

The Hillary Clinton doctrine

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At the beginning of 1980, President Jimmy Carter inaugurated a major American military buildup in the Middle East.

In his State of the Union address of that year, the US president outlined what became known as the Carter Doctrine, declaring, “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

The doctrine was pitched as the Carter administration’s response to two events that had taken place the year before. The first was the Iranian Revolution that overthrew the US-backed dictatorship of the Shah, who had served as Washington’s loyal gendarme in the region. The second was the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, which Washington itself had provoked to—in the words of then-Carter and now-Obama advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski—“give to the USSR its Vietnam war.”

Carter left no doubt as to what “vital interests” Washington was prepared to defend with force. He stressed that Afghanistan was of “great strategic importance” because it lay in a region that “contains more than two-thirds of the world’s exportable oil.”

Nearly three decades later, the US is fighting a bitter colonial-style war in Afghanistan, occupying Iraq and continuing to engage in overt threats and covert destabilization operations against the clerical regime in Iran, all for the purpose of defending these same “vital interests.”

This is the context in which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s remarks Wednesday in Thailand should be understood. Clinton appeared to be expounding her own doctrine (or perhaps a Clinton corollary to the Carter Doctrine) by threatening to extend a US nuclear

umbrella over the oil-rich nations of the Middle East in response to an alleged threat that Tehran will acquire a nuclear weapon. She added that the US would arm Iran’s Arab neighbors (a collection of monarchies and emirates, together with US-occupied Iraq).

“We...have made it clear that we’ll take actions, as I’ve said time and time again, crippling action, working to upgrade the defenses of our partners in the region,” Clinton said in a Thai television interview. Her remarks echoed a statement she made during her unsuccessful run for the Democratic presidential nomination last year, in which she threatened to “totally obliterate” Iran should it attack Israel.

She continued: “We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment: that if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to develop the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it is unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer because they won’t be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon.”

The Iranian regime maintains that its uranium enrichment program is intended solely for the generation of power.

Clinton’s remarks drew immediate fire from Israel, which has threatened to carry out a unilateral attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. It cast her call for a nuclear umbrella as signaling Washington’s resignation to a nuclear-armed Iran and the resurrection of Cold War-style methods of “containment” and “mutually assured destruction.” State Department spokesmen denied that Clinton was in any way softening the US position on the Iranian nuclear program.

The introduction of a US military umbrella in the Persian Gulf on the pretext of answering an Iranian threat would serve to further Washington’s aim of imposing American hegemony over the oil-rich region.

This was spelled out in a report issued earlier this

year by a “presidential task force” that included Dennis Ross, who was subsequently named by the Obama administration as its special adviser for the Gulf and Southwest Asia.

“Confronting the Iran nuclear program also offers opportunities to advance US interests,” the report stated, adding that it would allow Washington “to deepen US relationships with its Middle East friends.”

Clinton’s saber rattling, however, serves another more immediate purpose. It is aimed at exploiting as fully as possible the bitter internal struggle between the rival bourgeois factions in Tehran’s clerical regime that has erupted in the aftermath of the disputed June 12 presidential election. Her remarks follow the recent statement by Vice President Joseph Biden vouching for Israel’s “right” to attack Iran militarily if it deems such an attack necessary to defend its security interests.

The US secretary of state repeatedly pointed to the conflict within the Iranian regime as impeding direct talks between Tehran and Washington. “We’ve certainly reached out and made it clear that’s what we’d be willing to do, even now, despite our absolute condemnation of what they’ve done in the election and since,” she said, “but I don’t think they have any capacity to make that kind of decision right now.”

This was coupled with renewed warnings that the US offer of negotiations would not be extended indefinitely. “The nuclear clock is ticking,” she said. The US, she added, “will not keep the window open forever.” And she renewed her threat that Washington would impose “crippling sanctions.”

All of this is designed to exert maximum pressure on an Iranian government that appears increasingly unstable in the hope that it will shift the balance of power toward the camp of the defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi and his patron, the billionaire former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

This faction has criticized the foreign policy of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as reckless, while signaling its support for a more rapid introduction of free market economic policies, a wider opening to foreign capital and a rapprochement with US imperialism. All of this explains Washington’s outrage over the Iranian election results and the unbridled enthusiasm of the US media for Mousavi’s so-called “green revolution.”

Given the immense strategic interests of US imperialism in the region—US armed forces are waging wars on both Iran’s eastern (Afghanistan) and western (Iraq) borders, while the country ranks number three in terms of proven oil reserves—the Obama administration is prepared to expend considerable resources to effect a change at the top of the regime in Tehran.

Such considerations are regarded as irrelevant by the petty-bourgeois pseudo-“left” in the US, which is hostile to any class analysis, attention to program or consideration of the long history of American intervention in Iran in evaluating the real content of the movement led by the improbable “reformers,” Mousavi and Rafsanjani. For them, the Iranian events have served chiefly as a means of solidifying their support for the Obama administration and US imperialism as it escalates the war in Afghanistan and prepares for new interventions.

There are immense dangers in the escalating US intervention. The talk of a nuclear umbrella, a regional arms buildup and possible Israeli air strikes all pose the threat of a conflagration that could dwarf the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while drawing in other major powers with their own considerable interests in the region.

Only the working class—in Iran, the United States and internationally—can defeat these dangers by mobilizing its strength in independent political struggle against the profit system that produces war.

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