

Cheney's speech in Sydney:

An ominous silence on Iran from the US vice president

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The most significant aspect of the US Vice President Dick Cheney's keynote speech in Sydney today was what he did not say. Cheney defended the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, justified the US military "surge" in Baghdad, questioned whether North Korea could be trusted to stick to the recently signed agreement with the US and expressed criticisms of China's military buildup. He also hailed the US-Australia alliance and even found time to praise Prime Minister John Howard for the Australian interventions in the tiny Pacific states of East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Tonga.

But Cheney made not the slightest reference to Iran or to the menacing US military build-up in the Persian Gulf. The vice president and his staff have taken the lead in placing a confrontation with Iran at the top of the Bush administration's agenda. His own national security advisor John Hannah is reported to have told a staff meeting that 2007 would be "the year of Iran". Cheney made one of his very infrequent trips abroad last November to Saudi Arabia to secure the support of the monarchy for the US strategy in the Middle East, including against Iran. The purpose of the current trip to Japan and Australia—two of the Bush administration's few remaining dependable allies—has been to secure similar backing.

The stated purpose of Cheney's visit was to thank the Australian and Japanese governments for their military assistance in the subjugation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In the days before the vice president's arrival, the Howard government made a series of announcements designed to demonstrate its unstinting loyalty to the Bush administration's militarist agenda—a new US military base in Western Australian, an additional 70 Australian military instructors for Iraq, and a possible doubling of Australian troops in Afghanistan. Yet Cheney expressed no thanks for these new commitments: he had bigger things on his mind.

The topic of discussion will undoubtedly be different tomorrow behind closed doors when Cheney meets with the Howard government's top-level cabinet security committee. Iran's refusal to meet this week's UN deadline to shut down its uranium enrichment facilities, the US propaganda war against Tehran's alleged support for anti-US insurgents in Iraq and the arrival this week of a second US aircraft carrier group in the Persian Gulf are certain to be on the agenda. The Howard government was one of a handful to unconditionally support the criminal US invasion of

Iraq in 2003. Cheney expects the same unswerving political backing for any new US war against Iran.

Cheney's policy speech was delivered to the Australian-American Leadership Dialogue at Sydney's Shangri-la Hotel behind an unprecedented wall of security. The two other speeches of his trip were delivered to audiences of US military personnel—aboard the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk at the Yokosuka naval base in Japan and at the Andersen air force base on Guam. The settings reflect a US administration under political siege, broadly hated and despised by the vast majority of people around the world, including in America and Australia. Even from the handpicked audience at the Shangri-la Hotel, Cheney's ravings about the fictitious "global war on terrorism" could evoke only the smallest smattering of applause, let alone a standing ovation.

Cheney's basic message in all three countries was the same: the civilised world, led by the US, confronts an unprecedented challenge from globally organised terrorism that has set its sights not only on conquering the Middle East but the world. "Terrorist attacks," he said, "are not merely criminal acts by tiny bands of men. Instead they represent a movement that is global in scope, that formed over a period of decades and that is determined to sow chaos and destruction within civilised countries."

Conjuring up the vision of a titanic struggle for world domination between good and evil, Cheney declared that the goal of "the terrorists" was to seize control of countries in the Middle East "so they can have a base from which they can launch attacks against governments that refuse to meet their demands. Their ultimate aim, and the one they boldly proclaim, is to establish a caliphate covering a region from Spain across North Africa across the Middle East and South Asia, all the way around to Indonesia. And it wouldn't stop there."

Cheney's delusional invocation of a global terrorist plot recalls nothing so much as the rantings of Nazi leaders in the 1930s about an international Jewish Bolshevik conspiracy. In both cases, the propaganda is designed to whip up a climate of fear and prejudice, stifle rational debate and obscure the real purpose of militarist aggression. The transformation of a tiny minority of Islamic extremists—which the US played no small part in financing and arming in the 1970s and 1980s—into a global threat to the most powerful imperialist country is simply absurd. Cheney is attributing to "global terrorism" the grandiose aims of world

domination held by the extreme right-wing layer of the American ruling elite that he directly represents.

Former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who speaks for layers of the US ruling elite that are deeply concerned about the consequences of the Bush administration's reckless policies for America's global position, poured scorn on this "war on terror" in congressional testimony on February 1. "A mythical historical narrative to justify the case for a protracted and potentially expanding war is already being articulated," he warned. "Initially justified by false claims about WMDs in Iraq, the war is now being redefined as the 'decisive ideological struggle' of our time, reminiscent of the earlier collisions with Nazism and Stalinism."

After noting that both the German Nazis and Soviet Stalinists had a powerful military state at their disposal, Brzezinski made the obvious point: "In contrast, most Muslims are not embracing Islamic fundamentalism; al Qaeda is an isolated fundamentalist Islamic aberration; most Iraqis are engaged in strife because the American occupation destroyed the Iraqi state; while Iran—though gaining in regional influence—is itself divided, economically and militarily weak. To argue that America is already at war in the region with a wider Islamic threat, of which Iran is the epicentre, is to promote a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Cheney's speech, however, was not aimed at convincing, but intimidating. While not specifically naming the Democrats, he took aim at all critics, even the most tepid, who questioned the wisdom of an open-ended US military aggression. Elaborating on his theme of recent weeks, Cheney once again implied that anyone who equivocated, proposed a political or diplomatic solution, or criticised the escalating war in the Middle East gave succour to "the terrorists". "No argument, no principle of moral law, and no appeal to reason or mercy can be expected to stop them," he declared, "the only option for our security and survival is to go on the offensive... to continue until the enemy is destroyed."

It is in this context that the strategic vision elaborated in Cheney's speech must be understood. An unending war against an undefined enemy can be used to justify a US attack on anyone or any country at any time. Cheney specifically cautioned against the agreement reached between the US and North Korea to resolve the longstanding conflict over Pyongyang's nuclear programs. The vice president, who is well known for his opposition to the negotiations, declared: "We go into this deal with our eyes open. In the light of North Korea's missile tests last July, its nuclear tests in October, and its record of proliferation and human rights abuses, the regime in Pyongyang has much to prove." If the words were not stronger, it was only because the Bush administration's prime focus is elsewhere for now—on Iran and the Middle East.

Cheney also fired a warning shot in China's direction. While praising Beijing's role in the six-party talks over North Korea, he added: "Last month's anti-satellite test, and China's continued fast-paced military buildup are less constructive and are not consistent with China's stated goal of a 'peaceful rise'." The vice president immediately went on to praise the "trilateral security structure"—made up of the US, Japan and Australia—which is aimed at countering Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific region. He noted that Howard was due in Tokyo next month for talks on

Australia-Japan strategic ties. "The growing closeness among our three countries sends an unmistakable message—that we are united in the cause of peace and freedom across the region."

Cheney specifically commended the Howard government for its aggressive neo-colonial interventions in the small Pacific states of East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Under conditions of a rising tide of opposition to Australian interventions throughout the region, Cheney's comments were designed to reinforce the message: anyone who challenges Canberra's bullying will inevitably face the full force of the United States as well.

The whole speech was bound together with hypocrisy and cant. Cheney's appeals to the common values of democracy, tolerance and freedom belie the record of the Bush administration and the Howard government in destroying basic democratic rights and promoting anti-Muslim prejudice. Pro-growth and pro-market policies, he declared, have meant that "in this year 2007, our two countries are enjoying wealth and prosperity on an unprecedented scale". In fact, the unleashing of "free enterprise" has led to an unprecedented social divide in the US and Australia. A tiny minority has benefitted at the direct expense of the vast majority of the population, which faces a continuing decline in living standards.

Cheney speaks for the billionaire bankers and speculators who gouged huge profits out of the restructuring, downsizing and slashing of American corporations in the 1990s. This layer views the extension of US dominance in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia as the only means for offsetting the erosion of America's economic and strategic position. These are the real backers of Cheney's "war on terror"—to justify military aggression abroad and the suppression of political opposition at home.

The vice president's glaring silence on Iran in his set-piece speech should fool no one. It merely signifies that the Bush administration, with Cheney at the very centre, is still putting the pieces in place for the next target in the US "war on terror". A deceptive calm before the storm.



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