

New UN Sanctions Make US-Iran War More Likely

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1803: Casus Belli

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Passage of the third United Nations Security Council sanctions resolution against Iran makes a war between the United States and Iran more likely. The Bush administration has been pressing the United Nations Security Council for months to pass a third set of sanctions against Iran, which the council [passed](#) as [resolution 1803](#) on March 3, 2008. As part of this effort, the United States delegation has shown uncharacteristic flexibility regarding various provisions of the draft resolution, as Secretary of State Rice and other administration officials have repeatedly called for swift passage of the resolution.

There is reason to suspect the Bush administration's push for passage is actually focused on a single item: Provision (11), which calls upon member states to inspection of cargo bound to or from Iran. This is based on two fundamental assessments: 1) the Bush administrations has [long planned to attack Iran](#); and, 2) the [rationales for these attacks have shifted](#) from nuclear weapons development to direct responsibility for US casualties in Iraq. And now it is likely a new shift in rationale is underway, claiming hostile actions against US vessels and using Provision (11) to create the pretext.

Provision (11) of Resolution 1803 (2008) reads as follows:

Calls upon all States, in accordance with their national legal authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, in particular the law of the sea and relevant international civil aviation agreements, to inspect the cargoes to and from Iran, of aircraft and vessels, at their airports and seaports, owned or operated by Iran Air Cargo and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line, provided there are reasonable grounds to believe that the aircraft or vessel is transporting goods prohibited under this resolution or resolution 1737 (2006) or resolution 1747 (2007);

It is likely that the Bush administration will now move swiftly, within the next few weeks, to use this authority to create a casus belli for attacking Iran. While the resolution limits inspections to air craft and vessels owned or operated by Iran Air Cargo and Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line as well as only at air and sea ports, these restrictions represent fine print issues to the Bush administration that it can circumvent or ignore, perhaps by claims that interceptions at sea are only in pursuit of refused authorized inspections at some port or intelligence about the cargo only arose after a vessel left port.

Such claims could then be followed by a much publicized "chase" of the vessel bound for Iran, accompanied by demands the vessel return to a neutral port for inspection and claims the US is exhausting every effort avoid a crisis. This would continue until the vessel approaches Iranian territorial waters, where it would then be boarded with the maximum expectation of a confrontation between US and Iranian naval vessels or aircraft. It is

assumed the Bush administration would make these public demands as humiliating as possible for Iran in order to reduce the likelihood Iran would comply.

Prelude to War

Recent encounters involving US and Iranian naval vessels show an evolution toward a much more aggressive and manipulative posture in official Washington's characterization of these events. The widely reported [incident between US and Iranian vessels](#) on January 6, 2008 in the [Strait of Hormuz](#) was actually the third such recent encounter. The [first two encounters occurred in December 2007](#), during one of which on December 19, 2007 the USS Whidbey Island fired warning shots toward an approaching Iranian vessel, causing the Iranian vessel to alter course. The first two encounters passed unreported at the time and were largely routine for the area of operations. However, the third encounter on January 6, 2008 was not only characterized as a far more grave "incident" by official Washington, accompanied by [reports by official US sources of threats made against the US vessels](#), based on [video and voice transmission](#) "evidence" released by the Pentagon. Examination of the voice transmission recordings indicated the actual segment containing the only threat was of doubtful authenticity; and, a later release of an [Iranian video](#) of the same incident indicated the Pentagon had mischaracterized its own video.

The import of this evolution, given passage of Security Council Resolution 1803, is clear: While Iran could avoid future incidents by keeping its patrol vessels clear of US vessels so long as both parties operate with good faith in pursuit of innocent passage, United States intercepting and boarding Iranian vessels provides Iran with little opportunity to avoid incidents the US could exploit to justify military action against Iran, should Bush make the decision to attack Iran, using self-defense as justification to bypass or game Congressional approval.

While the actual course of events is unknown and present many alternative possibilities, circumstances suggest one probable sequence of events:

1. One or more naval incidents in which US warships halt the passage of Iranian flag vessels near Iranian territorial waters, provoking some response from these or other Iranian vessels;
2. This in turn permits the US government to characterize these events as hostile acts of war against US enforcement of a Security Council resolution, ordering the US military to react to alleged Iranian actions, promptly escalating from in locus to theater-wide attacks on Iranian naval assets at sea;
3. These are followed, whether there is a significant Iranian response or not, by operations directed at Iranian naval bases;
4. The relatively small US attacking forces directed toward the naval bases are defended by a far larger force that conducts wide-ranging attacks on Iran's air defense systems;

5. This then creates an event platform from which [long planned operations](#) against Iranian industrial and nuclear facilities would be undertaken.

Gravest Consequences

Should this or equivalent events occur, the potential for destabilizing US domestic and international consequences of extreme gravity would be substantial, approaching near certainty. This nominally unattractive and reckless gamble for unclear objectives would fit Bush's pattern of governance, whereby poorly planned and managed military operations are undertaken in pursuit of a mostly secret agenda, [justified by a series of ever changing public rationales](#). Given the risks, it is unlikely war with Iran would be undertaken just for a chance to create conditions in the Middle East that lock in future policy options, as he has in domestic policy with a massive deficit. Instead, given the stakes, Bush would be expected to attack not only his foreign enemies, but at the same time strike at his domestic foes under the cover of the resulting emergency.

The more significant Iran's response or the more disruptive the economic and political consequences, the more likely it would be combined with or be followed by a formal declaration by Bush of a [national emergency](#), possibly affecting US national elections, resulting in a de facto coup d'état and the most serious destabilization of the United States since the civil war. While these risks would normally result in swift dismissal of such a plan of action, unfortunately such an attack on Iran would be consistent with Bush's history of striking out at those who impede or criticize him as well as his willingness to take radical actions because of an apparent failure to appreciate the institutional and systemic costs involved.

Backing Away from the Brink

Finally, this is admittedly an extreme assessment. However, given Bush wants to attack Iran and does, these appear to be the likely consequences. To further assess their likelihood, ask the question: If Bush wants to attack Iran, who is to stop him? Not the United States Congress; not the United Nations; not the courts; not public opinion, nor the press. The one chance, however slight, of stopping Bush would rest almost entirely with the British government, if Parliament became aware of the plan and renounced it prior to the commencement of hostilities.

While nothing can be done to prevent a completely fabricated incident, clearly Iran would be expected to reduce the threat of attacks upon itself by the following:

1. Never issue any threats against the US or its allies, and only assert Iran would defend itself if attacked;
2. Should its ships be challenged, Iran might halt the vessel at sea and offer to be boarded by UN inspectors only, claiming that US personnel might try to "plant" items on Iranian vessels and/or later use fabricated videos, or that an armed boarding party might precipitate a dangerous confrontation;
3. As the crisis develops, Iran might order all its vessels and aircraft either to return

to their bases or to disperse away from the confrontation area as well as undertake other detectable preparations to indicate Iran anticipates an attack, hoping to signal the White House, via the Pentagon's real time assessments, likely significant cost to the US of an attack;

4. Publicly warn about fabricated incidents prior to any naval confrontation, and repeat these warnings upon the commencement of any confrontation;
5. Warn recipient nations of likely long term disruption to oil and gas deliveries;
6. Undertake diplomatic efforts, including convening the UN Security Council to address US violations of the sanction's limits.

While there is some chance of stabilizing the situation early in the sequence of escalating events, this would require the concerted efforts of responsible US, Iranian, and international governing authorities, provided Bush can be persuaded to halt the attacks, the Iranians to limit their response to within their borders, and the rest of the world's governments and populace to respond with sufficient restraint. But history gives small comfort about such a turn of events involving nations with irresponsible leadership and substantial resources.

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