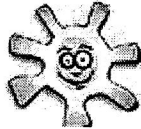


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## Edward Mortimer: Dealing with Iran

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Next week's state visit to Washington by President Jiang Zemin of China is a delicate affair.

The Clinton administration, realising China's strategic importance, is desperate to make a success of it. But China is not popular on Capitol Hill for reasons ranging from disgust at its human rights record to fear of its competitive skills.



So Mr Clinton needs Mr Jiang to do something that will go down well on the Hill. He may have found it. If there is one country US legislators love to hate even more than China it is Iran. And it seems Beijing has agreed to stop selling nuclear technology and anti-ship cruise missiles to Tehran.

This prospect has enabled Jamie Rubin, the state department spokesman, to present Mr Clinton's plan to lift the ban on US nuclear technology sales to China as a victory for hard-nosed containment of Iran.

Enthusiasm about the hoped-for new commitments from China, Mr Rubin last week reminded the world that "a nuclear-armed Iran . . . would threaten US interests as well as regional and international security". Therefore, he said, "we have continuously opposed nuclear co-operation by all countries with Iran, even to safeguard the nuclear programmes that are permitted under the International Atomic Energy Association, such as the one with which China has been involved".

Iran is a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and thus has to open all its nuclear facilities to international inspection. Admittedly, Iraq was also a signatory before 1990, though since then the International Atomic Energy Association - with strong US support - has tightened its safeguards and inspection procedures. Yet the US opposes co-operation with Tehran, even on its civilian nuclear programme.

The US administration's Iran policy is no more consistent than its China policy. It has just disappointed the sponsors of last year's Iran-Libya Sanctions Act by not imposing immediate sanctions against Total, the French energy company, for its agreement to invest \$2bn in developing an Iranian natural gas field. Mr Clinton may be no friend to Iran, but he would like to avoid a trade war with the European Union, which strongly objects to the idea of the US Congress telling European companies where they can or cannot invest.

Early in his first term, the president espoused a policy of "dual containment" aimed at both Iran and Iraq. The declared aims of the policy were to end Iran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli peace process, its support for terrorism, its military build-up, and its programme to develop long-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. These are laudable enough. But there are no clear benchmarks for measuring the success or failure of any of them.

On the first point, one is tempted to ask: "What peace process?" It seems hard to expect Iran to give public support to something about which Israel itself seems so ambivalent.

On terrorism, Muhammad Khatami, Iran's new president, made a good start by getting rid of Ali Fallahian, the intelligence minister who was named by a Berlin court as directly involved in the murder of four Kurdish opposition figures in 1992. That will not console the victims of suicide bombings in Israel and Saudi Arabia, but any direct link between these and Iran remains unproved.

As for the military build-up, it is unrealistic to expect unilateral disarmament in a country surrounded by heavily armed and unstable neighbours. The US should also note the improvement in Iran's relations with its Arab and Turkish neighbours.

It is in seeking to head off Iran's unconventional warfare programmes that the US can expect most international sympathy. But refusing co-operation, as argued above, may not be the best way to achieve this. Involving Iran in international agreements, while seeking to allay the security concerns that make it feel the need for such weapons, seems a more hopeful approach.

Chibli Mallat, a Lebanese expert on Islamic law and politics, points out that Mr Clinton's original policy on Iran included a fifth objective, now quietly forgotten, to improve human rights and democracy within Iran. This would be worth reviving.

Iran is not a western-style democracy. But it still enjoys far greater pluralism and freedom of expression than most other states in the region. Mr Khatami's election was achieved by massive popular support, against the wishes of the religious establishment.

Iran's human rights record is, of course, dismal. But it is here, more than in foreign policy, that one can expect Mr Khatami to make a difference. His election campaign focused on the need for greater freedom. He has appointed a tough reformist as interior minister. And already the press is much more open in its exposure of official abuses. There must be scope here for international figures such as Mary Robinson, the UN's new human rights commissioner, to work with the government in improving standards.

Finally, US policy in the region has been hamstrung by its tendency to treat Iran and Iraq as equally evil. In fact Iran was the first victim of Saddam Hussein's aggressive policies. Prof Mallat believes Tehran would be interested in developing a common strategy to remove Saddam from power, if convinced that such a policy was genuinely aimed at freeing the Iraqi people rather than extending US control.

If Mr Rubin can sell a "soft-on-China" policy as being hard on Iran, perhaps it would not be beyond him to sell a "new-deal-with-Iran" policy as "let's finally get serious with Saddam".

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