

Deja Vu All Over Iran

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Comedians might be forgiven for making jokes that President Bush is talking about drawing down U.S. forces in Iraq because he needs them next door in Iran. It isn't, however, so far off the mark.

The pieces are falling into place for Operation Regime Change II, this time in Iran. You'd think, given how badly it went the first time, and how utterly unpredictable a showdown with Iran would be, that the Bush administration would have at least changed its m.o.—but no. Shaking his head in New York, where he was attending United Nations Security Council discussions on Iran, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said bluntly: "It looks so déjà vu." He ridiculed the idea of sanctions on Iran as useless and ineffective, and he called the U.S. push for a showdown over Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program a "self-fulfilling prophecy."

He's right. Even John Bolton, the neoconservative saber-rattler who represents the United States at the U.N., agrees. Said Bolton, when asked about Lavrov's comment: "If that is déjà vu, then so be it, but that is the course we are on in an effort to get Iran to reverse its decision to acquire nuclear weapons."

So let's look precisely at what course that is. In the past few weeks, we've seen the Bush administration create a brand-new Office of Iranian Affairs at the State Department, which looks suspiciously like a step toward creating the Iraq war planning office at the Pentagon called the Office of Special Plans. No word yet on whether the Department of Defense plans to create a parallel Office of Iranian Affairs, but it can't be far behind. So that's déjà vu, for sure.

The United States is pressing the U.N. to sanction Iran, to be more aggressive in shutting down a nuclear program that, so far at least, the International Atomic Energy Agency has not been able to find, exactly. Even the least charitable among us might forgive the U.N.'s diplomats, including Lavrov, for being suspicious of the Bush administration when it pledges to take Iran to the U.N. Security Council and to abide by the result. In 2002, the Bush administration took Iraq to the UNSC, got the IAEA inspectors invited back in, began pressing for further U.N. action—and then gave up the whole thing and invaded Iraq unilaterally. So that, for sure, sounds like déjà vu.

Then there are the exiles. The Bush administration, backed once again by a bloodthirsty Republican Congress—with the same cast of characters, led once again by Sen. Sam Brownback—is planning to spend \$75 million to support Iranian "democrats" and to back Iranian exile television stations. And, according to a recent State Department planning document, the United States is busily setting up anti-Iranian intelligence and mobilization centers in Dubai, Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Tel Aviv, Frankfurt, London and Baku to work with

“Iranian expatriate communities.” I wonder how many Ahmad Chalabis they can find in those places. Dozens, I’d guess. More déjà vu.

Finally, believe it or not, almost as if the United States were deliberately trying to undercut its own diplomacy at the U.N., various U.S. officials are talking openly about bypassing the U.N., ignoring international legitimacy, and forging yet another ad hoc coalition of allies—a “coalition of the willing”—to confront Iran. Still more déjà vu.

And then, of course, there is the saber-rattling. No one is better at that than the Israelis, and last week the neoconservative Hudson Institute gave a platform to a rabid former Israeli army chief of staff, Moshe Yaalon, who had these charming words to say:

Israel has the ability to disrupt the Iranian air defense system; Israel can strike Iran through a number of ways, not only through aerial attack. ... The Israeli strike can be precise, like targeted assassination. Just as we succeed in striking a lone terrorist, we can also strike a nuclear site without causing major damage to the environment and harming civilians.

But U.S. officials, too, from Vice President Cheney to Bolton to the president himself continue to insist that all options are on the table, that a military attack against Iran cannot be ruled out, and so forth. Lots more déjà vu there.

As cooler heads have pointed out, none of this amounts to an actual strategy. The Iranians know that a military attack on their nuclear facilities isn’t a feasible option. Not only would it kill hundreds, perhaps thousands of civilians (if all of the more than 50 sites, many in populated areas, were attacked), but the Iranians know that they could strike back at the United States with a deadly combination of counterstrikes. Martin Indyk, the hard-headed hawk at the Brookings Institution, ridicules the idea of a military strike against Iran:

The Iranians have 500,000 battle-hardened Pasdaran [members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp], plus the people they have control or influence over in Iraq. I would just put this proposition on the table—the United States cannot strike Iran while we still have our troops in Iraq.

The Iranians also know that the idea of U.N. sanctions is hollow, since neither China nor Russia will go along with economic sanctions against the country.

The Iranians know that the exile community is weak and fractious, and they don’t fear its might. They know that they have tremendous assets to bring to bear against the United States in a confrontation.

The fact is that the invasion of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq knocked off two of Iran’s deadliest regional enemies, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. Iran has amassed great power inside Iraq, not by supporting the insurgents, as President Bush claims, but simply by using its Shiite allies to gain power in Baghdad. Iran is building its influence in Lebanon, too, and among the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and elsewhere. Meanwhile, the Bush administration seems incapable of understanding the need to engage with Iran, to seek their help in Iraq, and to search for an accommodation with the ayatollahs. Ironically, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad of the United States in Iraq has been given permission to talk to Iran about calming tensions in Iraq, but according to the latest statements from U.S. embassy he has not yet done so. According to a March 12 Reuters report:

The U.S. ambassador in Baghdad denied on Sunday seeking Iran's help to calm violence in Iraq and said there were still concerns about the Islamic Republic's links with militias in Iraq.
...

"Ambassador Khalilzad has the authority to meet with Iranian officials to discuss issues of mutual concern," the embassy said in a statement. "But he has not sent a letter in any language to the Iranians."

And, that, unfortunately, is the saddest commentary of all.

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