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## Beijing cautions US over Iran

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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China has broken silence on the developing situation in Iran. This comes against the backdrop of a discernible shift in [Washington's](#) posturing toward political developments in Iran.

The government-owned China Daily featured its main editorial comment on Thursday titled "For Peace in Iran". It comes amid reports in the Western media that the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is rallying the Qom clergy to put pressure on the Guardians Council - and, in turn, on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei - to annul last Friday's presidential election that gave Mahmud Ahmadinejad another four-year term.

Beijing fears a confrontation looming and counsels Obama to keep the pledge in his [Cairo](#) speech not to repeat such errors in the US's Middle East policy as the overthrow of the elected government of Mohammed Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953. Beijing also warns about letting the genie of popular unrest get out of the bottle in a highly volatile region that is waiting to explode. Tehran on Friday saw its sixth day of massive protests by supporters of Mir Hossein Mousavi, whom they say was cheated out of victory.

### A parallel with Thailand

Meanwhile, China's special envoy on Middle East, Wu Sike, is setting out on an extensive fortnight-long regional [tour](#) on Saturday (which, significantly, will be rounded off with consultations in Moscow) to fathom the political temperature in capitals as varied as [Cairo](#) and [Tel Aviv](#), Amman and Damascus, and [Beirut](#) and Ramallah.

Beijing also made a political statement when a substantive bilateral was scheduled between President Hu Jintao and Ahmadinejad on Tuesday on the sidelines of the summit meeting of the [Shanghai](#)

Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Yekaterinburg, Russia.

Conceivably, Hu would have discussed the Iran situation with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev during his official visit to Moscow that followed the SCO summit. Earlier, Moscow welcomed Ahmadinejad's re-election. Both China and Russia abhor "color" revolutions, especially something as intriguing as Twitter, which Moscow came across a few months ago in Moldova and raises hackles about the US's interventionist global strategy.

China anticipated the backlash against Ahmadinejad's victory. On Monday, The Global Times newspaper quoted the former Chinese ambassador to Iran, Hua Liming, that the Iranian situation would get back to normalcy only if a negotiated agreement was reached among the "major centers of political power ... But, if not, the recent turmoil in Thailand will possibly be repeated". It is quite revealing that the veteran Chinese diplomat drew a parallel with Thailand.

However, Hua underscored that Ahmadinejad does enjoy popularity and has "lots of support in this nationalist country because he has the courage to state his own opinion and dares to carry out his policies". The consensus opinion of Chinese academic community is also that Ahmadinejad's re-election will "test" Obama.

Thus, Thursday's China Daily editorial is broadly in the nature of an appeal to the Obama administration not to spoil its new Middle East policy, which is shaping well, through impetuous actions. Significantly, the editorial upheld the authenticity of Ahmadinejad's election victory: "Win and loss are two sides of an election coin. Some candidates are less inclined to accept defeat."

The daily pointed out that a pre-election public opinion poll conducted by the Washington Post newspaper showed Ahmadinejad having a 2-1 lead over his nearest rival and some opinion polls in Iran also indicated more or less the same, whereas, actually, "he won the election on a lower margin. Thus, the opposition's allegations against Ahmadinejad come as a trifle surprising".

The editorial warns: "Attempts to push the so-called color revolution toward chaos will prove very dangerous. A destabilized Iran is in nobody's interest if we want to maintain peace and stability in the Middle East, and the world beyond." It pointedly recalled that the US's "Cold War intervention in Iran" made US-Iran relationship a troubled one, "with US presidents trying to stick their nose into Iran's internal business".

### **Theocracy versus republicanism**

Beijing understands Iran's revolutionary politics very well. China was one of the few countries that warmly hosted Ruhollah Khomeini as president (in 1981 and 1989). In contrast, [India](#), which professes "civilizational" ties with Iran, was much too confused about Iran's revolutionary legacy to be able to correctly estimate Khamenei's political instincts favoring republicanism. Most of the Indian elites aren't even aware that Khamenei studied as a youth in Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University.

Be that as it may, the Hu-Ahmadinejad meeting in Yekaterinburg on Tuesday once again shows Beijing has a very clear idea about the ebb and flow of Iran's politics. Hu demonstrably accorded

to Ahmadinejad the full honor as Beijing's valued interlocutor.

Chinese media have closely followed the trajectory of the US reaction to the situation in Iran, especially the "Twitter revolution", which puts Beijing on guard about US intentions. Indications are that the US establishment has begun meddling in Iranian politics. Rafsanjani's camp always keeps lines open to the West. All-in-all, a degree of synchronization is visible involving the US's "Twitter revolution" route, Rafsanjani's parleys with the conservative clergy in Qom and Mousavi's uncharacteristically defiant stance.

Obama faces multiple challenges. On the one hand, as Helene Cooper of The New York Times reported on Thursday, the continuing street protests in Tehran are emboldening a corpus of (pro-Israel) conservatives in Washington to demand that Obama should take a "more visible stance in support of the protesters". But then, a regime change would inevitably delay the expected US-Iran direct engagement and upset Obama's tight calendar to ensure the negotiations gained traction by year's end, while Iran's centrifuges in its nuclear establishments keep spinning.

Also, a fragmented power structure in Tehran will prove ineffectual in helping the US stabilize Afghanistan. However, top administration officials like Vice President Joseph Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would like the US to "strike a stronger tone" on Iran's turmoil. Cooper reported they are piling pressure on Obama that he might run the risk of "coming across the wrong side of history at a potentially transformative moment in Iran".

### **A Thermidorian reaction**

No doubt, the turmoil has an intellectual side to it. Obama being a rare politician gifted with intellectuality and a keen sense of history would know that what is at stake is a well-orchestrated attempt by the hardcore conservative clerical establishment to roll back the four-year-old painful, zig-zag process toward republicanism in Iran.

Mousavi is the affable front man for the mullahs, who fear that another four years of Ahmadinejad would hurt their vested interests. Ahmadinejad has already begun marginalizing the clergy from the sinecures of power and the honey pots of the Iranian economy, especially the oil industry.

The struggle between the worldly mullahs (in alliance with the bazaar) and the republicans is as old as the 1979 Iranian revolution, where the *fedayeen* of the proscribed Tudeh party (communist cadres) were the original foot soldiers of the revolution, but the clerics usurped the leadership. The highly contrived political passions let loose by the 444-day hostage crisis with the US helped the wily Shi'ite clerics to stage the Thermidorian reaction and isolate the progressive revolutionary leadership. Ironically, the US once again figures as a key protagonist in Iran's dialectics - not as a hostage, though.

Imam Khomeini was wary of the Iranian mullahs and he created the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as an independent force to ensure the mullahs didn't hijack the revolution. Equally, his preference was that the government should be headed by non-clerics. In the early years of the revolution, the conspiracies hatched by the triumvirate of Beheshti-Rafsanjani-Rajai who engineered the ouster of the secularist leftist president Bani Sadr (who was Khomeini's protege),

had the agenda to establish a one-party theocratic state. These are vignettes of Iran's revolutionary history that might have eluded the intellectual grasp of George W Bush, but Obama must be au fait with the deviousness of Rafsanjani's politics.

If Rafsanjani's putsch succeeds, Iran would at best bear resemblance to a decadent outpost of the "pro-West" Persian Gulf. Would a dubious regime be durable? More important, is it what Obama wishes to see as the destiny of the Iranian people? The Arab street is also watching. Iran is an exception in the Muslim world where people have been empowered. Iran's multitudes of poor, who form Ahmadinejad's support base, detest the corrupt, venal clerical establishment. They don't even hide their visceral hatred of the Rafsanjani family.

Alas, the political class in Washington is clueless about the Byzantine world of Iranian clergy. Egged on by the Israeli lobby, it is obsessed with "regime change". The temptation will be to engineer a "color revolution". But the consequence will be far worse than what obtains in Ukraine. Iran is a regional power and the debris will fall all over. The US today has neither the clout nor the stamina to stem the lava flow of a volcanic eruption triggered by a color revolution that may spill over Iran's borders.