

Iran: Why does Bush invoke the threat of World War III?

Part 1: Iran's strategic position

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On October 17, George Bush made a remarkable statement concerning the mounting tensions between the US and Iran: “If you’re interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing [Iran] from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon.” Bush has since repeated and defended this comment. It testifies to the superficiality of media commentary that this declaration has not been subjected to critical analysis.

Bush’s statement has profound and far-reaching implications. Washington’s deliberate stoking of political tensions with Iran over the last year—with accusations of Iranian military assistance to the anti-US Iraqi resistance, and the branding of portions of the Iranian armed forces as “terrorist”—does not simply threaten Iran. It is a confrontation with a global cast of characters.

Further investigation of the context of Bush’s comments substantiates their significance. He made his initial statement about World War III just one day after Russian President Vladimir Putin had said during a visit to Iran, “Not only should we reject the use of force, but also the mention of force as a possibility.”

Clearly, Bush’s remarks were a response to Putin, a fact that has been barely, if at all noted in the bourgeois media. However, such inflammatory comments, coming on the heels of an important state visit by the Russian president, indicate that US hostility to Iran is bound up with global considerations central to the interests of US imperialism.

The verbal exchange between Putin and Bush raises important questions. What is so crucial about Iran that its acquisition of a few crude nuclear devices—far outweighed by the hundreds of strategic nuclear devices held by Israel, let alone the thousands possessed by the major nuclear powers—would trigger a world war? When Washington contemplates fighting World War III over an Iranian nuclear weapon, whom does it view as its potential adversaries, and why?

Iran, oil, and the geopolitics of the Persian Gulf

Iran is at the heart of oil-rich, war-torn Southwest Asia. It lies

on the north shore of the Persian Gulf, which holds 63 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. Immediately to the north of Iran lie Turkey, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and the former Soviet states of Central Asia—springboards to Europe, Russia and China. By virtue of this geography, control of Iran is a valuable prize for all the major capitalist powers, which could use it to decisively increase their influence in commercial and diplomatic relations.

Iran’s own energy reserves are massive. According to US Department of Energy figures, Iran has the second largest proven oil reserves in the Middle East—136.3 billion barrels. It also has 970 trillion cubic feet of natural gas—the second-largest reserves in the world. Its oil and gas exports account for the vast bulk of its activity in international markets, generating 85 percent of export revenue and 65 percent of state revenue. It exports over 2.5 million barrels of oil per day and is a critical supplier to East Asia and Europe.

Even more than its own energy reserves, Iran owes its strategic importance in the Persian Gulf energy industry to its position astride the Gulf’s shipping lanes. Oil shipped out of the Gulf on tankers must pass through the Strait of Hormuz off Iran’s southern coast to reach the Indian Ocean.

Anthony Cordesman of the US Center for Strategic and International Studies writes: “Oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz account for roughly 40 percent of all world traded oil.” He cites International Energy Agency figures showing that, of the 17.4 million barrels shipped daily through the Straits of Hormuz, 13 million travel east, through the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca near Singapore, to East Asia. Of the remainder, 3.5 million barrels travel through the Bab el-Mandab into the Red Sea, to Europe and the US.

He continues: “Iran’s coastline is particularly important because tanker and shipping routes pass so close to Iran’s land mass, the islands it controls in the Gulf, and its major naval bases. At the narrowest point (the Strait of Hormuz), the Gulf narrows to only 34 miles wide, with Iran to the north and Oman to the south. The key passages through the Strait consist of 2-mile wide channels for inbound and outbound tanker traffic, as well as a 2-mile wide buffer zone.”

Tehran has purchased numerous cruise missiles from Russia and China and deployed them on patrol boats and at naval bases along these shipping lanes. Iranian officials, including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have repeatedly said that, in the event of a US attack on Iran, energy shipments through the region will be “jeopardized.”

Iran has emerged from the 2003 US occupation of Iraq as the most serious regional obstacle to the strategy of US imperialism in the Persian Gulf. It wields considerable influence within the Shiite fundamentalist parties that have functioned as Washington’s favored quislings inside Iraq.

Iran also has potential political influence with the population of the southern Gulf shore. In Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province, as well as Bahrain, US-backed Sunni monarchs rule over an oppressed Shiite population subjected to sectarian discrimination. These monarchs are terrified of any Shiite-populist political agitation like that carried out during the early years of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

Iran has been under a US embargo since the 1979 Revolution overthrew the US-backed Shah. Its oil is largely traded with other powers. Asia accounts for the largest share (56 percent, largely to Japan and China, with lesser amounts to Korea, India and Southeast Asia); Europe, especially Italy and France, buys 29 percent of Iran’s oil exports. Europe, China and Korea also supply over 50 percent of Iran’s imports, and several European corporations have set up manufacturing operations there.

Iran as a global commercial gateway

Iran is a potential nexus of oil pipelines and trade routes between all the major geopolitical competitors of the US bourgeoisie. It is a transit point, via its northwestern border, for oil and gas flowing from the Middle East and Central Asia to Turkey and the European market. Via its northeastern border with the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan, it could become a transit point to Kazakhstan and thence to western China.

Iran has taken on a particularly vital role in this last regard, since the other land routes to the Indian Ocean from Central or East Asia are barred—either by geographical barriers such as the Himalayas, or by the permanent state of civil war in US-occupied Afghanistan and the increasing destabilization of Pakistan.

Iran has significant potential to help the former Soviet republics of Central Asia (notably Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) ship their oil and gas via the Indian Ocean to world markets. This is particularly important since, in the aftermath of the industrial collapse that accompanied the dissolution of the USSR, the region’s economy has largely been rebuilt around oil and gas exports, enriching a narrow layer of former Stalinist apparatchiks. Currently, all oil and gas is exported through a Soviet-era pipeline network controlled by the Russian corporation Gazprom.

The question of Central Asia’s oil and gas has long held the attention of US corporations and diplomats. At a 1998 hearing

of the US House of Representatives’ Committee on International Relations, Frederick Starr of the Central Asia Institute of Johns Hopkins University noted: “The heaviest burdens of the measures we are taking toward Iran fall disproportionately on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, for it prevents them from exporting their oil by one of the most obvious alternative routes to Russia, namely Iran. The US position has been to argue that this would not be in the Central Asians’ best interests. None of our friends in the region agree.”

Other speakers at the hearing also admitted that the US veto of pipeline construction through Iran significantly distorts the region’s economy. Unocal executive John Maresca described Russian plans for a pipeline to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk and a US plan for a pipeline through the Caucasus (from Baku, Azerbaijan to Tbilisi, Georgia and to Ceyhan, Turkey—the so-called BTC pipeline). Both pipelines are now operational.

Maresca said: “Even if both pipelines were built, they would not have enough total capacity to transport all the oil expected to flow from the region in the future. Nor would they have the capability to move it to the right markets.... Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union are all slow growth markets where demand will grow at only a half a percent to perhaps 1.2 percent during the period 1995 to 2010. Asia is a different story altogether.”

Since then, Iran has developed pipeline links to Turkmenistan, sealing a deal to pump 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from Turkmenistan through Iran and Turkey to Europe. However, such links would undoubtedly multiply if Iran were not living under the constant threat of US attack.

Iran has also become increasingly active in regional diplomacy. Since 2006, it has had observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional grouping including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The SCO has actively lobbied for the closure of US military bases in Central Asia obtained just after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, during the initial US attack on Afghanistan.

These basing rights have now largely been revoked, as Central Asian governments have come to view Washington as principally dedicated to their overthrow—especially after the failure of the US-backed “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan and the US-backed Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan, both in 2005.

To be continued



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