

OPEN UP, ALREADY

The World Is J-Curved

By Ian Bremmer

Sunday, October 1, 2006; Page B03

U.S. officials threatening to isolate Iran from the international community may want to take their cue from the Iranian leadership, which is doing a fine job of purging the Islamic Republic of foreign influences all on its own. Last December, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad banned Western music from state-run television and radio. And in mid-May, his government announced plans to increase the number of stations capable of blocking foreign satellite broadcasts from 50 to 300 within two years. Just as its government was making the airwaves safe for theocracy, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice again threatened Iran with "isolation from the international community."

Similarly, the Bush administration insists that if Kim Jong Il's government would dismantle its nuclear program, the U.S. government would support North Korea's integration into the family of nations. If it refuses, Washington will "further deepen North Korea's isolation," Rice said.

What the United States seems not to recognize is that the world's most repressive regimes depend on isolation to survive; they are stable precisely because they are closed. Kim knows he must hide North Korea from the outside world, and the outside world from North Koreans. If half the people of North Korea watched 30 minutes of CNN (or al-Jazeera, for that matter) and fully understood the damage wrought by their government's catastrophic policies and brutality -- or the contrasting standards of living in Japan and South Korea -- Kim's regime might not survive. Threatening that regime with isolation is like threatening a drowning man with a lifeboat.

So, what is the best way to transform a stable but closed state into a stable and open one? Historically, such transformations have required countries to go through a dangerous period of turmoil. Some states, such as South Africa, survive the transition. Others, such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, do not.

In the Middle East, the Bush administration is seeking to spread democracy and free markets -- in essence, to transform closed states into open ones. But imposing such a transformation from the outside is likely to exacerbate the transitional turmoil, as U.S. troops in Iraq are discovering every day. It's easy to push a closed state into instability; it's much tougher to help its citizens build a new political stability based on openness.

Imagine a graph that charts a country's stability on the vertical axis and its openness (both within the country and to the world) on the horizontal one. If each nation appears as a point on the graph, the resulting pattern looks very much like the letter J. Nations higher on the graph are more stable; those lower are less stable. Nations to the right of the dip in the J are more open; those to the left are

less open. This simple J curve captures many of the dilemmas inherent in global politics today.

A state's stability depends on its capacity to withstand shocks and avoid producing them. For instance, when the July presidential election in Mexico resulted in a close vote, recount demands and massive protests in Mexico City, local and foreign investors largely shrugged off the controversy. Why? Over the past several years, the country's political, financial and legal institutions have gained greater public confidence. The government is more competent, and the middle class is growing. Mexico experienced a political shock, but the election revealed the country's underlying political stability.

A country's openness, meanwhile, is the extent to which the state allows people, ideas, information and goods to flow freely across and within its borders. Are foreign books translated into the local language? Can citizens tap independent local, national and international media? Can they travel outside the country? Is foreign investment permitted? Can citizens communicate and conduct business freely?

Open and stable countries on the right side of the J curve have a collective interest in opening up the closed states on the left side. But the most powerful agents for change in any society are the people living in it. Democratizing North Korea from the outside is not a realistic short-term goal. Instead, the gradual infiltration into North Korea of communications technology -- such as cellphones, the Internet, satellite dishes and text-messaging equipment -- is more likely to undermine authoritarian rule from within over time. Consider the recent official reaction in North Korea when discarded VCRs and contraband tapes of South Korean soap operas made it across the border from China. The tapes reportedly became so popular that state-run television warned citizens not to imitate South Korean slang or hairstyles.

Unfortunately, U.S. policy too often helps authoritarian governments isolate their people. The French firm Alcatel recently upgraded Iran's telecom network and provided the country with its first high-speed DSL Internet connections. But when the company began merger talks with the U.S. firm Lucent, some lawmakers here criticized Alcatel's ties with Iran. Wiring the country allowed Iranians to better communicate with one another and the outside world. Instead of condemning the effort, Washington should find ways to imitate it.

Even limited trade ties between open and closed states improve communication between people within and across national boundaries. By inviting countries such as Iran, Russia and Saudi Arabia to join the World Trade Organization, open states can help reinforce the growth of middle classes and create rising expectations for further opening. It won't happen overnight; Cuba and Burma are already WTO members. But it's a first step in a long-term effort.

In the short term, however, it can also be a tremendously destabilizing effort. For a closed stable country to become an open stable one, it must pass through the dip in the J curve -- a transition of greater openness combined with dangerous instability. Is the world ready for open national elections in Pakistan, for example? In Egypt? If fair elections took place next month in China, would the country become more stable or less so?

The dip in the J curve is a frightening place. Sectarian violence and insurgent attacks kill hundreds of Iraqis each week. In such an environment, it is natural for the public to demand a quick return to stability, even if it means sacrificing openness. (Russia, for instance, responded to the chaos of the Boris Yeltsin years by embracing Vladimir Putin -- essentially voting its way back up the left side of the J curve, toward a more stable but authoritarian state.)

Moving right along the J curve is harder; it requires plenty of time and political capital, and neither is abundant in Iraq. Success will require years of troop support and financial assistance. The Bush administration has done little to prepare the American people or the international community for such commitments. And the Iraqi people may not have enough faith in their new government to make the sacrifices necessary to ensure its success. If violence intensifies further, Iraq could eventually generate a new authoritarian regime or collapse into chaos as locals increasingly rely on sectarian militias to defend their interests.

With such turmoil in mind, it's easy to see why the leaders of left-side states will do their best to resist any incremental opening or transition. Kim has no interest in allowing the Peace Corps to move freely around the North Korean countryside letting people know what life is like on the outside. Iran's clerics point their restive youth away from the temptations of Western culture and instead emphasize Western attempts to deny Iran its nuclear program.

Indeed, many authoritarian leaders know that if they provoke the United States, Washington will isolate their countries and thus strengthen their authority. Some of these provocations may seem a little crazy. (See Ahmadinejad on the Holocaust or Kim on, well, any number of things.) But when Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Burma's ruling military junta warn of a U.S. invasion, they are not out of touch with reality; they're merely stealing ideas from the playbook that has helped keep Cuban President Fidel Castro in power for 47 years.

In Iran, standing up to the United States is a winning issue. Indeed, many in Iran's government probably would welcome international sanctions as a useful tool with which to unify Iranians behind the regime, deprive domestic rivals of public support, and rewrite laws to ensure that would-be reformers cannot regain a foothold in government.

By contrast, China's experience with stability and openness is not as clear. The country's openness to trade, foreign investment and advanced communications seems to place it on the right side of the J curve. But in reality, its police-state politics consign it to the left side. In essence, Chinese leaders hope to beat the J curve -- they're gambling that by generating greater prosperity for China's people, they can bring the country into the international community without unleashing the turmoil that flows from opening up an authoritarian state.

Can the Chinese Communist Party survive China's dip in the J curve? Perhaps 11 percent growth will fend off public anger with the country's authoritarian system. Maybe it won't. About 50,000 Chinese police are now charged with monitoring the Internet, but each day, 100,000 Chinese log on for the very first time. And the dangers of a sudden economic slowdown -- which can emerge from a sustained oil price spike or from the imposition of severe travel restrictions following an avian flu outbreak -- could quickly derail China's longer-term political stability. The country could be closer to dangerous instability than many realize.

In one way or another, all states -- even open, stable ones -- are constantly moving along the J curve. Some states swing widely; others shift imperceptibly over time. However, history suggests that all closed states eventually wither or explode; their walls merely hide their potential instability from the world. Only an openness that links citizens within and across nations can help states build stability and social and economic dynamism. Only the free exchange of information, values and people can build global stability that enriches all who take part in it.

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