

Time for Diplomacy, by Paul Heinbecker*

The question Prime Minister Harper faces now, after wisely stressing over the weekend his preference for a peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue, is how to help bring about that very desirable conclusion. Mr. Harper did not endorse Prime Minister Netanyahu's drive for a preventive attack on Iran, publicly, at least, and maintained a degree of independence for Canadian diplomacy.

Real concern had been building up, and not only in Canada, about how strongly our most pro-Israeli government would support Mr. Netanyahu's position on the eve of the latter's crucial visit to Washington. Whether it was a call from the White House that concentrated Ottawa's minds, or Ottawa's own calculation of the damage that could be done to relations with our most important ally by contributing to jamming President Obama on a major political issue in an election year, or a judgment that after Afghanistan that Canadians were reluctant to countenance another, potentially major, elective war or a doubt that a preventive military attack was really in Israel's interest much less Canada's or, possibly, the cumulative impact of all these considerations, Harper appeared to pull back.

While this more circumspect Canadian position is very welcome, the larger issue remains for Israel, the US and everyone else, including Canada, of what to do about Iran's suspect nuclear program. Iran has an appalling human rights record, repressing its own people, imprisoning and murdering foreigners including Canadian citizens and suppressing democracy. The Iranian regime has called for the erasure of the state of Israel from the map, called into question the Holocaust and sponsored terrorism. It has played fast and loose with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). If Iran succeeds in giving itself nuclear weapons capability, it could well trigger an arms race among Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey, blowing a big hole in the NPT, the treaty that has been a cornerstone of Canadian foreign policy for a half century. So the stakes are high, especially for Israel but not only for Israel.

The question is not whether Iranian policies should be opposed, but what the most effective way of opposing them is. Again in Washington this week, Netanyahu was selling hard his belief that Iran's nuclear sites should be destroyed militarily and very soon, preferably by the US but by Israel if the US demurs. Jerusalem appears to feel it has much less time than Washington does because Israel lacks the military capacity the US has to attack the Iranian program once it is buried deeply into Iranian terrain. When that happens, the Israelis claim that the program will have effectively entered a "zone of immunity", the term coined by Defence Minister Barak to describe the point after which the Israelis could no longer destroy it militarily.

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But thus far the US is demurring. The US Administration does not want to be dragged into another war in the Middle East at a time when it is finally bringing the boys (and girls) home from Iraq and Afghanistan. Further, as Obama himself explicitly told Netanyahu, the Administration believes it is succeeding in isolating Teheran and that there is time for diplomacy and sanctions to work. A preventive attack by two nuclear powers on a state that neither the US nor the IAEA believes currently has a nuclear weapons-making capability would be seen by most allies as premature and by much of the world as aggression, and would promptly reverse Iranian isolation. Pre-emptive military action, which entails demanding tests as regards the seriousness of the danger, the immediacy of the threat and the absence of effective alternatives, is foreseen under the UN Charter and international law but the kind of preventive action urged by Israel against a potentially emerging threat is not.

Few believe that even a successful attack would eliminate Iran's ambitions or set Iran's program back more than two or three years. And, the "day after" consequences of an attack could be significant. While Iranian intentions are unknowable, Iranian capacity is considerable. It is generally believed that the Iranians can retaliate by launching missiles against Israel, attacking Israeli citizens abroad and stimulating action against Israel by Hezbollah and/or Hamas. The Iranians are unlikely to excuse the Americans from arming and backing the Israelis, and can, depending on the size of the risk they choose to run, foment attacks on American forces in Afghanistan and at the many US bases in the region, as well as perpetrate attacks on Americans at home and abroad. The Iranian military can attack oil installations on the other side of the Persian Gulf, including potentially in Saudi Arabia, and impede the shipment of oil through the Straits of Hormuz, sending oil prices sky-rocketing at a time of particular weakness in the global economy. Another western attack on a Muslim country would likely generate a fresh wave of Islamist extremism and terrorism. And all this just as Teheran was being progressively isolated and its only state ally in the Middle East, Syria, was teetering on the brink of disintegration.

President Obama has been at pains to make clear that the US, "has Israel's back", whatever his perfervid Republican electoral opponents might claim. What that means exactly and where US "redlines" are, is presumably what Prime Minister Netanyahu was seeking to tie down in Washington. While Netanyahu has not thus far succeeded in persuading Obama to act precipitously, he appears to have successfully manipulated the pressures of the US presidential election to narrow Obama's options. In his speech to AIPAC Sunday, Obama said he did "not have a policy of containment"; [he had] a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon", and would not hesitate to use force to achieve that goal. He appears thereby to have taken off the proverbial table the policy of deterrence, a policy that the US itself had employed against two of the worst monsters of the 20th Century, Stalin and Mao, both of whom had the blood of millions on their hands and sufficient nuclear capability to bury the West, which they repeatedly threatened to do.

After the US election, the levers available to Netanyahu to press for US military action diminish dramatically. But in the meantime, under relentless attack by Republican candidates as feckless in his support of Israel, Obama is effectively narrowing his own choices to war or acquiescence in an ambiguous Iranian nuclear program. He is, also, putting the Iranians progressively into a position where their choices are reduced to war or submission. Netanyahu, for his part, having declared Iran an existential threat to Israel, has the choice of acting to remove that threat or answering to history why he did not. As all concerned's choices narrow, prospects of war increase.

If ever there was a need for creative diplomacy, it is now. Ottawa needs to use its vaunted friendship with Washington and Jerusalem to offer ideas to break the logic of war. It is a pity that we are not now on the Security Council and in a position to use that body to do so.