

No 'Bush Moments' in Iran

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As a fresh crisis brews over Iran's nuclear program, some pundits are recommending a "Nixon Moment" as a way to avoid a confrontation that could plunge the Middle East into untold miseries.

The phrase "Nixon Moment" refers to US President Richard Nixon's surprise visit to the People's Republic of China in February 1972, a move that ended more than two decades of animosity between Washington and Beijing. There is no doubt that the visit was historic, if only because it removed a major source of tension in the Far East and the Pacific basin.

Many pundits today want President George W. Bush to produce his version of the "Nixon Moment" by going to Tehran to normalize relation with the Islamic republic and remove the threat of another major war in the Middle East. In other words, it does not matter what Iran's current leaders say and do. What matters is whether the US president has the vision and the courage to take their hand and bring them into the global mainstream. And, if Bush does not want to produce a "Tehran Moment", the blame for whatever tragedy that might happen will be on him.

That, however, is a voluntariste vision of how things work in the real world of international politics. The voluntariste vision assumes that things could be willed into being, regardless of realities that may or may not permit their realization. Leaders with vision and courage can transform every situation by their will power.

Things, however, do not work like that in the real life and did not do so in the case of the so-called "Nixon Moment".

In a sense the "Nixon Moment" had little to do with Richard Nixon and/or Henry Kissinger. It was the product of years of political development in the US, China, and the world at large that went beyond the control of set of individuals. The "Nixon Moment" would have happened, if not exactly on that February day in precisely the same setting, under any other occupant at the White House. The reason why the "Nixon Moment" happened was that its time had come. It had to happen because historical circumstances demanded it.

More importantly, and contrary to the claim made by Nixon and Kissinger, the initial crucial moves that made the "Nixon Moment" possible came from the Chinese side.

The first feelers were put to the Americans by the Chinese through Pakistan and Iran in 1969. Ardeshir Zahedi, who was Iran's foreign minister at the time, received the first Chinese communication indicating a desire for dialogue with the US through the Pakistanis and passed it on to William Rogers, Nixon's first secretary of state.

"The Americans did not seem interested at first," says Zahedi who is writing his memoirs. "Our analysis, however, was that China was changing under the pressure of events. This is why we seized the occasion to start talks about restoring diplomatic relation with Beijing."

The crucial question was in what way had China changes?

Zahedi's answer is revealing.

"We realized that People's Republic of China, that is to say the Maoist regime in Beijing, was tired of being the embodiment of a revolution and was trying to transform itself into a normal nation-state, behaving like other nation-states."

There were several reasons for this. The policy of forced collectivization had wrecked the country's agriculture on which more than 70 percent of the population depended. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had wrecked havoc with the Chinese economy, causing the death of untold numbers due to famine. Torn by an internal power struggle that Mao had started, the ruling Communist Party was beginning to regroup around a new leadership that included such realists as Prime Minister Chou En-lai. The Gang of Four, the leadership of the most radical wing of the party, was already losing ground.

More importantly, China felt isolated and found itself surrounded by hostile powers: The USSR, India, Afghanistan, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and United States in Vietnam. Even Pakistan, one of only two neighbors still friendly to China, was linked to the US through the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (Cento). (The other friendly neighbor was North Korea.)

The Chinese leaders realized that by posing as the vanguard of a global Communist revolution they were putting the survival of their regime at risk. For the Communists to remain in power, it had become necessary to put the revolution on the backburner and rethink China as a nation.

The Iranian analysis was quickly confirmed when China agreed to stop supporting various guerrilla organization fighting the Iranian presence in the region, including the Omani province of Dhofar. The way was open for a much-

publicized visit to China by Shah's twin-sister Princess Ashraf, followed by a state visit to Beijing by Shah's Empress Farah and Prime Minister Hoveyda in 1971.

By the time world witnessed the "Nixon Moment", many nations, including such US allies as France and Iran, had already accepted China as an ordinary state that had sacrificed its revolutionary pretensions to its national interests.

"The Chinese needed Iran to counter-balance the USSR," says Zahedi, "We needed China for the same reason. It was pure power politics and had nothing to do with vision and/or courage."

Well, can we expect a "Bush Moment" with President Bush traveling to the Iranian capital to share a sandwich of caviar with the "Supreme Guide" Ali Khamenehi?

The answer is: No.

To start with, Iran is not China. For all the bluster of its current leaders, the Islamic republic is a small regional power that, despite its ability to do mischief, cannot develop a credible strategy of defiance. Unlike the Chinese leadership of the late 1960s, present Iranian leadership faces mounting domestic opposition, especially from a strong middle class that had no counterpart in China at the time. In the 1970s the US and China needed one another to counterbalance the Soviet Union. Today, there is no USSR and the US, strongly present in the region, has no need of Iran as an ally against any putative adversary.

But the main reason why no "Bush in Tehran" opera is in the cards has to do with the way Iranian leaders perceive their current situation.

Iran's current leaders still believe that their regime can survive only if it remains committed to its revolutionary message and tries to "export" it to the rest of the region.

They are still prepared to sacrifice the interests of Iran as a nation-state to the interests of Iran as a revolutionary cause. They are where Chinese Communist leaders were in the mid-1960s when they still believed that they could "export" their revolution and reshape the entire world. In other words, they have not yet been mugged by reality.

And until they are mugged by reality they will not do what Chinese did in 1969, that is to say start putting feeler for a dialogue with the US. For a "Bush Moment" to become possible, let alone probable, Tehran must bury the Khomeinist revolution and think Iran as a country, not an instrument of global Jihad. At present, there are no signs that this happen anytime soon.