

AVOIDING GEOPOLITICAL DISASTER IN 2007/8:
IRAN, KOREA AND THE END OF THE BUSH DOCTRINE

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January 14th 2007

In his address to the nation on January 10th President Bush rejected the key findings of the Iraq Study group and chose a path of military escalation in Iraq. More importantly, although less commented upon, was his decision to threaten Iran and to a lesser degree Syria, both of which he claimed were aiding insurgencies in Iraq.

While the vehement criticisms of the military escalation in Iraq, given the dubious likelihood of the Iraqi security forces being able to carry out their assigned missions, are appropriate, it's that larger geopolitical context, and the Iranian question in particular, that is cause for greater concern. It is so precisely because events are now in motion that might lead fairly directly to a much larger war, one that no one, with perhaps the exception of some neo-conservative intellectuals in Washington, and Al Queda members in South Waziristan, actually want to fight.

Should a wider war breakout in the Gulf involving the U.S. and Iran and draw other states across the Middle East into the conflagration, it will have global repercussions in part because so much of the fuel for the global economy comes from the Gulf and is shipped through the Straits of Hormuz. Iran is the northern shoreline of those Straits, and thus has the ability to seriously disrupt if not totally stop shipping carrying petroleum to the rest of the world. Were this to happen, all bets are off as to how events might unfold.

For reasons outlined below it is now imperative that the leadership of the Democratic Party in the United States take common cause with dissident Republicans and act to stop preparations for an American attack on Iran. The necessity of engaging with Iran and Syria as part a larger regional settlement was spelled out in the Iraq Study Group Report. Politicians in Washington need to take initiatives to make a dialogue in the region happen. Likewise it is important that political leaders elsewhere act to reduce the dangers of the war spreading, and do so in the clear recognition that the American administration is out of step both with international public opinion and with opinion within the United States itself.

This administration has walked away from the political opportunity offered to it by the Iraq Study group, and has deliberately chosen to use force rather than to attempt a military de-escalation coupled to regional diplomacy. Thus the danger grows of a series of miscalculations

and escalations leading to a wider war in the Gulf and possibly across the Middle East. As with other dangerous geopolitical confrontations in the past predicting events is impossible. But it is clear that events frequently spiral out of control and wars happen when political leaders either miscalculate badly or simply run out of options.

As Niall Ferguson shows so clearly in his recently published history of the War of the World, very few people saw the First World War coming until a couple of days before it started, and by then it was too late to stop the momentum. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 came when the Japanese leadership concluded that they had to fight or accept the dismantling of their imperial achievements in Asia over the previous two decades. U.S. sanctions, and in particular the denial of fuel supplies to Japan as an attempt to pressure them to stop their war in China, boxed them into a corner. They chose to fight rather than back down. This action, justified by quasi religious nationalism, and against what were clearly ridiculous odds in the long run, clearly took much of the American political leadership by surprise.

In these cases there were serious misunderstandings and miscalculations on all sides leading to unforeseen events and terrible wars. Historical analogies are rarely precise and need to be treated with great caution, but as I show below, some of the same dynamics, misunderstandings and miscalculations may well be in play in the Gulf region now, and it is time to make sure that they do not play out in another drama that no one wants.

In the immediate aftermath of the President's speech, which warned of American action against Iranian networks supporting militias in Iraq, the international media reported that American forces raided an Iranian consulate in Iraq taking computers and documents from the building while detaining Iranian representatives. By most standards such flagrant breaches of diplomatic immunity are tantamount to a declaration of war. But such niceties are now apparently of little concern to American policy makers, although they may well be interpreted in Tehran as the prelude to what is in store in the coming months.

In addition to warning of this and presumably other attacks to follow, the President also announced that he was sending Patriot missiles to the Gulf states, and dispatching Secretary of State Rice to the region to speak with leaders of Arab regimes in the region who are currently friendly to America. These regimes are obviously worried about growing Iranian and Shia influence in the region and especially alarmed at this prospect if and when it coincides with an American pull out from Iraq. Recently administration charges that Iran is supplying explosive devices and aid to the Shia insurgents have become more pointed, although as the Observer newspaper in Britain makes clear in a 14 January 2007 story "After the Surge ... what next?", these claims are at best oversimplifications.

The standoff over Iranian uranium enrichment continues; Iran is demanding the right to use this technology and has made this claim a matter of national pride. Most sources agree that even if enrichment continues Iran will still need years to complete the process of building a nuclear bomb. Given the serious state of the Iranian economy, and the oil sector in particular, the claim that they will need to use nuclear generating capacity in the foreseeable future to supply their

electrical grid is credible. The American position is simply that Iran must stop enrichment activities as a precursor to any larger discussion of diplomatic initiatives and the possibility of lifting sanctions. National pride in Iran now makes such a unilateral climb-down very unlikely indeed, a fact the American administration fully understands. Thus an impasse continues.

Its aggravated by Iran's current president who has an unfortunate habit of saying provocative things that play on Israel's fears well beyond what threats Hezbollah offers from Lebanon. When fears of Iranian nuclear weapons are combined with the growing capabilities of Iran's Shahab ballistic missiles, some of which have the range to at least potentially hit Israel, alarm bells ring in Tel Aviv. There have been repeated Israeli warnings that it may act militarily to setback Iranian nuclear plans by directly attacking its nuclear facilities. It acted in 1981 against Iraq in just this way when it used its air force to bomb the Osirak reactor. A replay in Iran would be much more difficult, but newspaper reports in January 2007 make it clear that planes from the Israeli air force are currently flying the length of the Mediterranean sea, apparently training for long distance missions.

Israeli officials have made it clear that they think that George W. Bush will use airpower if all other things fail to get the Iranian nuclear fuel production facilities stopped. Given that Iran has apparently made its rights to produce fuel for its nuclear reactor a matter of nationalism, and explicitly warned the US to stop its meddling in the Gulf region, all is set for a crisis in which the danger of miscalculation increases. The Israeli position of not accepting Iranian nuclear weapons under any circumstances applies leverage to the Bush administration suggesting that if Washington doesn't attack, Israel just might. The prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran, with the region wide war that this might trigger, is more than most people in Washington want to consider. President Ahmadinejad's fiery rhetoric simply makes matters worse, but while it seems that much of his rhetoric is for domestic consumption within Iran, it plays into the hands of Israeli hawks determined to maintain their state as the only nuclear weapons power in the region.

The President's address to the nation makes it clear that any hopes that the Democratic party's victory in the mid-term elections last November would mean the end of the "Bush doctrine" have been dashed. Clearly the President has chosen to take the advice of some neo-conservative intellectuals, and specifically in this case, the "Choosing Victory" plan drawn up by the American Enterprise Institute's Iraq Planning Group published a few days before the President's address, rather than the bipartisan advice of the prestigious [Iraq Study Group Report](#).

The President's choice to continue emphasizing military action over diplomatic initiatives is consistent with his self preferred role as a war president. His focus remains on victory rather than a negotiated settlement to the numerous conflicts in the Middle East. It is also consistent with recent reformulations of the war on terror as a "long war", and crucially with the basic logic of what has now simply become known as the "Bush doctrine", with its policy using military force to remove regimes seen as even potentially offering a threat to American interests. Some years ago Iran was specifically named as one of the "Axis of Evil" slated for regime change.

The administration has been entirely consistent with the stated objectives in the Bush doctrine and its explicit claims to preeminence and this logic of preventative war. The war on terror is about taking war to the enemy, removing regimes that even potentially pose a threat to the US or its interests. Both the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were entirely consistent with the application of the Bush doctrine to world affairs.

Iran now fits the bill too. Its determination to develop a nuclear fuel cycle, with the potential for a weapons program as a spin-off, is too much of a provocation to the remaining neo-cons in Washington. There are now some UN sanctions in place, and the US "Iran Freedom Bill" which mandates US sanctions against Iran was signed into law before the mid-term elections last Fall with scarcely a public comment. Pressure on Iran is clearly mounting.

Through the eyes of the neo-conservatives, and especially in the words of Joshua Moravchik's article in the November 2006 edition of Foreign Policy magazine, its time to plan the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities, something that he argues Bush will need to do before he leaves office. If Iraq appears headed for a civil war, or indeed for a breakup and partition in some form, then the view from Washington is that Iran can only benefit. If Iran has nuclear weapons this is then even worse. Iran with a bomb will embolden the Jihadists so it much be stopped, and military force is the only way to do it they argue.

Strategy's old adage taken from Sun Tsu is "know your enemy, know yourself". Its not clear that the neo-conservatives pay much attention to such things, they certainly didn't in the case of Iraq. Assuming that an attack on Iran will be tolerated by the population who will be glad to see the end of the Mullahs suggests a similar blindness to that which guided, or misguided, the strategy for the invasion of Iraq. Iranian national pride in the face of an American attack might have all sorts of effects that the war planners may not have considered.

Tehran has now dealt with five years of the Bush doctrine and lived with the flat refusal by Washington of a number of its diplomatic olive branches, especially those in the aftermath of 9/11 when it collaborated with the U.S. in the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan. They have watched as plots for bombing strikes have been discussed in the press in the West, and observed repeated calls from Jerusalem for attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. They know that the American air force and its cruise missiles can get through to hit Iranian targets. Nonetheless in the Fall of 2006 the Iranians conducted high profile missile firings and military exercises suggesting clearly that they are preparing for the worst. The missiles apparently have some cluster bomb warheads on them too now, a point made explicitly by Iranian commentators.

The Iranians have studied not only the Bush doctrine, but its military and political antecedents. Thinking about sanctions, military action and regime change will certainly be on the minds of geopolitical analysts in Tehran. Serbia offers the obvious US model to apply in Iran given that the US doesn't have the necessary troops to invade. It took a lengthy bombing campaign in 1999 and a while for the sanctions, which made reconstruction difficult, to really squeeze Milosevic. But it worked in the end and his regime fell; Kosovo was a useful pretext which distracted everyone from the larger goal of regime change, just as nuclear enrichment is in the case of Iran.

Regime change in Kabul and Baghdad have followed by overt military means; Kiev and Beirut by ostensibly peaceful people power revolutions. Caracas in 2002 was bungled, but surely an attempt on Tehran can't be far behind? Besides as everyone in Tehran, but few apparently in Washington remember, regime change has been done before in the early 1950s when an elected government in Tehran was overthrown by American and British plotting and the Shah imposed to do the America's bidding. This geopolitical understanding is a perfectly sensible interpretation of events when viewed from Tehran, and its likely to shape much thinking in the coming months. Taking this seriously is key to acting prudently on the part of policy makers everywhere.

In Washington the neo-cons are worried; the Democratic Congress and Senate might thwart the Bush doctrine in their rush to get out of Iraq. But on the other hand this offers them a golden opportunity. Play the Iran threat card and get in the attack to weaken Iran dramatically so a pull out leaving Iraq in chaos doesn't matter because the Iranians can't take advantage of the mess left behind. Seymour Hersh suggested just this possibility in the New Yorker last December when he pointed to a political deal in Washington where Democrats can have their Iraq pullout while the neo-cons get their wish for an air assault on Iran.

Clearly a major air strike won't involve many American casualties unless a few aircraft are unlucky, so the democrats haven't got to worry about body bags. Put sanctions on Iran, flatten its nuclear and military capabilities by a concerted air attack which will force an internal rising against the Mullahs by all those whose business opportunities are ruined by sanctions ... and all might be well in the end. Iran is a much bigger prize anyway, so forget worries about the mess in Baghdad. Arab allies will be reassured and the oil will flow from grateful and friendly states there.

Which might make some kind of sense if you think that military force is all that matters and that the Iranians will simply sit there and take the destruction of their facilities, and the death of at least some of their scientists and professors who are nuclear specialists, as well as the people who simply happen to be killed when the bombs fall. But given the nationalistic tone of Iranian foreign policy announcements in the last few years this seems a very unlikely assumption. Why would the Iranian regime wait for all this to unfold?

The cautious and sensible voices in Tehran will argue against assuming the worst, but if it appears that Washington is serious, that the Democrats are willing to countenance the use of airpower against Iran, and then news comes that cruise missile carrying American submarines have slipped anchor from their bases, and more aircraft carrier task forces are steaming for the Persian Gulf, then what? The military minds in Tehran will know that sitting and waiting for an American strike is folly. If Iranian leaders become convinced that an attack is imminent then there is no reason for them to wait to have their weapons destroyed on the ground before they can use them. The strategic logic of "use em, or lose em" applies very clearly in this case.

But surely the Iranians wouldn't be so stupid as to start a shooting war in the Gulf? Surely they also must realize that they are not going to win in the long run? They must calculate that a

closure of the Straits will mean that their own oil exports will stop one way or another? Indeed they do, but if the regime is convinced the Americans are about to launch a strike designed to cripple their economy, infrastructure and military capabilities, and one way or another bring a collapse of their regime, then they may feel they have no choice. If the survival of their Islamic revolution is in jeopardy then such an existential threat requires extreme measures.

There is no clear way the Iranians can distinguish between an imminent strike designed to demolish their nuclear capabilities but leave the regime in power. Both will involve extensive air raids and cruise missile attacks on economic and military targets. In the coming months the increased American activity in Iraq will provide plenty of camouflage to conceal preparations for an attack. The Iranians also know that it is unlikely that the next American president will follow the strategies of the Bush doctrine, so if the neo-conservative blueprint of using force to transform the Middle East is going to be tried, it has to be done in the next two years. Joshua Moravchik has stated just this in Foreign Policy magazine. So the coming period is their time of maximum danger.

Iran can't strike America directly, but as they have demonstrated last Fall they have the ability to strike the oil facilities in the Gulf states and along the Saudi Arabian coastline in the states with which America is increasingly closely allied. Those cluster munitions on the Shahab missiles might do a perfectly fine job of setting oil terminals and pipelines on fire. They don't have to be very accurate, just hit the area and the numerous small explosions are bound to start at least a few disastrous fires. Is it entirely accidental timing that Saudi Arabia announced last Fall that it was increasing security around its oil facilities on the Gulf coast, ostensibly to protect them from Al Qaeda terrorists, and did so just after the high profile Iranian military maneuvers?

Is it also coincidence that President Bush in his recent address to the nation explicitly said that the U.S. will shortly ship Patriot missiles, with at least a putative claim to be capable of intercepting ballistic missiles such as the Shahabs, to friendly states in the Gulf? If the Shahabs, old fashioned sea mines or the various cruise missile type weapons in the Iranian arsenal aren't effective at destroying oil infrastructure across the Gulf, why not take a scene out of the movie *Syriana* and use some Revolutionary Guard volunteers with explosive laden fishing boats to ram tankers in the Gulf. Enough tankers pass through the straits of Hormuz every day to seriously disrupt international oil shipments. Shia militias across the region might cause all sorts of additional mayhem. The Iranians have all these options should they feel compelled to use them.

While the international economy has recently shown that it can weather oil prices well above US\$50 a barrel, can it do so if the prices are three or four times that? Maybe, but its highly doubtful, and in that doubt lies the potential for an entirely convincing Iranian strategy of deterrence. Except that the neo-conservatives and other advocates of a military strike on Tehran don't seem to be paying any serious attention to the options now facing opponents of the Bush doctrine. After all it's Americans who are supposed to take the initiative and they alone supposedly have the option of pre-emption.

In the last few months the leaders in Iran, often a fractious lot, have closed ranks ominously. Religion, nationalism and a rekindled revolutionary zeal in the face of American threats and Israeli saber rattling present an ominous combination. But so far at least the Iranian leadership has chosen diplomatic options hoping apparently that European, Russian, Indian and Chinese trade links will remain robust enough to keep their deeply troubled economy from collapsing. Now as sanctions are ramped up in early 2007 some news from Tehran suggests plans for gasoline rationing to begin in March. Unlikely though it may seem given that Iran is an oil exporting country, it does not have adequate refining capacity to supply the domestic market where gasoline is priced close to a dime a liter, and where such cheap supplies are viewed as something akin to a right of citizenship. Rationing too will put pressure on the political leadership in Tehran and facilitate those who wish to revive anti-American sentiments.

Simultaneously the North Korean regime on the other side of Asia is feeling the pinch; financial sanctions in the aftermath of its recent nuclear test must be hurting, even if the flow of material across the Chinese border and shipping to and from North Korea's ports has not been interrupted as some in Washington might wish. No one seems to have paid much attention to the apparently impromptu news conference held by the North Koreans on the street side in New York as the UN was debating what actions to take in response to its nuclear test last October. What was said was very clear; North Korea should be congratulated on its improving deterrence on the Korean peninsula. The need for such measures will only be reinforced in Pyongyang in early 2007 by press reports of a "routine" re-assignment of a squadron of F-117 stealth bombers to U.S. Bases in South Korea. These are precisely the planes that would lead any U.S. military attack on the North Korean regime, another of the states listed as part of the Axis of Evil in the Bush doctrine.

While statements such as the one in New York outside the United Nations are quickly ridiculed and dismissed as crazy, the simple but powerful message they convey is completely ignored. Clearly in the absence of the guarantee of non-aggression that Pyongyang has long sought, the leadership of the DPRK has decided that deterrence is its only option to ensure regime survival. Which implies that it too might, in extremis, resort to the option of pre-emption. If regime collapse appears imminent the pressure for war might become irresistible. Chaos in the region might allow the regime to survive in some form, a better option for the regime leaders surely, than their certain demise and the indignities of trial in the Netherlands or worse. If the Iranians are seriously distracting the Americans on the other side of Asia, and the U.S. inventory of smart munitions and other high-tech weapons is depleted by war there, when would the North Koreans get a better opportunity? If military logic takes over from diplomacy such thinking comes to the forefront; hence the importance of thinking about strategies that do not force North Korea into a position where its leadership think they have no option but to fight.

So if Iran, facing an imminent Israeli or American attack, pre-empts, and in the ensuing chaos, Pyongyang follows suit a month or two later, then what? The nightmare of global war and a chaotic crash of the world economy could follow rather rapidly. It might unfold something like this.

First, as the Saudi and some of the other Gulf oil facilities burn and a couple of tankers sink in the Straits of Hormuz enough oil stops being exported from the Gulf to drive the price up rapidly. Panic ensues on the stock markets of the world as a scramble for supplies and fears of a major downturn in the global economy become a self fulfilling prophesy. The Americans then attack Iran's remaining missile sites, military bases, nuclear facilities and some key government buildings and residences of leading politicians in Tehran. They also attack oil facilities and major bridges in a bid, Serbian style, to destroy the Iranian economy. The Russians, furious that once again their economic interests in the region are being attacked by American firepower, offer to help the Iranians rebuild. Washington warns Moscow not to. ...

Second, after initial losses and much destruction on the peninsula, American troops and the South Korean army turn their much superior firepower on North Korea, and despite the fact that most of Seoul is in ruins, begin to invade the North. Bombing raids trigger large refugee movements towards the Chinese border and China issues an ultimatum saying that it will not accept American troops on its border when the North Korean state finally implodes. Following which it sends troops into the collapsing North to "stabilize" the situation. American naval movements in the Pacific trigger further Chinese warnings to stay away from Taiwan, China also invokes agreements with Russia and Iran for military and economic cooperation as its exports to the US start to be interrupted and oil supplies become scarce. ...

Third, as the straights of Hormuz finally become hopelessly blocked and Lloyds of London rescinds insurance protection on all shipping in the Persian Gulf, the price of a barrel of oil climbs over \$150. The Dow Jones falls below 6,000. When that news reaches Pakistan wild celebrations break out in South Waziristan where the remaining members of Al Queda finally appreciate the extraordinary genius in Osama Bin Laden's 9/11 strategy. Its taken a bit longer than planned, but finally Bin Laden's attack on 9/11 has at last achieved its clear strategic objective. Its led the Americans into military action which is destabilizing the Islamic world while simultaneously badly damaging the U.S. economy and eradicating the flow of oil wealth that keeps the house of Saud and other secular ruling elites in power in the Middle East. And George Bush, by walking into the trap set for him, has then lost his war on terror.

It doesn't have to end in a terrible reprise of 1914 and 1929 combined, although reading Niall Ferguson's retelling of these events in his The War of the World suggests all sorts of eerie parallels. Not least is the important point that empires are most dangerous precisely when they find their control and relative power declining. The temptations to use violence when rapid economic dislocations, declining power and ethnic conflict coincide are what he warns against; current circumstances are loosely analogous.

All of which means that it is especially important to act in ways that ensure that cooler heads really do prevail in the coming months. The late 2006 discussions of a political conference in the region designed to get all the states involved in a debate about the future of the Gulf was a good start, but one that has been rebuffed by George Bush and his neo-conservative advisors in the January address to the nation. Such diplomatic initiatives are important especially in so far as

they reassure the leadership in Tehran that the chances of its being attacked in a way that removes it from power are thus reduced.

But shipping weapons to the Gulf States, sending a carrier task force to the area and once again dispatching the Secretary of State to the region to coordinate what can only be seen in Tehran as anti-Iranian actions with allies in the Gulf, sends the opposite message. It makes Iranian threats to attack oil infrastructure on the Southern shores of the Gulf all the more legitimate in Iranian eyes given the obvious collaboration of these regimes with America.

A serious attempt at a geopolitical settlement of longstanding issues in the region is long overdue. None of this will be easy and opportunistic politicians will no doubt make things difficult. But the necessity of a political settlement is clear if the alternative is that military threats set in motion some variation on the nightmare scenario outlined here.

The scenario in this article is not a prediction; none of this has to happen. It's only a cautionary tale to focus attention on what might happen unless the debate about Iraq is understood in the larger geopolitical context. But it does require political action especially in Washington, but elsewhere too to ensure that miscalculation doesn't lead to a wider disastrous war.

The President's address to the nation has made the need for action urgent. The dynamic of escalation must be stopped before irreversible decisions are made; a larger political dialogue which does not threaten Tehran with regime change is now essential in the Middle East. Likewise with the situation in the Korean peninsula.

Democrats and Republicans in the United States have to refuse to countenance an attack on Iran as the price of a pullout from Iraq; they need to refuse the blackmail of those that use every opportunity to tie a threat to Israel to further militarization of political difficulties in the region. Rejecting the strategy of forceful regime change at the heart of the Bush doctrine is essential; no one has to like the regime in Tehran, but talking seriously to it about a comprehensive political settlement is now essential.