

The tantalising prospect of reconciliation

Barack Obama has made his opening pitch. Might the ayatollahs respond in kind?



Illustration by S. Kambayashi

After nigh on three decades of abuse-filled estrangement, two spouses mull a reconciliation. Bitter memories of insults and humiliation linger. Mutual acquaintances, fearing more broken crockery, offer to mediate. The initial exchanges have been held at high volume. But at least the sulky silence has been broken.

President Barack Obama was a teenager when America severed ties with its former ally, Iran, after Islamist revolutionaries occupied America's embassy in Tehran in 1979. Since then, mutual enmity, expressed in military confrontations, acts of sabotage and a steady stream of invective, has ripened into a broader strategic rivalry. But on March 20th, in a televised address on the day Persians mark their new year, Mr Obama proffered a new vision, promising to resolve differences by diplomacy and inviting the "Islamic Republic of Iran", as he politely called it, to "take its rightful place in the community of nations."

By thus implicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of a regime whose theocratic values are inimical to his own, Mr Obama broke with his predecessor, George Bush, who invariably distinguished rhetorically between Iran's people (good, freedom-seeking) and its unelected top leadership (vile, repressive), and strained every sinew to unsettle Iran's ruling clerics.

In his address, Mr Obama, by contrast, offered Iran nothing short of a "partnership"—provided, he added vaguely, the Iranians displayed their peaceful intent. Though he referred obliquely to Iran's support for violent groups that dispute Israel's right to exist, the president refrained from directly mentioning Iran's contentious nuclear programme, which the Israelis regard as an existential threat, or its abuse of human rights. Some former officials in Mr Bush's administration were aghast.

Iran's response was immediate—and typically cautious. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, its supreme leader, rattled off a list of America's misdemeanours, not least its support for Iraq's Saddam Hussein in his war with Iran in the 1980s. He urged America to change its behaviour, not just

its tone. But he promised a policy based on reason, not emotion; Mr Obama and his team would be judged by their actions.

These are likely to be modest steps, to begin with. The administration's review of America's Iran policy, almost complete, has impressed on those involved how far America's rivalry with Iran has permeated policymaking across the region. For instance, America's hostility to groups such as Hamas in the Palestinian territories and Hizbullah in Lebanon is coloured by a perception that they are Iran's proxies. It is notable, too, that Mr Obama's desire to improve relations with Russia is fuelled partly by his hope that the Russians will press Iran harder to give up its nuclear ambitions. American experts on Iran also have a big say in policy towards Iraq and Afghanistan, whose occupation has furnished Iran's leaders with unanticipated chances to advance their claims to be a regional power. Indeed, it is on Iran's borders that efforts at detente may start.

Signals count for much. According to an Iraqi government official, Iran's Revolutionary Guard has reduced its meddling in Iraq since Mr Obama's inauguration. Now Afghanistan, the subject of much presidential attention, offers an opportunity for more overt co-operation.

America wants to dangle an offer to help stem the flow of drugs into Iran, which may have as many as 2m addicts, as a lure. The Iranians, for their part, want Mr Obama to assure them he will not try to replace the out-of-favour President Hamid Karzai, whom they helped install, with an American stooge, far less make terms with dissidents from the viscerally anti-Iranian Taliban; Mr Obama recently hinted at such an approach. Some NATO commanders muse that Iran could offer a fine supply route for their troops into Afghanistan, safer than the Khyber Pass from Pakistan, now regularly attacked by the Taliban.

So all eyes will be on the Iranian delegation expected to attend a big meeting to discuss Afghanistan at The Hague on March 31st. But the Americans do not expect a definitive Iranian response to their overture until after June's presidential elections in Iran, when they hope that the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose vicious fulminations against Israel have engendered boundless ill-will, will lose to a more moderate candidate.

There is also a possibility, mooted by Dennis Ross before he headed the American policy review, and perhaps now under way, of establishing a back channel. That could reduce the chance of a collision between two countries that have forgotten how to speak to each other.

Co-operation in Afghanistan would do as a starter. But for Mr Obama and his European allies, as well as for the new Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu, the real test will still be Iran's progress towards self-sufficiency in producing nuclear fuel, which could let it, perhaps in a matter of months (estimates vary), make a bomb. Iran denies such ambitions; Israel is disinclined to wait and find out.

Mr Obama hopes to buy time by dissuading Russia from delivering a missile-defence system that Iran has ordered and whose deployment could precipitate an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites. As an opposition politician, Mr Netanyahu appeared to advocate such an attack. The Iranians may quietly slow the addition of more centrifuges to their cascade at Natanz, in central Iran; otherwise, promoters of detente will have an uncomfortable sense that time is running out.

The Obama administration is said to have warned Israel that attacking Iran would be counter-productive, spurring it to redouble its nuclear development in secret and perhaps to sow chaos in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Gulf. But Mr Obama is being badgered by fiercely pro-Israeli groups at home to look more kindly on the prospect of a pre-emptive Israeli attack.

If engagement fails, the administration may use financial levers to squeeze Iran harder. Stuart Levey, a Treasury official whose arm-twisting of banks around the world has partially dried up credit lines to Iran, is one of a very few senior Bush-era officials to have survived the change of administration. Some Americans reckon that this sort of pressure works better.

But financial pressure may be less effective these days because of a growing belief in Iran that America's power is waning, its economy in ruins. In 2003, when America ignored Iran's hints of a grand bargain, the ruling clerics sought America's embrace because they feared its wrath. No longer. As the epicurean mullah said when urged to eat some wholesome jelly, "If it is so fortifying, why does it wobble so much?"

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