

Cheney's War II

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Twice in the past week, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have cranked up the rhetoric about the government of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Last Wednesday, the president said a nuclear-armed Iran raised the specter of "World War III," and on Sunday, the vice president said flatly, "We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

Given the consensus within western intelligence agencies that Iran is at least five years - probably more than 10 years - away from being able to build nuclear weapons, why the sudden outburst of fear-mongering? Doesn't this sound a bit too familiar, a bit too 2002?

Indeed, many of the same neoconservative, American Enterprise Institute-Weekly Standard drumbeaters who brought us the war in Iraq also are on board for a bombing campaign against Iran. "The plain and brutal truth is that if Iran is to be prevented from developing a nuclear arsenal, there is no alternative to the actual use of military force," wrote the neocon intellectual Norman Podhoretz in Commentary magazine last June.

"Surgical strikes" is the phrase of choice this time around, replacing "shock and awe." The strategy, such as it is, as disclosed by Seymour Hersh in The New Yorker earlier this month, no longer would be aimed solely at Iran's nuclear facilities. Instead, it also would target the training camps and headquarters of its Revolutionary Guards forces, thus "emboldening" the moderates within Iran. Just how one "emboldens" the people of a foreign nation by sending bombers and cruise missiles to blow up parts of it isn't precisely clear.

The irony, of course, is that Iran was not nearly so large a problem before the United States invaded Iraq, creating waves of anti-U.S. sentiment - and fears of other possible U.S. invasions - throughout the Muslim world. Moderate pro-Western forces in Iran suddenly were out of favor, and a new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an extremist by any definition, took power. Ahmadinejad, with his denials of the Holocaust and his vows to exterminate Israel, makes a convenient enemy, but real power in Iraq remains with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In recent months, Bush and U.S. commanders in Iraq repeatedly have criticized Iran for its cross-border support for Shiite militias, pointing to the Quds forces of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Those are special operations troops that have a direct allegiance to the Atayollah Khamenei and that have been linked to the production of sophisticated roadside bombs used against U.S. troops.

Speaking Sunday to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Cheney accused the Iranian government of complicity in the deaths of U.S. forces. In words that echoed those he used about Iraq in 2002, he said that Iran's people have "the right to be free of tyranny."

"Our country, and the entire international community, cannot stand by as a terror-supporting state fulfills its grandest ambitions," the vice president said.

At a press conference last Wednesday, Bush said, that "if you're interested in avoiding World War III, it seems like you ought to be interested in preventing [Iran] from having the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon." That remark alone substantially redefined downward - from possessing a nuclear weapon to merely having the knowledge to make one - the potential basis for action.

Fortunately, this time around, there are less bellicose voices within the administration. Both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates are known to be trying to cool the rhetoric coming out of the vice president's office.

Even so, Cheney must not be underestimated; he has proved himself fully capable of leading Bush out of the frying pan and into the fire. Responsible leaders in Congress and the administration must stop him before he goes any further.

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