

Cooler Heads Shall Prevail as Diplomatic Pressure Mounts on Iran

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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2011



An anti Iranian protestor demonstrates outside the Iranian embassy in London, Dec. 2, 2011 (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth).

Last week, diplomatic relations between Iran and the United Kingdom turned sour following attacks on the former's embassy in Tehran. International pressure on Iran has been mounting, in light of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, and now with its diplomats ordered to leave Britain and vice versa, international relations with, and perceptions of, Iran continue to deteriorate. This week, we speak to CIGI Distinguished Fellow Paul Heinbecker to learn more about how the West is dealing with Iran.

CIGI: Given your distinguished diplomatic career, how would you rank the severity of the diplomatic row between Iran and the UK? Is expelling diplomats merely symbolic or does it truly impact day-to-day foreign relations?

Paul Heinbecker: This is a serious development. An act of violence against an embassy is absolutely prohibited under international law, and, given the nature of Iranian society, it seems nearly impossible that the Iranian authorities wouldn't have known that it was going to take place. They should have prevented it. Overall, Britain is right to react very strongly.

Embassies are as necessary as ever for promoting and protecting interests, including serving the day-to-day needs of citizens. By closing its embassy in Teheran and ordering the Iranians out of London, the UK has virtually broken relations with Iran. Still, there are ways for the two countries to maintain a minimal connection, for example by asking third countries to represent their interests.

Relations between the UK and Iran have historically been poor — notably since the UK's overthrow in the fifties, with CIA help, of the democratically elected government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in order to maintain control of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, now known as BP. But there are contemporary reasons why much of the international community is reacting negatively to Iran. Its human rights record is appalling and its behaviour on nuclear energy is highly suspicious.

CIGI: In considering Iran's regional and nuclear aspirations (in a part of the world undergoing significant political change), what foreign policy options and decisions do you think the West has, and what are most appropriate in light of last week's events?

Ironically, the insecurity that motivates Israeli and Western fear of Iran is in some sense likely making the Iranians more insecure and more determined to press on with their nuclear program.

Heinbecker: First of all, everybody should keep a cool head. The claims in the IAEA report that Iranian nuclear activities are inconsistent with a peaceful program are worrying, but the evidence is circumstantial and not conclusive. Iran does not have a nuclear weapon yet so far as anybody knows, and there is no certainty that it is determined to cross the nuclear weapon threshold, rather than stop just short, so that it can go nuclear quickly if it ever decides its security requires it to do so.

Further, in my judgment, the West is doing what it should do — being careful. An attack on Iran would be fraught with difficulties and consequences. As Iranian nuclear facilities are dispersed, an effective attack on them would require numerous strikes, with inevitable civilian losses. It would not be "surgical." Further, the Iranians are 65 million strong, and nothing would unite them faster than a foreign military attack. A significant part of the population doesn't support this Iranian government, but if Iran were attacked, after the first bomb or two, the people would likely stop blaming their own government and start blaming whoever was dropping the bombs. Moreover, the entire Islamic world would likely see an attack on Iran as yet another Western attack on Islam, with potentially profound negative implications, not least for terrorism.

While I am not an apologist for the Iranian regime, I believe it is important to recognize that Iran also has security concerns. The repetition of threats from abroad is likely to reinforce those concerns. Ironically, the insecurity that motivates Israeli and Western fear of Iran is in some sense likely making the Iranians more insecure and more determined to press on with their nuclear program.

Further, unlike the cases of the Israeli bombing of nuclear facilities in Iraq in the eighties and in Syria a couple of years ago, Iran is unlikely to just do nothing if it is attacked. The Iranians are capable of launching a considerable response. They may have the capability to attack Israel by missile. They almost certainly can block the Straits of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world's oil passes, and they could attack neighbouring Arab oil fields and ports. Both would have dramatic effects on oil prices, potentially causing serious damage to the international economy at a time when its health is already precarious. Further, the Iranians have proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, and could, to some degree, activate them.

Deterrence and containment remain the better options. Were the Iranians to develop a nuclear weapon, they would still face deterrence by other nuclear powers, including by Israel and the US. The utility of nuclear weapons resides mainly in their ability to deter others from using nuclear weapons. The Israelis' concern that the Iranians might turn nuclear weapons over to terrorists is legitimate, although there is no case on record of that being done, because the response of others to any country that did so would be devastating. Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has argued that time is on Iran's side because an attack in the future would be ineffectual because of the redundancies now being built into the Iranian program. Perhaps, but Iran's Syrian ally is in disarray and its lifelines to Hezbollah and Hamas are increasingly insecure.

CIGI: Last week, an Ottawa-based newspaper quoted Iran's Chargé d'Affaires in Canada Kambiz Sheikh-Hassani, saying "there is a lot of potential in the Iran-Canada relationship." Your recent book *Getting Back in the Game* argues in favour of a specific Canadian approach to foreign policy, while your recent op-ed in *The Globe and Mail* discusses foreign policy with direct regard to Iran. What makes most sense for Canada moving forward?

Heinbecker: We need to keep a cool head — point one. Point two, we should not be taking our foreign policy lead from Israel or the United States or anyone else, on this issue or any other. When the former head of Mossad, Meir Dagan, calls an attack on Iran the stupidest thing he's ever heard, you know you have to think twice. The third point is that we should be making our own judgments about the IAEA report and, presuming that we find it convincing, we should be pursuing the sanctions route aggressively. My judgment is that a policy of "smart" sanctions, targeted on the Ayatollahs, Iran's Republican Guard and the administration of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, rather than on the population at large, and deterrence rather than preventive action is the better way for us to go. Over time, I would try to enrich the relationship between Ottawa and Teheran to integrate the Iranians further into the international economic system so that they have a greater stake in not destroying it.