

# Iran's Best Friend

Editorial and Opinion

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At the rate that President Bush is going, Iran will be a global superpower before too long. For all of the axis-of-evil rhetoric that has come out of the White House, the reality is that the Bush administration has done more to empower Iran than its most ambitious ayatollah could have dared to imagine. Tehran will be able to look back at the Bush years as a golden era full of boosts from America, its unlikely ally.

During the period before the Iraq invasion, the president gave lip service to the idea that Iran and Iraq were both threats to American security. But his advisers, intent on carrying out their long-deferred dream of toppling Saddam Hussein, gave scant thought to what might happen if their plans did not lead to the unified, peaceful, pro-Western democracy of their imaginings. The answer, though, is now rather apparent: a squabbling, divided country in which the Shiite majority in the oil-rich south finds much more in common with its fellow Shiites in Iran than with the Sunni Muslims with whom it needs to form an Iraqi government.

Washington has now become dangerously dependent on the good will and constructive behavior of Shiite fundamentalist parties that Iran sheltered, aided and armed during the years that Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq. In recent weeks, neither good will nor constructive behavior has been particularly evident, and if Iran chooses to stir up further trouble to deflect diplomatic pressures on its nuclear program, it could easily do so.

There is now a real risk that Iraq, instead of being turned into an outpost of secular democracy challenging the fanatical rulers of the Islamic republic to its east, could become an Iranian-aligned fundamentalist theocracy, challenging the secular Arab regimes to its west.

Fast-forward to Thursday's nuclear deal with India, in which President Bush agreed to share civilian nuclear technology with India despite its nuclear weapons programs and its refusal to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

This would be a bad idea at any time, rewarding India for flouting the basic international understanding that has successfully discouraged other countries from South Korea to Saudi Arabia from embarking on their own efforts to build nuclear weapons. But it also undermines attempts to rein in Iran, whose nuclear program is progressing and unnerving both its neighbors and the West.

The India deal is exactly the wrong message to send right now, just days before Washington and its European allies will be asking the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer Iran's case to the United Nations Security Council for further action. Iran's hopes of preventing this depend on convincing the rest of the world that the West is guilty of a double standard on nuclear issues.

Mr. Bush might as well have tied a pretty red bow around his India nuclear deal and mailed it as a gift to Tehran