

Bush invokes threat of “World War III”

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The press conference held by President George W. Bush Wednesday was, like all of his press appearances, full of non-sequiturs, evasions and political bullying. Bush called the news conference to present himself as an opponent of excessive federal spending, by which he meant a few billion for children's health insurance in the bill he vetoed last week, not the hundreds of billions his administration has squandered on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the trillions in tax cuts for the rich.

The routine of his 20th press conference of the year was broken only when Bush was asked about the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tehran, widely seen as undercutting the Bush administration's campaign to isolate Iran and pave the way for military action against it. Putin took part in a meeting of the five states bordering on the Caspian Sea, each of them pledging not to allow their territory to be used for military action against any of the others.

Bush was asked about Putin's statement, made with Iranian President Ahmadinejad at his side, that there was no evidence of an Iranian effort to build a nuclear bomb and that no country should threaten a military attack against Iran.

Referring to the Iranian regime, Bush declared, "I believe they want to have the capacity, the knowledge in order to make a nuclear weapon. And I know it's in the world's interests to prevent them from doing so. I believe that the Iranian—if Iran had a nuclear weapon, it would be a dangerous threat to world peace. We've got a leader in Iran who has announced that he wants to destroy Israel. So I've told people that, if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon."

Before analyzing this remarkable statement, let us consider the reaction of the journalists assembled at the press conference. The president of the United States, the man who proverbially has his finger on the nuclear button, has issued a threat of world war. His language—"World War III"—suggests the use of the US nuclear arsenal against a country of 75 million people, which would represent an act of mass murder without parallel in human history.

But not a single representative of the "fourth estate" chose to ask a follow-up question on the subject. No one asked why a conflict between Iran and the United States should become global in character, or which countries around the world would be likely to become combatants, or what weapons the United States might use against Iran or other targets. There were a few desultory questions about the diplomatic travels of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the Middle East, about the crisis in the housing market, the health care veto, Iraq and torture, and then the press conference ended.

The ensuing media coverage was of a similarly perfunctory character. The initial wire service and broadcast accounts did not even make mention of the “World War III” remark. Even though NBC News led its evening news with the extraordinary threat, there were only relatively brief news articles in the daily newspapers, and not a single editorial expressing any opposition.

The language of Bush’s threat deserves scrutiny. He said, “If you’re interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing them from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon.” This represents a further step beyond the threats used in the run-up to the US war against Iraq, when the regime of Saddam Hussein was first accused of possessing weapons of mass destruction, and then, when no such weapons turned out to exist, charged retroactively with having had the intention to build them. Now even “having the knowledge necessary” to build WMD is enough to justify a US preemptive war.

Moreover, what precisely does “preventing them from having the knowledge” mean? How does the US government propose to enforce a ban on techniques which, in the 62 years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have become widely understood among those working in the nuclear power industry throughout the world? Will it kill every scientist and engineer in Iran? Will it kill every Iranian who might someday grow up to become a scientist or engineer?

The most important aspect of the Bush remark is what it reveals about the internal deliberations of the US national security apparatus. Bush is hardly an original or far-sighted thinker, and he would hardly come up with a comment on the threat of World War III unless this was being actively discussed in the White House, Pentagon, State Department and CIA.

The Bush administration clearly envisions a military clash with Iran on some pretext or other—alleged Iranian involvement in anti-US resistance in Iraq, an alleged Iranian-backed terrorist attack, or the alleged Iranian nuclear weapons project—that could escalate into a broader conflagration.

Israel could become involved immediately, if it did directly trigger the conflict through a preemptive air strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities. Last month’s Israeli attack on a Syrian site is widely considered a dress rehearsal for such an action. Significantly, the day after Putin’s appearance with Ahmadinejad in Tehran, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert traveled to Moscow, with no advance notice, to hold discussions with the Russian president.

A US-Iran clash could easily escalate into a wider struggle, involving the US stooge regimes among the Arab states, Britain, perhaps France, and whatever US client-states could be dragooned into a new Iraq-style “coalition of the willing.”

On the other side would be Iran, most likely backed either passively or actively by Russia, China and the other states of the Caspian basin and Central Asia, all of which have begun to react with hostility to the increasingly brazen and aggressive US intervention in the area.

Russia and China conducted joint military exercises in Kazakhstan this year, together with the other states of the Shanghai organization, a loose alliance set up by Moscow and Beijing to push back against US domination. Both regimes have a vital need to secure access to critical raw materials, particularly the rich oil and gas resources of the region.

In relation to Russia, the Bush administration has conducted a flagrantly provocative policy,

seeking to install a US-controlled anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, ostensibly directed against Iran, but regarded by the Russian military as an initial step in an effort to neutralize the Russian nuclear deterrent. The State Department has backed anti-Russian regimes in Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states, while seeking to promote the establishment of additional US clients in Central Asia.

China, for its part, is regarded as the principal obstacle to American world domination in the long term. On an array of issues, from trade and currency disputes to the status of Taiwan and Bush's appearance Wednesday with the Dalai Lama—the ousted theocratic ruler of Chinese-controlled Tibet—the administration's China policy has been nearly as reckless as its policy in relation to Russia and Central Asia.

Bush's warmongering posture has the backing of the entire US political establishment. All the major presidential candidates of both Democratic and Republican parties have declared that they would not "tolerate" or "permit" a nuclear-armed Iran, and all have voiced their opposition to supposed Iranian "interference" in Iraq. In nearly every Republican presidential debate, the major candidates have gone even further than the Bush administration, explicitly supporting the US use of nuclear weapons against Iran's nuclear power and research facilities.

The frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton, gave an additional rationale for war with Iran, telling a town hall meeting in South Carolina last Saturday that an attempt by Iran to disrupt oil supplies from the Persian Gulf would warrant military retaliation.

Her only reservation was the need to gather international support for such a war. "I would hope that the world would see that was an action of last resort, not first resort," she said. "Because we need the world to agree with us about the threat that Iran poses to everyone."

At the same time, the newly installed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, told reporters at the Pentagon that the US military had "more than enough reserve" to carry out military action against Iran, if that was ordered by the White House.

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