

Obama's defence appointee signals continuing US belligerence

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The trip by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates to the Middle East over the past week provided a sobering warning of what to expect when Barack Obama becomes president next month. Far from any winding back of US militarism, Gates, who will remain in his post under Obama, emphasised that the occupation of Iraq would continue and the war in Afghanistan escalate, even as he renewed threats against Iran.

Gates toured the region more as an envoy for Obama than as an official of the Bush administration. He told a press conference last Thursday at a military base in Kandahar, Afghanistan that the president-elect had been "very explicit" in making "this fight in Afghanistan a high priority and he would like to see more resources devoted to this fight, including more troops".

Far from waiting for the next administration, the Pentagon is already engaged in extensive preparations to put an extra 20,000 US troops into Afghanistan in time for offensive operations next spring against anti-US insurgents. And in line with Obama's support for tougher US action inside Pakistan, the number of missile strikes on alleged "terrorist" targets in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan has jumped in recent months.

Gates made his most belligerent statements—toward Iran in particular—at a meeting of the Gulf states in Bahrain on Saturday. After bringing "a message of continuity and commitment" from Obama to US allies in the region, he pointedly warned that "anyone who thought that the upcoming months might present opportunities to 'test' the new administration would be sorely mistaken".

No one in the room was left in any doubt that "anyone" referred to Iran. Gates branded Iran as "a country whose

every move seems designed to create maximum anxiety in the international community". He accused Tehran once again of "training and supplying groups intent on undermining the [Iraqi] government, more often than not through violence" and supplying financial and military aid to organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah. "At the same time, Iran has continued its pursuit of a nuclear program that is almost assuredly geared toward developing nuclear weapons," he said.

Gates repeated the accusations of Iranian meddling in Iraq just days after a top US general announced that a fall in the supply of armour-piercing bombs had contributed to their declining use in attacks on US forces. While providing little evidence, Washington has repeatedly condemned the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG) for furnishing the weapons. Now, according to Lieutenant General Thomas Metz, the IRG was pulling back the number being smuggled into Iraq.

In the course of his election campaign, Obama increasingly hedged with caveats and qualifications his original proposal for direct talks with Tehran. Gates's comments underscore the fact that there will be no easing of tensions under the Obama administration. The opposite will be the case. Any offer of negotiations will be on Washington's terms and will be accompanied by a sharp intensification of diplomatic, economic and military threats designed to bludgeon the Iranian regime into accepting US demands.

Obama summed up his policy in an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press" on December 7. Asked under what circumstances he would open up a dialogue with Iran, he explained that before any talks, "I think we need to ratchet up tough but direct diplomacy with Iran, making very clear to them that their development of nuclear weapons

would be unacceptable, that their funding of terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah, their threats against Israel are contrary to everything that we believe in."

Obama advocated "a set of carrots and sticks" to change "their calculus about how they want to operate". After noting that economic incentives might appeal to a country under enormous economic strain, he proposed enlisting the support of China, India and Russia to impose tougher sanctions. Any talks would simply be to present Tehran with Washington's demands and ultimately let them determine "whether they want to do this the hard way or, or the easy way".

Writing in *Newsweek* on December 8, Obama campaign adviser Dennis Ross called for "tough talk with Tehran" and criticised the Bush administration for being too lenient. "Iran has continued to pursue nuclear weapons because the Bush administration hasn't applied enough pressure—or offered Iran enough rewards for reversing course. The UN sanctions adopted in the past three years primarily target Iran's nuclear and missile industries, not the broader economy," he wrote.

Ross advocated a course that amounts to enlisting the support of the Europeans, China, Japan and Saudi Arabia to crash the Iranian economy by imposing an economic blockade. "Iran has profound economic vulnerabilities," he explained, "it imports 43 percent of its gas. Its oil and natural gas industries—the government's key source of revenue, which it uses to buy off its population—desperately require new investment and technology. Smart sanctions would force Iran's leaders to see the high costs of not changing their behaviour."

What Ross did not spell out is that the provocative imposition of an embargo could rapidly lead to military conflict. Ross was part of a task force at the Bipartisan Policy Center that released a report in September outlining a robust approach, "incorporating new diplomatic, economic and military tools in an integrated fashion". The authors made clear that "we believe a military strike is a feasible option and must remain a last resort to retard Iran's nuclear development".

That report pointed to the importance of the continued US military presence in Iraq and build-up in Afghanistan, as offering "distinct advantages in any possible

confrontation with Iran". It continued: "The United States can bring troops and materiel to the region under the cover of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, thus maintaining a degree of strategic and tactical surprise. The United States can also more easily insert Special Forces and intelligence personnel into Iran and protect key assets of our regional allies."

Ross, who is well known for his right-wing, militarist views, is yet to be appointed to a post in the Obama administration. But it is clear that the outlook of "bigger carrots and bigger sticks" is pervasive among those who have—including Gates and Obama himself. It should also be recalled that in the course of the election campaign Obama's rival, soon to be Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, warned that she would not hesitate to "obliterate" Iran if it attacked Israel.

The threat of a new eruption of US militarism in the Middle East under the Obama administration demonstrates that the driving forces are not malevolent individuals but the fundamental economic and strategic interests of US imperialism. Whatever tactical differences may exist between the Bush and Obama administrations, the entire political establishment is united in its determination to exploit American military superiority to offset the US's declining economic power. Nowhere is this more vital than in countering its European and Asian rivals in the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

The deepening of the economic and financial crisis centred in the United States only makes the task more urgent for the incoming administration.



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