

IRAN AS A WORLD POWER--THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The Shah of Iran clearly is a man in a hurry. He has the oil riches to industrialize his country and to create the armed forces to deter attack on its modernized base. There is the possibility of internal opposition as expectations mature, but he has minimized it by reducing the power of: landowners, the religious right wing, and populist nationalism.

Iran's growing expectations revolve on predictions of economic strength surpassing that of Britain and France by the mid-1980's. Already the Iranian GNP exceeds that of each country in the Middle East; its population is greater than all the Gulf countries combined; and it is building up the area's strongest armed force.

The U.S. depends on available Iranian oil. It also is a major supplier of arms to the Shah. What are the strategic implications for the U.S. as Iran grows into a world power?

There is much in the public realm to reveal what the Shah wants in the world.

To the East, he desires an Afghanistan that resists Soviet influence and does not encourage tribes in Pakistan thinking independence. He wants a stable Pakistan that offers no example to Iran's tribal Baluchis to bring together their kin in an autonomous state.

In the Middle East region he aspires to: a pre-dominance of Iranian power; governments less susceptible to the sudden change of a Balkan atmosphere; a stable resolution of the questions of a Palestine state and Israeli survival; and a dampening of Iraqi hostility.

To the north and south he needs some assurance of deterrence against Soviet land and naval power.

If these aims are the primary concerns of Iran, and certainly they describe the range of perceived problems, then one must expect a future evolution of policies not now apparent. Every other industrial nation on the periphery of the Soviet Union or with borders on the seas hedges the future either by cooperating with the Communist Superpower or by contracting alliances elsewhere to insure against facing that threat in isolation. If the process of decision is beginning, the alternatives are becoming more distinct.

Turkey, in a similar position to the west, is faced with U.S. sanctions and a NATO seemingly incapable of political integrity. The UK is no longer important in the Gulf or in NATO. France, swimming against the tide of Western decline, is increasingly isolated and a power more apparent than real.

Only the U.S. offers a possible Western refuge of security, although its will or interest in alliance is less sure than before. U.S. emphasis is on policies that

assure oil supplies from the Arab countries because Washington influence on Israel gives that policy leverage while offering the means to bring agreement on Middle East peace. While Iran provides oil to Israel to keep its own options open, it risks a future lack of influence in the Gulf if stability is achieved. The U.S. will be beholden to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The latter will use its riches to achieve a dominant area influence, with at least implicit U.S. arms protection. One could then expect Iraq to associate with the Saudis and their capital to develop its own vast oil resources, while exploiting the opportunity to expand trade with the U.S.

Under these circumstances, Iran might seek closer ties with the Soviet Union, whatever the inconsistency with royal rule. If the Soviets will require oil imports in the 1980's, as many believe, they may find this arrangement attractive and worth delaying tribal subversion in Afghanistan. The latter commitment would give Iran security to the east, as well as to the north. It also would lessen the importance of the link with Pakistan which now forces Iran to balance China against a closer tie with the USSR. Iran could then expand liaison with India, looking towards a coordinated power dominion over the Indian Ocean area. Iranian nuclear weapons and India-Iran political actions to deny that ocean to outside states rationally would follow.

These are the trends that could force the Shah into political/economic arrangements with the Soviets despite the threat it presents to the continuity of his rule. The alternative would be association with the EEC and thus the West; and a naval security grouping with the U.S., UK, France, and perhaps Australia, that would create a compatible link with the U.S.-Arab partnership.

With the forthcoming Geneva meeting to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute, the U.S. needs to develop a policy towards Iran. A policy which brought Western economic recovery and a rejection of NATO political diffusion could leave the Shah to accept its pragmatic usefulness. Thus, the future, in one other part of the world, requires the U.S. to recognize its key role in maintaining international stability.