

## **Washington changes the trajectory of nuclear dispute**

Anthony Bubalo and Michael Fullilove  
The Sydney Morning Herald  
2 June 2006

First came the surprise, then the sense of the strategy - the US decision to negotiate with Iran is a smart move, write Anthony Bubalo and Michael Fullilove.

Yesterday's announcement by Condoleezza Rice that Washington will join its European partners in negotiating directly with Iran over its nuclear program is good news, although it is too early to tell if this is a new dawn, or another false one.

A nuclear-armed Iran would threaten US security, regional stability and the cause of global non-proliferation. It is precisely because the stakes are so high that Washington needs to be leading the negotiations rather than working through proxies.

John Kennedy's aphorism, "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate", applies no less to the axis of evil than the evil empire.

Direct talks are the smart move regardless of the way the talks develop. It is not impossible Washington and Tehran could do a deal which satisfies both sides.

If Iran rejects talks, or they founder, the US, having proven its diplomatic bona fides, will be in a stronger position to demand tough action from the UN Security Council. As long as the US approaches the talks in a serious way, this initiative is likely to maximise international solidarity, which is necessary if the world is to have any chance of convincing the Iranians to step down peacefully.

The decision to talk now does not remove President George Bush's option to bomb later. But it does make the prospect of military action less likely.

Air strikes against Iran would carry great risks to the US position in the region, its international reputation, the situation in Iraq and the price of oil. It is questionable whether they would deal a serious blow to a well dispersed and protected Iranian nuclear program anyway.

The US Vice-President, Dick Cheney, the leader of the Bush Administration's hawks, will not be happy this morning in his secure, undisclosed location. His boss's decision is the best indication yet of the new moderation in grand strategy which has become apparent over the past two years. Washington's regular resort to diplomacy has surprised its ideological allies in the US and Australia (who confidently predicted the second term would be as forward-leaning as the first) and its critics (who dismissed early indications of the move as mere words). It also underlines the emergence of Rice as a strong Secretary of State and the driving force of late Bush foreign policy.

Of course, much depends on the Iranian response. Tehran will be wondering how to return the spinning ball that Washington has lobbed into its court.

In recent weeks the regime has expressed its willingness to engage in direct talks with the US - but only conditionally. It will, therefore, balk at the US precondition for talks - full suspension of enrichment and reprocessing activities - and will be suspicious that the offer is little more than a diplomatic feint.

But equally, Tehran knows that to reject talks outright would be to hand the diplomatic advantage to Washington. Moreover, there are real incentives for the regime to negotiate directly with the US, including an easing of Washington's economic embargo or even security guarantees.

Such guarantees would be critical to Tehran given its belief that the Bush Administration's real goal is not to end Iran's nuclear program but to end the regime.

Not everyone in Tehran will be happy about the idea of talking to Washington directly. Notwithstanding his recent grandstanding letter to Bush, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be uneasy that such negotiations will sideline him and his more ideologically driven supporters.

He still retains the capacity to derail the talks through a deftly thrown rhetorical bomb or, given his links to Iran's intelligence services and the Revolutionary Guard, another kind of incendiary. However, the key figure in determining how Iran responds will be Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While Khamenei's ideological outlook is closer to that of Ahmadinejad than to regime pragmatists, he is also a realist and will be conscious Iran is in a strong bargaining position.

Indeed, Washington's troubles in Iraq, oil prices and Hamas's electoral victory prompted Khamenei's foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, to comment that at no time had Iran had such "powerful means for haggling" with the US.

There is now a real opportunity to change the trajectory of a dispute that seemed headed in the ultimate direction of military confrontation. The fraught history of US-Iranian diplomacy over the last quarter of a century shows both sides are adept at dropping such chances. To do so on this occasion would return the dispute to a confrontational trajectory that would be highly dangerous for Iran, the US and the rest of the international community.

Anthony Bubalo is a research fellow and Dr Michael Fullilove is program director, global issues, at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.