

# Fukuda's first task: Preventing a U.S.-Iran war

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Japan has a new leader. Obviously, the voters expect Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda to take care of the economy and their pensions. But one of Fukuda's most important tasks should be to convince the United States not to attack Iran.

The Bush administration's Iran policy has been incredibly contradictory. On the one hand, by removing Saddam Hussein, the United States simultaneously eliminated Iran's No. 1 enemy and enabled Iraqi Shia factions beholden to Tehran to dominate most of Iraq.

The porous Iraq-Iran border is now a highway for Iranian agents, weapons and money infiltrating Iraq.

Turkey was another bulwark against Iranian inroads. But the strengthening of Kurdish separatists in the wake of the Baath regime's demise has created new challenges for Ankara and undermined the Turkish-American alliance. It thus knocked Turkey out of the containment ring surrounding Iran.

On the other hand, President George W. Bush clearly detests the Iranian mullahs, branding their regime a member of the infamous Axis of Evil. There is no doubt that Washington is considering all options, including war, in dealing with the Iranian atomic program.

Moreover, even more than in the

case of Iraq in 2002-3, there is broad bipartisan support in the United States for such as course of action. Many politicians, both Republicans and Democrats, have been vociferous in calling for considering military force against Iran. International support would also be stronger than during the Iraqi War.

Germany, which campaigned against the invasion of Iraq, cannot appear to side with a regime that calls for the extermination of the Jewish State. Dr. Bernard Kouchner, France's foreign minister, urged his country to be ready for war with Iran, an indication that Paris would also side with Washington. Russia would secretly welcome a conflict that would hurt the United States, push Iran towards Russia and increase the price of Russian oil and gas. China would be happy to see American power diverted from East Asia.

War, as Carl von Clausewitz noted, is a most unpredictable activity. But the probable consequences of a U.S.-led assault will be massive increase in Iranian support for anti-U.S. insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, possibly bombings and assassinations throughout the Arab world and beyond, and a Hezbollah attack on Israel and what is left of the Lebanese state.

In many ways, as a Japanese government official told me, Iraq is to America what the Chinese quagmire was to Imperial Japan in the 1930s.

Striking Iran would be America's Pearl Harbor.

It would not end with a U.S. capitulation to Iran, but a war could spell the epitaph of American power and influence in the Persian Gulf.

What will be the consequences for Japan? First, this country's security depends on American hegemony. Another U.S. defeat in the Middle East (Iraq being the first one) would further erode the ability of the United States to act as the main pillar of the world order upon which Japan depends.

Second, Japan—and the rest of the world—needs a continuous, but gradual, climb in petroleum prices. This will enable the market to develop new sources of energy, thus reducing the world's thirst for oil. Oil has the twin disadvantages of being located in unstable or hostile nations and of damaging the environment.

Therefore, the sooner it is relegated to the history books, the better for our planet. However, a conflagration involving Iran could suddenly push oil prices to stratospheric levels and disable supply networks, hitting the Japanese and world economies like a tsunami.



Robert Dujarric

Third, Japan's economic interests in Iran could suffer seriously if its American ally attacked Iran.

Some observers will argue that these risks are worth taking to prevent a nuclear Iran. Indeed, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calls for wiping out Israel and his Messianic beliefs do not make him the ideal candidate to have his finger on the nuclear trigger.

But in many ways, former dictator of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin and his successors were far more dangerous than Iran's president. These mass murderers were convinced that the ultimate victory of communism would require the unlimited use of military force against the capitalist enemy. Unlike Iran, they had at their disposal a massive nuclear and conventional arsenal. Yet, the right combination of strength and flexibility allowed the free world to deter the Soviet Union. Iranian behavior since Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah indicates that Tehran is not "irrational" and that it can be deterred.

Therefore, Japanese should hope Fukuda will not repeat former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's mistake of encouraging the United States as it contemplates yet another catastrophic Middle Eastern war.

*The author is director of the Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies at Temple University's Japan Campus in Tokyo.*