

US militarism threatens to unleash regional conflagration

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In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#)

Following on the heels of President George W. Bush's warning last week that those countries "interested in avoiding World War III" should align themselves with Washington's escalating threats against Iran, a series of unfolding developments point to the danger of armed violence engulfing a broad swath of the Middle East and Central Asia and, indeed, posing the threat of a new world war.

Six years after the US invasion of Afghanistan and four-and-a-half years after the invasion of Iraq, the continuation and deepening of the conflicts in both of these countries is setting into motion a political chain reaction of incalculable dimensions.

It is igniting military conflict in a region that extends from the borders of Europe in the West to those of India in the East, including the countries of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, while threatening to draw in other major powers with strategic interests in the region.

The stage is being set for armed confrontations that threaten the deaths of hundreds of millions and, indeed, the destruction of the entire planet.

In the first instance, the danger of a widening war is posed against Iran. Vice President Richard Cheney continued to ratchet up the menacing rhetoric against Teheran over the weekend, while also vilifying and threatening Syria.

"The Iranian regime needs to know that if it stays on its present course, the international community is prepared to impose serious consequences," Mr. Cheney said in a speech on Sunday. "The United States joins other nations in sending a clear message: We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." Cheney's remarks were made before a meeting of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a prominent think tank that includes some of the key architects of the war of aggression against Iraq.

Cheney denounced Iran as "the world's most active state sponsor of terrorism," adding that "our country, and the entire international community, cannot stand by as a terror-supporting state fulfills its most aggressive ambitions."

Cheney's speech, which echoes the rhetoric about "weapons of mass destruction" used by the vice president in the fall of 2002 in the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, carried the unmistakable implication that Washington is preparing to attack Iran militarily on the pretext of blocking the Teheran government from continuing its nuclear program.

These threats are not being made under conditions in which Washington has succeeded,

either in Iraq or in Afghanistan, in suppressing popular resistance and installing viable puppet regimes. Bush was forced Monday to request another \$46 billion to pay for military operations in both countries, where fighting has continued to intensify. The request brings the total amount budgeted for the fiscal year that began on October 1 to \$196 billion.

The Bush administration and the American ruling elite as a whole have concluded that there is no way out of these intractable colonial-style wars in which the US military is already mired. The impact of these festering conflicts takes on a momentum of its own throughout the region. While there appears to be an element of madness in the policy of escalation now being pursued by Washington, underlying it is the logic of the combined crisis of US and world capitalism.

The prospect that the current wars will be further expanded has triggered deep disquiet within the military command itself, as was reflected in remarks by the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in an interview published by the *New York Times* Monday.

While stressing that he intended to press for a continued increase in the military budget, the new chairman, Admiral Mike Mullen, warned: "We're in a conflict in two countries out there right now. We have to be incredibly thoughtful about the potential of in fact getting into a conflict with a third country in that part of the world."

Armed attacks inside Iran

But in relation to Iran itself, there are growing indications that armed actions have already begun. Citing British Defense Ministry sources, the London *Times* reported Sunday that "British special forces have crossed into Iran several times in recent months as part of a secret border war against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Al-Quds special forces."

According to the paper, British SAS commandos, operating jointly with US and Australian special forces units, have engaged in at least a "dozen intense firefights" with Iranian forces in the border area. The *Times* cited "persistent reports of American special-operations missions inside Iran preparing for a possible attack."

One only needs imagine what would happen if one of these special forces units were to be wiped out inside Iran. No doubt, the claim would be made that they were attacked on the Iraqi side of the border, thereby providing the *casus belli* for a US attack.

The paper also reported the redeployment of seven American U2 spy planes to bases in Cyprus and Abu Dhabi, for use in mapping out targets for a US air assault on Iran.

Meanwhile, the Iraq war also threatens to spill across the Iraqi-Turkish border, with reports that a Turkish military convoy of some 50 vehicles carrying troops and weaponry is being sent to the border area after Kurdish separatist guerrillas of the PKK carried out one of their bloodiest attacks in nearly a decade. The operation Sunday left as many as 17 soldiers dead, with another eight reported captured by the PKK.

Last week, before this latest attack, the Turkish parliament voted overwhelmingly in favor of a resolution authorizing the government to send the army across the border into Iraq to strike PKK bases there.

In London for a two-day visit, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan stated, "If a

neighboring country is providing a safe haven for terrorism ... we have rights under international law and we will use those rights and we don't have to get permission from anybody."

Erdogan went on to blame the US invasion and occupation of Iraq for the deteriorating situation on the Iraqi-Turkish border and the mounting threat of a wider war.

"There's no success that I can see," he said. "There's only the deaths of tens of thousands of people. There's just an Iraq whose entire infrastructure and superstructure has collapsed."

Turkey is well aware that the US has turned a blind eye towards the PKK's operations, while actively supporting its sister organization in carrying out terrorist attacks against Iran in the name of Kurdish separatism.

The latest PKK attack provoked demonstrations organized by opposition parties demanding military action. In Ankara, thousands marched chanting "Down with the PKK and USA!"

Turkey's move towards retaliation threatens to plunge into chaos the one region of Iraq that has been spared the murderous violence elsewhere.

While Washington's neo-colonialist intervention in Iraq is spilling across the borders of Turkey and Iran, so too the continuing warfare in Afghanistan is threatening to ignite a political powder keg in neighboring Pakistan.

The massive bomb attack against the convoy of Benazir Bhutto last Thursday that killed 136 people and left hundreds of others wounded may well prove the opening shot in a far wider bloodletting and civil war in Pakistan.

Bhutto, who was deposed as prime minister nearly a decade ago amid corruption charges, was brought back to Pakistan as part of a deal brokered by Washington with the country's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf. The aim is to forge a power-sharing agreement that would rescue the pro-US regime from mounting popular unrest, while paving the way for the incursion of US forces into the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, where the Taliban enjoys refuge and popular support.

The implications of the joining together of the failing attempt by the US and its allies to suppress the resistance in Afghanistan and the mounting crisis in Pakistan was spelled out by former top United Nations envoy Paddy Ashdown in an interview last week with the Reuters news agency.

"I believe losing in Afghanistan is worse than losing in Iraq," said Ashdown. "It will mean that Pakistan will fall and it will have serious implications internally for the security of our own countries and will instigate a wider Shiite, Sunni regional war on a grand scale."

Ashdown added, "Some people refer to the First and Second World Wars as European civil wars and I think a similar regional civil war could be initiated by this...to match this magnitude."

Mounting tensions with Moscow

These developments threaten to thrust the US military into countries that span more than a

2,500-mile swath of territory extending from the Black Sea to the Arabian Sea. This region also constitutes the southern flank of the former Soviet Union, posing an ever more explicit threat to Moscow, against whom Bush's World War III remarks were principally directed.

US-Russian tensions found fresh expression last Thursday with a nationally televised broadcast by President Vladimir Putin in which he characterized the US intervention in Iraq as an attempt to seize that country's oil wealth and warned that Russia had the military capacity to prevent any American attempt to do the same thing on its soil.

"Thank God, Russia is not Iraq," he said. "It is strong enough to protect its interests within its national territory and, by the way, in other regions of the world."

The broadcast included footage of the test launching of Russia's new Topol-M ballistic missile, which was said to have hit a target thousands of miles away in the Pacific.

Putin vowed to invest heavily in the rebuilding of Russia's military. "We will pay attention not only to developing the nuclear triad but other weapons as well." He also warned that if Washington goes ahead with its proposal to deploy a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, "We will certainly take steps in response to ensure the security of Russian citizens."

Asked about Bush's remark about World War III, White House press spokesperson Dana Perino insisted that he was only "using that as a rhetorical point."

A survey of the instability and conflicts that US military interventions have unleashed across this region, which not incidentally contains the lion's share of the world's remaining energy reserves, makes it abundantly clear that the threat of a far wider conflagration is anything but rhetoric.

Underlying this threat lie the conflicting interests of rival capitalist nations and above all the drive by US imperialism to offset its economic decline in relation to rivals in Europe and Asia by exploiting its military superiority to seize hold of vital natural resources and markets.

Under these conditions, the danger that US militarism will plunge mankind into a new world war is all too real, as Washington's increasingly reckless interventions cut across the vital interests of other major powers.

This is the inescapable logic of the doctrine of "preventive war" elaborated by Bush and embraced by the predominant sections of America's ruling establishment.

Within this US ruling elite, there exists no genuine political opposition to the turn towards global warfare. The Democrats, the ostensible opposition party, have continued to fund both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars, while joining with the Republicans in the US Senate to pass a resolution branding Iran's main security forces a "terrorist organization," thereby providing the political pretext for an unprovoked attack on yet another nation.

The real and growing danger of a far wider and more devastating war, threatening the lives of hundreds of millions, can be answered only by means of the independent mobilization of the working class, both in the US and internationally, on the basis of a common socialist program to put an end to war and the capitalist system that creates it.

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