

The US, Iran and the End of the International Order

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According to a recent article by Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker, the US military has moved from contingency to operational planning to prepare for an attack on Iran. Former US intelligence operative William Arkin has revealed in the Washington Post that the Bush Administration actually started preparing for a war against Iran as early as 2002. While the Administration officially claims to be looking for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, it is feared the decision to go to war was made a long time ago and will not be reconsidered. What are the real reasons behind this belligerence?

As the IAEA has repeatedly acknowledged, Iran is not in violation of any of her legal obligations as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In fact, Iran has allowed far more intrusive international inspections of her nuclear facilities than required by the NPT. Iran remains the only country to have done so. Iran has repeatedly stated that she does not wish to develop nuclear weapons, even though many Western and Israeli analysts, including the leading Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld, have accepted it would clearly be in Iran's strategic interest to possess such weapons as deterrence. There is, however, simply no evidence whatsoever that Iran is, or intends to be, developing nuclear weapons.

Iran has repeatedly, at least from the year 2002 onwards, expressed her willingness to engage in bilateral negotiations with the US, with the ultimate goal of normalizing the two countries' relations. Reportedly Iran could even consider recognising Israel in exchange for security guarantees from the US. All such overtures by Iran have hitherto been ignored by the Bush Administration, although it is noteworthy that senior Republican senator Richard Lugar recently called for direct US-Iranian negotiations. Meanwhile the Bush Administration and the media that support its belligerent stance have made an effort to demonize Iran and, in particular, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This sort of demonization is a familiar phenomenon to all those who followed the countdown to the attack on and invasion of Iraq. According to this logic, one simply cannot negotiate with "madmen", one can only issue one ultimatum after another and thus show that the "madmen" will not compromise and therefore must be "taken out".

While some in the Bush Administration undoubtedly believe Iran's nuclear energy programme may ultimately threaten Israel, and perhaps even the US, it seems clear that, what is really at stake here is American geopolitical hegemony over the vast oil and gas reserves of the Middle East. By invading Iraq and removing the Baathist dictatorship the US actually helped religious Shi'ite parties, closely allied with Iran, seize power in Baghdad. In other words, Iran's regional prestige grew enormously as a result of the invasion of Iraq. Now Iran has good relations with practically all her neighbours and can be considered the most powerful country in the Middle East (perhaps apart from nuclear-armed Israel). It is

remarkable that none of Iran's neighbours regard the Iranian nuclear energy programme as a threat: even Saudi Arabia has said so repeatedly, and according to recent reports, Saudi representatives have visited Moscow to plead with the Russian leaders that they do everything in their power to stop an American attack on Iran.

Ultimately the whole crisis is most likely caused by Peak Oil. The US wants to use her military superiority, perhaps including her massive nuclear arsenal, to assert control of the largest remaining fossil fuel reserves in the world. Iran is such a big problem because, while the US has - for ideological reasons - refused to do business with the Islamic Republic, China, Japan, Russia and India have stepped in and secured lucrative deals with the Iranians. This is quite worrying: any attack on Iran can be seen as an indirect attack on China and Russia, among others. China could conceivably retaliate, for instance, by collapsing the dollar (her dollar reserves are the largest of any country), and that would be a serious escalation, potentially leading to catastrophic consequences. Similarly, any attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would probably kill many Russian engineers and technicians working in them; Russia's response could be unpredictable. One must also not forget that an attack would surely infuriate the whole Muslim world and, in particular, Iran's Shi'ite brethren in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan, Lebanon etc. and markedly increase the risk of Islamic terrorism worldwide.

Should the US attack Iran with nuclear weapons, as reportedly planned, a 60-year-old taboo against these weapons would be instantly abolished and all nuclear powers would be ready to use similar weapons too. Non-nuclear countries would undoubtedly hasten to produce their own doomsday arsenals, and the likelihood of an all-out nuclear war would grow significantly. It is ominous that the semi-official Foreign Affairs recently published an article which speculated that the US could possibly take out Russian nuclear arsenal with Russia incapable to retaliate; reportedly the article was read with extreme alarm in Moscow.

To conclude, if the US does attack Iran, she will surely be "crossing the Rubicon": the established international order will be gone forever, and the whole Middle East may go up in flames. It remains to be seen whether a desperate attempt to control the Middle Eastern oil and gas, by a country on the verge of bankruptcy, will be considered worthwhile by that country's leaders in Washington.

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