

# Disappearing Diplomacy

By Jim Lobe | October 2, 2007

Amid growing speculation about prospects for U.S. military action against Iran, neoconservatives and other hawks won a significant—if somewhat incomplete—victory in rallying the Democratic-led Congress to its side.

In a 76-22 vote last Wednesday, senators approved a non-binding amendment to the 2008 Defense Authorization bill that called for the administration of President George W. Bush to designate Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) "a foreign terrorist organization."

Among those voting for the measure was the Democratic front-runner for the 2008 presidential election, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York.

At the same time, the House of Representatives voted nearly unanimously—408-6—for another measure, the Iran Sanctions Enabling Act, which would force Bush to impose sweeping sanctions against foreign companies that invest more than \$20 million in Iran's energy sector.

That bill, which is opposed by the Bush administration due to strong pressure from Washington's European and Asian allies and key U.S. multinational companies, is considered likely to stall in the Senate through the remainder of this year.

But its huge margin of approval, which some observers said was boosted by last week's controversial visit to New York by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, helped demonstrate once again how responsive members of both major parties are to the so-called "Israel Lobby," which has made the sanctions bill its top legislative priority this year.

Both votes took place amid an intensifying struggle within the administration over control of Iran policy, with hawks, led by Vice President Dick Cheney and his neo-conservative advisers, pitted against the State Department and Pentagon chief Robert Gates and his top military brass.

The State Department, while never ruling out military action, has consistently argued for continuing diplomatic efforts to address both alleged Iranian backing for anti-U.S. Shiite militias in Iraq and Iran's rejection of UN

Security Council demands that it freeze its uranium-enrichment program.

For the past two months—since the last time the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors met in Baghdad—the struggle appears to have reached an impasse.

In late July, Bush agreed in principle to a proposal by Cheney for cross-border military strikes against IRGC targets that have allegedly been involved in training and supplying Iraqi Shiite militias, according to Philip Giraldi, a former military intelligence and CIA officer, writing recently in the *American Conservative*.

But the Pentagon brass, which has become increasingly outspoken about the overextension of U.S. ground forces in Iraq and the uncertainty about how Iran would react, countered with a more cautious strategy of building a new military base and extending patrolling along suspected smuggling routes, according to knowledgeable sources.

Similarly, the diplomatic dialogue between the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad over stabilizing Iraq—originally launched last May—has not resumed since their second and last meeting in late July when Amb. Ryan Crocker publicly complained about Tehran's alleged increase in support, via the IRGC, for Shiite militias that were attacking U.S. troops.

In testimony in Washington, DC, two weeks ago, Crocker said he "found no readiness on the Iranians' side at all to engage seriously on these issues," while Gen. David Petraeus, Washington's top military commander in Iraq, charged that Tehran was engaged in a "proxy war" against the United States in Iraq.

Last month, the *Washington Post* reported that the administration had decided in principle to designate the IRGC, which, in addition to its military role, controls a number of large businesses that could be subject to sanctions, but had yet to determine whether it would name

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the entire organization or only its elite unit, the Quds Force. That no announcement has yet been made is indicative of the continuing infighting around Bush.

The continuing paralysis, however, appears to have favored the hawks, who have pressed their campaign for cross-border military action against Iran in the opinion pages of such neoconservative publications as the *Weekly Standard*, the *National Review*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Their calls for action became so intense that the commander of the U.S. Central Command and Petraeus' superior, Adm. William Fallon, who has been trying to get authorization to negotiate an "incidents at sea" agreement with Iran, complained publicly that "this constant drumbeat of conflict is ... not helpful and not useful.

"It is not a good idea to be in a state of war. We ought to try and to do our utmost to create different conditions," he told al-Jazeera.

In fact, the first call for cross-border attacks on Iranian targets was made by the Senate's "independent" Democrat, Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), who is regarded as particularly close to the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

It was Lieberman and Republican Sen. John Kyl (R-AZ)—the honorary co-chairs of the pro-Likud Committee on the Present Danger (CPD)—who cosponsored the Senate amendment naming the IRGC as a terrorist group in an effort clearly designed to help tilt the internal balance within the administration.

As introduced, the amendment, which, according to several Capitol Hill sources, was drafted by AIPAC, actually went considerably further, deploying language that some

senators argued could be interpreted as authorizing war against Iran.

Among other provisions, it called for the United States to "combat, contain, and roll back the violent activities and destabilizing influence inside Iraq of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran ... and its indigenous Iraqi proxies" and "the prudent and calibrated use of all instruments of United States national power in Iraq, including ... military instruments, in support of [that] policy."

But those paragraphs were deleted after Democratic Sen. Jim Webb of Virginia delivered a passionate speech in which he charged that the amendment "is Dick Cheney's fondest pipe dream" and "could be read as tantamount to a declaration of war."

In a further softening, the drafters changed one policy statement that claimed it was a "vital [U.S.] national interest" to prevent Iran from turning Shiite militias in Iraq into its proxies to saying it was a "critical national interest." The previous wording generally connotes an interest over which the United States would be prepared to go to war.

Still, the fact that the amendment was approved by a significant margin—and with the support of key Democrats, including Clinton and Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada—is certain to be used by hawks within the administration as an indication of bipartisan support for a more aggressive policy toward Iran.

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