

Bush exploits Strait of Hormuz incident to threaten Iran

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Five days after Sunday's encounter between US warships and Iranian boats in the Strait of Hormuz, details of what took place remain in dispute. What is clear, however, is that the US administration, at the very least, deliberately inflated the incident on the eve of President Bush's visit to the Middle East to menace Iran and raise the political temperature in the volatile region.

Speaking on Tuesday, just hours before departing, Bush accused Iran of "a provocative act", saying: "It is a dangerous situation, and they should not have done it, pure and simple." Speaking in Jerusalem the following day after meeting with Israeli leaders, he went one step further, warning Tehran of "dangerous consequences" if US ships were attacked. "All options are on the table to protect our assets," he said, "My advice to them is, don't do it."

Bush's aggressive language was obviously appreciated by the Israeli government, which has been sharply critical of last month's National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) by 16 US agencies that Iran had ended any nuclear weapons program in 2003. The assessment undercut the escalating propaganda campaign by the Bush administration and its Israeli allies for tough international action to force Iran to shut down its nuclear facilities. The incident in the Strait of Hormuz conveniently provided Bush with the opportunity to renew his warnings of the alleged danger posed by Iran.

"Iran was a threat, Iran is a threat and Iran will be a threat to world peace if the international community does not come together and prevent that nation from the development of the knowledge to build a nuclear weapon," Bush declared. "A country that once had a secret program can easily restart a secret program. A country which can enrich [uranium] for civilian purposes can easily transfer that knowledge to a military program."

Just over a month ago, Bush and his officials were insisting that Iran had a nuclear weapons program and

posed an imminent threat. Now, without missing a beat, the president insists that Iran remains a threat and must be prevented from having the "knowledge" to build a nuclear weapon. Moreover, the hypocrisy involved in making such a statement in Israel, which has covertly manufactured its own nuclear weapons, is breathtaking. While Bush speaks of the Iranian threat, Israel and the US are both notorious for launching unprovoked military strikes and wars of aggression in the Middle East.

Over the past year Israel has issued its own menacing warnings that it would not permit Iran to gain nuclear weapons. Reports in the British press have pointed to advanced Israeli preparations for air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. Following talks with Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert indicated Iran had been a major topic of discussion and that he had been reassured. "I certainly am encouraged and reinforced, having heard the position of the United States under the leadership of George Bush, particularly on this subject," he said.

Comments by Israel's ambassador to the US, Sallai Meridor, highlight the determination of Israel and the US to heighten the confrontation with Iran, despite the NIE findings. After explaining that the two governments were "in sync and think similarly", he responded to a question about a military strike on Iran, by ominously declaring: "Both the US and Israel haven't removed any option from the table. All options are on the table, not only in the future."

The political manner in which the US has exploited the naval encounter in Strait of Hormuz to inflame tensions is out of all proportion to the incident itself. According to the original Pentagon account, five small, lightly-armed Iranian speedboats allegedly buzzed three US warships passing through the strait. One of the Iranian vessels dropped several white, floating box-like objects, causing one US ship to alter course. A radio message warned: "I am coming to you. You will explode after a few minutes."

Naval personnel warned the Iranian boats to keep their distance and manned weapons.

No weapons were fired and the Iranian vessels backed off. Indeed, while an unnamed US official acknowledged that the US warships were minutes from opening fire, the Iranian boats, which came no closer than 500 metres, displayed no obvious sign of hostile intent. The three US vessels—the guided missile cruiser USS Port Royal, the guided missile destroyer USS Hopper and the guided missile frigate USS Ingraham—were all heavily armed with machine guns, Phalanx close-in weapons systems, torpedoes and large calibre guns.

Over the past five days, holes have begun to appear in the initial Pentagon story. The US navy released a video of the Iranian speedboats spliced together with audio from the bridge of one of the ships. No mention was made of the white boxes and the key word “few” in the radio threat was indecipherable. The video, which has been widely broadcast, runs for only 4 minutes and 20 seconds and was thus an edited version of the 20-minute incident using audio from just one warship.

Commander Lydia Robertson, spokeswoman for the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, acknowledged yesterday that the navy could not be certain the radio message even came from one of the five Iranian boats. It may have come from another ship in the area or from shore, she said, adding: “We don’t have a direct connection, but it’s not necessarily a disconnect.” Another aspect of the “threat” is also odd—there is no background noise as one would expect in a broadcast from a small high-speed boat.

Iranian officials dismissed the incident as an ordinary occurrence and denied that any threat was made. An unnamed spokesman for the Iranian Revolution Guards, which operated the boats, told state-run TV: “The footage released by the US Navy was compiled using file pictures and the audio has been fabricated.” Tehran has now released its own edited video of the events showing an Iranian officer in a small craft speaking via radio to “coalition warship 73” and carrying out routine identification procedures.

Iran’s low-key response tends to indicate that no one in Tehran is seeking to make political mileage out of the incident. In fact, the regime has more to lose than to gain by heightening tensions with the US. The Iranian government has been seeking to finalise arrangements for another round of talks in Baghdad involving the US and Iranian ambassadors over security in Iraq. Over the past month, Tehran has improved relations with neighbouring Gulf states, making advances that would be upset by any

new confrontation.

The Bush administration on the other hand has been seeking at every turn to pressurise and provoke Iran. On Wednesday, the US Treasury Department imposed new financial penalties on a top-ranking Iranian Revolutionary Guard general, Ahmed Foruzandeh, a Syrian-based television station and two Iraqis living in Iran for allegedly fuelling the anti-US insurgency in Iraq.

When he heads to the Persian Gulf tomorrow, Bush will find no enthusiasm among US allies for a conflict with Iran. Gerd Nonneman, an academic at Exeter University, told Reuters: “The royal families in the Gulf are looking at the Bush visit with slightly weary resignation... On the one hand they want a joint diplomatic strategy to avoid a nuclear-armed Iran but they are saying we think we can engage Iran more effectively. We think we can take the sting out of this by engaging with Iran.”

Iran’s longstanding regional rival, Saudi Arabia, has explicitly declared that it will rebuff any US demand to break off relations with Tehran. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal told a press conference on Wednesday: “We’ll listen to everything the [US] president says. He can raise any issue he likes. [But] we’re a neighbour to Iran in the Gulf, which is a small area, so we’re keen for harmony and peace among countries in the area.”

For the Bush administration, the incident in the Strait of Hormuz could not have been better timed to stymie the development of diplomatic relations with Iran, to heighten tensions in the region and possibly to justify a further US military buildup against Tehran. It cannot be ruled out that the US, which has a long history of engineering provocations, concocted this latest naval encounter to meet these political purposes.



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