

Nuking Iran

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Foad Khosmood: In the April 17 issue of New Yorker Magazine Seymour Hersh has an eye-opening piece that quotes Administration insiders who suggest nuclear war with Iran is a serious option. You had written back in October of 2005 that “The strategic decision by the United States to nuke Iran was probably made long ago.” What led you to that conclusion at that time? What do you think of the Hersh piece?

Jorge Hirsch: Of course the Hersh piece is extremely useful in bringing this issue to the forefront of public attention. However already several months ago an analysis of the facts led me to the conviction that a deliberate decision had been made to use nuclear weapons against Iran. First, the US pursuit over several years to get an IAEA resolution against Iran, no matter how weak, which it finally achieved in September 2005. It didn't make any sense as a diplomatic move if the goal was to exert pressure on Iran, in view of the clear dissent by Russia and China. It had two purposes: one was to bring the issue eventually to the UN Security Council, even knowing that Russia and China would veto any action against Iran, so that, just as in the case of Iraq, the US could argue that other countries share its concern but not the resolve to act. But more importantly, the US issued a commitment to the UN in 1995 that it wouldn't use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries signatories of the NPT, which however explicitly excluded countries that are in “non-compliance” with the NPT. So by securing the IAEA resolution of September 2005 of Iran's “non-compliance” the US achieved that it can now use nuclear weapons against Iran “legally”, i.e. without violating its 1995 commitment. This explains why it was pushing for it so adamantly.

Furthermore the US has radically changed its nuclear weapons policies since 2001 to erase the sharp line that traditionally existed between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons. It now “integrates” both types of weapons in its military strategy, and envisions the use of nuclear weapons against underground facilities, preemptively against countries “intending” to use WMD's against US forces, and “for rapid and favorable war termination on US terms”. Several scenarios like that, that apply specifically to the Iran scenario, were made public in 2005 in the Pentagon draft document “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations”, to prepare the country for what was being planned.

Furthermore, the administration has been pushing Congress every year to fund new nuclear weapons, “more usable” nuclear weapons, and bunker busting nuclear weapons, to prepare the public mind for the attack. Many are under the mistaken impression that Congress has resisted these efforts, however they forget or don't know that the B61-11, a bunker-buster that can be used against Iranian underground facilities, is in the US arsenal since 2001. Its yield (power) is classified but is likely to include very low yield, to cause “reduced collateral damage” and thus be more “acceptable”.

Furthermore, as I pointed out several months ago and is also mentioned by Hersh, the administration is stacked with nuclear weapons experts that are hawks and participated in the formulation of the new nuclear weapons policies: National Security advisor (Hadley), deputy national security advisor (Crouch II), undersecretary of defense for intelligence (Cambone), chairman of the Pentagon's Defense Science Board (Schneider), undersecretary of state for arms control and international security (Joseph) and ambassador to the UN (Bolton). Bolton was appointed in the face of very strong bipartisan opposition. None of these positions require specific nuclear weapons expertise, however these "nuclear warriors" are in high positions for a reason: to advise President Bush to use nuclear weapons. And let's not forget Cheney, who was the architect of new nuclear weapons policies back in 1992 to target non-nuclear-weapon countries, and Rumsfeld who advocates a smaller high tech military where nuclear weapons play an essential role.

It also became clear to me that there is a long-term advantage in the view of advocates of America's "preeminent role in the world" (PNAC) to use nuclear weapons against Iran: to establish the credibility of the US nuclear "deterrent" against non-nuclear countries that pursue courses of action contrary to US interests. The Iran situation lends itself to a scenario where the US use of nuclear weapons will appear to be "inevitable", under the conditions that have been created by the US carefully and methodically over the course of several years for that purpose. Finally, I believe President Bush has embraced the breaking of the 60-year old taboo against the use of nuclear weapons as his personal goal, to be his lasting "legacy" that will overshadow other "accomplishments" of his administration.

FKh: Is a war with Iran now inevitable? Is a nuclear war inevitable?

JH: If there is an aerial bombing of Iran, I believe it is inevitable it will go nuclear. The intention is there, the advisors are there, the nuclear policies and the weapons are there. The excuses to make it "acceptable" to the American public are there. The President has sole authority to order the use of nuclear weapons, Congress has no say. The chain of command doesn't go through the Joint Chiefs of Staff that may oppose it as Hersh mentions: it goes directly from Bush and Rumsfeld to commanders of the Unified Combatant Commands such as Gen. Abizaid and Gen. Cartwright. Unless those individuals disobey orders, there is no way to stop it.

I believe there is a high probability of war with Iran because key people in the administration desperately want it, but I don't believe it is inevitable. I hope there will be a sufficiently large public outburst of opposition, eg thanks to Hersh's and other's revelations, to make it impossible. The dire situation in Iraq of course is making it more difficult, and I hope there will be strong voices in the administration and influential republicans that will recognize the likely disastrous consequences and oppose it. Or perhaps influential old-timers like Bush Sr. and Scowcroft will be able to dissuade President Bush.

However I believe there is very little time: an attack may well happen within the next 2 weeks, while Congress is in recess. There is no advantage to those that want it to happen in waiting.

FKh: What is the rationale for America using nukes on Iran, given that even the CIA believes Iran is at least "10 years" from any nuclear weapon production?

JH: The use of nuclear weapons against Iran will be justified by "military necessity". In theory, Iran could equip missile warheads with chemical or biological weapons and aim them

at Israeli cities or US bases in the area. The declared US policy of “preemption” would “justify” using highly accurate earth penetrating nuclear weapons to destroy missile silos or suspected underground facilities housing WMD’s. The argument will be made that a few hundred or thousand Iranian “collateral damage” casualties of low yield earth penetrating nuclear weapons is preferable to potential tens of thousands of US or Israeli casualties from Iranian missiles equipped with WMD warheads.

The US accuses Iran of having clandestine chemical and biological weapons facilities, even though it doesn’t present proof of such assertions, and despite the fact that Iran is signatory of the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological Weapons Convention treaties. Furthermore the US has worked very hard over the past 15 years to create the perception that nuclear, biological and chemical weapons are all similar “WMD”’s, to prepare the ground for the US use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon countries. However the scientific fact is, nuclear weapons are million-fold more destructive than all other weapons and in contrast to chemical and biological weapons there is no protection against nuclear weapons.

FKh: What would be the likely impact on the EU3/IAEA/UN negotiation process for Iran? Some theorized that the Bush Administration is hoping Iran would withdraw from the NPT, like North Korea did, creating an excuse for intervention. What is your view on this?

JH: Just like in the run-up to the Iraq war, I believe there was the hope that Iran would withdraw from the NPT to create conditions to “justify” an aerial attack. Iran would have been justified in withdrawing, since its right as an NPT signatory are clearly being violated. Wisely it has chosen not to do so. North Korea is in the fortunate situation of having a deterrent to US attack, a few nuclear weapons with which it could retaliate if attacked. Iran does not have that recourse.

FKh: Could the threat of using American nuclear weapons be overplayed in order to serve as a “limit” to any Iranian response to a conventional attack/strike? I distinctly recall in the first months of 2003, the Administration leaked that US is prepared to use nuclear weapons in “retaliation” if Saddam decided to use chemical weapons against advancing US troops.

JH: I don’t believe the threat of American nuclear weapons use is being overplayed. Iran will respond to a conventional attack with conventional weapons (eg missiles) and will not be deterred by a US nuclear threat from doing so. The US will use nuclear weapons against Iran because certain sectors of the American establishment, that are in power now, believe it is in the long term strategic interest of the US to do so.

FKh: Is Iran’s recent show of force in the Persian Gulf through military exercises involving high-speed torpedoes significant to the US establishment?

JH: I don’t believe it is. The US can use overwhelming force against Iran, including nuclear weapons, and Iranian military power is relatively insignificant. The US can destroy a large number of Iranian facilities with relatively little risk to US forces. As Gen. Abizaid recently remarked, “If you ever even contemplate our nuclear capability, it should give everybody the clear understanding that there is no power that can match the United States militarily.” However no US military power will be able to contain the chaos and asymmetrical warfare

that will engulf the region after the US attacks Iran.

FKh: Is there any likelihood of UN Security Council approving any kind of force against Iran? What about Sanctions?

JH: I don't think there is any likelihood the UN Security Council will approve any kind of force nor sanctions against Iran. Iran is well within its rights within the NPT to enrich uranium on an industrial scale. The US does not want Iran to do it even on a research scale, it doesn't want Iran to have even the "knowledge" or "capability" to do so. President Bush openly acknowledged Iran's right (in the March 16 NSS, and also earlier) when he said that this is a "loophole" of the NPT. Well, one party to a treaty cannot simply declare part of a mutually agreed treaty a "loophole", and expect other parties to automatically submit to unilateral modifications of the treaty.

Russia and China recognize that it is Iran's right to enrich uranium, so they will not agree to force or sanctions against Iran, and since both have veto power at the UN Security Council, neither of those courses of action will be approved by the Security Council.

FKh: Can Russia and China be persuaded to back the Bush regime the way IAEA member India was just weeks ago when it voted to report Iran to the UN? It is often mentioned that these countries have economic interests in Iran, but doesn't that mean they could be "bribed" with bigger incentives from the US?

JH: Neither Russia nor China can be persuaded to back the US in this instance. There are no "bigger incentives" that the US could offer to Russia and China, they are backing a legitimate right of Iran, and it is not to their strategic advantage to allow for further expansion of US power in that region. India could indeed be bought off by US incentives like the nuclear deal, because its shortsighted leaders don't recognize that they are committing national suicide by entering into this nuclear deal with the US.

FKh: Does the US Congress pose any barrier to this administration? Some say in an election year, where Republicans could lose control of Congress, risky actions like war -or even riskier "nuclear" war- will not be approved. What do you think?

JH: Congress is unfortunately not posing barriers to the administration in the Iran situation, on the contrary some democrats sound even more hawkish than the administration. This is likely to be in large part due to the very effective work of AIPAC, and the persistent US propaganda over the years that Iran is the "prime sponsor" of terrorism, developing weapons of mass destruction and even having ties with Al Qaeda. Those statements have as little proof as the propaganda against Iraq had, yet Congress has accepted them as facts.

I don't believe the prospect of losing control of Congress plays a role in the thinking of the people in the administration that are intent in nuking Iran. They regard this action as being in the long term strategic interest of the United States, they have worked towards this goal for many years, so that short term setbacks like losing control of Congress are not likely to be a deterrent. The invasion of Iraq doesn't make sense in isolation, since it would leave Iran in a much stronger position in the region. The intent was always to attack Iran after invading Iraq, to suppress Iran's rise as a strong regional power that does not conform to US interests.

FKh: Some in Iran's substantial exile community think it best to pressure Iran's

government to back off the confrontation. It seems Iranian leadership is backed into a political corner but If Iran suddenly decided to “give in” and stop nuclear production, will that pacify the Bush Administration?

JH: It will not, the nuclear issue is just an excuse. The US has built its case against Iran over many years, see for example the 1998 Rumsfeld report: “Iran is placing extraordinary emphasis on its ballistic missile and WMD development programs.”, “Iran has acquired and is seeking major, advanced missile components that can be combined to produce ballistic missiles with sufficient range to strike the United States.”; “Iran is developing weapons of mass destruction. It has a nuclear energy and weapons program, which aims to design, develop, and as soon as possible produce nuclear weapons.” Those are just assertions, with no backing from reality. In 1993 the CIA estimated that Iran was 8-10 years away from acquiring nuclear weapons, the NIE estimate 12 years later is that it is still 10 years away.

If Iran declared it will stop nuclear production, the US would make other demands: that it opens up all its military facilities to inspections, destroys all its missiles, whatever it takes to get Iran to say “no”, and then use that as a reason to attack.

The best assurance that Iran will not develop nuclear weapons is to allow it to have a full civilian nuclear program under IAEA supervision, as allowed by the NPT, including uranium enrichment to 3%, well below weapons-grade uranium at 90%, as many other non-nuclear-weapon countries do. Bombing Iran will drive its nuclear program underground and ensure it will do the utmost to acquire nuclear weapons as soon as possible.

FKh: Will the American people really stand for another “Iraq” only 3 years after the previous one?

JH: Unfortunately the American people will not be asked, and neither will Congress. In signing into law the congressional authorization to use force against Iraq in October 2002, the President explicitly stated that even though he appreciated receiving that support he didn’t need it, since he has the authority to initiate military action under the War Powers Resolution, and he can also invoke the 2001 Senate Joint Resolution 23 alleging that Iran supports terrorism against the US. First the bombing will start, then the President will address Congress and the public to “explain” the action and ask for support.

FKh: Just last week you wrote in AntiWar.com: “People in the know have to come forward with information that brings the impending attack to the forefront of attention of Congress and the American public and thwarts it.” Is the Hersh article what you had in mind?

JH: Yes, the Hersh article is an example of what I had in mind, but it is not enough. People in the know have to come out and reveal detailed plans, for example whether tactical nuclear weapons are already deployed in the Persian Gulf region. This is very likely to be so, and American people have a right to know. Of course revealing classified information is punishable under US law. However it should be remember that the Nuremberg principles (crafted by the US and its allies) established that international law supersedes internal law. The use of nuclear weapons against Iran, and any preparations to that effect, would be illegal and immoral under international law (eg 1996 International Court of Justice opinion, that the US is bound to). General Pace repeatedly warned Iraqis during the 2003 invasion that any use by them of WMD would be “illegal and immoral”, and he very recently advised

the US military that “It is the absolute responsibility of everybody in uniform to disobey an order that is either illegal or immoral”.

I am convinced the American people will stand behind and support anybody that has the courage to “break the law” and reveal that the US is about to break the 60-year-old taboo on the use of nuclear weapons, since such an action by the US will cause long term grave damage to America. And I am convinced that if the administration goes through with this plan, those responsible will eventually be brought to justice.

FKh: You have mentioned a threat of Iranian chemical and biological weapons as a justification for invasion. You’ve even theorized that such an argument may be framed in the context of the Avian Flu pandemic threat to Europe and America. Is the administration really that desperate for a context? And does this not betray that there is no real danger from Iran?

JH: By now there is an international consensus that there is no “imminent threat” from Iranian nuclear weapons. Even those that argue that Iran is intent in developing nuclear weapons acknowledge that Iran would need several years to do so. The Israeli “point of no return argument” has been at times adopted by administration officials (eg Robert Joseph) but is not very convincing. To justify a US attack, that is likely to escalate into large scale military action, an “imminent threat” is needed. The US accuses Iran of having chemical and biological weapons and programs as well as of sponsoring terrorism, and it is natural to expect that some combination of those allegations will be used. E.g. that Iran is about to launch missiles with chemical or biological warheads against US troops in Iraq, or is about to give terrorist groups chemical or biological weapons to be used against America. It is important to note that Executive Order 13292 of 2003 made information on “weapons of mass destruction” and on “defense against international terrorism” classified. The reason for that is so that such allegations would not be subject to public scrutiny prior to the attack.

There are however several reasons that point to the Avian flu pandemic threat as a convenient excuse: 1) It has a natural time element that cannot be postponed, the yearly bird migration season; 2) The bird flu “danger” has been played up by administration officials far beyond what is scientifically justified; 3) Administration officials emphasize the danger of bird flu transmission over long distances by wild birds, even though this is scientifically in doubt; 4) Iran has an advanced biotechnology and biomedical effort, and the US accuses Iran of having a bioweapons program embedded in it. It is natural that Iran would be studying the H5N1 avian flu virus, even the US is deliberately trying to develop dangerous mutations of the virus to learn how to combat them. 5) There are scientists in the US administration and in the US military that have warned about the danger of influenza as a bioweapon.

Of course what I discuss above answers the last part of your question: there is no real danger from Iran, it is all fabricated.

FKh: What will be the likely Iranian response to a conventional air strike? What about a nuclear strike?

JH: Iran is likely to respond to any US attack using its considerable missile arsenal against US forces in Iraq and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf. Israel may attempt to stay out of the conflict, it is not clear whether Iran would target Israel in a retaliatory strike but it is certainly possible. If the US attack includes nuclear weapons use against Iranian facilities, as

I believe is very likely, rather than deterring Iran it will cause a much more violent response. Iranian military forces and militias are likely to storm into southern Iraq and the US may be forced to use nuclear weapons against them, causing large scale casualties and inflaming the Muslim world. There could be popular uprisings in other countries in the region like Pakistan, and of course a Shiite uprising in Iraq against American occupiers.

Finally I would like to discuss the grave consequences to America and the world if the US uses nuclear weapons against Iran. First, the likelihood of terrorist attacks against Americans both on American soil and abroad will be enormously enhanced after these events. And terrorist's attempts to get hold of "loose nukes" and use them against Americans will be enormously incentivized after the US used nuclear weapons against Iran.

Second, it will destroy America's position as the leader of the free world. The rest of the world rightly recognizes that nuclear weapons are qualitatively different from all other weapons, and that there is no sharp distinction between small and large nuclear weapons, or between nuclear weapons targeting facilities versus those targeting armies or civilians. It will not condone the breaking of the nuclear taboo in an unprovoked war of aggression against a non-nuclear country, and the US will become a pariah state.

Third, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty will cease to exist, and many of its 182 non-nuclear-weapon-country signatories will strive to acquire nuclear weapons as a deterrent to an attack by a nuclear nation. With no longer a taboo against the use of nuclear weapons, any regional conflict may go nuclear and expand into global nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are million-fold more powerful than any other weapon, and the existing nuclear arsenals can obliterate humanity many times over. In the past, global conflicts terminated when one side prevailed. In the next global conflict we will all be gone before anybody has prevailed.

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