

Obama advisers discuss preparations for war on Iran

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On the eve of the US elections, the *New York Times* cautiously pointed on Monday to the emergence of a bipartisan consensus in Washington for an aggressive new strategy towards Iran. While virtually nothing was said in the course of the election campaign, behind-the-scenes top advisers from the Obama and McCain camps have been discussing the rapid escalation of diplomatic pressure and punitive sanctions against Iran, backed by preparations for military strikes.

The article entitled “New Beltway Debate: What to do about Iran” noted with a degree of alarm: “It is a frightening notion, but it not just the trigger-happy Bush administration discussing—if only theoretically—the possibility of military action to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program... [R]easonable people from both parties are examining the so-called military option, along with new diplomatic initiatives.”

Behind the backs of American voters, top advisers for President-elect Barack Obama have been setting the stage for a dramatic escalation of confrontation with Iran as soon as the new administration takes office. A report released in September from the Bipartisan Policy Center, a Washington-based think tank, argued that a nuclear weapons capable Iran was “strategically untenable” and detailed a robust approach, “incorporating new diplomatic, economic and military tools in an integrated fashion”.

A key member of the Center’s task force was Obama’s top Middle East adviser, Dennis Ross, who is well known for his hawkish views. He backed the US invasion of Iraq and is closely associated with neo-cons such as Paul Wolfowitz. Ross worked under Wolfowitz in the Carter and Reagan administrations before becoming the chief Middle East envoy under presidents Bush senior and Clinton. After leaving the State

Department in 2000, he joined the right-wing, pro-Israel think tank—the Washington Institute for Near East Policy—and signed up as a foreign policy analyst for Fox News.

The Bipartisan Policy Center report insisted that time was short, declaring: “Tehran’s progress means that the next administration might have little time and fewer options to deal with this threat.” It rejected out-of-hand both Tehran’s claims that its nuclear programs were for peaceful purposes, and the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate by US intelligence agencies which found that Iran had ended any nuclear weapons program in 2003.

The report was critical of the Bush administration’s failure to stop Iran’s nuclear programs, but its strategy is essentially the same—limited inducements backed by harsher economic sanctions and the threat of war. Its plan for consolidating international support is likewise premised on preemptive military action against Iran. Russia, China and the European powers are all to be warned that their failure to accede to tough sanctions, including a provocative blockade on Iranian oil exports, will only increase the likelihood of war.

To underscore these warnings, the report proposed that the US would need to immediately boost its military presence in the Persian Gulf. “This should commence the first day the new president enters office, especially as the Islamic Republic and its proxies might seek to test the new administration. It would involve pre-positioning US and allied forces, deploying additional aircraft carrier battle groups and minesweepers, [and] emplacing other war materiel in the region,” it stated.

In language that closely parallels Bush’s insistence that “all options remain on the table”, the report declared: “We believe a military strike is a feasible option and must remain a last resort to retard Iran’s

nuclear program.” Such a military strike “would have to target not only Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, but also its conventional military infrastructure in order to suppress an Iranian response.”

Significantly, the report was drafted by Michael Rubin, from the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute, which was heavily involved in promoting the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A number of Obama’s senior Democratic advisers “unanimously approved” the document, including Dennis Ross, former senator Charles Robb, who co-chaired the task force, and Ashton Carter, who served as assistant secretary for defense under Clinton.

Carter and Ross also participated in writing a report for the bipartisan Center for a New American Security, published in September, which concluded that military action against Iran had to be “an element of any true option”. While Ross examined the diplomatic options in detail, Carter laid out the “military elements” that had to underpin them, including a cost/benefit analysis of a US aerial bombardment of Iran.

Other senior Obama foreign policy and defense advisers have been closely involved in these discussions. A statement entitled, “Strengthening the Partnership: How to deepen US-Israel cooperation on the Iranian nuclear challenge”, drafted in June by a Washington Institute for Near East Policy task force, recommended the next administration hold discussions with Israel over “the entire range of policy options”, including “preventative military action”. Ross was a taskforce co-convener, and top Obama advisers Anthony Lake, Susan Rice and Richard Clarke all put their names to the document.

As the *New York Times* noted on Monday, Obama defense adviser Richard Danzig, former navy secretary under Clinton, attended a conference on the Middle East convened in September by the same pro-Israel think tank. He told the audience that his candidate believed that a military attack on Iran was a “terrible” choice, but “it may be that in some terrible world we will have to come to grips with such a terrible choice”. Richard Clarke, who was also present, declared that Obama was of the view that “Tehran’s growing influence must be curbed and that Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon is unacceptable.” While “his first inclination is not to pull the trigger,” Clarke stated, “if circumstances required the use of military force,

Obama would not hesitate.”

While the *New York Times* article was muted and did not examine the reports too deeply, writer Carol Giacomo was clearly concerned at the parallels with the US invasion of Iraq. After pointing out that “the American public is largely unaware of this discussion,” she declared: “What makes me nervous is that’s what happened in the run-up to the Iraq war.”

Giacomo continued: “Bush administration officials drove the discussion, but the cognoscenti were complicit. The question was asked and answered in policy circles before most Americans know what was happening... As a diplomatic correspondent for Reuters in those days, I feel some responsibility for not doing more to ensure that the calamitous decision to invade Iraq was more skeptically vetted.”

The emerging consensus on Iran in US foreign policy circles again underscores the fact that the differences between Obama and McCain were purely tactical. While millions of Americans voted for the Democratic candidate believing he would end the war in Iraq and address their pressing economic needs, powerful sections of the American elite swung behind him as a better vehicle to prosecute US economic and strategic interests in the Middle East and Central Asia—including the use of military force against Iran.



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