regimes gain momentum and bring change. It will take time but true democracy is the future to a better world.

The hard road ahead Like any politician, Suu Kyi will face the challenge of having made a

set of promises that are not mutually supportive. Much of her challenge boils down to problems that she needs to solve and that she wants the West help on, but the West is not prepared to provide the type and amount of help she needs. There is no sign that the junta's main international allies are becoming embarrassed. China is not going to give the junta its Gorbachev-Honecker moment. All that leaves are appeals to the better nature of the junta to relinquish power voluntarily and getting the armed forces to switch loyalties or at least stand

aside. There is an old saying in the sub-continent, "softly softly catchee monkee" and following this principal is more likely to work than subversive action and open conflict. Everyone hopes Aung San Suu Kyi would manage to be an agent for positive change in Myanmar and would not end up an ex-figurehead who goes on speaking tours, is admired, feted, and basically sidelined.

Beginning of a new era: Bangladesh perspective

Bangladesh Myanmar relation began officially from January 13, 1972 the date on which Myanmar accorded recognition to Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. The history of Bangladesh

Myanmar relation during 1972-2012 has experienced ups and downs in their bilateral relations. The major of their relation is economic co-operation. However, after a promising beginning, trade has not risen to significant level although there are potentials for trade expansion. The reciprocity with which the government of Myanmar has consistently reacted to Bangladesh's policies has consolidated traditional friendly ties. Maritime border demarcation issue has been resolved through good will and now comes the issue of implementation. One important element of this change of policy could be opening trade and transportation networks with Bangladesh, both as destination and as transit to the rest of south Asia and vice versa. However Rohingya refugee issue must be resolved satisfactorily for relations to be fully warm, co-operative and meaningful. In fact, opening trade, travel and commerce across the border could go a long way towards improving the relationship. No doubt, relation would be somewhat more productive if Myanmar returns to democratic governance.

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