
A new Cold War with Iran?

By John Tirman
The Boston Glob - 14/8/2007

WE OFTEN hear that the US-Iran confrontation is a new Cold War - a highly charged ideological rivalry with nuclear capabilities on each side and "proxy" wars pursued for geostrategic advantage. While there are resemblances, the standoff is not like the US-Soviet conflict. In fact, it could be dangerous to think that it is.

The differences between the two rivalries are significant. Iran does not have much military capability, unlike the USSR, which may be one reason for Tehran's nuclear development program. They may see it as parity and respect on the cheap.

In terms of conventional military firepower, Iran has plenty of bodies but little technology.

The Islamic Republic has tools -- dedicated cadres, 70 million people willing to defend their country, and covert operatives around the region, especially Iraq. But this is nothing like the massive, well-equipped armies and nuclear arsenal possessed by the Soviets.

The "war of ideas" is different as well. Soviet communism was a highly imperfect version of what Karl Marx intended, but Marxism generally appealed to hundreds of millions of the downtrodden worldwide, regardless of culture. Shia Islam, the ideology of Iran, appeals only to a small segment of the Muslim world, and not beyond; even in Iran, its militancy is not obviously popular.

Most important, the US-Soviet competition was a highly formalized affair, with a large number and variety of institutions and norms to keep it from spinning out of control -- treaties, multilateral and bilateral organizations, commerce and trade, cultural and scientific exchanges, and so on.

These institutions and norms were nested in many parts of each government's official institutions (e.g., foreign office, defense establishment, executive offices), as well as academic institutions, party institutions, the news media, and civil society. All these players acted to moderate the conflict, in effect, and to counterbalance the occasional incendiary incident or bad actor.

The effect of this thick web of political, scientific, and social relationships was robust. Even on human rights, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics felt compelled to moderate its behavior after the 1975 Helsinki Accords came into force. The Soviet commitment to international norms and institutions due to their need for legitimacy and to satisfy other national interests, such as trade, made them reasonable and predictable, if nonetheless opposed to US policies.

When the end of the Soviet Union came, it came swiftly and peacefully largely because these institutions and norms had long been accepted.

No such system of institutions and norms govern or guide the US-Iran competition. There's no buffer, hotline, embassies, or ongoing talks.

We have purposefully excluded Iran from the international community and its normative framework and processes, labeling Iran a pariah, rogue, or terrorist regime.

The absence of formal ties, commerce, and other kinds of exchange has rendered Iran opaque to Americans, and that opacity is reciprocal.

This is a perilous situation. One misstep can lead to war. So while it seems improbable war is on the agenda of US decision makers, events can take over, not least events engineered in Iran by those who wish to see the United States further humiliated in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The actual Cold War had its dangers, to be sure -- massive nuclear arsenals and colossal waste in military expenditures -- but it was stable, and was contained.

What is truly worrisome about the Iran-US rivalry is how the lack of stability and communication might lead to war. And, as we've discovered in Iraq, a real war is both catastrophic for its millions of victims, and unpredictably damaging for those who start it.

Lulling ourselves into thinking this is a manageable mini-Cold War -- like we were seduced to think Iraq would be a "cakewalk" -- could be America's next big error of arrogance.

John Tirman is executive director and principal research scientist at MIT's Center for International Studies.
