



BACKGROUND

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Congress to White House: Don't Attack Iran

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The Bush Administration's recent about-face on talking to Iran has tempered concerns about another war in the Middle East. We can only be glad that four months after the Iraq Study Group's recommendations, the Administration has begun to take the sensible course they outlined.

Yet we should not be complacent. Recent saber rattling has made the possibility of an escalation from rhetorical combat to real combat acute, despite the recent move to diplomacy. Congressional leaders should remain steadfast in stating that it would be absolutely wrong to use military force against Iran right now: it is the worst possible time, and other options have not been exhausted.

The Situation

First, let's be clear: the Iranian government is a real threat to American national security. In Iraq, Shiite militias receive arms, training, financing, and political support from Iran, and some elements of the Sunni insurgency may be using Iranian explosives (as well as arms from some neighboring Sunni states). Iran has used its considerable influence within Iraq to play a double game: bolstering Shiite allies within the government, and sowing enough discord to cause us problems.

Beyond Iraq, the Iranian government is among the worst state sponsors of terrorism, notably through its support of the armed wings of Hizbollah and Hamas. Iran's rising influence in the Middle East has contributed to the discord in Lebanon and the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And

Iran's President Ahmadinejad has called for the destruction of Israel and denied the Holocaust.

Iran also has a government that opposes nearly every progressive value. Iran's clerical regime has instituted repressive laws on a populace that has traditionally been amongst the region's most worldly and educated. Women are stoned for adultery, children are imprisoned, homosexuals are hung in public, dissent is stifled, legitimate candidates are thrown off the ballot.

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Most disturbingly, Iran continues to develop its nuclear program. Given its links to terrorists, its belligerent rhetoric about wiping Israel off the map, and its potential to start a nuclear arms race in the region, a nuclear-armed Iran would be a nightmare.

What to Do: The Administration's Approach

Iran is a problem. But what is the solution? The Bush Administration has belatedly heeded calls from Congress and the Iraq Study Group to sit down at a meeting with Iran. This is a positive step forward, yet it comes after a series of more belligerent steps.

Time and again, tough talk toward Iran has been used as a substitute for a clear policy. President Bush has spent years condemning the Iranian regime; meanwhile, Iran only grew stronger. Recently, the President indicated that the U.S. will strike directly at Iranian agents working inside Iraq. The sometimes clumsy attempts to present evidence of Iran's support for attacks on U.S. troops triggered uncomfortable memories of the



intelligence used to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Despite the nod to diplomacy, there are clearly voices in the Administration who favor a harder line.

There are two possible scenarios for a military confrontation. The first would be a calculated strike on Iran's nuclear program by the United States, a possibility that has seemed more real since President Bush ordered an additional carrier strike group to the region. The second is an escalation from the status quo. Since the U.S. is now actively targeting Iranians within Iraq, and since we have limited diplomatic channels to Iran, an incident within Iraq could rapidly escalate into a broader military confrontation, or serve as a Gulf of Tonkin type pretext for war.

The Problem with an Attack

Despite the very real problems that the United States has with Iran, military action is not the answer.

To begin with, strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure may not even succeed in eliminating Iran's nuclear program. There are 18 known nuclear sites in Iran, and there are estimates that Iran has up to 70 hidden facilities. This infrastructure is dispersed around the country, and some of it is buried deep underground. Cruise missiles and air strikes might degrade the Iranian nuclear capacity, but it is unlikely to eliminate it, and will almost certainly lead to a broader conflict.

Our armed services are not poised to take on yet another military confrontation, particularly one that involves ground forces. Our military is badly overstretched fighting a war in Iraq, a war in Afghanistan, and a global war against Islamist terrorism. Units are on their second or third deployments to Iraq and some have had their tours extended. Guard and Reserve units have been deployed as if they were active duty forces. Less than a third of Army units are at high levels of readiness. Equipment needs to be replaced. Coming up with the 21,500 troops for the troop surge to Iraq strained our reserve force, and Afghanistan needs to be reinforced. A recent report by the Joint Chiefs of Staff reportedly warns that the U.S. military may not be able to adequately respond to another crisis.

While our ability to achieve our objectives with

military force is unclear, the consequences of military action are. Within Iraq, an attack on Iran would likely turn Iraq's Shiite population against us. Overnight, the United States might find itself fighting a full-bore Shia insurgency in addition to the Sunni Arab insurgency that we are fighting today.

Within Iran, an attack would cost us our greatest potential ally in promoting change: the Iranian people. Many Iranians, like Eastern Europeans during the Cold War, are frustrated with a government that denies them basic freedoms and opportunity. And unlike many Muslim-majority countries, substantial numbers of Iranians view the United States favorably. Yet Iranians have a deep sense of nationalism fed by centuries of Persian tradition. An attack would rally popular support for the government that could overcome the very real divisions in Iranian society.

Globally, an attack on Iran could be disastrous for U.S. leadership. We went into Iraq with few allies; we would go into Iran with none. Nations could feel further compelled to coalesce to check American power. Within the region, even our Arab friends - who are wary of Iran's rising influence - would view military action with trepidation. Anti-American sentiment would skyrocket. Terrorist recruitment would spike even further. Iran's proxies - notably Hizbollah - could launch terrorist attacks in Lebanon, in Israel, and in the United States.

Our economy would also pay a heavy price. Iran ships some 4 million barrels of crude around the world each day, accounting for about 5 percent of the global supply. The uncertainty provoked by military action would drive up prices. Analysts say oil could rise to \$130 per barrel (from \$60 now) if strikes threaten Iranian oil production or the Strait of Hormuz through which most Iranian, Saudi, and Middle Eastern oil is shipped, leading to unprecedented prices at the pump.

Given the price to be paid to U.S. prestige, U.S. military readiness, and to the U.S. economy, a protracted conflict with Iraq and Iran could be a tipping point that costs America its role as the world's superpower.

What to Do: A Progressive Approach

Beyond these cautionary notes, military action



makes little sense because other options have barely been tried. By all estimates, Iran's nuclear program is still years away from a workable nuclear weapon. We are in the midst of working with our allies to use strong, coordinated international pressure and stepped up sanctions to push the Iranian regime. Discussions between Iran and the United States are only now beginning. To succeed, this diplomacy must be given time to work, with contacts between the United States and Iran that are both bilateral and multilateral.

The United States has leverage in solving this problem. Iran's government wants above all to stay in power. It can be deterred, and it can be offered both disincentives - the threat of further isolation and pressure - as well as incentives if it changes its behavior. Among those incentives are economic engagement - including the lifting of sanctions, membership in the World Trade Organization, and increased exchange programs; security assurances; and normalized diplomatic relations. And we can build on a common interest against chaos in Iraq that could bring millions of refugees and a raging sectarian conflict across Iran's border. Over time, the agents of change within Iran should be the Iranian people, not the U.S. military.

Finally, perhaps the best weapon we have against Iran is reducing our demand for oil. Oil and gas sales account for between 2/3 and 3/4 of Iranian government income. Since oil is a commodity sold on the global market, each barrel we use-even if produced domestically-- puts money in the pocket of the Iranian government. Use less oil, and we deprive the Iranian government of the funds needed to fuel its nuclear ambitions.

Conclusion

The Bush Administration is the first post-war American Administration to believe that the United States is too weak to achieve its goals in the world through robust diplomacy. President Reagan might have called for Gorbachev to "tear down this wall," but at the same time he was dispatching an arms control envoy to Moscow. President Nixon made his reputation as a fervent anti-Communist, but he struck his greatest blow against the threat of Communism by further splitting China away from the Soviet Union. President Kennedy declared that he would "bear any burden" in defense of liberty, yet in the hour of liber-

ty's greatest peril - the Cuban Missile Crisis - he got nuclear weapons out of Cuba without firing a shot.

The Administration's new diplomatic overtures will only succeed if they represent the beginning of a sustained shift. To date, President Bush has used diplomacy as a tool to clean up messes, not to achieve America's aims. Because of this approach, every action that the United States has taken since identifying Iran as part of an "axis of evil" has made Iran stronger, not weaker.

Congress has already started to stand up to the President before saber rattling begins again. An attack on Iran would only magnify the pain of the Iraq war by stirring up another hornet's nest. It would hurt America's security. And it is the wrong way to achieve our most important goals: stability in the region, and a nuclear-free Iran.

This paper, in its entirety can be found at:

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