

EU should steer US away from air strike on Iran

OPINION: The regime in Iran is close to collapse and an attack by the West would only rally support behind it, writes **SANDEEP GOPALAN**

BOMB-BOMB-BOMB, bomb, bomb Iran. Remember that disturbingly funny moment from the last US presidential election? John McCain crooning bomb-bomb-bomb, bomb, bomb Iran (in a parody of the Beach Boys classic *Barbara Ann*), tunelessly and out of touch with reality? Much to everyone's dismay, the audience cheered loudly.

It appears that such sentiments are alive and well in America. Recent events in Iran have given a fillip to US hawks and there is talk of military action. This would be a terrible mistake.

Iran's government is teetering on the brink of collapse. The streets of Tehran are echoing with words that few dreamed would be heard anytime soon, if ever – “Death to Khamenei.” The Revolutionary Guards and their plain clothes thugs have done everything possible to generate hatred for Iran's misguided ruling elites. And the government's dastardly war against its own people – best exemplified by the ruthless attacks on mourners at the dissident cleric Ayatollah Montazeri's funeral – is one it cannot win.

Khamenei's bloodlust might have created a tipping point because of the symbolism of Ashura – the sacred holiday commemorating the killing of Prophet Mohammed's grandson, Hussein, by the Caliph Yazid. He is now compared to Yazid, a murderer of innocents who is reviled by Shia Muslims for his tyranny and licentiousness. This cannot be good news, even for the “supreme leader”.

Amidst all this, there is talk in Washington of military attacks and more sanctions. Just last week, there was an op-ed in the New York Times advocating air strikes by the US – not Israel, as many other hawks have done in the past – against Iran's nuclear facilities. This is not an isolated view: a recent Pew Research poll in the US showed that 61 per cent of respondents supported military action against Iran. Senators Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman have tapped into this mood and repeatedly called for air strikes.

Lieberman said recently: “We can tell them we want them to stop that, but if there's any hope of the Iranians living according to the international rule of law and stopping, for instance, their nuclear weapons development, we can't just talk to them . . . they'll take that as a sign of weakness on our part and we will pay for it in Iraq and throughout the region and ultimately right here at home.”

Supporters of air strikes tout Israel's 1981 attack on Iraq's Osirak reactor. Saddam's Iraq is a bad analogy. Aside from the minor inconvenience that an air strike would violate international law, Iran is ruled by a democratically elected government (flawed as it is) with serious military capability. Air strikes would be costly and result in

certain retaliation. Moreover, there is no guarantee that all of Iran's nuclear capacity would be destroyed. At best, aerial strikes would wound Iran and yield a fresh crop of terrorists determined to extract revenge.

The last thing the Iranian people now need is a military attack by the West to rally popular opinion by setting up a common enemy. This would give oxygen to a desperate government and cause a turn away from any chance of reform.

Ahmadinejad is a master at rallying people against a phantom menace. He has blamed the West for everything ranging from last year's disputed presidential election to periodic student unrests. Just this week, the British ambassador was summoned for a dressing down for "interference in Iran's internal affairs." He must be deprived of every excuse for legitimacy.

Now is not the time for more economic sanctions either. There is a Bill doing the rounds in Congress seeking to impose sanctions on companies doing business with Iran. Obama administration officials have also talked this week of ramping up sanctions to hit the Iranian leadership when it is vulnerable. These moves are unlikely to yield much success. Firstly, there is no evidence that sanctions have any effect in triggering a desirable political realignment. If anything, they appear to strengthen the resolve of their targets.

Secondly, it allows ruling elites to cast the issue into the familiar rhetoric of Western empire-mongers and brave Third World resistance. This co-opts fellow travellers on the colonial trail and generates support from other developing countries. There is little that the West can do to win that ideological battle, despite it being based on a fiction.

Thirdly, sanctions create opportunities for companies from competitor and other rogue states to make money at the expense of US companies. This reduces economic leverage and funds enemy coffers. There is plenty of evidence that Chinese companies have filled the void left by US sanctions. Pushing more business in their direction only creates more incentives for China to bat for Iran in the UN.

Through all this, the EU has been a mute bystander. This is an abdication of responsibility, particularly for a post-Lisbon Treaty Europe with high expectations. The EU has international legal personality and the ability to conclude foreign treaties. With the appointment of a permanent president and a high representative for foreign policy, it has fewer excuses to play sidekick to Uncle Sam. It must punch its weight in international relations.

The EU must ensure the US does not make a mistake by bombing Iran. It must engage in robust diplomacy to take military action off the table for now. It must also support the resistance by ensuring that every murder committed by Iran's tyrants is on the top of the international community's agenda. Light, rather than heat, is what is needed to help Iran's resistance.

Prof Sandeep Gopalan is the head of the law department at NUI Maynooth. These opinions are expressed in his personal capacity

