Pentagon prepares for military strikes against Iran

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An article in last weekend's edition of the *Sunday Telegraph* in Britain confirms that the US is drawing up plans for air and missile strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. Long-distance B2 bombers, each carrying up to 20 tonnes of precision bombs and flying from bases in the US, would "most likely" be involved.

"Central Command and Strategic Command planners are identifying targets, assessing weapon-loads and working on logistics for an operation, the *Sunday Telegraph* has learned. They are reporting to the office of Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, as America updates plans for action if the diplomatic offensive fails to thwart the Islamic republic's nuclear bomb ambitions," the article stated.

According to the senior Pentagon adviser, who spoke to the newspaper, the strikes would be "a last resort" to prevent Tehran proceeding with its nuclear programs. But he made clear that the military planning was not simply routine. "This is more than just the standard military contingency assessment. This has taken on much greater urgency in recent months," he said.

The *Sunday Telegraph* report has not been denied by the White House, indicating that the information was probably leaked deliberately. Questioned about the article on ABC News, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated: "The President never takes any of his options off the table... But there is a diplomatic solution. Now we are in the [UN] Security Council, there are many steps that the Security Council can take... to help enforce IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] requirements on Iran."

The IAEA governing council voted on February 4 to report Iran to the UN Security Council for possible punitive measures over its alleged breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, any discussion in the Security Council was delayed until early March to allow for further negotiations with Tehran.

The immediate effect of the Pentagon's provocative leak will be to further inflame tensions with Iran and make a negotiated end to the confrontation less likely. The Iranian regime has branded the IAEA decision illegal and declared it will restart uranium enrichment research. Tehran insists that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes and asserts its right under the NPT to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment.

But as Rice's comments indicate, the purpose of the *Sunday Times* article is as much to put pressure on the other permanent members of the UN Security Council—Britain, France, Russia and China—as on Iran. The none-too-subtle message is: if the UN Security Council fails to take tough measures against Tehran, Washington is prepared to attack Iran, unilaterally if necessary.

Washington's aggressive stance is not primarily motivated by concerns about Iran's nuclear programs, but is aimed at asserting US predominance in the resource-rich region against its European and Asian rivals. Economic sanctions or a military strike against Tehran would not directly impact on US interests as Washington has maintained an economic blockade since the fall of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979. But the EU, Russia, China and Japan, which have developed significant economic relations with Iran, would all be seriously affected.

Any US military action would not only lead to the slaughter of innocent Iranian lives, but would further destabilise an already volatile Middle East. A study released yesterday by the British-based thinktank, Oxford Research Group, estimated that hundreds of civilians would be killed in the initial bombing wave on

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Iran's nuclear facilities. It suggested that the Pentagon would deliberately aim "to kill as many of the technically competent staff as possible, therefore doing the greatest damage to longer-term [nuclear] prospects."

The report entitled "Iran: Consequences of a War" made the obvious point that any US attack would not be limited to Iran's nuclear facilities, but would have to include air defences, command and control centres and other military targets so as to weaken Iran's ability to retaliate. It predicted that thousands of Iranian military personnel would be killed in the first wave of attacks.

Nor would it end there. If Iran sought to rebuild its nuclear facilities, the US would be compelled to attack again leading to "a highly dangerous cycle of violence" that could spread throughout the region. The study, which opposed a US military strike, warned of "a protracted military confrontation that would probably involve Iraq, Israel and Lebanon, as well as the United States and Iran, with the possibility of the west Gulf states being involved as well."

All of these consequences are as evident to Pentagon planners as to the British thinktank. Yet that has not deterred Washington leaking plans for a military attack on Iran that would be just as reckless and criminal as the US-led invasion of neighbouring Iraq in 2003. Of course, such an assault is by no means certain, but there is a certain political logic to events.

The theocratic regime in Tehran, which is whipping up nationalist fervour to bolster its own weak position, has shown no signs of backing down. At a large rally in Tehran on Saturday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad hinted that Iran may pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty altogether. Tehran has also indefinitely postponed talks in Moscow to discuss a compromise for a joint uranium enrichment plant on Russian soil, effectively scuttling Russian efforts to defuse the issue.

As a result, it is likely that Iran will be referred to the UN Security Council at the next meeting of the IAEA governing council on March 6. While military action is not on the agenda, the US is pushing for the UN to impose punitive economic sanctions. China, Russia and other European countries will no doubt attempt to stall, but as in the past are unlikely to risk a confrontation with the US. The Bush administration, on the other hand, has no qualms about threatening, and if need be carrying out, the most reckless actions to achieve its ends.

In Washington, news that the Pentagon is preparing plans for military strikes against Iran failed to provoke any critical comment from the Democratic Party, indicating its tacit acceptance of Bush's stated position that all options—that is including the military one—are on the table.

The only criticism of the Bush administration's stance comes from the extreme rightwing—the so-called neo-conservatives—who scathingly dismiss Rice's diplomatic efforts and call for a democratic crusade to bring about "regime change" in Iran—as in Iraq.

In a comment entitled "It's the Regime, Stupid" in the *Washington Post* on January 30, arch-conservative Robert Kagan dismissed an air strike on Iran's nuclear facilities as ineffective. Pointing to the danger of Iranian retaliation, he declared: "Unless we were prepared to escalate, ultimately to the point of taking down the regime, we could end up in worse shape than when we began."

Kagan's solution was to covertly support opposition to bring down the regime—an Iranian version of the US-backed so-called colour revolutions in the Ukraine, Georgia and Lebanon. But, as he pointedly added: "if this or the next administration decides it is too dangerous to wait for political change, then the answer will have to be an invasion, not merely an air and missile strike, to put an end to Iran's nuclear program as well as to its regime."

Despite the quagmire that the American military has created in Iraq, there is clearly support in the US political establishment for another reckless military adventure in neighbouring Iran. The article in the *Sunday Telegraph* indicates that preparations are already well underway.

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