

Iran target of US Gulf military moves, Gates says

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This report points suggests that the new Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is indeed building the groundwork for a confrontation with Iran.

His statements, which have been fed into the news chain consist in accusing Iran of interfering in Iraq.

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Increased US military activity in the Gulf is aimed at Iran's "very negative" behaviour, the Bush administration said today.

The defence secretary, Robert Gates, told reporters that the decision to deploy a Patriot missile battalion and a second aircraft carrier to the Gulf in conjunction with a "surge" of troops in Iraq was designed to show Iran that the US was not "overcommitted" in Iraq.

Speaking in Brussels after meeting Nato officials, Mr Gates said: "We are simply reaffirming that statement of the importance of the Gulf region to the United States and our determination to be an ongoing strong presence in that area for a long time into the future."

His remarks followed tough comments on Iran at the weekend from other senior US officials. The vice-president, Dick Cheney, accused Iran of "fishing in troubled waters inside Iraq", while the national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, said the US was "going to need to deal with what Iran is doing inside Iraq".

Such remarks, following the prospect of "hot pursuit" raids into Iran as raised by George Bush in his televised address last week, have fuelled speculation that the US is softening up the American public for possible action against Tehran.

The increasingly confrontational pose struck by the US is a repudiation of one of the key recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which called for the start of a dialogue with Iran and Syria in an effort to extricate the US from Iraq.

Mr Gates, who as recently as 2004 publicly called for diplomatic engagement with Iran, said the situation was now different. In 2004, Iran was concerned by the presence of US forces on its eastern and western borders, in Iraq and Afghanistan, but its behaviour had changed.

“The Iranians clearly believe that we are tied down in Iraq, that they have the initiative, that they are in position to press us in many ways,” he said. “They are doing nothing to be constructive in Iraq at this point.”

“And so the Iranians are acting in a very negative way in many respects. My view is that when the Iranians are prepared to play a constructive role in dealing with some of these problems then there might be opportunities for engagement.”

Besides concerns about Iran’s nuclear programme, the US has accused Tehran of supporting Shia militia and of not doing enough to stop foreign fighters from infiltrating Iraq.

US-led forces in northern Iraq arrested five Iranians last week who the US military says were connected to an Iranian Revolutionary Guard faction that funds and arms insurgents in Iraq – a claim Iran has rejected.

Meanwhile, Iran said it was installing 3,000 centrifuges, effectively confirming that its nuclear programme was running behind schedule as these devices for uranium enrichment were meant to have been in place by the end of last year.

“We are moving toward the production of nuclear fuel, which requires 3,000 centrifuges and more than this figure,” the government spokesman Gholamhossein Elham told a news conference. “This programme is being carried out and moving toward completion.”

At the weekend, Iran dismissed reports from Europe that its uranium enrichment programme had stalled. Enriched uranium is used as fuel in nuclear reactors and, at a higher degree of enrichment, in atomic bombs.

Iran has condemned as “invalid” and “illegal” a UN security council resolution that imposed sanctions on it last month for its refusal to halt uranium enrichment.

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