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US, Iran Step Back From the Brink

By Patrick J. Buchanan
January 14, 2016

To awaken Thursday to front-page photos of U.S. sailors kneeling on the deck of their patrol boat, hands on their heads in postures of surrender, on Iran's Farsi Island, brought back old and bad memories.

In January 1968, LBJ's last year, 82 sailors of the Pueblo were captured by North Korea and held hostage with Captain Lloyd "Pete" Bucher, and abused and tortured for a year before release.

In the final 444 days of the Carter presidency, 52 Americans were held hostage in Tehran, and released only when Ronald Reagan raised his hand to take the oath.

In 2001, under George W. Bush, an EP-3 with 24 crew members was crashed by a Chinese fighter and forced to land on Hainan Island, where they were held for 11 days until we expressed "sorrow."

Compared to these hostage-takings, the Farsi Island incident does not seem serious. Its resolution within hours by Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif suggests that Iran wants nothing to halt implementation, just days away, of the nuclear deal that will release \$100 billion in frozen assets.

Facilitating the sailors' release was a taped admission by one, identified as the "commander," who called Iran's treatment of the sailors "fantastic," and said the intrusion into Iranian waters "was a mistake. That was our fault. And we apologize for our mistake."

Still, what the reactions to this incident reveal is that not only is the United States dealing with a divided regime and nation in Iran, the U.S. is itself divided on what course to pursue with Iran.

"This administration's craven desire to preserve the dangerous Iranian nuclear deal at all costs evidently knows no limits," said John McCain. He castigated U.S. officials, presumably including Kerry, for "falling all over themselves to offer praise for Iran's graciousness in detaining our ships and service members."

Marco Rubio, inflamed over the treatment of the sailors, pledged anew to kill the nuclear deal on his first day in office. But by then Iran will have complied with its terms and gotten its cash.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy Commander Ali Fadavi warned that "the USS Truman aircraft carrier showed unprofessional moves for 40 minutes after the detention of the trespassers."

Fadavi added that Iran "was highly prepared with our coast-to-sea missiles" and "missile launching speedboats" to strike, had the U.S. warship taken action. Last fall, Iran tested two ballistic missiles in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, and a missile boat a mile from the Truman test-fired a rocket in the opposite direction.

There may be bluster and bluff in this. But if the RGC had fired at the Truman, that would have brought swift retaliation and a possible air, naval and missile war in the Persian Gulf.

Any prospective U.S. detente with Iran would be dead.

And, truth be told, some Americans, Saudis, Sunni Arabs and Israelis, who regard Iran as an existential threat, would relish seeing U.S. power unleashed against Iran.

So, too, many of the mullahs and Revolutionary Guard Corps might welcome a clash to abort the nuclear deal, restore the purity of their revolution, and rout the allies of President Hassan Rouhani in the February elections.

Indeed, assuming no clash in the next six weeks, the date to watch is Feb. 26, when elections are held for control of Iran's 290-seat assembly.

A Guardian Council has power to disqualify candidates and it is likely that of the 12,000 who have filed, many will be purged for not supporting the principles of the Islamic Republic as required.

Yet, if President Rouhani, his prestige enhanced by the nuclear deal, to which all five U.N. Security Council members have signed on, and with billions being released to Iran, wins, a brighter day will begin.

And the world will await the reaction of the defeated hard-liners.

That same Feb. 26, elections are to be held for the 88-seat clerical Experts Assembly, which will choose the successor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, himself the successor, 25 years ago, to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founding father of the revolution.

Rumors of Khamenei's deteriorating health – he reportedly has suffered from stage 4 prostate cancer – could mean the Experts Assembly will be naming soon a new Supreme Leader of Iran.

The Feb. 26 elections could thus decide whether there is to be a cold peace between the United States and Iran, or a new war in the Middle East.

In the summer of 1914, the Great War came because, in the great capitals – Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, Paris, London – those who saw war as a disaster for civilization were outmaneuvered by more resolute men who saw war as the opportunity to smash hated rivals once and for all.

Anti-war Americans and Iranians won this one; they will have to win them all. The war parties, here and over there, need win only once.

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