

# Cheney threatens Iran from US aircraft carrier in Persian Gulf

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Underscoring the essential objective of his Middle East tour, US Vice President Dick Cheney used the deck of the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis in the Persian Gulf Friday to deliver a bellicose threat against Iran.

“With two carrier strike groups in the Gulf, we’re sending clear messages to friends and adversaries alike, we’ll keep the sea lanes open,” Cheney said in a speech delivered to ranks of sailors assembled on the deck in the over-100-degree heat. With the carrier sailing barely 150 miles off of the Iranian coast, the US vice president declared, “We’ll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region.”

Further spelling out his attack on Iran, Cheney declared, “We’ll stand with our friends in opposing extremism and strategic threats. We’ll disrupt attacks on our own forces.” This last remark was an obvious reference to the drumbeat of unsubstantiated US claims that Iran is training and supplying weapons to Iraqi resistance forces attacking American occupation troops. The Bush administration dispatched the two carrier battle groups to the Persian Gulf at the end of last year in a bid to step up military pressure against Iran. Meanwhile, in occupied Iraq, US forces were ordered to seize Iranian diplomatic personnel, some of whom are still being held prisoner there. At the same time, Washington has pressed for the United Nations to impose new sanctions against Iran over its uranium enrichment program. While Tehran has insisted that it is seeking to develop peaceful nuclear power, the Bush administration has charged that Iran is trying to obtain nuclear weapons. Washington has imposed its own unilateral sanctions against Iran and has sought to intimidate Europe into following suit, pressuring banks and corporations there to cut ties with Tehran.

The vow to “keep the sea lanes open” and stop Iran from “dominating the region” are a reflection of Washington’s real objectives in the region. It is to impose unchallenged US domination over the region and its vital oil supplies. The massive American naval deployment is aimed at securing a US stranglehold over the Strait of Hormuz, the sea lane through which some 20 percent of the world’s oil passes.

Cheney’s appearance on the Stennis invited inevitable comparisons to the earlier use of such warships as platforms for the administration’s war speeches. It was in March 2002 that the American vice president landed on the same carrier to deliver a speech to a captive uniformed naval audience in which he vowed that the US would take “decisive” action to “prevent terrorists, and

regimes that sponsor terror, from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction.”

In his speech Friday, Cheney noted his presence on the same warship five years earlier, but, not surprisingly, offered no explanation for the absence of weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties that the administration fabricated to justify its unprovoked invasion of Iraq in March of 2003.

And, of course, little more than four years ago President Bush flew out to a returning aircraft carrier off the California coast to announce—before a huge banner declaring “Mission Accomplished”—that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” and American had “prevailed.”

Cheney’s speech seemed to unintentionally mock that now infamous assertion. Four years later, with US casualties steadily mounting, he declared, “We want to complete the mission, get it done right and return with honor.” He tried to convince the Stennis crew members that “the American people do not support a policy of retreat,” despite poll after poll indicating that the overwhelming majority of the US population is in favor of pulling all American forces out of Iraq.

“It’s not easy to serve in this part of the world,” Cheney told the sailors. “It’s a place of tension and many conflicts.”

Indeed, the American vice president knows whereof he speaks, having come to the region to whip up tensions and lay the groundwork for another armed conflict. With the US intervention in Iraqi having sunk into a bloody disaster, he and other elements within the Bush administration see the expansion of the war—this time against Iran—as a possible means of extricating US imperialism from its deepening strategic crisis in the region, as well as of rescuing the administration from political disintegration and ignominy at home.

While Cheney began his six-day, five-nation tour of the Middle East with a surprise visit to Iraq, his two days in the US-occupied country amounted to little more than a photo-op and showing of the flag designed for domestic political consumption. While going through the motions of pressuring the US-backed Iraqi regime to meet Washington’s “benchmarks” for “political progress” in Iraq, Cheney is well aware that the Iraqi regime is largely powerless and incapable of making any major changes without risking collapse.

Far more important, from Washington’s standpoint, is Cheney’s effort to shore up the shaky alliances with key Arab regimes in order to further its militarist operations in the region.

The most critical of these is the long-standing US ties with the

Saudi monarchy. Cheney is set to meet with Saudi King Abdullah on Saturday in the northwestern desert town of Tabuk, a provincial capital.

The vice president's trip was reportedly organized at the end of last month in response to mounting signs that the Saudi regime has grown increasingly agitated over the deepening debacle that Washington has created in the region.

In March, Saudi King Abdullah expressed the displeasure of Saudi Arabia's ruling family over the disaster in Iraq by using a speech to the Arab League summit to describe the US presence in the country as an "illegitimate foreign occupation."

Further signaling the mounting displeasures of the monarchy, last month Abdullah abruptly cancelled a trip to Washington for a White House dinner, apparently out of anger over the failed US policy in Iraq.

And there have been indications that the Saudi regime is failing to toe the American line in the Middle East. In March, Abdullah hosted a state visit by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, while a month earlier, the monarchy brokered the Mecca Agreement, forging a "unity government" between the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas and Fatah, thereby breaking with Washington's—and Israel's—campaign to keep Hamas isolated.

During his last trip to Saudi Arabia in November, Abdullah reportedly told the American vice president that if US occupation troops were to pull out of Iraq, the Saudi regime would consider providing financial support to Iraq's Sunni population to wage a civil war against the country's Shiites.

Cheney has reportedly been sent to Saudi Arabia to assure the monarchy that the Bush administration has no intention of withdrawing US troops from Iraq as long as it stays in office, and to seek its assistance in pressuring Sunni parties in Iraq to remain in the Maliki government and to support the speedy approval of a draft oil law that would open up the country's petroleum reserves to exploitation by American-based energy conglomerates.

The American message may not find ready acceptance, however. As David Ignatius, the *Washington Post* foreign affairs columnist wrote this week, "Saudi sources say the king has given up on the ability of Iraq's Shiite prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, to overcome sectarian divisions and unite the country. The Saudi leadership is also said to believe that the current US troop surge is likely to fail, deepening the danger of all-out civil war in Iraq."

According to Ignatius, the Saudi monarchy favors Maliki's ouster and his replacement by former interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, the long-time CIA asset and former Baathist, described by some critics as "Saddam without the mustache." Washington, he reports, opposes such a new attempt at "regime change," fearing it would only deepen the chaos and mass opposition to the US occupation.

The friction between Washington and the Saudi regime has its source in what is seen by the Saudis and other Arab rulers as the untenable contradiction in US policy, which is based on propping up a Shia-dominated Iraqi regime with close ties to Iran, while at the same time seeking to isolate Iran, roll back its influence in the region and prepare for possible war against the country.

As investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* earlier this year, the CIA has collaborated closely with the

Saudis in covert operations directed at undermining the Shia political movement in Lebanon, Hezbollah, including through the promotion of Sunni Islamist groups sympathetic to al-Qaeda. According to Hersh, these operations' "clandestine side has been guided by Cheney."

Also on Cheney's itinerary are meetings with United Arab Emirates President Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and the Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah, where he is expected to pound the same war drum against Iran while seeking the aid of these regimes and their intelligence services in quelling the insurgency in Iraq.

Cheney's trip comes on the heels of last week's international conference on Iraq held at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Media reports on the conference were dominated by speculation about a possible US diplomatic opening towards Iran and Syria to facilitate an end to the chaos in Iraq—something that was never substantiated in the furtive encounters between US officials and their Iranian and Syrian counterparts.

The American vice president's speech on the aircraft carrier and his secret talks with Arab monarchs and despots points to the real thrust of US policy in the region, which is founded on the continued and escalating use of militarism in Iraq and potentially against Iran.

One indication of the seriousness of the threat of a new war came from Bahrain, where the emirate's official news service reported that the local regime has been drawing up contingency plans to deal with Iranian missile strikes and sabotage attacks in the event of a US war against Iran. The kingdom hosts the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet.

"We at the Interior Ministry have made plan to deal with the possible threats," Bahraini Interior Minister Rashid Bin Abdullah Al Khalifa told the agency. Last month, the Bahraini regime conducted a joint emergency response exercise with US forces based on the scenario of an Iranian missile attack.



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