

Iran feels the chill in US cold war tactics

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Global Research, August 02, 2007

Asia Times 2 August 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Washington has dispatched its frontroom team, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to the Middle East, ostensibly to give the peace process a big push. In reality, they are acting as shrewd arms merchants, while at the same time talking of the struggle for people for freedom against oppression. Someone please order Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* as mandatory flight reading for them.

Indeed, echoes of Heller's nerdy bombardier, Captain John Yossarian, who alerted the world to the insanity of modern capitalistic warfare more than anyone else, can be heard aplenty, eclipsing the trailblazers of Washington's new manifest destiny who are "spreading Jeffersonian democracy" to the dark Middle East.

But don't expect Rice to push for women's suffrage in Saudi Arabia and other US client states when her plane lands in the oil region. Her obligatory "we will push for reform" is for domestic consumption. Not so with the rest of her rationale for the huge arms sales to the Saudis and a generous aid package to the other Arab "moderate", Egypt, which recently shied away from normalizing ties with Iran precisely out of fear of losing Washington's assistance. It all boils down to one word: Iran.

"There isn't a doubt that Iran constitutes the single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of the Middle East that we want to see," Rice has been quoted as saying in the Washington Post, whose reporter, Robin Wright, has not minced any words in describing the situation as a "cold war."

So just as the US armed to the teeth its authoritarian, at times bloodthirsty, allies in the name of anti-communism, the same logic now operates in the name of containing Iran.

Harking back to the "dual containment" doctrine of the Bill Clinton administration, which in turn was an extension of the so-called "Carter doctrine" of Jimmy Carter that set aside the previous Richard Nixon doctrine of relying on local hegemons to enforce stability, Washington's new cold-war ideology is not entirely new and reflects a consistent US foreign policy rooted in its oil-based hegemony.

The kind of Middle East that Rice likes to see may have a new nomenclature, ie, "the Greater Middle East", but at bottom it is the same old Middle East, dubbed as "subordinate" or a "subsystem" by pundits during the half-century of the US-Soviet Union Cold War.

There have been several attempts to break out of the "subordinate" system. Gamal Abdul Nasser's pan-Arabism, leading to a temporary merger with Syria, was one such heroic frustrated by the preemptory Six-Day War launched by Israel in 1967. Others were Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the current Iran-Syria alliance, which is still in the formative

stage and it is too early to draw more than a tentative conclusion about it.

The floodgates opened by the Iranian revolution were choked by the Western-backed Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 and the growing “encirclement” of Iran by the US power that has evolved through several stages. One was the influx of US troops in 1990-91 because of the Kuwait crisis with Iraq and the other, still unfolding, the post-September 11, 2001, developments culminating in the invasion of two of Iran’s neighbors – Iraq and Afghanistan. And this is not to mention US base-building in other neighbors in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East.

The Iranian “jailbreak” has had mixed results to date. While the US “rollback” strategy, either to resurrect the compliant *ancien regime* or to “tame” radical Islamists in Iran, has not succeeded, the “containment” strategy has not been altogether a failure.

The battle continues, at times along blurred and confusing lines, cross-cutting solidarities and alliances bewitching the simple, bifurcated logic of the old Cold War. This in turn raises serious questions about the viability of the terminology “cold war” to describe this “altered” state of affairs in today’s Middle East.

As a clue to the latter; Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has not only not opposed the US arms sales to Saudi Arabia, a departure from past Israeli reactions, he has welcomed it in the name of a “united front” with the US and moderate Arabs against the threat of Islamic radicalism led by Iran.

But how moderate, or reliable, are those moderate Arabs, when the United States’ own ambassador to the United Nations, Zalmay Khalilzad, complains in an article in the New York Times about the destructive role they are playing in Iraq? Again, the murmur of Yossarian can be heard: “The enemy is anybody who is going to get you killed, no matter which side he’s on.” Just ask the American soldiers in Iraq, who are hunted down by Saudi suicide bombers revered by Saudi *muftis* (scholars) as “heroes of Islam”.

The Wahhabi patronage of the Saudis’ meddling in Iraq has not only not been stopped by Washington, worse, it has now found a convenient justification under the rubric of a grand new “cold war”. Who knows, with the threat perception so manipulated, American soldiers may now find a reprieve from the suicide bombers focusing on the other, bigger threat, that is, Shi’ite-run Iran.

The functional utility of the cold-war terminology thus becomes clearer. It allows the US to perpetuate its sway over the European continent, seeing how the Iran missile threat has translated in new military pacts between the US and Eastern Europe. It cements the United States’ alliance with the Persian Gulf states and lessens their tendency to diversify their arms sources in view of the need for interoperability of weapon systems. It provides a long-term strategic threat perception – about proliferation, terrorism, etc that binds Washington and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) capitals. And finally, it provides a venue for Israel’s inclusion in the security calculus of the GCC states considered front-line states in the new cold war. These are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman.

Another advantage of the cold-war terminology is that it softens the “military option” openly entertained against Iran by some in the US and Israel and, learning from the past, raises the issue of confidence-building measures and enhanced communication that would help avoid

“accidental war”, given the tight corners of the Persian Gulf crowded with US warships.

Indirectly, it also enhances Iran’s regional prestige and thus contributes to the Iranian push for regional cooperation, given the cognitive synergy between Iran’s security outlook and the GCC’s cooperative security initiative. The “cold” aspect of this war has, in other words, certain and unmistakable advantages, and the pertinent question is whether they trump the disadvantages.

The cold-war virtual reality

Compared with the “systemic” conflict of the Cold War between two militarily symmetrical techno-powers along bifurcated Marxism-versus-capitalism ideological fault lines, US-Iran competition today lacks the key ingredients of the superpower rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union.

Assigning Iran the functional role of filling the vacuum of the Soviet enemy may serve some defense subcontractors lobbying Washington and Riyadh, yet it hardly makes for sound foreign-policy making on Washington’s part.

For one thing, as Jane’s Defence Weekly aptly put it recently, US arms sales to the Saudis “open the way for a further shift in the balance of power and technology in the region”. In 2006, the Saudis bought 72 European Typhoon aircraft at a cost of US\$18 billion and now they are purchasing sophisticated F-15E US bombers that can deliver 12-tonne bombs some 1,600 kilometers away, ie, the Iranian capital city Tehran.

This, together with other GCC states’ purchases of state-of-the-art weapons, including jet fighters from the US and Europe, is extremely disconcerting to Tehran, which already sees itself encircled by US power. This could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy as the more the US continues down this path, of harvesting the rewards of its self-declared cold war with Iran, the more it pushes Iran toward a nuclear survival strategy, given the growing conventional-arms imbalance.

At present, the Iranians have no nuclear dimension in their defense strategy, despite what the US government and media might say to the contrary. This might change if the US persists on pushing the Iranians into a corner and exacerbating their national-security concerns.

The crux is that today Iran feels strategically threatened by the US and its allies and, as we know, threat perception has historically been the real engine of nuclear proliferation. A non-threatening US Iran policy is needed, otherwise Tehran will be forced to maximize the few leverages it has. These include Iraq, where the US-Iran dialogue on Iraq’s security is taking place in the vacuum of the larger context of US-Iran and Iran-GCC rivalry. These issues are not separate, and the US cannot realistically expect Iran to commit security suicide by helping it stabilize Iraq just as the US is doing everything possible to isolate and destabilize Iran.

That is unrealistic, and Iran has a “forward” defense strategy that extends into Iraq and it will not forfeit this, irrespective of the security dialogue in Baghdad. The insecurity of US forces in Iraq and their current quagmire serves Iran’s security interests and a fully secure Iraq with US forward bases near the Iranian borders are inimical to Iran’s national-security interests.

Thus structural limits or distortions handicap the US-Iran dialogue on Iraq, which must be expanded to tackle the larger “strategic issues” between the intrusive superpower and the assertive regional power, otherwise any hopes of a major breakthrough in those talks are misplaced.

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