

Could battle of wills escalate to war?

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First in a three-part series exploring the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program.

Every time Robert Gates is asked whether the United States is preparing for war against Iran, the U.S. Defence Secretary becomes agitated and impatient, expressing disbelief the question would even be posed.

"I don't know how many times [President George W. Bush] and I have had to repeat that -- we have no intention of attacking Iran," he says.

It's a variation on what the White House and Pentagon have been saying for months amid growing tensions over Iran's nuclear program and alleged interference in Iraq.

The repeated denials have not convinced U.S. lawmakers, wary of a pre-emptive strike, or the scores of military analysts in Washington who make a living reading the tea leaves for signs of war.

With the White House refusing to open bilateral talks with Iran and Tehran this week ignoring a UN deadline to suspend nuclear-enrichment work, the battle of wills may be moving closer to war of a much deadlier variety.

"The President is searching for options other than the use of military force that will reinforce diplomacy, because he has not given up on diplomacy," says Raymond Tanter, co-chairman of the Washington-based Iran Policy Committee and a National Security Council member in the Reagan administration.

"But it is inconceivable to me that the Bush administration would hand over the Iranian nuclear file to the next president, not with the possibility of having a repeat of what North Korea has done, creating nuclear weapons on George Bush's watch."

The tension reached new levels this week with the release of an International Atomic Energy Agency report saying Tehran continues to build a heavy-water reactor and expand enrichment work, bringing it closer to the possible development of nuclear weapons.

Even as the United States seeks to punish Iran through economic sanctions, there is evidence of advanced U.S. contingency planning for a military attack in forms both obvious and subtle.



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The United States says it hopes to use diplomacy to convince Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to abandon his country's uranium enrichment program.

The most conspicuous sign came just after Valentine's Day, when the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis arrived in the Persian Gulf to join a second carrier, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Loaded with F/A-18 Hornet and Super Hornet strike fighter jets, and accompanied by a flotilla of destroyers armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles, the two carrier battle groups would enable the United States to carry out round-the-clock bombardment of Iranian nuclear facilities.

Less obvious, but perhaps just as ominous, have been the incremental signs Mr. Bush is preparing for war.

In January, he announced plans to double the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve to "protect America against severe disruptions to our oil supply."

On Feb. 11, U.S. military analysts in Baghdad displayed Iranian-made weaponry allegedly used in attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq. Retired U.S. air force colonel Sam Gardiner says the show-and-tell marked the first step in a possible Bush administration plan to justify preemptive strikes on Iran, without seeking the authorization of Congress or the UN Security Council.

"I don't think the decision has been made to do a pre-emptive strike. I do think everything is being put in place as if that were the plan," says Col. Gardiner, who has conducted war-games planning on Iran.

"That press conference in Baghdad was about telling the world that Iran has done enough, has done aggression, against the U.S. I think it was about setting down a marker -- that we have the authority to strike Iran."

With diplomatic efforts stalled, the outlines of a possible U.S. bombing campaign against Iran have trickled out over the past year.

Most military analysts believe an attack would include extensive sorties by long-range B-2 stealth bombers, embarking from the continental U.S. or the U.S. military base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.

The bombing runs would be supplemented by cruise missiles launched by B-52 bombers and from the U.S. carrier battle groups in the Gulf.

Experts believe the bombing campaign could last from five to 14 days, with targets including the Iranian nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz, the military complex at Parchin and the nuclear reactor being built at Bushehr.

"Two carrier strike groups buy you a 24-hour prompt strike capability," says John Pike, director of Global Security.org, a military information Web site.

Many Middle East experts believe the United States would also try to knock out Iranian missile installations and air force bases.

The intent would be to limit Tehran's ability to retaliate against Israel, U.S. troops in Iraq or Arab states friendly to the United States.

A third military option, perhaps the least likely, is an attack aimed at taking out Iran's leadership in a bid to spur regime change.

"If you hit Iran, she is going to hit back," says Wayne White, an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute and former intelligence analyst in the State Department.

"So any attack against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, if you are being militarily prudent, would have to contain a large element aimed at taking out their retaliatory options. If you are not taking that capability down, they are going to be using it. So once you start

hitting it, you had better hit it hard and persistently."

Mr. White, who opposes air strikes, believes it's foolhardy to think the U.S. could extricate itself quickly from a conflict with Iran once military action began.

"It would not be a surgical operation. It would virtually be a war against Iran ... and there wouldn't be any end-game," he says.

"The last person who attacked Iran in order to push the Iranians back as a threat was Saddam Hussein--and he ended up in an eight-year war with 150,000 to 200,000 Iraqi casualties."

What's less certain is Mr. Bush's willingness to actually mount an attack.

The most forceful proponents of pre-emptive strikes are U.S. neo-conservatives who pushed for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but their influence with the White House has been on the wane.

The President himself repeatedly insists he plans to exhaust all diplomatic efforts, short of bilateral talks.

"Diplomacy cannot be effective in this case without the threat of something worse to come," says Michael Rubin, a Middle-East scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

"Europe has demonstrated that a policy of speaking softly and carrying a big carrot simply does not work."

Both Mr. White and Col. Gardiner believe Mr. Bush ordered the U.S. naval buildup in the Gulf primarily to frighten the mullahs into compromising.

"Only an Iran under a lot of pressure will negotiate," Mr. White says.

"The thing you want to be afraid of is that the Iranians, instead, don't negotiate and then the military option becomes one that appears unavoidable."

As an option beyond diplomacy, the Bush administration may also boost Iranian opposition groups such as the National Council of Resistance of Iran and the cultish Mujahedin e-Khalq by removing them from the State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations, Mr. Tanter says.

"Doing so would signal to the regime in Tehran that regime change is on the table, and there are costs for non-compliance [on the nuclear front]," he says.

Increasingly, analysts believe there are two possible triggers for U.S. air attacks -- confirmation Iran is close to producing a nuclear weapon or evidence of its involvement in a heavy-casualty attack on U.S. forces in Iraq.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has said Iran could have the knowledge to conduct industrial-level enrichment of uranium within six months, potentially crossing the White House's line in the sand.

"The path toward a conflict is not vague. The President has said what he can't stand, and the Iranians have said what they are going to do," Col. Gardiner says.

"If there were a major-casualty event in Iraq, and if the DNA of that attack were questionable or it looked like Iran was responsible, we could have a greater Middle East war."

Whatever the scenario, few experts believe Mr. Bush would be deterred from attacking Iran out of fear of a backlash by Americans, citing his willingness to buck public opinion by ordering a troop surge in Iraq.

"The President feels very strongly about the so-called existential threat that an Iranian nuclear weapons capability poses against Israel," Mr. White says. "He is serious about the military option being on the table."

As for the timing of potential attacks, it's a bit of a mug's game -- contingent on the pace and success of diplomacy.

But don't expect Mr. Bush to wait until the heat of the next presidential campaign -- in the fall of 2008, when his powers will be on the wane -- to make a call, Mr. Tanter says.

"The spring of 2008 is the most dangerous from the point of view of American decision making on Iran."

MONDAY

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