

Détente is no longer inconceivable as the national interests — the driver of *Realpolitik* — of both converge, not least in Iraq.

But as tensions run high, academics on all sides can try and help defuse them. Some, in particular physicists, are already active in back-channel diplomacy, encouraging détente by opening up informal, person-to-person communications that bypass their stiff-necked leaders. The US National Academy of Sciences is also expanding scientific cooperation and dialogue with Iran. Such efforts are to be applauded.

A crucial imperative is to find a way out of the international crisis over Iran's nuclear programme. Academics have a role here, too. From historians and nuclear physicists to national academies, they can help to elevate the level of debate above that conveyed by Fox News or Iran's state television. They can explain the complex geopolitical realities that have led to the current escalation, but also inject much-needed scientific facts and objectivity into the debates about the purposes of Iran's nuclear efforts.

It is important to unpack the issues. Iran needs to come clean on any past military aims. But the key challenge is to deal with the here and now: regimes' past intents can be changed by forceful diplomacy. Many nuclear experts argue that the most important goal is for the international community to have confidence that Iran's current programme is not diverted to military ends. And so the priority is to persuade Iran to agree to the 1997 'additional protocol' to the IAEA's

safeguards agreement. The protocol gives the agency extra powers, such as short-notice inspections of any site — not just of declared nuclear facilities — and so guards against the biggest worry: clandestine diversion of nuclear expertise.

Iran has not ratified the additional protocol, although it voluntarily allowed equivalent broad access from May 2004 to January 2006. But after United Nations resolutions required it to suspend uranium enrichment, Iran stopped its extended cooperation with the IAEA, and reaped popular domestic support in the process by portraying the actions as foreign threats to their right to nuclear energy.

Earlier this week the United Nations Security Council agreed to further sanctions against Iran in the hope of forcing a suspension of enrichment. Such an aim is indeed desirable for many reasons, but an insistence that there can be no negotiations until Iran ceases enrichment is futile and counterproductive. A negotiated solution would strengthen the hand of reformers in Iran, because it would dilute Ahmadinejad's ability to wield external threats and divert domestic attention from his dire human-rights and economic record.

Many of Iran's democratic forces have their roots in a vibrant scientific community, which too often has been subjected to humiliating visa refusals and actively or passively ostracized by colleagues elsewhere. An experiment for Iranian and US scientists: follow the example of fellow researchers, find a counterpart in your field, and connect with them. ■

The EPA's tailspin

The director of the Environmental Protection Agency is sabotaging both himself and his agency.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is fast losing the few shreds of credibility it has left. The Bush administration has always shown more zeal in protecting business interests than the environment (see *Nature* 447, 892–893; 2007). But the agency's current administrator, Stephen Johnson, a veteran EPA toxicologist who was promoted to the top slot in 2005, has done so with reckless disregard for law, science or the agency's own rules — or, it seems, the anguished protests of his own subordinates.

On 27 February, to take the first of two examples that surfaced last week, Senator Barbara Boxer (Democrat, California) used a routine budget hearing to give Johnson a grilling. Why hadn't he given her state permission to regulate the carbon dioxide emissions of vehicle exhausts? California needs a waiver from the EPA to regulate in this way, and in the past such waivers have been granted easily. And, Boxer reminded him via a series of leaked memos and PowerPoint presentations, Johnson's own top-level staff begged him to sign the waiver in this case. "This is a choice only you can make," one colleague wrote to him. "But I ask you to think about the history and the future of the agency in making it. If you are asked to deny this waiver, I fear the credibility of the agency that we both love will be irreparably damaged."

In December, Johnson announced he would refuse the waiver, an act that would also deny permission to more than a dozen other states seeking to base their exhaust regulations on California's. Johnson

argued that climate change is not a local phenomenon, so dealing with it isn't what the authors of the Clean Air Act intended for the waiver system.

Although logical, this argument is similar to that made by Johnson's EPA in an earlier case involving Massachusetts, when the agency fought against CO₂ regulation all the way to the Supreme Court — and lost. His insistence on using it again can perhaps best be understood from the fact that Johnson answers to a White House that is hostile to regulation on principle. It is also worth noting that his refusal documentation, made official on 29 February, extensively quotes an industry trade association, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

The second example came on 29 February, in the form of a joint letter to Johnson from the four labour unions representing most of the EPA's professional staff. Listing examples of alleged bad faith by Johnson, the unions essentially refused to work with him until he cleans up his act. Among the complaints was an assertion that he repeatedly ignored the EPA's official Principles of Scientific Integrity, citing "fluoride drinking water standards, organophosphate pesticide registration, control of mercury emissions from power plants" — and the waiver refusal.

In a rational world, Johnson would resign in favour of someone who could at least feign an interest in the environment. Alas, it seems that he will probably stay on until January 2009, refusing waivers, fighting lawsuits and further depressing employees' morale. In the meantime, we can only offer those employees a fantasy: the White House doesn't want the agency to do anything, so shut it down until next January. Take some fully paid sabbatical time to relax, and prepare for a return to the old-fashioned protecting of the environment that so many of you joined the agency for. ■