

Is Attacking Iran a Viable Option?

The definitive end of U.S. military supremacy

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I have written several articles on the Iran crisis pitting two expanding and important strategic alliances against each other and the similarities to the powder keg of Balkan and European alliances that erupted into World War I.

On one side is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Led by China and Russia, the SCO has four other permanent member states: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Along with a senior official from India's oil and gas industry, the prime ministers of Pakistan, Mongolia, Afghanistan and Iran attended the last meeting in Shanghai on June 15. It was the first meeting since Iran announced that it had successfully enriched Uranium: Iran was invited to become a full member.

The meeting was about strengthening trade and exports but also had a strong undertone of strengthening the alliance. A verbal oath was sworn for defending each other in the event of any attack. China and Russia have already signed military cooperation agreements with and are the main suppliers of advanced weaponry to Iran and Syria. This gave them verbal military cooperation agreements with all the SCO members, including Iran.

A senior spokesperson for U.S. ally Japan said: "The SCO is becoming a rival block to the U.S. alliance; it does not share our values. We are watching it very closely." The U.S. too was watching it very closely, but from afar because their request for observer status at the meeting had been denied on the grounds that they shared neither land nor fluvial border with any of the SCO member states.

The meeting's undertone of warning the U.S. against attacking Iran was evident in Chinese President Hu Jintao's closing statement: "We hope the outside world will accept the social system and path to development independently chosen by our members and observers and respect the domestic and foreign policies adopted by the SCO participants in line with their national conditions."

Jintao's statement was immediately followed by the verbal agreement — all members vowing to defend each other's sovereignty and the alliance as a whole.

The strengthening of this rival alliance and its challenge to U.S. supremacy was worrying amid speculation of advanced U.S. plans for war in Iran. The developments in the coming weeks and months increased the powder keg tensions of a well-backed Iranian nuclear standoff.

The start of July, with joint military exercises by U.S., Romanian and Bulgarian armed forces, which continued until September, coincided with the North Korean missile tests of July 5 and

began an intense period of war games and weaponry testing from all the major players in both alliances.

Aug. 19 saw the beginning of Iranian military exercises and missile tests in all the border provinces likely to become the frontline in the event of a U.S. attack. The SCO and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) headed by China and Russia respectively, held joint exercises in coordination with the Iranian exercises, both launched Aug. 24 in Kazakhstan, which between them involved all 10 members of the SCO except Uzbekistan.

The Russian and Chinese exercises were thought to have come in response to mistrust of the U.S.'s intentions in the region, the threat of attack on Iran, the U.S. navy's involvement in the rebuilding of Kazakhstan's navy since 2003, and Iranian fears that the U.S. was attempting to build up their ally Azerbaijan to counter Iranian influence and dominance in the region. Hence, the Iranian exercises along the Azerbaijan border.

These provocative drills from all sides of the powder keg of alliances could easily have took us one step closer to war, because of the strong support from the Muslim world, Russia and China for Iran's stance that it has a right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As the exercises continued, they coincided with Iran's response to the six-nations incentive package on Aug. 22, which was a practically flat refusal to suspend enrichment as a precursor for U.S.-involved talks. This made Iran's failure to comply with U.N. Resolution 1696 and suspend enrichment by Aug. 31 inevitable.

This lead to a stalemate, the U.S. maintaining its hard line toward the rogue regime and immediately pressuring for sanctions, the EU taking the middle ground, and Russia and China effectively vetoing any form of U.N. punishment against Tehran. China is of course heavily dependant on Iran's oil reserves on its path to becoming a world superpower.

As October comes to an end, we are still no closer to a compromise on ending Iranian enrichment and possible proliferation. The U.N. is split and sanctions just do not look viable in the foreseeable future. Yet another draft resolution has been drawn up by the U.S. and its allies and diplomats say it could be presented to Russian and Chinese officials this week. The proposed resolution aims to impose restrictions on Iran's nuclear progression similar to those imposed on North Korea last week with the passing of U.N. Resolution 1718.

However, the fact that North Korea angered China and Russia with its openly defiant and dangerous (for China) nuclear test, has put the bond between China and Russia, and the dependence of China on Iran, foremost in their decision making processes, not to mention strengthening the SCO alliance. All of which makes the passing of this draft resolution unlikely.

As the U.S. has always maintained that it will not let Iran get the bomb, decisive military action continues to become increasingly likely. Who knows, Bush may give us one last expensive war on his way out of office. All the signs seem to indicate that this is highly possible. North Korea, named alongside Iran and Iraq as part of Bush's axis of evil, performed its first nuclear test on Oct. 9. Its defiance of the international community in its six-nations format could and in my view will harden Bush's already hard-line stance toward Tehran's enrichment program and make military action a real possibility should Iran seem close to obtaining the bomb.

The months between Iran ignoring U.N. Resolution 1696 and North Korea's nuclear test

brought many statements from senior Iranians. Many speaking on condition of anonymity threatened tough retaliation against any imposed sanctions. The latest announcement, on Oct. 23, that Iran had launched a second batch of 164 centrifuges, bringing the total to 328 interconnected centrifuges, which can enrich uranium for energy or weaponry purposes, further exasperated the Bush administration.

But according to a diplomat close to the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, no UF₆ uranium gas is being fed into the cascade, as has generally been the case with the first batch: "The second cascade was brought on line earlier this month but they appear to be just running it empty. That is, vacuum-testing to assess durability."

These reported advances in Iran's quest for nuclear power, either for civilian or military use, are increasing the pressure on the U.S., the EU and the fractured UN to end the standoff before it reaches a critical point like North Korea's defiant test. As is Israel's leadership, who have also constantly fueled the tensions over the past months by periodically threatening the use of its military might to end Iranian enrichment, a cycle of responding to Iran's slow but propagandized advances tit-for-tat. Therefore, in such a heightened climate, if Bush puts another wrong foot forward in his handling of Kim Jong-il (that is, concentrates on Iraq and pressurizes Iran while allowing North Korea's nuclear ambitions to become nuclear weapons and reach a catastrophic climax), it could strengthen the Iranians' resolve, which is already strong because of China's large dependence on Iranian oil.

Chinese dependence, which is empowering an Iranian regime bent on becoming a nuclear power, is a dangerous mix in itself. Add to this, reports from Chinese and Russian defectors that a catastrophic conflict with the U.S. has been in the planning for years and that the timetable is to be stepped up in the event of an attack on Iran, and it becomes very dangerous indeed.

Despite the consequences of a U.S. attack on Iran ranging from bad to catastrophic, depending on the strategy and success of the attack, the stalemate within the dysfunctional U.N. is threatening to leave Bush with no option. Speculation over the use of military force against Iran has been rife since Tehran's April announcement of successful uranium enrichment.

The latest surge in tensions is over proposed U.S. naval exercises with Britain, France, Bahrain and Kuwait in the Persian Gulf next week. Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) quoted an unnamed Foreign Ministry official as calling the maneuvers dangerous and suspicious. The official also said the exercises, reported to be practice runs for intercepting and searching ships carrying WMDs, were not in line with the security and stability of the region but instead aimed at fomenting crisis. The source blamed the neoconservatives' warmongering, which is being used in an attempt to achieve success in the mid-term elections.

I believe the proposed exercises are another attempt by the U.S. to provoke Iran into a knee-jerk reaction, which would further it from alienate Russia and China and ultimately allow Bush to use military action to stop Iran's nuclear program.

According to a war game organized by The Atlantic with the help of retired air force colonel and specialist in the field Sam Gardiner, which simulated preparations for an assault on Iran by the next American administration be it Republican or Democrat, such an assault could involve any or all of three separate strategies: (1) a punitive raid on key Revolutionary

Guard units to retaliate for Iranian actions in Iraq and elsewhere, (2) a pre-emptive strike on all possible nuclear facilities or (3) the forceful removal of the Mullah regime from Tehran in a regime change operation.

The war games panel decided that the first two could be carried out independently but that the third would require the success of the first two as preparation. In reality, the second option — a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities — is the one most often discussed. Also in reality, any one of these actions or the encouragement of similar actions from Israel's military forces could well unleash a catastrophic global conflict.

The earliest retaliation would likely come in the form of missile attacks on Israel and other U.S. allies within the range of Iranian missiles (1,280 kilometers), followed by the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, a vital oil channel, as threatened in the event of sanctions. Also, Iran may decide that a bloody defeat for the U.S., even if it means chaos in Iraq, is something they might actually prefer and begin exerting their significant influence over the majority Shia militias in Iraq to more heavily join the war against U.S. forces. Iran has so far discouraged the Shia communities from becoming involved in the insurgency. This would mean that the number of U.S. forces in Iraq would be greatly reduced for the first time as forces would be needed for the Iran invasion, which would coincide with the most dramatic rise of violence against U.S. forces since the Iraq invasion began.

If the Iran invasion did not go according to plan, the subsequently shrinking number of U.S. troops in Iraq could shortly find themselves unable to control the rising violence and forced into a hasty withdrawal from the Green Zone. Such an outcome would be seen as a defeat and empower the Jihadists for decades to come.

If any or all of the SCO members (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) were dragged into the conflict with allegiance to Iran, in turn bringing involvement from U.S. allies (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, Japan, Israel and the U.K., although the latter two would quite possibly be involved in some capacity from the beginning), a catastrophic global conflict would become World War III.

If none of these countries became involved but the badly overstretched U.S. military failed to achieve regime change in Tehran, whatever Iranian nuclear capabilities remained would undoubtedly be channeled toward the rapid advancement of any existing nuclear weapons program.

Military action in Iran, therefore, should be consigned to the realm of fiction. But Bush's predisposition to falling for his own rhetoric, and the slim chances of achieving any form of sanctions against Tehran, leave a catastrophic global conflict that could easily become World War III looming over our heads. Whatever the strategy, if Bush or the next American president decides to use military force against Iran, it could easily result in the definitive end of U.S. military supremacy in the 21st century.

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