

By Peter Zeihan

Fear is a powerful motivator, even getting results when the threat is exceedingly remote. It makes us cross at crosswalks even when traffic is thin, pay more over time for fire insurance than our homes are worth, and shy away from snakes even when signs clearly inform us they are not poisonous. Humans instinctively take steps to prevent negative outcomes, oftentimes regardless of how likely -- or more to the point, unlikely -- those unpleasant outcomes are. As with individuals, the same is true for countries.

Anyone can blithely say Cuba or Serbia would not dare ignore the will of their more powerful neighbors, or that Brazil's or Egypt's nuclear programs are so inconsequential as not to impact the international balance of power. But such opinions -- even if they truly are near-certainties -- cannot form the foundation of state power.

National leaders do not have the luxury of ignoring the plethora of coulds, mights and maybes that pepper their radar screens every day. An analyst can dismiss a dark possibility as dubious, but a national leader cannot gamble with the lives of his countrymen and the existence of his state. They must evaluate even improbable threats against the potential damage to their respective national interests. Many of the standing policies we take for granted have grown from such evaluations.

While the likelihood of Israel bombing the Aswan High Dam is rather remote, Egypt cannot afford to risk the possibility, which contributed to Cairo's burying-of-the-hatchet with Israel. Worrying about continental European countries sublimating their national differences, uniting into a federated superstate and invading the United Kingdom may seem to flirt with lunacy, but within that lingering concern lies the root of the Anglo-American alliance.

Similarly, worrying about China using the archipelagos of Southeast Asia as a staging point for an invasion of Australia may seem ludicrous, but that fear dominates military planning in Canberra. Predicting national management of improbable outcomes is among the more difficult tasks presented to Stratfor's staff. Such empathetic analysis requires not just a deep and dispassionate understanding of a country's strengths and weaknesses, but also a deep and extremely passionate understanding about how a country's neighbors perceive it.

Our work is not simply about what is, but about what leaders fear might come to be. And that requires not merely understanding reality, but developing an accurate evaluation of the sorts of risks national leaders are willing to take with their actions -- and their inactions. This management of improbable outcomes also dominates the question of the day: Iraq.

Currently, the Iranians and Americans are locked into increasingly public negotiations over Iraq's future. Buried at the heart of those talks are two nightmare scenarios. Iran wants to ensure that a Sunni-controlled Iraq is never resuscitated, while the United States desires a

framework to guarantee that Iran cannot invade the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula.

Neither of those nightmares is particularly likely to occur. The Sunnis of Iraq not only are the smallest of Iraq's three major ethno-sectarian groups, but as a community, they are just as fractured as the country's notoriously squabbling Shia. The Sunnis thus sport splits between secular Baathist nationalists and Islamist militants, among other fractures. Yes, the Sunnis under Saddam Hussein rose to command all of Iraq, but even with strong American support the recreation of such a constellation could come neither quickly nor easily. And even were that to occur, it is not as if Iraq's Sunnis are itching for a genocidal war with a neighboring country sporting a population more than ten times the size of Iraq's Sunni community.

On the flip side, the Iranian military is hardly capable of marching into the Saudi oil fields. The mountainous nature of Iran means the country is packed with minority groups -- in fact nearly half of all Iranians are not ethnically Persian -- that could rise up and threaten the regime in Tehran.

Managing this country requires an infantry-heavy military better suited toward domestic control than to a 350-mile slog through swamps and very flat, very hot, dry deserts where the Iraqi army discovered it was very easy to see one's entire force become very destroyed. Yet what may seem remote to one side cannot be ruled out as impossible by the other, and in that sliver of possibility lies a foe's worst fear -- and American and Iranian leaders alike do not dare ignore the risks of those nightmares arising.

The last Persian-Mesopotamian war (known in modern vernacular as the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war) claimed a million casualties. Would you like to be the Iranian leader who allowed a Sunni-ruled Iraq to re-emerge? Nearly 25 million barrels per day of crude oil -- nearly one-third of global output -- is produced in the Persian Gulf. Would you like to be the American president who failed to prevent all that power from becoming concentrated under a single (hostile) state?

The topic of the American-Iranian negotiations is not to get past these fears -- no amount of Carter-esque goodwill is going to convince Washington and Tehran to trust the other -- but instead to embed these fears in the final settlement and craft a solution that is institutionally neutral. For this a template does indeed exist.

In fact, the United States has done precisely this, in partnership with a country for which it held far more vitriol and anger than it does for Iran. At the end of World War II, the Soviets wanted to ensure that Finland could never again bloody the Russian nose (casualty ratios in the Russo-Finnish War, or Winter War, of 1941 were the worst Soviet Russia ever suffered). Yet the bulk of Finland was not in Soviet hands at war's end, and the Western powers certainly did not want to see the balance of power in the Baltic states altered. The settlement was that Finland would have a Western-style participatory democracy, but the Soviet Union would enjoy a de facto veto over all decision-making. The result was a "free" Finland with a capitalist economy and a robust defense force, but a country that did not join either NATO or the European Economic Community and remained strictly neutral in international affairs.

Replicating the Finnish example in Iraq would create a united Iraq with American security

guarantees that could prevent any Iranian incursion into Arabia, but with sufficient Iranian aspects to prevent the formation of a powerful offensive military. The fears of both sides would be managed by being built into the foundation of a new Iraqi state. Should Washington seek to double-cross Tehran and begin a serious Iraqi rearmament campaign, Iran could use its influence over the Shia to tear Iraq down and revive the threat to Arabia. And should Iran play the Shiite card, the United States could side militarily with the Sunnis.

No one would really "win," but neither would anyone really lose.

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