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Unleashing the Dogs of War – A Growing Strategic Inevitability?

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By John Collins.

There seems a growing confidence among American hawks about the inevitability of an attack on Iran. [Few](#) appear willing to overtly bang the war drum, but notable hawks like [Max Boot](#) seem comfortable to engage in the debate from a perspective of 'how' and 'when' a targeted and 'limited' strike should occur, rather than 'if' one should occur. Meanwhile, a few [anachronistic voices](#) continue to make the argument for regime change. Opposing this 'inevitability' crowd are those persistent [voices](#) arguing that a 'sweet spot' of diplomacy and sanctions remains viable in the immediate term. Rather than arguing that the military option is an inherently 'bad' one, however, these moderates seem to be coalescing around arguing the relative sub-optimality of war in the current context, but increasingly admit that diplomacy is time constrained and its outcomes are contingent on Iranian short term actions.



Simultaneously the Obama administration appears to be shifting to a decidedly more hawkish stance. Most explicit seems to have been a discernible change in tone by the US defence secretary. Leon Panetta's recent and repeated warnings that there are certain '[red lines](#)' which the regime should not cross can be interpreted as part of a diplomatic offensive directed at the international community as much as Iran. Meanwhile President Obama, in some contrast to his desire for a new kind of diplomacy where the US aims to "say in public what we say in private" sent a private letter to the Iranian regime. On this letter both sides have – respectively – remained quiet and coy. Lastly, the Administration appears to be spilling indications of a fundamental shift in attitudes towards an Israeli conception of the situation. As Gideon Rose [suggested](#) in December: "I am increasingly hearing different people in the U.S. government starting to see things like the Israelis, that...we're only a few months off from a critical point at which we could no longer knock out the program with a strike." This situation can only have been worsened by the current debacle over the Straits of Hormuz.

Bryan Gibson, in a recent [article](#) for the *Majalla*, has argued that the Iranian threat to close the Straits is most likely a bluff, given Iran's economic dependency on this narrow waterway. However, the sanctions regime is removing this economic motive at a rapid rate. As the *New York Times* [reported](#) on today: "European Union foreign ministers are expected at a meeting on Monday to agree an oil embargo against Iran"; "Turkish refiner Tupras also planned to cut its dependence on imports of Iranian oil"; while "Saudi Arabia...said it could swiftly raise oil output for key customers if needed." Meanwhile, all these micro events appear to be playing into a broader macro strategic narrative:

Fort Sumter in the Gulf?

Intervention in Libya, as I've argued [elsewhere](#), made plain that conventional warfare has not been rendered obsolete for the 21st century by the failure of state building in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Libya, NATO decimated Gadhafi's forces, at minimal cost, while eschewing any draw towards nation building. Extrapolating these events to the current situation with Iran, it becomes altogether credible that the potential exists to destroy the Revolutionary Guard's offensive capability without the US committing itself to a sustained nation building effort. This of course fosters enormous uncertainty about what political situation would emerge in Iran after a military strike. However, given the uncertainties that attend a potentially nuclear Iran the strategic arithmetic could convince American planners of the relative merits of the military option over a wait-and-see approach. Meanwhile, given the strategic options available, events seem to fit a strikingly cogent narrative of Iran playing into the US' hands.

Potentially the Obama Administration faces three options should diplomacy fail:

- 1) A hands-off approach that sees the strong potential for Israeli unilateral action. Such action would in all probability drag the US into an all-out and extremely messy regional war.
- 2) the US takes preemptive action to forestall Israeli action in the hopes of avoiding a broader Arab-Israeli conflagration. The likelihood with action like this, however, is that events will merely play out as they would have under the above Israeli action.
- 3) The US pushes Iran into striking first thereby winning cover for a military strike as a purely defensive act. This would potentially contain events to an American/NATO-Iranian conflagration and forestalling a broader regional war.

Clearly any one of these outcomes would be a disastrous. But in the context of a breakdown of diplomacy or a nuclear armed and erratically belligerent Iran, US planners would presumably view the third option as the 'least bad' one available. This may

explain the current US strategy. As [Adam Quinn](#) described it at an [event](#) at the ISA last night: the US may, through the use of an ever tightening neck-tie of sanctions and rhetoric, cajole the Iranians into striking first. The parallels with Abraham Lincoln maneuvering the South into striking the first blow in the Civil War would surely not be lost on this President.

Internal Dynamics:

The generally accepted narrative surrounding the Iranian regime is that of a fragmented power structure. In recent years it seems that a combination of sanctions and the brutal quelling of internal dissent have strengthened the relative economic and political strength of the Revolutionary Guard vis-a-vis the other pillars of the regime. This skewing of Iranian politics towards a reactionary military elite might help explain the growing unwillingness of the Obama administration to countenance a scenario of containment in the aftermath of the country obtaining a nuclear weapon. On the other hand it also fits into the above strategic narrative whereby the US can count on powerful hardline elements within the regime to make the first move. The recent actions regarding Hormuz and the [threatening](#) rhetoric being directed at Iran's neighbours seems simultaneously to betray a hubristic arrogance along with a realisation of how economically isolated they have become. In this case, there is a strong potential for a miscalculation and a bucking against the ever tightening US straight jacket by some level of the Iranian military command.

A Narrowing Window:

Let me be clear: this article does not make an argument for or against military action. It is instead an attempt to discern whether some greater regional strategy is emerging in Washington. We could, on the other hand, be witnessing the beginning of a high stakes game of brinkmanship where the US is banking on an Iranian loss of nerve. Whatever happens, however, a resolution seems on the way. The status quo is unsustainable in the face of mounting tensions and a stern US unwillingness to countenance a nuclear Iran. Whatever the behind-the-scenes strategic planning, war seems to be far more likely than it did even just several months ago. If 2012 ends up being notable merely for severe macro-economic instability the world should think itself lucky.

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