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DRIFT TO WAR

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There was a decrease in US military casualties in Iraq during October. A decline in civilian casualties was also claimed by the US military authorities but other agencies, including Iraqi government sources, were less positive. These other reports were more plausible given the huge increase in the use of air power by the US military – there were more than three times as many air strikes in the first ten months of 2007 as in the whole of 2006.

In any case, even if the security situation in Iraq was showing some small sign of improvement, attention shifted a thousand miles to the east where even the violent conflict in south east Afghanistan was overshadowed by political developments in Pakistan.

The return of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had been expected to see a consolidation of power in the hands of General Musharraf in combination with Mrs Bhutto and her party. In the event, a suicide bomb attack on her motorcade on the day of her arrival indicated the problems that would be faced and Mrs Bhutto returned to her residence in Dubai before the end of the month.

As the security situation in the border districts with Afghanistan deteriorated, General Musharraf endeavoured to take direct control of the country, leaving the US attempts to broker a Musharraf/Bhutto coalition in disarray. By the end of the month it looked highly unlikely that the forthcoming elections would be held, especially as many key members of opposition political parties were being detained by security forces on behalf of the Musharraf regime.

Further Sanctions against Iran

In the United States, the situation in Pakistan caused concern but this scarcely impinged on the 2008 presidential election campaign. Indeed, it was the issue of Iran that became steadily more prominent during the course of October, with the Bush administration announcing a further round of sanctions at the end of the month. These appeared to pre-empt further international discussions and, on the surface, appeared mainly directed at Iran's presumed nuclear weapon programme. The US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice concentrated on this, saying that "the international community cannot just sit idly by until we face unpalatable choices. A nuclear weapon in the hands of the Iranian regime would be deeply destabilizing in the world's most volatile region."

The new round of sanctions was directed primarily at aspects of the Iranian economy controlled by the Revolutionary Guard, but would also have an impact on the country as a whole. It was reported, for example, that the World Bank was finding it difficult to channel money into the country because of US sanctions against Iranian banks, with this holding up \$5.4 million of aid for earthquake relief and other civil projects.

The US move came at a time when the Ahmadinejad government had become more hawkish on the nuclear issue, not least with the removal of the experienced Ali Larijani as the main negotiator with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In more general terms the Iranian reaction to the new US sanctions was dismissive, a stance no doubt aided by the opposition to the sanctions expressed by both Russia and China.

The US Presidential Campaign

Probably more significant is the changing mood in the United States where polling now indicates that a majority would support an attack on Iran if it was aimed at stopping the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, a majority of those expressing an opinion expect an attack before the end of President Bush's term of office.

The administration is able to air a more vigorous anti-Iran agenda partly because of developments within the election campaign even before the start of the primaries. On the Democrat side, Hillary Clinton is the clear front runner and she has been notably cautious on issues such as a full withdrawal from Iraq and has also failed to rule out the use of force against Iran. In part this may be because of the perennial Democrat fear of being labelled unpatriotic, especially during a presidential election campaign, but a more significant factor is the manner in which the competition for the Republican nomination has developed. To the surprise of many, the former Mayor of New York, Rudi Giuliani, has emerged as a lead candidate, despite his liberal views on issues such as abortion. He is, though, anything but liberal on issues of foreign and security policy, and may be compensating for his domestic attitudes by a particularly hard line on issues such as Iraq in order to ensure that the more conservative elements within the Republican Party will back him.

The overall effect of the stances being taken by the two lead candidates, Clinton and Giuliani, means that there is no leading political figure urging caution on Iran with any vigour. This may become highly significant if the Bush administration continues to increase its emphasis on the Iran nuclear issue and also the claimed Iranian involvement in the Iraq insurgency.

Slide to War?

Although energy prices remain high, and Iran should therefore be reaping the foreign exchange rewards for its oil and gas exports, their economy is not in good shape and there have even been instances of petrol rationing, an extraordinary development in such an oil-rich country. The Ahmadinejad government has suffered as a result of economic mismanagement, and this has been compounded by criticism from moderates over the removal of Mr Larijani from his nuclear negotiating post. At the same time, the view of most analysts, both inside and outside Iran, is that any kind of external military action against the country, whether involving Israel or the United States, would have a powerful unifying effect across the country. The present government therefore has a direct political interest in a crisis with the United States as a means of boosting domestic support.

Furthermore, the powerful Revolutionary Guard has lost much of its standing in Iranian society since the end of the Iran/Iraq War and would greatly enjoy the status that would ensue from protecting the country in the face of external aggression. It is even possible that radical elements within the Guard would see it as useful to incite such an attack, perhaps through a border incident or some maritime action directed against US personnel along the lines of the detention of 15 British sailors and marines earlier in the year.

The dangers of war are compounded by three other factors. One is that the Bush administration has greatly increased in claims about Iran's interference in Iraq. Not only does Iran have to stop its nuclear programme but it must also stop the Iraqi intervention. As a result, any war would have to embrace wider aims. The second factor is that the Israeli government is not prepared to allow a nuclear-armed Iran and would be likely to take direct military action in the absence of any US action before the Bush administration leaves office. Finally, the Israeli government also recognises that any action it might take would incite an Iranian response against US forces in the Persian Gulf region which would, in turn, ensure a very vigorous American counteraction using forces that are very much larger and closer to Iran than those of Israel. In the view of many Israeli analysts, this would serve the very useful purpose of weakening the Iranian regime.

War and its Outcomes

Because of the increase in tensions and the risk of a war involving Iran and the United States, with or without Israel, it is advisable to set out the probable course of such a conflict and its outcome, since this readily illustrates the dangerous predicament that would emerge should war come about. In doing so, it makes sense to examine the likely US war plans, however war might start, a matter discussed in an earlier report from Oxford Research Group (*Iran: Consequences of a War*, February 2006). Whether this results from an Iranian provocation, an Israeli attack with an Iranian response against US forces, or an attack initiated by the United States, the form that the US action would take will be broadly similar.

US military action will have three main aims. The first will be to severely disable the Iranian command and control system, its radar and anti-aircraft systems and its air force. These will greatly reduce the risks to US air crew but will involve attacking many hundreds of targets using strike aircraft and cruise missiles. The second aim will be to disable Iran's nuclear research and development facilities, including the Bushehr reactor, major nuclear plants at Isfahan and Natanz and Tehran as well as manufacturing facilities, mostly in and near Tehran.

These would involve many scores of targets but the third aim, the disabling of the Revolutionary Guard, would be an even bigger task than either of the first two. The Guard, with its extensive logistics support, has large numbers of locations, with those adjacent to the Iraqi border or along the shores of the Persian Gulf having priority. A US attack would stretch over many days and would involve repeat attacks following bomb damage assessments of initial raids.

There is an assumption that the United States is too overstretched because of the Iraq and Afghan wars to attack Iran, but this is incorrect for two reasons. One is that both Iraq and Afghanistan are primarily ground wars involving the US Army and the Marine Corps, both of which are indeed under severe pressure. By contrast, a war with Iran would be fought as an air war, for which the United States has substantial resources in the region. The second reason concerns changes in air force armaments. A relatively recent development has been the deployment of a new bomb, a 250lb device with a particularly potent explosive charge. This is reported to be quite close in its destructive power to the standard 2,000lb bomb. A typical USAF strike fighter will normally deploy with four 2,000lb bombs, but can carry up to 22 of the smaller bombs. As a result, it is feasible to attack a greatly increased number of targets in a given sortie, giving the target designators much more freedom of action during their war planning.

Because of the extent of US air power, both in the US Air Force and in terms of the US Navy's carrier aviation, the capability of the US military to attack Iran is formidable. Given that the war aims would be the destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities and substantial damage to its armed forces, especially the Revolutionary Guards, the initial air war would be on a very large scale and would stretch over several weeks. It appears that the Bush administration does hold the view that such a war would be deeply unpopular within Iran, with the Ahmadinejad regime being blamed for taking the country into the war. This is highly questionable, the much more likely outcome being a unifying of the country and a re-invigorated military, no matter what the initial damage done by the air strikes.

In the short term, a US attack would appear to have a very substantial effect and might even be hailed as a victory, much as was the Iraq War in 2003 with President Bush's "mission accomplished" speech. In the longer term, over months rather than weeks, though, Iran would have many options in terms of its response. An obvious outcome would be an utter determination by the state to develop a nuclear weapons programme while withdrawing from the Non-proliferation Treaty. This alone would make regional powers such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia rethink their own nuclear options. Furthermore, as Iran took steps to reconstitute its nuclear infrastructure the United States would undertake further air raids, with these potentially stretching over years.

Iran would also be able to intervene much more forcibly in Iraq, would be able to interfere with oil supply routes out of the Persian Gulf and could even encourage paramilitary attacks on west Gulf oil facilities. All of this would have a profound impact on the price of oil and natural gas, causing major problems for the world economy. Paradoxically, high oil prices would actually aid Iran, given the probability that countries such as China would want to maintain their oil trading arrangements.

The central issue here is that any military action by the United States against Iran would not be a short-term matter. There may well be some centres of power in Washington, particularly around Vice-President Cheney, who believe that military action would have such severe consequences for the Tehran government that it would become unstable and would succumb to regime change. The likelihood of this happening is remote. Moreover, in spite of the damage done to the country's military power and, indeed, to its infrastructure, the much more likely outcome would be an utter determination to resist external aggression.

It is worth remembering that the Iran/Iraq War of 1980-88 was started by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein in the expectation that a chaotic and internally weakened Iran in the immediate aftermath of a violent revolution would be no match for the professional armed forces of Iraq. That proved to be a grievous error leading to a bitter war that was fought with tenacity and commitment by the Iranians, even at the cost of several hundred thousand young men.

Iran twenty years later is a country that would almost certainly unify in the face of American military action. As in Iraq, what might be assumed in Washington to be a military operation designed to achieve its required outcomes within a couple of months would actually stretch on into a least a decade, if not longer. However difficult the path of diplomatic engagement turns out to be, there is no other option available. The fact that this is not recognised within the heated confines of the US 2008 Presidential Election campaign is of particular concern.

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