

Momentum for Strike on Iran Threatens To Be Irreversible

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Unless Vice President Dick Cheney and his political influence are removed from Washington immediately, the momentum building towards a U.S. military strike on Iran may become irreversible. Although Cheney has been severely wounded by the combination of domestic pressures, epitomized by the implications of the Lewis Libby trial, and a growing international consensus *against* the permanent war policy associated with the Cheney-Bush regime, as any good hunter knows (and Cheney is not among them), a wounded bear is a dangerous beast and will attack viciously unless neutralized.

According to Washington sources, the planned attack against Iran could come by May. All the pieces are coming into place, from a military standpoint, and the propaganda machines are working overtime to churn out stories of Iranian weapons smuggled into Iraq to be used to kill American GIs. At the same time, however, it must be stressed that the clear recognition of the nature of the war danger and what it would unleash, is prompting powerful political forces, inside the U.S. as well as abroad, especially in Russia, to intervene to prevent a new catastrophe.

The accelerated buildup towards conflict is unfolding just as Tony Blair's Britain has announced its intention to start withdrawing its forces from southern Iraq, thus leaving the U.S., with its "surge" of additional troops, as a sitting duck. Yet the British are also providing the "evidence" for a U.S. attack on Iran (see the Editorial in last week's issue), and apparently positioning themselves to let the U.S. take the brunt, should the attack occur.

Gulf of Tonkin Revisited

With the arrival in the Sea of Oman Feb. 15 of the *USS John C. Stennis* carrier group, which joined the *USS Dwight*

D. Eisenhower, in the Sea of Oman, the military buildup reached a new level, and the *USS Nimitz* is reportedly also on its way. The *Stennis* is backed by a strike group with more than 6,500 sailors and Marines and with additional mine-sweeping ships. Although the official U.S. statement claimed the deployment of the *Stennis* was "to conduct maritime security operations in regional waters, as well as to provide support for ground forces operating in Afghanistan and Iraq," the real target is Iran. With the gathering of numerous naval vessels in the region, the stage would be set for orchestrating an "accidental" confrontation between the U.S. and Iran, which would then be used to motivate a full-scale American pre-emptive attack on Iran.

A high-level U.S. official stated as much publicly. On Feb. 19, the U.S. Fifth Fleet Commander in the Persian Gulf, Vice Adm. Patrick M. Walsh told a small press conference at Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, that, "what concerns me is miscalculation. That's certainly what we are trying to avoid—a mistake that then boils over into a war." Although he placed the responsibility on Iran's shoulders, he acknowledged the danger of an "incident" which could trigger a war. Walsh pointed to military exercises being conducted by Iran, which he said could threaten innocent ships in international waters, U.S. troops, and neighboring states. He referred specifically to the northern part of the Persian Gulf, where there are two Iraqi oil platforms, and "the incursions from Iran have continued to grow over time." He emphasized that Iranian maneuvers had taken place in busy shipping lanes in the Strait of Hormuz, which is the narrow mouth through which two-fifths of world oil supplies pass.

Walsh said that Iranian sailors had loaded mines onto small mine-laying boats and test-fired a Shahab-3 ballistic



U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Kyle D. Gahlau

Dick Cheney waves to the audience aboard the USS Kitty Hawk, during his warmongering visit to Asia on Feb. 21, where he again threatened Iran.

missile into international waters. “The Shahab-3 most recently went into waters very close to the traffic-separation scheme in the straits themselves,” he said in an interview carried by Associated Press. “This gives us concern because innocent passage of vessels now is threatened,” he said.

‘Preparations Have Been Made’

Just days later, on Feb. 21, retired Air Force Col. Sam Gardiner, an expert on Iran, stressed the importance of such military preparations. Speaking at a forum of the Century Foundation in Washington, D.C., on the day of the deadline defined by the UN Security Council Resolution 1737, which called on Iran to stop enrichment of uranium, or face further sanctions, Gardiner said: “I don’t think a decision has been made [by the Bush Administration] to take action against Iran, but preparations have been made.” He said he had come to this conclusion from all available media reports, particularly two actions: sending of three U.S. mine counter-measure ships to the Persian Gulf, and the Pentagon’s announcement on Feb. 14 that 1,000 troops, in addition to the 21,500, would be sent to Iraq. He claimed that 1,000 was the right kind of number for special operations teams to move inside Iran.

New reports appeared at the same time, regarding scenarios for an American attack. The *BBC*, on Feb. 20, cited “diplomatic sources” who said that talk of U.S. negotiations with Iran was merely a “fallback plan,” with the primary attack already decided on. CentCom in Florida, it reported, has already chosen its targets in Iran—which include Iranian air and naval bases, missile facilities, and command-and-control centers—and is only waiting for a “trigger” to launch. The Pentagon denied the report.

Russia Calls the Game

The Russian leadership has made clear that it is acutely aware of the nature of the immediate danger of military conflict between the U.S. and Iran, and, more broadly, of the fact that Russia is among the ultimate targets of the permanent-war faction in the United States. President Vladimir Putin shocked the world with his remarks in this direction, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Immediately thereafter, Putin discussed the strategic crisis with government leaders in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan (see last week’s *EIR*).

Just prior to this visit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in an interview to the Lebanese weekly *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, pointed to the danger of the military buildup in the region. “Unfortunately,” he said, “the concentration in this part of the world of significant foreign military contingents and of the newest types of weapons can provoke the use of force. In such a situation, even a small accident, like the one that recently occurred as a result of the collision between a U.S. nuclear submarine and a Japanese tanker, can lead to unpredictable consequences.” He went on:

“We fully share the fears of our Gulf partners that in the case of a confrontation or the enactment of a force-based scenario in the Gulf zone, their states are bound to be jeopardized by a large-scale military, humanitarian, and environmental catastrophe.”

The most explosive statement Lavrov made in the lengthy interview, had to do with the danger that the U.S. might use its forces deployed in Iraq for operations against Syria or Iran. “An escalation of the conflict and its spillover into Iraq will inevitably entail catastrophic consequences, not only for the Middle East,” he said. “I think Washington understands this.” Lavrov added: “We also firmly believe that the MNF [Multi-National Force] in Iraq should act solely in accordance with the mandate of the UN Security Council, which does not provide for any actions outside that country.”

Instead of confrontation, Lavrov urged diplomacy. He said it was Russia’s “principled stand” that the nuclear issue should be “tackled solely by politico-diplomatic methods,” and said Russia was “doing everything for the talks [on Iran’s nuclear program] to begin as soon as possible.” He called for a “direct dialogue between Washington and Tehran” as urged by “representatives of influential political circles in the U.S.,” a reference to the Baker-Hamilton group.

Following the issuance on Feb. 22 of the report on Iran’s program, by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Mohammad ElBaradei, which said that Iran had contin-

ued its uranium enrichment activities, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice began talking about a new UN Security Council resolution to impose further sanctions, and Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns reportedly rushed to the computer to whip up a draft text. Lavrov had earlier stated that Russia would abide by the IAEA's professional assessment, and Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin stated unequivocally that the issue is not new sanctions.

It Takes Two To Dialogue

The Russians are not the only ones to demand negotiations, as a means of averting what they perceive to be a commitment to war. Former weapons inspector Hans Blix, in a Feb. 20 commentary in the *International Herald Tribune*, entitled, "Will the United States Attack Iran?" warned that the Bush Administration was heading for an attack. After reviewing the military buildup, he challenged Washington to follow the North Korean model vis-à-vis Iran. "The U.S. seems able to sit down for talks without demanding that the production of plutonium be stopped prior to the talks, and even to indicate that an agreement could constitute the opening of diplomatic relations and guarantees against attacks in return for denuclearization," he wrote. Citing the Baker-Hamilton report's clear call for opening talks with both Iran and Syria, he noted that that this had been ignored by a Bush Administration which "prefers to talk to Iran and Syria through public statements and military threats. . . ."

ElBaradei also pushed for direct talks between the U.S. and Iran, saying that sanctions and military strikes are the worst policies, since they will only strengthen the hardliners, and, as everyone should know, "you cannot bomb knowledge." He called for both sides to take a "time out," meaning Iran would temporarily suspend its program and the U.S. would not freeze sanctions. He concluded by saying, "It's just a question of how to get both sides to the negotiating table while saving face. The Iranian issue will only be resolved when the U.S. takes a decision to engage Iran directly. . . . The nuclear issue is the tip of the iceberg."

Institutional support for direct talks is evident in both Tehran and Washington, and many see the North Korea agreement as a model for resolution. Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki has repeatedly said Tehran is ready for talks, as has President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, on condition that there be no pre-conditions posed by the other side, i.e., that the two meet as equals. This has been repeatedly rejected by Rice, who insists enrichment and related activities must first cease.

But, according to the Council on Foreign Relations' Iran expert, Ray Takeyh, speaking at a conference call press conference on Feb. 22, "there is a consensus" in both Washington and Tehran, for talks and setting up diplomatic relations. He said this was across the political spectrum in Iran, and has the blessing of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while, even in the U.S., some statements have

reflected this view. He admitted, however, that there was a danger of a "war by miscalculation" or "Gulf of Tonkin"-type incident.

On Feb. 22, CNN posted a story by Christiane Amanpour, based on a 90-minute interview she had conducted with an unnamed senior Iranian official, who asserted that he was speaking, in effect, for the Supreme Leader. The official stated that Iran sees the United States as a natural ally (against al-Qaeda) and as a country that has never invaded Iran. "We are not after conflict. We are not after crisis. We are not after war," the official told CNN, "but we don't know whether the same is true in the U.S. or not. If the same is true on the U.S. side," he concluded, "the first step must be to end this vicious cycle that can lead to dangerous action—war." The official warned that right now, both Iran and the U.S. are "afraid of looking weak if we take the first step. We have this fear in common with America. Before contemplating recognition, each side feels it necessary to convince the other side that 'I am not weak.' "

The British Role

But within the Blair-Cheney circles, the policy remains war. This became excruciatingly clear when Ali Larijani, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and chief negotiator on nuclear issues, concluded a series of very successful talks with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana, and Swiss President Micheline Calmy-Rey in mid-February. Larijani had laid out Iran's case at the Davos conference, then followed up with separate political talks. In Bern, a new proposal was presented discreetly by the Swiss, for facilitating the start of negotiations. According to the *Tehran Times*, the proposal "calls for resuming talks under the condition that Iran halt feeding the centrifuges with processed uranium hexafluoride (UF6) gas." This is according to Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini. Iranian sources told *EIR* that this may explain why President Ahmadinejad did not announce any further breakthroughs in the program on the Iranian Revolution's anniversary.

The Larijani initiative, however, was followed immediately by press stories geared to throwing cold water on the possibility of negotiations. First, the *Financial Times* of Feb. 13 covered a document allegedly drafted by Solana's staff, saying Iran would inevitably get a bomb, with the implication that talks would be worthless. (The draft had not been endorsed by Solana.) Second, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* published a story in its Feb. 17-18 edition, about how the Cheney-Bush crew sabotaged an attempt by Iran, which the Swiss had mediated, to overcome the political conflict back in 2003. The message was clear: don't bother to try to resolve the crisis diplomatically.

Meanwhile, the British, in particular, continue to stoke a U.S. conflict, with their stories, including from Blair himself, about Iran being the source of the IEDs hitting U.S. troops.