

An insight into the White House debate over military action against Iran

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The British-based *Guardian* has provided a fresh glimpse into the fierce debate raging inside the Bush administration over taking aggressive military measures against Iran. In an article on Monday based on a “well-placed Washington source,” the newspaper concluded that the balance “has shifted back in favour of military action before George Bush leaves office in 18 months”.

It is hardly a secret that Vice President Dick Cheney and his right-wing backers support a military assault on Iran and are opposed to the diplomacy being pursued by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Standing on the deck of a US aircraft carrier in May, Cheney warned that the huge American naval presence in the Persian Gulf was aimed at sending a clear message that the US would “keep the sea lanes open” and “stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region”.

According to the *Guardian* article, following an internal review the White House again debated policy toward Iran at a top-level meeting last month with senior Pentagon and State Department officials. Previously Bush had favoured Rice’s policy of enlisting European support in “putting a diplomatic squeeze on Iran”. At the meeting, however, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns indicated that diplomatic efforts could still be continuing beyond January 2009—the end of Bush’s term. Cheney expressed frustration and Bush sided with him.

“Bush is not going to leave office with Iran still in limbo,” the Washington source told the *Guardian*. “The balance has tilted. There is cause for concern.” Bush and Cheney, the source explained, did not trust any potential successors in the White House, Republican or Democrat, to deal with Iran decisively.

It is of course impossible to determine the exact balance of factional forces in the crisis-ridden Bush administration based on a single source, no matter how well placed. An article in the *New York Times* on June 15 put a somewhat different spin on a similar, if not the same, high-level White House meeting. Also at that gathering, “the hawks in the room reported later that they were deeply unhappy, but not surprised” that diplomatic efforts would continue beyond the end of next year.

The *New York Times* concluded from its sources that Rice and her deputies “appear to be winning [the debate] so far”. The article noted, however, that “conservatives inside the administration have continued to press for a tougher line, making arguments that their allies outside government are voicing publicly”. It pointed in particular to the remarks of former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, that “regime change or the use of force are the only

available options to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapons capability, if they want it”.

The newspaper also noted that one of Cheney’s top aides, prominent neo-con David Wurmser, had recently told conservative research groups and consulting firms in Washington that the vice president believed Rice’s diplomatic strategy was failing and that by “next spring” Bush might have to decide whether to take military action against Iran.

Whether Bush is shifting toward Cheney, or Rice is “winning so far,” is not clear. What is obvious, however, is that the most militaristic faction in the White House is continuing to wage a tenacious battle both internally and in the public arena for preemptive military action against Iran, despite the catastrophe facing US forces in Iraq and against the overwhelming antiwar sentiment of the American people. According to the contorted logic of Cheney and Co., the difficulties confronting the US in the Middle East stem from Tehran and will be solved by either crippling or toppling the Iranian regime through military strikes.

It should be emphasised that the scope of the White House debate on Iran is exceedingly narrow. To regard Rice as a “dove” is absurd. In a television interview on CNBC on July 6, she branded Iran as a very dangerous state that was becoming “increasingly dangerous”. Tehran must know, Rice declared, that while Washington was committed to a diplomatic solution, “there are coercive elements to US policy as well”. She reiterated that Bush was “never going to take his options off the table”—in other words, the threat of military action remains.

Rice’s comments confirm the belligerence of her so-called diplomacy and that any “solution” will be strictly on Washington’s terms. She only launched her diplomatic offensive for UN sanctions over Iran’s nuclear programs after Bush had ordered a second aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf to underscore the military threat. She has refused to meet with Iranian officials over the nuclear issue unless Tehran shuts down its disputed facilities in advance. Face-to-face discussions have been limited to a meeting in Baghdad to press Iran to end its alleged “meddling” in Iraq. Rice’s diplomacy in the UN has consisted of bullying the EU, Russia and China into backing sanctions against Tehran, using the implied threat that the alternative is unilateral military action.

Rice has publicly backed greater funding for “pro-democracy” activities, including support for internal political opponents of the Iranian regime. A string of newspaper reports over the past 18 months testifies that the CIA and other US agencies are engaged in

covert operations to foment opposition, including armed attacks, to destabilise the Iranian regime. At the same time, the State Department has been seeking to consolidate an anti-Iranian alliance of so-called moderate Middle East states, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan, to undermine Iranian influence in the region. Rice has also backed US Treasury initiatives to pressure international banks and corporations to go beyond the current UN sanctions, cut off relations with Iran and thus economically strangle the country.

While she may not currently advocate a strike against Iran, Rice is well aware that threats are worthless unless one is prepared to carry them out. Moreover, any one of her aggressive “diplomatic” measures has the potential to trigger an unexpected chain reaction of events leading to military confrontation. Rice’s somewhat more cautious approach is aimed in part at blunting criticism of the Bush administration’s reckless militarism. Sections of the political and foreign policy establishment regard an attack on Iran as simply compounding the disaster for US interests in the Middle East created by the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Both the *Guardian* and *New York Times* highlighted Israel’s demands for action against Iran’s nuclear facilities as an important factor in the Bush administration’s calculations. Patrick Cronin, director of studies at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, told the *Guardian*: “The red line is not in Iran. The red line is in Israel. If Israel is adamant that it will attack, the US will have to take decisive action. The choices are: tell Israel no, let Israel do the job, or do the job yourself.”

Since the beginning of the year, several articles have appeared outlining Israeli military preparations for an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Both US and Israeli officials have seized on the provocative statements of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to intensify their military threats. According to the *New York Times* article, Shaul Mofaz, Israel’s transportation and former defence minister, told Rice in Washington last month that sanctions against Iran had to be strong enough to end uranium enrichment by the end of the year. If not, he warned, Israel “would have to reassess where we are”.

Israel is unlikely to attack Iran without US approval and is not, in the final analysis, the determining factor in any US military decision. However, Israeli officials are maintaining the pressure on Washington to act. Brigadier General Yossi Kuperwasser, former head of Military Intelligence’s research division, told the *Jerusalem Post* last week that the time for launching an effective military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities was running out. Assuming without proof that Iran was intent on building nuclear weapons, Kuperwasser impatiently warned: “The program’s vulnerability to a military operation is diminishing as time passes and they are very close to the point that they will be able to enrich uranium at an industrial level.”

The Bush administration is maintaining its relentless barrage of unsubstantiated allegations that could provide the pretext for war: that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, supporting anti-US insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, and “sponsoring terrorism” in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and throughout the Middle East. But the real driving force for war against Iran lies in US ambitions to secure its domination over the resource-rich regions

of the Middle East and Central Asia. In its relative economic decline, the US has increasingly resorted to military means to achieve its ends. The chief argument against any US diplomatic deal with Iran is that it would leave America’s European and Asian rivals, which already have strong economic and political ties with Tehran, in the driver’s seat.

It is not possible to predict, at this stage, the outcome of the White House debate. But there is no doubt that Bush’s instinctive reaction is to side with the most ruthless, militarist layers of his administration. Veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who is known for his high-level US sources and has repeatedly written over the past two years on Bush’s preparations for attacking Iran, provided a frightening insight into the president’s delusional mentality in comments to the Campus Progress National Conference on June 26.

According to Hersh’s sources, Bush frequently compares himself to Winston Churchill, making tough wartime decisions, regardless of popularity or any genuine Iranian threat. “Bush sees himself as somebody—that ‘yes, I may be at 30 percent in the polls, but in 20 or 30 years, they’ll appreciate what I’ve done’,” Hersh explained. “Anyway, Iran is nowhere near a bomb, despite what you’ve heard. They’re years and years away and would stop tomorrow if you gave them a peace guarantee... [T]he intelligence community keeps on saying, ‘There’s no bomb there.’ And Cheney keeps on saying to the young briefing officers, ‘Thank you son, I don’t buy that,’ in that nice pleasant tone.”

Asked what it would take for the US to end the tensions with Iran, Hersh bluntly answered, referring to Bush: “Well, you’ve got to have a coup to overthrow this guy. He’s not going to talk to Iranians. I don’t think he is, no matter what, and that’s terrifying because the Iranians are more than willing to talk.” Talk of a coup may perhaps be nothing more than a throw away line to underscore the point that Bush has no intention of entering into meaningful dialogue with Tehran. But it does indicate the ferocity of the antagonisms in the American political establishment. It also points to the desperation of those highly-placed Bush critics who speak to Hersh, and who regard any military adventure in Iran as catastrophic to the interests of US imperialism.



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