



US ex-official urges talks with Iran

>By Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington

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Richard Armitage, deputy secretary of state during President George W. Bush's first term, has urged the Bush administration to hold talks with Iran over its nuclear programme.

Mr Armitage said Washington would benefit from talking to Tehran on a range of issues, including Iran's nuclear aspirations. The Bush administration has so far resisted calls from its European allies to engage Iran directly over its alleged nuclear weapons programme.

"It merits talking to the Iranians about the full range of our relationship...everything from energy to terrorism to weapons to Iraq," Mr Armitage told the Financial Times in an interview. "We can be diplomatically astute enough to do it without giving anything away."

"I saluted not talking to the Iranians solely about Iraq because it seems to give them a bigger stake in the outcome of the country than they deserve."

Asked whether the US could successfully persuade China and Russia to agree to place sanctions on Iran, Mr Armitage suggested that it would be possible, but he questioned how meaningful they would be.

"You could get travel bans and things of this nature on certain people," he said. "China and Russia would be able to sell it to the Iranians as 'look, this is a piece of cake, it is limited and targeted'. I think there is a small possibility but we are a ways away from that.

He said the administration could afford to be patient "for a while" on Iran because Tehran would not have access to a nuclear weapon for some time, and also because the IAEA, Russians and Chinese were all putting pressure on the Islamist republic.

Speaking about Iraq, Mr Armitage emphasised that he was not an opponent of the war, but he said things were "going badly".

"We haven't been able to train the police and armed forces sufficiently quickly," said Mr Armitage. "They have not been able to put together a government of national unity this long after the election. There is less oil, less water, available now than there was a year ago, a year and a half ago. They are exporting less oil. So I think that one has to say that things are going badly."

But he stressed that the US needed to "stay the course" and give the Iraqi government time to "stand on its own feet". He also welcomed the recent speeches by Mr Bush on Iraq, saying it would help to bolster

US public opinion.

Mr Armitage was instrumental during the first Bush administration in seeking to improve relations with India, including discussions about providing India with access to nuclear technology. But while he welcomed the recent improvement in US-India relations, he expressed some reservations about the nuclear deal the Bush administration recently concluded with Delhi.

"I thought that over time it would be possible to cap enrichment or something like that and so do much less damage to our non-proliferation goals...I worry a bit that we should have gotten a better deal," said Mr Armitage.

But he said he disagreed with critics who argue that the deal would damage non-proliferation goals by inspiring Iran and North Korea because "they are basically rogue states anyway". He said Congress would probably "grudgingly" go along with the deal but would attach some conditions.

Mr Armitage was less optimistic about the success of the six-party talks aimed at resolving nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula, saying it was going to be "very hard to dislodge North Korea from their nuclear weapons".

"From their point of view, the only reason the US has anything to do with them [and] the main reason other countries are providing food and energy is because they have nuclear weapons," he said.

Mr Armitage suggested that the gradual integration of North Korea and South Korea over time might encourage Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons. He said the administration could afford to be patient with North Korea.

"North Korea is not an insane nation. It is not a crazy nation. One could argue that Kim Jong-il has played a low hand very, very skilfully," said Mr Armitage.

But asked whether he expected the six-party talks to be successful, he said: "Not in a dramatic fashion...or in the near future. I would be delighted, but I don't see it."

Mr Armitage, who is considered an Asia expert, said the Bush administration also needs to pay more attention to Asia, although he acknowledged that officials have been understandingly preoccupied with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The whole centre of gravity of the world is shifting to Asia [in terms of] demographics, size of the economies, need for raw material, usage of petroleum, and sizes of the military," said Mr Armitage. "We have to wake up and spend plenty of attention and time on it."

Ahead of the visit of Chinese president Hu Jintao to Washington next week, Mr Armitage said the Sino-US relationship was a "little mixed" but "not bad".

"There is a growing recognition about China as a power in the ascent and there is a question out there about what China will do with their new ascension," he said.

"[China] has many of the trappings of a global power - a man in space, hosting of the Olympics, she is active in our own hemisphere with police officers in Haiti, and a lot of activities in the Southern hemisphere. So she is acting like a country that has great power aspirations."

The Bush administration has raised concerns about whether the rise of China will be peaceful, and the Pentagon has warned that the expansion of the Chinese military exceeds the potential threats facing the country. Asked whether he expected China's rise to be peaceful, Mr Armitage responded: "I think so, but we have to keep our eyes open."

Mr Armitage, a strong proponent of the view that the US-Japan relationship is a keystone of the US defence posture in the Asia-Pacific region, said Japan was "absolutely" living up to its obligations under the US-Japanese defence relationship. He stressed that the country had undergone major political and economic changes in recent years that were helping strengthen ties between the countries.

"You have never seen such movement in Japan as you have seen over the past five years...In the military sphere, in the famous words 'we showed the flag and boots on the ground', they've done it," said Mr Armitage.

"Who would have imagined Japan...refuelling American warships in the Persian Gulf and down in the Indian Ocean. Who would have imagined seeing Japan using its [Self Defence Forces] to aid Tsunami victims in Southeast Asia and in Sri Lanka."

The US and Japan are currently trying to hammer out the final details of a deal that would reduce the number of US forces in Japan, including moving 8,000 marines from Okinawa to Guam. The Pentagon, which wants Japan to pay 75 per cent of the \$10bn it estimates the move will cost, has been frustrated by what it sees as an unwillingness by Japan to foot its share of the burden.

Mr Armitage said he expected both sides would compromise over the Guam move, partly because the US is "spending a lot of money on other areas which are very important to Japan not least the reason of which is the access to oil".

Discussing Sino-Japanese frictions, Mr Armitage stressed that "the maintenance of warm economic ties and cold politics is not sustainable in the long run", but he said he expected the politician tensions to work themselves out over time.

"I think what you are seeing is a phenomenon that has never happened before in Asia. For the first time in Asian history, there are two equal players on the scene at the same time," he said.

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