

Gulf Gamble

As Ronald Reagan enters the ultimate phase of his presidency, and his successors are already jostling for position in the 1988 presidential race, the US leader finds himself entrapped by the issue that so weakened his predecessor, Carter, and which provided the opening for Reagan himself, namely Iran. After entering the White House on a militantly anti-Iranian platform, and then trying to establish covert ties with the Khomeini regime, Reagan now faces a set of problems relating to Iran which allow of no easy solution or laid-back obfuscation. Khomeini must be amused indeed at the way in which his Islamic revolution has cornered what

the Ayatollah has termed the 'wounded snake' in the White House.

The first issue relating to Iran is that of the investigation into the Irangate scandal. The Congressional hearings have not gone well for Reagan, and it is now almost universally accepted in the USA that the President has been both lying and incompetent. The glitter of his first years, presented as the 'Reagan Revolution', has gone. At best, Reagan can save some of his credibility and limp on for the next few months. It remains to be seen what additional revelations North and Poindexter provide, but whatever their contributions, the investigations

as a whole have destroyed Reagan's attempt to re-establish the presidency as the undisputed centre of foreign policy making in the USA.

The consequences for Reagan's foreign policy are important. First, it will now be much more difficult for the USA to escalate in Central America. The prospect of a direct US military intervention against Nicaragua, a venture which would, were it launched, have a high probability of military success, has now receded. The contras may survive, but in depleted form. Secondly, Reagan is being impelled to look for diversions, in order to tide his presidency over

the Irangate crisis. One such diversion is the apparently greater interest in a summit with the USSR, even at the risk of alarming the Europeans over an INF deal. But at the same time, the taste for the military gesture and for assertion of power that has so characterised this President - from Lebanon, to Grenada and Libya - remains: it is in this context that Reagan's new forward policy in the Gulf must be seen.

At first sight, the new US force projection in the Gulf appears perverse indeed. Only a year ago, US envoys were in Tehran offering arms to Khomeini and, in North's case, suggesting that the USA could arrange for the fall of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Iran's main war goal. Moreover, the incident that led to the new US presence in the Gulf was not an Iranian provocation, but the Iraqi attack on the USS Stark. However, the need felt in Washington to present a tough image after the Stark incident, coupled with the pressure to divert attention from Irangate, appears to have persuaded Reagan that a new militancy towards Iran is advisable. The Iranians may well not oblige with a direct challenge to the US navy, and the European allies, mindful of earlier US attempts to recruit them to Middle East policies that the US itself undermined, have been wary. But as a way of focusing US attention on a convenient foe, the Gulf is attractive.

There is, however, another reason for this new militancy towards Iran, namely the US failure to find rewarding interlocutors in Tehran itself. Some US officials, notably Robert McFarlane, appear to have believed that they could pull off an anti-Soviet strategic coup in Iran comparable to that which Kissinger achieved with his 1971 secret visit to Peking. The reality was very different: the Iranian leadership is neither united nor committed enough to abandon its long-standing hostility to the USA. As the documents of the Tower Commission Report indicate, McFarlane, faced with this



Iran: Reagan's future in their hands

disappointment and sitting irate in the Tehran Hilton, resorted to graphic terms in conveying to Washington his sense of frustration: 'It may be best for us to try to picture what it would be like if, after nuclear attack, a surviving Tatar became Vice President; a recent grad student became Secretary of State; and a bookie became the interlocutor for all discourse with foreign countries'. The attempt to open a channel of strategic collaboration with Iran was never realistic from the beginning.

Current short-term pressures aside, however, confrontation with Iran is not a simple option for any US administration. Iran's position on the southern frontier of the USSR, its growing involvement in support of the anti-Soviet guerrillas in Afghanistan, and its emergence as a major military power in the Gulf make it important for the USA to keep open the option of improving relations with Tehran. It is here that the deepest policy decision confronts Reagan: whether to downplay the importance of an understanding with Iran and seek greater cooperation with the USSR in the Gulf, or to work towards another opening to Iran in an attempt to consolidate an anti-Soviet alliance with the mullahs.

The increased US naval presence in the gulf is dictated above all by the strategic rivalry with Moscow, and Reagan has clearly rejected Soviet calls for great power collaboration in the region. Washington wants to prevent a greater Soviet role in the Gulf and appears, to date, to be committed to continuing support for the guerrillas in Afghanistan. The USA may be frustrated by Tehran's policies and attracted by the short-term gains of a naval clash with Iran. But in the longer run, if the rivalry with the USSR continues, Reagan or his successors will have to deal with Iran. The Tatar, the grad student and the bookie are very much in business and the 'wounded snake' or his successor may have to try again.

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