

What lies behind the race toward war with Iran?

Despite appearances of random, off-the-cuff decisions, rendered on tweets and without, or even in opposition to, the advice of foreign policy specialists, I am going to posit a rationale behind the warlike actions and pronouncements of Messrs. Trump, Bolton and Pompeo. To do so, I will try to put all the scattered and sometimes conflicting pieces together. I begin by acknowledging the issue that has attracted most attention. That is the nuclear danger. While it figures in all the media accounts, I put it aside for two reasons:

First, Iran has no nuclear weapons as every reasonably well-informed person in government and among the general population knows. To acquire them in the foreseeable future, Iran would have to buy them from an existing nuclear power. Nuclear capable powers have not been known to put their weapons on the market. But, as threats of invasion grow, Iran will probably be willing to pay almost anything to get them, so conceivably a deal could be made sometime in the future. However, with the possible exceptions of Pakistan and (even less likely) North Korea, *Iran has no currently indentifiable source of supply.*

Even if it could acquire a source, Iran would have to ship the devices or components from their current location. Such a move would certainly be monitored. Moreover, physical possession of a single weapon or several is only the first step in a very complex process of readying it or them for possible use. This transitional period, which would last for months if not years, would offer various means of prevention. *Clear and present danger is not where we are today nor will be in the foreseeable future.*

Second, Iran has been constrained by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) deal worked out by John Kerry and Javad Zarif. Not only has Iran made no further progress toward fabrication of a nuclear device, but it has dismantled much of its organization and has given up some of the materials it would need to fabricate a weapon. Nonetheless, in government use of propaganda, raising the nuclear issue has proven a powerful public relations gambit. *It focuses attention on the confrontation in terms readily understandable to and believed by the general public.*

Focusing attention on the nuclear danger poses three dangers:

First, whether the worry is sincere or whether is just used by key officials to play to the emotions of the less informed, and so to win praise, kudos, or elections, raising the nuclear danger fans emotions. From still-raw personal experience, I deeply fear nuclear war. Any sensible person should. It would be truly an end-game for both sides – and possibly for everyone else. However, despite rivers of ink describing the horrific results, *few people seem to have worried about the preliminary steps toward war* or fully absorbed the consequences. Governments, however, have spent considerable time and treasure developing alternatives to nuclear war and creating a bureaucracy charged with preventing accidents. But...

Second, flirting with the nuclear danger *creates space for mistakes*. A close reading of the short history of the nuclear age tells us that what we were doing certainly did not safeguard us from misjudgments, equipment failures or managerial incompetence. In the study I made after my very disturbing experience in the Cuban Missile Crisis, I discovered scores of near-misses. In situation after situation, we were saved by dumb luck.

Calibrating the boundary between defense and offense, reaction and provocation and the allowable and the forbidden is not a strategic call as some “big bomb” theorists like Albert Wohlstetter have argued or even a mathematical science like Thomas Schelling has proclaimed. *Safety lies less in judgment than in avoidance of the creation of conditions* in which weapons might be used. And...

Third, charging a rival with possession of weapons is open-ended: *no government can prove that it does not have and does not intend to acquire nuclear weapons*. Consequently, those who wish to pursue a policy of conflict always have the scope to do so. Indeed, the logical results of continued threats of invasion, devastation and, indeed, annihilation make acquisition of such weapons appear imperative to those so threatened.

So what did Iran do?

In May 2003, Iran called for a “grand bargain” in which it offered not to develop nuclear weapons, and meetings were set up to ventilate a possible deal. However, the Bush administration decided not to attend the meetings. (As *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof lampooned the American reaction, it was a case of “Hang Up. Tehran is Calling.”) It was in continuation of the 2003 offer and its amplification that Javad Zarif was allowed to negotiate with John Kerry the 2015 JCPOA nuclear arms limitation deal. JCPOA had the effect of *changing the context in which the nuclear issue could be handled* and of making Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons virtually impossible.

But, with advent of the Trump administration, America returned to the Bush administration policy and backed out of the agreement. Why did it do so?

Consider, first, the American opponents of a deal:

American hardliners, the core of Trump’s constituency, believe that the context of American-Iranian relations must be changed, but only along lines dictated by America: they *argue that America must “regime change” Iran*. And, generally, they have accepted that this could be done only after America had destroyed Iran’s armed forces and, inevitably, killed, wounded, impoverished or driven away from their homes much of its population. Senator John McCain led the chorus in singing to a popular tune, “Bomb bomb bomb, bomb bomb, Iran,” government-subsidized think tanks organized wargames and the military acted out their scenarios in “Operation TIRANNT” to show how McCain’s ditty could be played.

We did not then have the cold, hard and continuous lessons of Libya, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan so clearly before us, but now we know what the results would have been and still could be. Messrs. Trump, Bolton and Pompeo cannot avoid seeing them. But, they and other hardliners are undeterred by what they see, and what Mr. Kerry achieved is now regarded by many Americans as a sell-out of national security.

Now consider the Iranian opponents of a deal:

Iranian hardliners in Iran also fault their government for agreeing to Zarif’s deal. They accuse Zarif personally and the current Iranian leadership of virtual treason. When he was still the ambassador to the UN, Zarif told me that his position had become untenable. The “Hard Right” succeeded in 2007 in ousting him from government service.

As he met with even presumably reasonably well-informed Americans, many of whom were acutely aware of the pressure of the Far Right in America, Zarif was surprised to find that most did not know that many influential and determined Iranians were opposed to any form of accommodation with America.

Indeed, as he and others have pointed out, Iranian hardliners could back up their case against nuclear disengagement by pointing to the fate of those leaders who succumbed to American pressure to give up their nuclear arms programs: Saddam Husain and Muamar Qaddafi would probably be alive today if they had not done so. Presumably, Kim Jong-un ponders their fate while he keeps or increases his counterstrike capability.

So far at least, Iran does not have this option. But, ironically it was on the way to acquiring nuclear weapons -- with American assistance and approval -- under the Shah. *Had the 1979 revolution not taken place, Iran would today be a nuclear power*, like its neighbors Israel and Pakistan, but the revolutionary leader, *Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini*, renounced the program, saying it was sacrilege in Islam.

In place of this ultimate means of defense, Iran has built “unconventional conventional” forces. I have written extensively about them elsewhere (in my little book *Understanding Iran* and in recent essays on the web). They include creating and training of a potential guerrilla force (the *Sazeman-e Basijis*) that could number a million fighters with millions more potentially in reserve; stockpiling supplies and equipment throughout a country the size of America’s Great Plains states; organizing a survivable—because decentralized -- command and control structure; and prepositioning *weapons suitable for guerrilla warfare both on land and at sea*.

With the examples of Vietnam and Afghanistan before us, I predict that an invasion of Iran, having begun with overwhelming aerial bombing and multiple airborne and infantry forces, would wipe out the standing army (the *Pasdaran-e Enghelab*). But that would be only round one. The conflict would then turn into a guerrilla war, lasting far into the future, with results worse even than Afghanistan, costing huge casualties and causing great suffering. In the course of perhaps twenty years of fighting, Iran would be driven down to something like the condition of Haiti. The costs to America would not be so great as those to Iran, but I predict that it would cost us about four or five times as much as the Iraq-Afghan war, say \$20 trillion. Casualties would be heavy and every American neighborhood would have a share of the “walking wounded.” Even worse might be the impact on our increasingly brittle social-political-legal system. Finally, so severe would be the dislocation to the international system that it is at least possible that warfare in Iran would give rise to other conflicts.

If only a portion of my estimates is likely, the question arises: *why would rational, informed and experienced men, even those who may be emotionally deranged, risk such a policy?*

The most strident answer that has at least publically been given is that Iran poses a *grave if not existential danger to America*. This answer would be laughable if it were not asserted by our decision-makers. America is the strongest nation on earth while Iran is a poor, weak society with almost no means of projecting force outside of its neighborhood.

The *more considered answer is that Iran threaten American interests in its neighborhood.* That is to say, it has the power of disruption. It is “exporting terrorism.”

In truth, like America, Britain, France, Turkey, Russia and Israel, Iran has military forces in Syria and Iraq, and like those countries it supplies weapons to its friends and allies. Also like those countries it encourages its friends and allies to support its policies. And, like them, it almost certainly engages in “dirty tricks.” These policies are all unsavory, destructive and painful. They are one of the causes of the conversion of whole nations into refugees and they have destroyed decades of hard work on development. However, they have become standard operating procedure in relations among states. Iran did not invent them and hardly stands alone creating a potential for disruption.

Potential for disruption? Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen hardly need any stimulus from Iran. In more stable, politically acceptable conditions, Iranian intervention would be irrelevant. The simple fact is that much of Asia and Africa has been conditioned by experience over generations, as I have laid out in my 2018 Yale University Press book *Crusade and Jihad*, to be politically, socially and psychologically violence-prone. The unfortunate heirs to tragedies of the past live in a world suffering from what I have called the post-imperial syndrome. *No amount of military force can suppress that memory or cure its lasting ills.*

Indeed, the employment of military force, with the concomitant breakdown of such civic order as imperialism left behind, has created new opportunities for “warlordism,” as we see today in Afghanistan. Anarchy has both provided arms and created a demand for them. The whole Middle East is awash with arms. Today, on weapons, as my fellow Texans used to say, “the horse is out of the barn.” Indeed, we helped open the gate.

But, as we should long ago have learned in Greece, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Libya, however easy they are to get, arms are not the key element in terrorism, guerrilla warfare and other forms of conflict. The Mau Mau taught the British that effective guns can be made from water pipes and door bolts. Bombs are even simpler to acquire and use. Whatever else one may say of it, the National Rifle Association is correct in proclaiming that shooters, not guns, kill people. If a cause is believed to be just, anger is great and no means of accommodation exists, sticks and stones will do the job.

So, bottom line: Crudely put, Iran is a small part of our bigger problem with the world or even more crudely put, little, isolated and distant Iran cannot justify the horrible costs of a war. It follows that even a disarmed and regime-changed Iran will not calm desperate, starving or enraged guerrillas anywhere. Certainly not in a bombed out, displaced and bitter Iran.

From this, I conclude that as so often in the beginning of wars, the dominant power – in this case President Trump’s administration – does not believe war will actually happen, that force will not be necessary because, faced with destruction, the weaker power will be realistic and surrender. Unfortunately, history does not bear out this belief.

Drawing the line between what the adversary will accept and what he cannot accept can never be clear because in national affairs a negotiated surrender, unlike a business deal, does not hinge on adding up the numbers of profit and loss.

Emotions, ideologies, personalities and guesses play destabilizing, sometimes irrational and often unpredictable roles: I learned this not only as a historian but witnessed it first hand in a vain attempt I made to find a way to head off the invasion of Iraq. What was true in Iraq was later played out in Libya. Saddam and Qaddafi could not surrender or even compromise; once the process of regime change began, they had to be killed and in the process their nation-states had to be destroyed. *Threat is almost never enough and surrender is seldom possible.*

So what, we must ask, is fueling the American drive toward the brink of war with Iran?

The question is difficult to answer, as I wrote at the beginning of this essay because it is embedded and largely obscured by what appear to be random, off-the-cuff decisions, rendered on tweets and without or in opposition to the advice of foreign policy specialists.

Given these constraints, I will hazard an answer by imposing a logical system where neither logic nor system is immediately apparent. With these provisos, let me try to peek into Mr. Trump's emotions and – perhaps, as he claims – his shrewdness. The following are my readings and hunches:

As he constantly asserts his mindset as a businessman, *I imagine that Mr. Trump realizes that the cost-benefit ratio makes actual war with Iran unattractive.* Indeed, my hunch is that he is not really interested in Iran as such or even in the much-proclaimed Iranian export of terrorism. He uses Bolton as the “bad cop” to try to bully Iran. That plays well to his constituency and keeps all the cards in his hands. He can do what he did in North Korea – threaten, badger and coo almost in one breath. He risks little or nothing. If Bolton's antics fail, he – like all the other henchmen -- is expendable. And, by allowing Boston to demand the impossible Trump may get what he really wants.

So what does Mr. Trump really want?

Linking each of Mr. Trump's actions and pronouncements is China. *China is the crucial but veiled part of what may be his conscious but certainly is his de facto strategic program.* Where Iran is small and weak, China is huge and increasingly strong. Iran does not rival America in any dimension, but *China is the only serious rival to America.*

Russia is still a great power – with a huge but unusable and unproductive nuclear arsenal (like ours) -- but as a nation-state it is now fractured, as a society it is increasingly divided and it rests on a sort of “rust-belt” economy. India has been and may again be a great power, but it is trapped by myriad divergences, is embroiled in a never-ending replay of the trauma of partition and lives or languishes according to the uncontrollable monsoon rains. I don't think Mr. Trump regards Britain or the European Union as more than adjuncts to the American system.

China alone has the mass, the determination and the skill to challenge America. Not today, not tomorrow perhaps but almost certainly, if it is undeterred, in the foreseeable future *Mr. Trump apparently believes it could pose, an existential threat.*

Mr. Trump's reactions, whether or not well articulated or even personally fully understood, I believe, form a strategic pattern. Consider these aspects of what he is doing:

First, he wants to prevent Americans from supporting Chinese growth by buying disproportionate amounts of Chinese goods. Since the Chinese have benefitted from cheap labor, cheap money and American consumer demand, its competitive advantage, he argues, must be undercut by duties on its produce.

Second, China has benefitted from American intellectual openness and from American (and European) business practice to acquire the “know-how,” to refine our inventions and to build our wares in China. *He wants to put in place means to stop pilfering of “intellectual property” and to control or prevent the movement of manufacturing to China.*

Third, he wants to put in place *ways to slow the pace of Chinese growth.* Growth in recent years has been explosive and previous American and Western attempts to slow it by, for example, trying to force a revaluation of the Chinese currency, the *renminbi*, have generally failed. Just as Germany in the 1930s surged ahead by devaluing its currency, so Chinese industry has been stimulated by what some economists believe to be a 25% exchange incentive. Trump did not start the demand for revaluation, but he has pushed it.

Fourth, the highly favorable (to America) *military balance has slipped.* Our bastion in Taiwan remains but the Taiwanese obviously no longer believe in it. Nearly a million Taiwanese have moved to the mainland. Britain’s Hong Kong is no more. The Chinese have reached out into the previously American-dominated South Pacific. And China has taken the lead position in several Asian and African economies. Its “Silk Road” is becoming an artery connecting China to the heart of Europe. Its military-industrial complex is growing. China now builds competitive military aircraft and has just begun construction of its second aircraft carrier. It is a significant nuclear power; indeed, after a small number, perhaps 50 or so, nuclear weapons are an economic drain rather than a military asset. China is thought to have more than 250 warheads; it does not need more. Its labor force is large, disciplined and increasingly trained. Suppression of dissidence is severe and, to us, very unattractive, but there is little sign of effective resistance even from such minority groups as the Tibetans and the Uyghurs. And the leadership appears to be unified.

In short, while the Chinese leadership has proclaimed that it is satisfied to be the junior hegemon and will not challenge America’s status as the world’s superpower, its moves convince many Americans, including I believe, Mr. Trump, that such a self-effacing policy for a proud and ancient world power can be only temporary.

So, without elaborate intelligence appreciations and strategic advice, Mr. Trump presumably asks, as he proclaims he would of a business rival, where is China vulnerable?

The answer, according to the Chairman of Energy Intelligence, my close friend Raja Sidawi, who is arguably the world’s number one expert in his field, is *energy.*

China is largely dependent on oil from the Gulf – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran. All of those countries, except for Iran are now in various ways and to various extents guided by America. So, as Mr. Sidawi has argued in our exchanges, if America could bring about the inclusion of Iran in the American consortium, it could monopolize the flow of and thus would *“be able to dictate the pace of Chinese economic growth.”*

In his actions, if not in coherent or at least articulated thought, Mr. Trump has reversed the 1904 strategic doctrine of Halford MacKinder. MacKinder had held that what he called the “world island” -- roughly Asia – was the “pivot” that controlled the world. That was the worldview the Germans adopted in the 1930s and 1940s. It led them to attempt to control Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Today, focusing not on land mass and population but on energy, as Mr. Sidawi points out, Mr. Trump is moving us toward a worldview in which the pivot is in the Gulf and from there, guided and controlled by America, the economy of all Asia including China, can be controlled. As he put it, assuming control of the energy sources of the Gulf, “*decisions on the Gross National Product of China will be made in Washington.*”

In summary, I think this is the key to understanding what is otherwise the current and seemingly meaningless conflict with Iran: Iran is the missing pillar in an American policy of *imperium in imperio* toward China. One way or another – threat, surrender, regime change or war – Trump believes that Iran must be brought into line. That is what might be called “the Trump Doctrine.”

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