

“Alternatives to a US Attack on Iran”

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(translated by Miriam Schive)

Why a US attack on Iran within the next 16 months seems possible. And how one might prevent it from happening ...

Attacking Iran would have catastrophic consequences for the region and the entire world for years to come: The efforts at state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq would be completely destroyed, if an Islamic Civil War were to break out; the anti-Western position would be radically strengthened and terrorism would rise significantly and vehemently, and the nuclear arms race in the region would be boosted – surely, Iran – and a number of other states – would put everything on the line to obtain a nuclear weapon.

The possible arguments for an attack: US President Bush and Vice President Cheney seem to believe that regime change / transformation / or even decapitation of the Iranian leadership is in line with their defining mission to change the Middle East for good. Both the President and the Vice President, apparently ignoring the overwhelming dissenting public opinion, still seem convinced that the effects of such a mission would enhance their role in history. According to the ‘War Powers Act,’ which the US Congress passed in 1973, the President has 90 days after introducing troops into hostilities to obtain approval by Congress – but this time period would offer ample time for devastating air strikes and Special Forces assaults.

### ***A trap for Iran***

The Bush administration is trying to construct a strategic trap for Iran based on a three-pronged argument: 1) Iran’s headstrong pursuit of a nuclear program; 2) Iran’s alleged involvement and responsibility for American casualties and instability in Iraq; 3) Iran’s alleged participation in regional destabilization and support for Syria, Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations. Any of these points could provide the basis to launch an attack against Iran.

President Ahmadinejad’s anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli speeches only worsen the situation. Iran has unambiguously allowed the deadlines set by the UN Security Council to expire without suspending its uranium enrichment program. On the contrary, Ahmadinejad has provocatively emphasized the fact that the nation will not only continue with the development of its civilian nuclear program, but will indeed accelerate the process. Very few people believe that the Iranian nuclear program is limited to civilian use, which, of course, provides ‘ammunition’ to those who see a military strike as the last resort before it is too late.

The Israeli Intelligence Service Mossad and EU-analyses assume that Iran will attain sufficient fissile material for a nuclear warhead by 2009, if not earlier. And, for Israel “to

do nothing is not an option for the Jewish people.” “Better to pay \$100 per barrel of oil, than to have a nuclear Iran,” is the clear Israeli position. Considering the large Jewish minority in Iran, Israel certainly has a basis for claiming a good awareness of the actual status of the Iranian nuclear program. However, neither Washington, nor London wants Israel to feel compelled to undertake unilateral military action.

### *A Conflict of Interest for the Republicans?*

On the other hand, the US will hold presidential elections in the fall of 2008, and, ultimately, the US will want to reduce its military presence in Iraq. Iran’s intimidation tactics and military posturing have supported the suggestion of the Sunni-governed Gulf states that a military operation aimed at weakening the Iranian regime might actually contribute to regional stability and might reduce Iran’s dominant position for the time being – particularly in preparation for the foreseeable decrease in US presence in the region.

Additional US Marine forces are currently en route to the Gulf. Furthermore Great Britain has pulled out the majority of its forces from the Basra region on the Iranian border; most likely in order to send a number of them to Afghanistan, Iran’s neighbor to the east. Saudi Arabia and other OPEC-states will almost certainly raise their oil production levels in order to dampen any rise in energy costs that would result from an attack. Some in the US also believe that a conflict with Iran could serve the interest of the Republican Party in the upcoming presidential elections.

A possible military operation would presumably consist mainly of air strikes; more than 10,000 sorties could bring ‘shock and awe,’ if aimed at strategic and military targets, as well as different infrastructure, such as energy and nuclear facilities. Special Forces operations would be aimed at select goals on the coast. The Special Forces attacks could also come from the East (Afghanistan and Pakistan). It can be assumed that these Special Forces are already on Iranian soil. Successive provocative incidents and the most recent bombings in Iran suggest that a ‘covert war’ has already commenced. These gradual ‘turning of the screws,’ tactics of the Special Forces operations are aimed at creating domestic Iranian instability and at weakening the current government. Aside from the fact that success is hardly foreseeable, these sorts of actions carry high risk of starting an ‘accidental war.’

What can be done to avoid this? There simply is no other rational option but to engage in diplomatic negotiations and to use different levels of sanctions, combined with goal-oriented negotiations. It is important that none of the involved parties loses its nerve. Therefore, restraint, deliberateness, understanding and the establishment of a long-term overall strategy are necessary.

Increasing concern about a possible military strike against Iran has created more public resistance than perhaps the Bush administration expected. On the other hand, however, this may assist President Ahmadinejad to find a more unified domestic front and provide further motivation to the efforts to achieve nuclear capability as soon as possible.

Differences in opinion within Bush's cabinet, such as between Condoleeza Rice and Vice President Cheney, certainly are not helping the negotiation position of the US. The Europeans and the US, together with Russia and China, must be steadfast and offer a unified front against Iranian interests – while simultaneously there must be a strong message to the Bush-administration that a unilateral military operation would be completely unacceptable.

What is essential is that contact be established between the US and Iran. The topics of conversation should be the region, terrorism, security, Hezbollah and, finally, the Iranian nuclear agenda. In this context, Iran should also be thanked for its cooperation in regard to Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The Iranian government should be taken at its word with regard to the offer to stop uranium enrichment, and the country must henceforth allow IAEA inspections.

### ***Prospects for Cooperation***

Aside from the 'sticks,' however, there should also be an offer of 'carrots' - an offer to support a multilateral nuclear energy solution; to stop sanctions and to announce economic cooperation. All of these things, however, would be conditioned upon the fact that Iran along with the EU3+3 can successfully find a solution for the nuclear problem and that Iran would receive security guarantees in return.

Barring such agreement, it should be made clear that Iran would face parallel selective sanctions, which would be intended to force the leadership to face reality. However, it must also be made known to the Iranians and, in particular, to the business community, that there is great interest in working with them, if the Iranian administration demonstrates a sincere interest in cooperation. Through the development of a regional order after the Iraq war, regional trade and infrastructure could be supported. There should also be an agreement that limits Iranian military influence in the region and creates a regional regime to control and limit armament. Gradually, the civil society and media in Iran should also be supported.