

Dear Mr. Bush: Don't Attack Iran

You don't have to be Chicken Little to worry where U.S. thinking is going, says former UN ambassador PAUL HEINBECKER

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Memorandum to the Prime Minister on a U.S. war with Iran:

Dear Prime Minister,

Now is the time to use your personal access to President George Bush to tell him that expanding the war in Iraq to Iran is a bad idea, one that Canadians and much of the rest of the world will not support. Not because Canadians and the world have much sympathy for the current Iranian regime -- they don't -- but because there is no telling what the consequences of an American attack on Iran would be, beyond being bad or, potentially, very bad.

Last week, in a speech to his country that conveyed messages to Iran as well as about Iraq, Mr. Bush accused Tehran of "providing material support for attacks on American troops" and promised to interrupt the alleged flow of support to insurgents from Iran and Syria. He has ordered a second aircraft carrier strike group into the Persian Gulf. And he has shipped Patriot missiles to defend U.S. bases and others in the region from attack, presumably from the Iranians, as there is no other plausible protagonist around.

U.S. forces subsequently targeted an Iranian government office in the Kurdish area of Iraq, against the wishes of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish authorities, and detained Iranian representatives working there, an initiative widely regarded as a provocation to Iran.

All of this is happening against the background of Mr. Bush's faltering "war" on terror, a war he has, unwisely, portrayed as having the highest of stakes. Defeat, he has argued, would position radical Islamist extremists to topple moderate Middle Eastern governments, create chaos in the region, enhance terrorist recruitment, use oil revenues to fund their ambitions and embolden Iran, including in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. This drastic scenario, which the President drew in his speech last Wednesday, could be used to justify equally drastic action.

You don't have to be Chicken Little to worry where this administration's thinking may be going. The President's approval ratings are terrible. His dream of spreading democracy in the Middle East is turning into a nightmare. He is reaching once again for his military hammer, this time in Somalia. His Iraq project is disintegrating under the twin pressures of a deepening sectarian conflict and a stubborn insurgency. His urge to surge in Iraq

amounts to "doubling up" on a losing bet. He has rejected the Iraq Study Group's advice that his administration talk to Iran and Syria -- talking to them would complicate more aggressive courses of action.

In the mix, somewhere, are America's fears over Iran's nuclear ambitions, an apprehension many share, particularly Israel, and calls for military pre-emption of Iran's presumed plans, a course of action far fewer support. The outgoing U.S. director of national intelligence has estimated that the Iranians are, at least, several years away from being able to develop nuclear weapons.

Provoking a conflict now with the Iranians, or Syrians, would be a terrible idea, and no one who is thinking straight would do it -- but that's exactly the point. The Bush administration is disappearing down a political vortex created by its policies in Iraq. Its record there is one of failure, likely to be one of the worst legacies ever bequeathed by a president to his successor. Even Republican senators are distancing themselves from this White House. Desperation is almost palpable in Washington. These are exactly the circumstances in which bold action is needed to save the Bush presidency, or so some of the not-yet-dead neo-cons are advocating.

But another Bush misadventure in the Middle East would do the U.S. incalculable harm, and it would literally take generations for Washington to recover in the region's, and world's, eyes. An attack on Iran would be seen in much of the Islamic world as yet another assault by the U.S. and the West on Muslims. More worrying, it could escalate and, if cooler heads did not prevail, lead to asymmetric responses by radicalized Islamists in cities across the world. At a minimum, it would further distract the U.S. from addressing the situation in Afghanistan and, not insignificant for Canada, potentially nullify the job our soldiers, diplomats and development officers have been trying to do there, as well as increase the dangers they face.

It is possible that all of the current Washington activity is psy-ops, a bid to dissuade the Iranians from interfering in Iraq or proceeding further with their nuclear programs. If that is the case, the U.S. is playing a game that carries real but possibly manageable risks, although miscalculations are always possible.

But it could also be that Washington's sabre-rattling is meant in deadly earnest. If so, taking on Iran and its 65 million people will be no cakewalk; many are likely to die on both sides. Worse, such action will court violent reactions around the world. Given the disposition of this administration to use military force and the enormity of the stakes involved, it would be wise for Washington's friends to do more than just hope for the best. Ottawa needs to speak the truth to its friends in Washington, for their sake as well as ours.

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