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Last update - 01:03 15/10/2006

Time is right to be proactive

By Yoav Sivan

Israeli policymakers' basic instincts exclusively favor America, and seek to tame other international players, particularly European nations. But to address the Iranian challenge, waiting for Washington to do the job or relying on Israeli deterrence is insufficient. Rather, a proactive Israeli foreign policy that takes advantage of favorable political circumstances may complement an automatic reliance on the U.S. Such favorable conditions may now be found in Japan and Germany.

It's true that the recent election of Shinzo Abe as Japan's prime minister drew little attention in the local media. Also, last week's comments made by German Chancellor Angela Merkel regarding the approaching German EU presidency did little to focus local attention in that direction.

But despite lacking local public attention as well as the geographic distance and difference in the political setting, these two examples offer a unique opportunity for Israel to finally implement a proactive foreign policy concerning Iran's nuclear program.

Prior to assuming his position, Abe had consistently held a hard-line reputation on Japanese foreign and defense policy. Most notably, the missiles test conducted by North Korea over the Sea of Japan in July 2006 had triggered Abe, then chief cabinet secretary, to suggest that Japan should explore the possibility of bombarding the attacker's bases in what was internationally interpreted as championing a "preventive strike theory."

Linking Iran and North Korea's nuclear threats has remained an American task thus far, or using President George W. Bush's cumbersome wording - both countries are members of the "axis of evil." But Japan's politically delicate dependence on foreign oil, accentuated by its fervent competition with China and India on assuring reservoirs for keeping the wheels of their respective economies rolling, makes it the least probable candidate to apply pressure on Iran. Using the same lingo

regarding Iran and North Korea might actually change that, as well as turn it into an Israeli interest, rather than the widely held stand here that Jerusalem should push for highlighting Iran as a unique stand-alone case.

In preparation for the German EU presidency, Merkel has set the initial six-month period's goals starting in January to focus on structural EU questions, economic single market initiatives, and the rather delicate issue of salvaging the constitutional treaty after being rejected in referenda in the Netherlands and France. Not surprisingly, perhaps, these issues reflect an explicit interest in channeling political energies into inner European affairs. But in the European case, as in Japan, oil dominates interests and shapes the map of diplomacy, connecting economics and foreign policy.

One of the challenges set by Merkel is achieving better coordination of international energy policies. The emphasis on energy introduces the Iran question through the back door - Iran being the fifth biggest oil exporter to the EU (Iranian oil accounted for approximately 7 percent of European consumption in 2004).

One way to adopt a proactive diplomacy, especially in the European case, is by suggesting and welcoming more international involvement in the peace process. This creates leverage to ask for pressure to be applied on Iran. Israel's foreign policy should advance in parallel yet closely linked directions: stronger pressure to adopt a harder line against Iran, while calling for greater involvement in the peace process, for example, by welcoming European coordination of an international summit in the format of the 1991 Madrid convention. It is easier for Israel to make this connection clear and fruitful when Europe is under German leadership.

Israel should seize the opportunity of the German EU presidency, as it is in its best interests that the European role be led by Germany, the union's most populated country and its economic locomotive. Most importantly, under German presidency, the EU is likely to be more attentive to Israel's needs due to Germany's ongoing commitment to the Jewish state. Of course, Germany is already a key player in the European field. The approaching presidency, contributing to its leading role, suggests the possibility that German intervention on Middle East questions should be sought for, rather than allowed half-heartedly. The few thousand-strong European troop contribution to the UN peace force in Lebanon is a good start. Now Israel can seek to move a step further.

Whether a historical irony or straightforward political analysis, we find that yesterday's prominent fascist forces have become today's champions of pacifism. Although concern over a strengthened Germany and Japan is understandable, it is time to reconsider our sentiments that are based on a dark past in order to shape policies that will bring a brighter future.

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