

Iran and Pakistan: danger signals

By Paul Rogers,
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The Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary in the United States have generated huge political buzz and media [commentary](#) [1], but very little of this has focused on the foreign-policy challenges facing the country in general and the war on terror in particular. This pattern may be understandable in light of the money, power and influence at stake in winning the presidency in the November 2008 election; but it also represents a certain retreat from [reality](#) [2], in the context of the current potential for a rapid development of crisis involving US forces in two regions: the Persian Gulf and Pakistan.

Tehran waits

The United States's national intelligence estimate (NIE) published on 3 December 2007 - entitled *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* [3] - offered what was in the context of escalating tension over the issue a radical reassessment of Iran's nuclear [plans](#) [4]. The NIE judged that Tehran's "nuclear-weapons program" ceased as a result of international pressure in 2003, and that a resumption of the effort was unlikely before 2010-15.

Paul Rogers is professor of peace studies at Bradford University, northern England. He has been writing a weekly [column](#) [2] on global security on **openDemocracy** since 26 September 2001

This conclusion was significantly different from the portrait of Iran presented by the George W Bush administration of an Iran that was intent on going nuclear as quickly as possible - an image of a threatening country reinforced by the president's [combative](#) [5] remark on 9 January 2008 during his visit to Israel that there would be "serious consequences" if Iran "attacked our ships" (see "[Bush rebukes Iran over naval stand-off](#) [6]", 10 January 2008). The overall effect of the NIE report was both to cool immediate concern about possible armed confrontation, and to undermine Washington's campaign to win support in the United Nations Security Council for a further tranche of [sanctions](#) [7] on Iran.

At the same time, the assessment was also bad news for two significant groups within Iran (see Nasrin Alavi, "[Iran: the uses of intelligence](#) [7]", 6 December 2007). The first was the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration itself, which has been facing increasing domestic opposition on account of its failure to fulfil the key election promise he made in 2005 - to deliver economic progress to Iran's poor. In light of this pressure at home, a belligerent America was an asset that helped the Iranian president use nationalist rhetoric as a unifying political diversion.

There is also political pressure on Ahmadinejad, who has recently been in the unusual position of implied criticism from the supreme leader, [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#) [8]. Iran's figurehead has usually defended the president when the latter is exposed to public criticism, but in the latest phase Ahmadinejad has been left without such protection (see Nazila Fathi, "[A President's Defender Keeps His Distance](#) [9]", *New York Times*, 8 January 2008). Moreover, his adversaries

are preparing for the important legislative elections [10] on 14 March 2008 in hopes of making significant gains.

The second group which felt a cold chill from the NIE report is Iran's Revolutionary Guard, the army within an army that had such a high status in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution [11] and the bitter war with Iraq that followed in 1980-88 [12]. The institution has grown soft and not a little bloated, especially as it has expanded its business activities. As a result it has lost some of its standing in Iranian society, an uncomfortable and unfamiliar circumstance.

An earlier column in this series suggested that one of the main dangers of a military confrontation between the United States and Iran might arise not from a conscious, high-level decision to go to war but through a deliberate provocation on either side (see "America and Iran: the spark of war [12]", 20 September 2007). The incident on 6 January 2008 involving Revolutionary Guard speedboats and three powerful US warships came close to turning into such a spark [12]. From the radical Iranian point of view, the timing could hardly have been better - Bush's visit to the region meant that the incidents were guaranteed to provoke a strong response that in turn would help to remind Iranians of the guard's political symbolism [12] and status.

In this light, it is most likely that the crisis was provoked by radical elements within the guard rather than from senior levels of the government. But for all that, it is unlikely to be an isolated event. Rather, more such incidents, with a risk of even edgier incidents, can be expected.

Many senior officers within the US's central command would be very reluctant to go to war with Iran, knowing the likely consequences. This, combined with the sheer weight and number of US forces in the Persian Gulf region, means that radical elements within Iran are in something of a "win-win" situation (see "The Persian Gulf: a war of position [14]", 8 February 2007). They can seek to provoke the US military and garner benefits from either an armed US response (by showing their own power) or the absence of a response (by assuming a prominent role as defenders of the revolution).

In addition to his weekly **openDemocracy** column, Paul Rogers writes an international security monthly briefing for the Oxford Research Group; for details, click here [13]

Paul Rogers's most recent book is *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* [14] (Polity, 2007) - an analysis of the strategic misjudgments of the post-9/11 and why a new security paradigm is needed

The impact of the NIE report, therefore, is more double-edged than first realised. The risk of a confrontation remains high in spite of its more sanguine assessment, and in some ways it may even have increased that risk.

Pakistan trembles

Meanwhile, the possibility of direct US military intervention in Pakistan has also increased (see "The Pakistan-Afghanistan abyss [14]", 4 January 2008"). A White House meeting on the issue included Dick Cheney, Condoleezza Rice and senior national-security advisers to review the need for increased action in the western part of the country (see Steven Lee Meyers, David E Sanger & Eric Schmitt, "US Considers New Covert Push Within Pakistan [15]", *New York Times*, 6 January 2008). The region is now considered crucial to US counter-terrorism strategy, a status fuelled by the belief that regime change in Pakistan [15] has become a core aim for the al-Qaida movement and its associates. The cited report quoted one official saying: "After years of

focussing on Afghanistan, we think the extremists now see a chance for the big prize - creating chaos in Pakistan itself.

What appears to be planned is an increase in CIA operations in Pakistan, a closer liaison between the CIA and the US military, including the ability to bring in US forces when required, and an enhanced programme to train Pakistani forces. The Bush administration has been cautious as to whether it could persuade the Pervez Musharraf regime to accept a greater US role, but holds that Musharraf's transfer [16] of army command on 28 November 2007 has created new opportunities. The new head of the army, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, is expected to be more sympathetic to US concerns (see Ann Scott Tyson & Robin Wright, "U.S. Officials Review Approach in Pakistan [17]", *Washington Post*, 7 January 2008).

In early December 2007, the head of the United States special-operations command (Socom [18]) paid his second visit to Pakistan within three months. Admiral Eric T Olson [19]'s trip included a visit to the headquarters of the Frontier Corps, an 85,000-strong paramilitary force that is expected to receive training and support from Socom (see Howard LaFranchi, "Can US woo Al Qaeda's own haven? [20]", *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 July 2007)

Pakistan has therefore become much more central to US operations in southwest Asia, a fact that in itself this raises three difficult issues. The first is that Pakistan's army has not concentrated on counterinsurgency capabilities in the past, as it has been much more geared towards the perceived threat from India. This means that any US involvement would almost inevitably be substantial and might ultimately involve regular troop deployments. The consequences for this in a country where there are already deep suspicions of the US could be considerable, not least for the vulnerable supply-lines for US troops that pass through Pakistan to Afghanistan (see "A Pakistani dilemma [20]", 15 November 2007).

The second issue is that the remaining concerns that sectors of the Pakistani army and the powerful Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) agency are not loyal to Musharraf, so that any increase in US involvement threatens the president's own position.

The third, and perhaps most significant issue is that the new White House pressure on Pakistan means that the other approach to the militia problem - negotiation and compromise - is almost entirely ruled out (see Syed Saleem Shahzad, "US wants Pakistan to bite the bullet [21]", *Asia Times*, 9 January 2008). There may be little or no purchase in the idea of negotiations with the al-Qaida movement itself, but there have been a number of cases where deals have been made with local Taliban elements based in Pakistan (See Antonio Giustozzi, "The resurgence of the neo-Taliban [21]", 14 December 2007). These indicate at least the possibility that there are other ways to defuse a dangerous conflict than by relying on military force, especially when that involves the United States.

As a Pakistani official comments to the *Asia Times*: "We have actually been thrown into a deep quagmire where we are not left with many options. The CIA's presence in Pakistan had made it impossible for Pakistan to handle the Taliban problem independently and through dialogue. On the other hand, there is no military solution on the horizon against the Taliban and another [Pakistani army] operation against militants would cause more than serious repercussions".

Washington slumbers

Meanwhile, back in the United States the primary [22] election campaign is approaching full flow with virtually no mention of these issues. In regard to both Iran and Pakistan, however, the potential for sudden crises and even overt conflict involving US forces, may now be higher than just a month ago.

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