

Are Key Obama Advisors in Tune with Neocon Hawks Who Want to Attack Iran ?

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A familiar coalition of hawks, hardliners, and neoconservatives expects Barack Obama's proposed talks with Iran to fail — and they're already proposing an escalating set of measures instead. Some are meant to occur alongside any future talks. These include steps to enhance coordination with Israel, tougher sanctions against Iran, and a region-wide military buildup of U.S. strike forces, including the prepositioning of military supplies within striking distance of that country.

Once the future negotiations break down, as they are convinced will happen, they propose that Washington quickly escalate to war-like measures, including a U.S. Navy-enforced embargo on Iranian fuel imports and a blockade of that country's oil exports. Finally, of course, comes the strategic military attack against the Islamic Republic of Iran that so many of them have wanted for so long.

It's tempting to dismiss the hawks now as twice-removed from power: first, figures like John Bolton, Paul Wolfowitz, and Douglas Feith were purged from top posts in the Bush administration after 2004; then the election of Barack Obama and the announcement Monday of his centrist, realist-minded team of establishment foreign policy gurus seemed to nail the doors to power shut for the neocons, who have bitterly criticized the president-elect's plans to talk with Iran, withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq, and abandon the reckless Global War on Terrorism rhetoric of the Bush era.

“Kinetic Action” Against Iran

When it comes to Iran, however, it's far too early to dismiss the hawks. To be sure, they are now plying their trade from outside the corridors of power, but they have more friends inside the Obama camp than most people realize. Several top advisers to Obama — including Tony Lake, UN Ambassador-designate Susan Rice, Tom Daschle, and [Dennis Ross](#), along with leading Democratic hawks like Richard Holbrooke, close to Vice-President-elect Joe Biden or Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton — have made common cause with war-minded think-tank hawks at [the Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#) (WINEP), the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and other hardline institutes.

Last spring, Tony Lake and Susan Rice, for example, took part in a WINEP “2008 Presidential Task Force” study which resulted in a report [entitled](#), “Strengthening the Partnership: How to Deepen U.S.-Israel Cooperation on the Iranian Nuclear Challenge.” The Institute, part of the Washington-based Israel lobby, was founded in coordination with the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and has been vigorously supporting a confrontation with Iran. The task force report, issued in June, was overseen by four WINEP heavyweights:

[Robert Satloff](#), WINEP's executive director, Patrick Clawson, its chief Iran analyst, [David Makovsky](#), a senior fellow, and Dennis Ross, an adviser to Obama who is also a WINEP fellow.

Endorsed by both Lake and Rice, the report opted for an alarmist view of Iran 's nuclear program and proposed that the next president set up a formal U.S.-Israeli mechanism for coordinating policy toward Iran (including any future need for "preventive military action"). It drew attention to Israeli fears that "the United States may be reconciling itself to the idea of 'living with an Iranian nuclear bomb,'" and it raised the spurious fear that Iran plans to arm terrorist groups with nuclear weapons.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with consultations between the United States and Israel . But the WINEP report is clearly predisposed to the idea that the United States ought to give undue weight to Israel 's inflated concerns about Iran . And it ignores or dismisses a number of facts: that Iran has no nuclear weapon, that Iran has not enriched uranium to weapons grade, that Iran may not have the know-how to actually construct a weapon even if, sometime in the future, it does manage to acquire bomb-grade material, and that Iran has no known mechanism for delivering such a weapon.

WINEP is correct that the United States must communicate closely with Israel about Iran . Practically speaking, however, a U.S.-Israeli dialogue over Iran 's "nuclear challenge" will have to focus on matters entirely different from those in WINEP's agenda. First, the United States must make it crystal clear to Israel that under no circumstances will it tolerate or support a unilateral Israeli attack against Iran . Second, Washington must make it clear that if Israel were indeed to carry out such an attack, the United States would condemn it, refuse to widen the war by coming to Israel 's aid, and suspend all military aid to the Jewish state. And third, Israel must get the message that, even given the extreme and unlikely possibility that the United States deems it necessary to go to war with Iran , there would be no role for Israel .

Just as in the wars against Iraq in 1990-1991 and 2003-2008, the United States hardly needs Israeli aid, which would be both superfluous and inflammatory. Dennis Ross and others at WINEP, however, would strongly disagree that Israel is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Ross, who served as Middle East envoy for George H.W. Bush and then Bill Clinton, was also a key participant in a September 2008 task force chaired by two former senators, Daniel Coats (R.-Ind.) and Chuck Robb (D.-Va.), and led by Michael Makovsky, brother of WINEP's David Makovsky, who served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the heyday of the Pentagon neocons from 2002-2006. Robb, incidentally, had already served as the neocons' channel into the 2006 Iraq Study Group, chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Representative Lee Hamilton. According to Bob Woodward's latest book, *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008*, it was Robb who insisted that the Baker-Hamilton task force include an option for a "surge" in Iraq .

The report of the Coats-Robb task force — "Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development" — went far beyond the WINEP task force report that Lake and Rice signed off on. It concluded that any negotiations with Iran were unlikely to succeed and should, in any case, be short-lived. As the report put the matter, "It must be clear that any U.S.-Iranian talks will not be open-ended, but will be limited to a pre-determined time period

so that Tehran does not try to ‘run out the clock.’”

Anticipating the failure of the talks, the task force (including Ross) urged “prepositioning military assets,” coupled with a “show of force” in the region. This would be followed almost immediately by a blockade of Iranian gasoline imports and oil exports, meant to paralyze Iran ‘s economy, followed by what they call, vaguely, “kinetic action.”

That “kinetic action” — a U.S. assault on Iran — should, in fact, be massive, suggested the Coats-Robb report. Besides hitting dozens of sites alleged to be part of Iran’s nuclear research program, the attacks would target Iranian air defense and missile sites, communications systems, Revolutionary Guard facilities, key parts of Iran’s military-industrial complex, munitions storage facilities, airfields, aircraft facilities, and all of Iran’s naval facilities. Eventually, they say, the United States would also have to attack Iran ‘s ground forces, electric power plants and electrical grids, bridges, and “manufacturing plants, including steel, autos, buses, etc.”

This is, of course, a hair-raising scenario. Such an attack on a country that had committed no act of war against the United States or any of its allies would cause countless casualties, virtually destroy Iran ‘s economy and infrastructure, and wreak havoc throughout the region. That such a high-level group of luminaries should even propose steps like these — and mean it — can only be described as lunacy. That an important adviser to President-elect Obama would sign on to such a report should be shocking, though it has received next to no attention.

Palling Around with the Neocons

At a November 6 forum at WINEP, [Patrick Clawson](#), the erudite, neoconservative strategist who serves as the organization’s deputy director for research, laid out the institute’s view of how to talk to Iran in the Obama era. Doing so, he said, is critically important, but only to show the rest of the world that the United States has taken the last step for peace — before, of course, attacking. Then, and only then, will the United States have the legitimacy it needs to launch military action against Iran .

“What we’ve got to do is to show the world that we’re making a big deal of engaging the Iranians,” he said, tossing a bone to the new administration. “I’d throw everything, including the kitchen sink, into it.” He advocates this approach only because he believes it won’t work. “The principal target with these offers [to Iran] is not Iran ,” he adds. “The principal target of these offers is American public opinion and world public opinion.”

The Coats-Robb report, Meeting the Challenge,” was written by one of the hardest of Washington ‘s neoconservative hardliners, Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute. Rubin, who spent most of the years since 9/11 either working for AEI or, before and during the war in Iraq , for the Wolfowitz-Feith team at the Pentagon, recently penned a report for the Institute entitled: [“Can A Nuclear Iran Be Deterred or Contained?”](#) Not surprisingly, he believes the answer to be a resounding “no,” although he does suggest that any effort to contain a nuclear Iran would certainly require permanent U.S. bases spread widely in the region, including in Iraq :

“If U.S. forces are to contain the Islamic Republic, they will require basing not only in GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries, but also in Afghanistan , Iraq , Central Asia , and the Caucasus . Without a sizeable regional presence, the Pentagon will not be able to maintain

the predeployed resources and equipment necessary to contain Iran , and Washington will signal its lack of commitment to every ally in the region. Because containment is as much psychological as physical, basing will be its backbone.”

The Coats-Robb report was issued by a little-known group called [the Bipartisan Policy Center](#) (BPC). That organization, too, turns out to be interwoven with WINEP, not least because its foreign policy director is Michael Makovsky. Perhaps the most troubling participant in the Bipartisan Policy Center is Barack Obama’s *minence grise* and one of his most important advisers during the campaign, Tom Daschle, who is slated to be his secretary of health and human services. So far, Daschle has not repudiated BPC’s provocative report.

Ross, along with [Richard Holbrooke](#), recently made appearances amid another collection of superhawks who came together to found a new organization, [United Against Nuclear Iran](#). UANI is [led](#) by Mark Wallace, the husband of Nicole Wallace, a key member of Senator John McCain’s campaign team. Among UANI’s leadership team are Ross and Holbrooke, along with such hardliners as [Jim Woolsey](#), the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and [Fouad Ajami](#), the Arab-American scholar who is a principal theorist on Middle East policy for the neoconservative movement.

UANI is primarily a propaganda outfit. Its mission, it says, is to “inform the public about the nature of the Iranian regime, including its desire and intent to possess nuclear weapons, as well as Iran’s role as a state sponsor of global terrorism, and a major violator of human rights at home and abroad” and to “heighten awareness nationally and internationally about the danger that a nuclear-armed Iran poses to the region and the world.”

Barack Obama has, of course, repeatedly declared his intention to embark on a different path by opening talks with Iran . He’s insisted that diplomacy, not military action, will be at the core of his approach to Tehran . During the election campaign, however, he also stated no less repeatedly that he will not take the threat of military action “off the table.”

Organizations like WINEP, AIPAC, AEI, BPC, and UANI see it as their mission to push the United States toward a showdown with Iran . Don’t sell them short. Those who believe that such a confrontation would be inconceivable under President Obama ought to ask Tony Lake , Susan Rice, Dennis Ross, Tom Daschle, and Richard Holbrooke whether they agree — and, if so, why they’re still palling around with neoconservative hardliners.

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