

# War Signals? What is the White House Planning in Relation to Iran?

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As reports circulate of a sharp debate within the White House over possible US military action against Iran and its nuclear enrichment facilities, The Nation has learned that the Bush Administration and the Pentagon have issued orders for a major “strike group” of ships, including the nuclear aircraft carrier Eisenhower as well as a cruiser, destroyer, frigate, submarine escort and supply ship, to head for the Persian Gulf, just off Iran’s western coast. This information follows a report in the current issue of Time magazine, both online and in print, that a group of ships capable of mining harbors has received orders to be ready to sail for the Persian Gulf by October 1.

As Time writes in its cover story, “What Would War Look Like?,” evidence of the forward deployment of minesweepers and word that the chief of naval operations had asked for a reworking of old plans for mining Iranian harbors “suggest that a much discussed-but until now largely theoretical-prospect has become real: that the U.S. may be preparing for war with Iran.”

According to Lieut. Mike Kafka, a spokesman at the headquarters of the Second Fleet, based in Norfolk, Virginia, the Eisenhower Strike Group, bristling with Tomahawk cruise missiles, has received recent orders to depart the United States in a little over a week. Other official sources in the public affairs office of the Navy Department at the Pentagon confirm that this powerful armada is scheduled to arrive off the coast of Iran on or around October 21.

The Eisenhower had been in port at the Naval Station Norfolk for several years for refurbishing and refueling of its nuclear reactor; it had not been scheduled to depart for a new duty station until at least a month later, and possibly not till next spring. Family members, before the orders, had moved into the area and had until then expected to be with their sailor-spouses and parents in Virginia for some time yet. First word of the early dispatch of the “Ike Strike” group to the Persian Gulf region came from several angry officers on the ships involved, who contacted antiwar critics like retired Air Force Col. Sam Gardiner and complained that they were being sent to attack Iran without any order from the Congress.

“This is very serious,” said Ray McGovern, a former CIA threat-assessment analyst who got early word of the Navy officers’ complaints about the sudden deployment orders. (McGovern, a twenty-seven-year veteran of the CIA, resigned in 2002 in protest over what he said were Bush Administration pressures to exaggerate the threat posed by Iraq. He and other intelligence agency critics have formed a group called Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.)

Colonel Gardiner, who has taught military strategy at the National War College, says that the carrier deployment and a scheduled Persian Gulf arrival date of October 21 is “very important evidence” of war planning. He says, “I know that some naval forces have already received ‘prepare to deploy orders’ [PTDOs], which have set the date for being ready to go as October 1. Given that it would take about from October 2 to October 21 to get those forces to the Gulf region, that looks about like the date” of any possible military action against Iran. (A PTDO means that all crews should be at their stations, and ships and planes should be ready to go, by a certain date—in this case, reportedly, October 1.) Gardiner notes, “You cannot issue a PTDO and then stay ready for very long. It’s a very significant order, and it’s not done as a training exercise.” This point was also made in the Time article.

So what is the White House planning?

On Monday President Bush addressed the UN General Assembly at its opening session, and while studiously avoiding even physically meeting Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was also addressing the body, he offered a two-pronged message. Bush told the “people of Iran” that “we’re working toward a diplomatic solution to this crisis” and that he looked forward “to the day when you can live in freedom.” But he also warned that Iran’s leaders were using the nation’s resources “to fund terrorism and fuel extremism and pursue nuclear weapons.” Given the President’s assertion that the nation is fighting a “global war on terror” and that he is Commander in Chief of that “war,” his prominent linking of the Iran regime with terror has to be seen as a deliberate effort to claim his right to carry the fight there. Bush has repeatedly insisted that the 2001 Congressional Authorization for the Use of Force that preceded the invasion of Afghanistan was also an authorization for an unending “war on terror.”

Even as Bush was making not-so-veiled threats at the UN, his former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, a sharp critic of any unilateral US attack on Iran, was in Norfolk, not far from the Eisenhower, advocating further diplomatic efforts to deal with Iran’s nuclear program—itsself tantalizing evidence of the policy struggle over whether to go to war, and that those favoring an attack may be winning that struggle.

“I think the plan’s been picked: bomb the nuclear sites in Iran,” says Gardiner. “It’s a terrible idea, it’s against US law and it’s against international law, but I think they’ve decided to do it.” Gardiner says that while the United States has the capability to hit those sites with its cruise missiles, “the Iranians have many more options than we do: They can activate Hezbollah; they can organize riots all over the Islamic world, including Pakistan, which could bring down the Musharraf government, putting nuclear weapons into terrorist hands; they can encourage the Shia militias in Iraq to attack US troops; they can blow up oil pipelines and shut the Persian Gulf.” Most of the major oil-producing states in the Middle East have substantial Shiite populations, which has long been a concern of their own Sunni leaders and of Washington policy-makers, given the sometimes close connection of Shiite populations to Iran’s religious rulers.

Of course, Gardiner agrees, recent ship movements and other signs of military preparedness could be simply a bluff designed to show toughness in the bargaining with Iran over its nuclear program. But with the Iranian coast reportedly armed to the teeth with Chinese Silkworm antiship missiles, and possibly even more sophisticated Russian antiship weapons, against which the Navy has little reliable defenses, it seems unlikely the Navy would risk high-value assets like aircraft carriers or cruisers with such a tactic. Nor has bluffing been a

Bush MO to date.

Commentators and analysts across the political spectrum are focusing on Bush's talk about dialogue, with many claiming that he is climbing down from confrontation. On the right, David Frum, writing on September 20 in his National Review blog, argues that the lack of any attempt to win a UN resolution supporting military action, and rumors of "hushed back doors" being opened in Washington, lead him to expect a diplomatic deal, not a unilateral attack. Writing in the center, Washington Post reporter Glenn Kessler saw in Bush's UN speech evidence that "war is no longer a viable option" in Iran. Even on the left, where confidence in the Bush Administration's judgment is abysmally low, commentators like Noam Chomsky and Nation contributor Robert Dreyfuss are skeptical that an attack is being planned. Chomsky has long argued that Washington's leaders aren't crazy, and would not take such a step—though more recently, he has seemed less sanguine about Administration sanity and has suggested that leaks about war plans may be an effort by military leaders—who are almost universally opposed to widening the Mideast war—to arouse opposition to such a move by Bush and war advocates like Cheney. Dreyfuss, meanwhile, in an article for the online journal TomPaine.com, focuses on the talk of diplomacy in Bush's Monday UN speech, not on his threats, and concludes that it means "the realists have won" and that there will be no Iran attack.

But all these war skeptics may be whistling past the graveyard. After all, it must be recalled that Bush also talked about seeking diplomatic solutions the whole time he was dead-set on invading Iraq, and the current situation is increasingly looking like a cheap Hollywood sequel. The United States, according to Gardiner and others, already reportedly has special forces operating in Iran, and now major ship movements are looking ominous.

Representative Maurice Hinchey, a leading Democratic critic of the Iraq War, informed about the Navy PTDOs and about the orders for the full Eisenhower Strike Group to head out to sea, said, "For some time there has been speculation that there could be an attack on Iran prior to November 7, in order to exacerbate the culture of fear that the Administration has cultivated now for over five or six years. But if they attack Iran it will be a very bad mistake, for the Middle East and for the US. It would only make worse the antagonism and fear people feel towards our country. I hope this Administration is not so foolish and irresponsible." He adds, "Military people are deeply concerned about the overtaxing of the military already."

Calls for comment from the White House on Iran war plans and on the order for the Eisenhower Strike Group to deploy were referred to the National Security Council press office, which declined to return this reporter's phone calls.

McGovern, who had first told a group of anti-Iraq War activists Sunday on the National Mall in Washington, DC, during an ongoing action called "Camp Democracy," about his being alerted to the strike group deployment, warned, "We have about seven weeks to try and stop this next war from happening."

One solid indication that the dispatch of the Eisenhower is part of a force buildup would be if the carrier Enterprise—currently in the Arabian Sea, where it has been launching bombing runs against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and which is at the end of its normal six-month sea tour—is kept on station instead of sent back to the United States. Arguing against simple rotation of tours is the fact that the Eisenhower's refurbishing and its dispatch were rushed forward by at least a month. A report from the Enterprise on the Navy's official website

referred to its ongoing role in the Afghanistan fighting, and gave no indication of plans to head back to port. The Navy itself has no comment on the ship's future orders.

Jim Webb, Secretary of the Navy in the Reagan Administration and currently a Democratic candidate for Senate in Virginia, expressed some caution about reports of the carrier deployment, saying, "Remember, carrier groups regularly rotate in and out of that region." But he added, "I do not believe that there should be any elective military action taken against Iran without a separate authorization vote by the Congress. In my view, the 2002 authorization which was used for the invasion of Iraq should not extend to Iran."

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