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How Bush would gain from war with Iran

The US has the capability and reasons for an assault - and it is hard to see Britain uninvolved

Dan Plesch
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[The Guardian](#)

President Bush has reminded us that he is prepared to take military action to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. On Israeli television this weekend, he declared that "all options are on the table" if Tehran doesn't comply with international demands.

In private his officials deride EU and UN diplomacy with Iran. US officials have been preparing pre-emptive war since Bush marked Iran out as a member of the "axis of

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evil" back in 2002. Once again, this war is likely to have British support.

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A plausible spin could be that America and Britain must act where the international community has failed, and that their action is the responsible alternative to an Israeli attack. The conventional wisdom is that, even if diplomacy fails, the US is so bogged down in Iraq that it could not take on Iran. However, this misunderstands the capabilities and intentions of the Bush administration.

America's devastating air power is not committed in Iraq. Just 120 B52, B1 and B2 bombers could hit 5,000 targets in a single mission. Thousands of other warplanes and

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missiles are available. The army and marines are heavily committed in Iraq, but enough forces could be found to secure coastal oilfields and to conduct raids into Iran.

A US attack is unlikely to be confined to the suspected WMD locations or to involve a ground invasion to occupy the country. The strikes would probably be intended to destroy military, political and (oil excepted) economic infrastructure. A disabled Iran could be further paralysed by civil war. Tehran alleges US support for separatists in the large Azeri population of the north-west, and fighting is increasing in Iranian Kurdistan.

The possible negative consequences of an attack on Iran are well known: an increase in terrorism; a Shia rising in Iraq; Hizbullah and Iranian attacks on Israel; attacks on oil facilities along the Gulf and a recession caused by rising oil prices. Advocates of war argue that if Iran is allowed to go nuclear then each of these threats to US and Israeli interests becomes far greater. In this logic, any negative consequence becomes a further reason to attack now - with Iran disabled all these threats can, it is argued, be reduced.

Iraq is proving an electoral liability. This is a threat to the Bush team's intention to retain

power for the next decade - perhaps, as the author Bob Woodward says, with President Cheney at the helm. War with Iran next spring can enable them to win the mid-term elections and retain control of the Republican party, now in partial rebellion over Iraq.

The rise in oil prices and subsequent recession are reasons some doubt that an attack would take place. However, Iran's supplies are destined for China - perceived as the US's main long-term rival. And the Bush team are experienced enough to remember that Ronald Reagan rode out the recession of the early 1980s on a wave of rhetoric about "evil empire".

Even if the US went ahead, runs the argument, Britain would not be involved as Tony Blair would not want a rerun of the Iraq controversy. But British forces are already in the area: they border Iran around Basra, and will soon lead the Nato force on Iran's Afghan frontier. The British island of Diego Garcia is a critical US base.

It is hard to see Britain uninvolved in US actions. The prime minister is clearly of a mind to no more countenance Iran's WMD than he did Iraq's. In Iran's case the evidence is more substantial. The Iranians do have a nuclear energy programme and have lied about it. In any event, Blair is

probably aware that the US is unlikely to supply him with the prized successor to the Trident submarine if Britain refuses to continue to pay the blood sacrifice of standing with the US. Tory votes might provide sufficient "national unity" to see off Labour dissenters.

New approaches are needed to head off such a dismal scenario. The problem on WMD is that Blair and Bush are doing too little, not too much. Why pick on Iran rather than India, Pakistan, Israel or Egypt - not to mention the west's weapons? In the era of Gorbachev and Reagan, political will created treaties that still successfully control many types of WMD. Revived, they would provide the basis for global controls. Iran must not be dealt with in isolation.

As the Iran debate unfolds, we will no doubt again hear about the joint intelligence committee. We should follow the advice of a former head of the committee, Sir Paul Lever, to remove US intelligence officials from around the JIC table, where they normally sit. Only in this way, argues Lever, can the British take a considered view themselves.

We need to be clear that our MPs have no mandate to support an attack on Iran. During the election campaign, the government dismissed any suggestion that Iran might be

attacked as ridiculous scaremongering. If Blair has told Bush that Britain will prevent Iran's nuclear weapons "come what may", we need to be equally clear that nothing short of an election would provide the mandate for an attack.

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