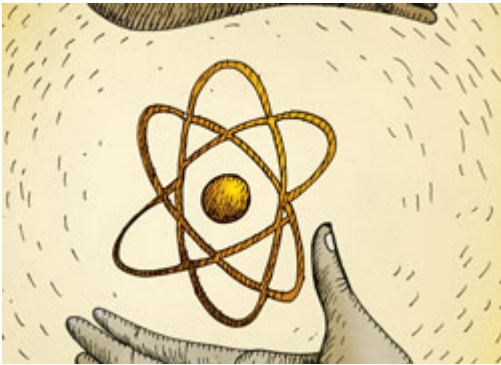


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Congress pushes for war with Iran

by Stephen Zunes



(Paul Lachine)

Viewpoint

In electing Barack Obama in 2008, the American people brought into the White House an outspoken opponent of the U.S. invasion of Iraq who not only withdrew combat forces from that country but promised to "change the mindset" -- the idea that the United States could unilaterally make war against oil-rich Middle Eastern countries -- that made the Iraq War possible.

In response, however, both Republicans and Democrats in Congress have been working to force this moderate president into going to war against Iran. And they have a lot of support.

Last December, in a 410-11 vote, the House of Representatives passed a bill (HR 1905) that would put into law a restriction whereby "No person employed with the U. S. government may contact in an official or unofficial capacity any person ... serving as a representative of the government of Iran."

Never in the history of this country has Congress ever restricted the right of the White House or State

Department to meet with representatives of a foreign state, even in wartime.

The legislation appears to have been designed to push the country toward a military conflict with Iran. History has shown that governments that refuse to even talk with each other are far more likely to go to war.

There is a clause allowing the White House to waive the requirement in cases where a "failure to exercise such waiver authority would pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the vital national security interests of the United States" and only if Congress was notified a full 15 days before any such meetings. The problem is that diplomatic encounters -- particularly with countries with which the United States has tense relations -- often need to be arranged in less than a 15-day period. The entire Cuban missile crisis lasted only 13 days, for example.

In the event of a crisis that threatens a military confrontation between the United States and Iran, the Obama administration would have to wait more than two weeks before having any contact with any Iranian officials, which by then could be too late.

This May, another resolution (HR 568) apparently designed to encourage a war against Iran passed the House by a 401-11 vote, urging the president to oppose any policy toward Iran "that would rely on containment as an option in response to the Iranian nuclear threat."

Combined with December's resolution, a huge bipartisan majority of Congress has essentially told the president that nothing short of war or the threat of war is an acceptable policy toward Iran.

According to Iranian-American analyst Jamal Abdi, a prominent critic of both the Iranian regime and U.S. policy, the motivation for the resolution may be to "poison those talks by signaling to Iran that the president is weak, domestically isolated, and unable to deliver at the negotiating table because a hawkish Congress will overrule him."

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Though Obama has made clear that Iranian procurement of nuclear weapons would be totally unacceptable, the language of this resolution significantly lowers the bar by declaring it unacceptable for Iran to even simply have "nuclear weapons capability," not necessarily any actual weapons or an active nuclear weapons program. Some members of Congress have argued that since Iranians have the expertise and technological capacity to develop nuclear weapons, they already have "nuclear weapons capability."

Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff for Secretary of State Colin Powell, noted, "This resolution reads like the same sheet of music that got us into the Iraq War, and could be the precursor for a war with Iran. It's effectively a thinly disguised effort to bless war."

Unlike December's resolution, it is not legally binding, but it does limit the president's options politically. As former Capitol Hill staffer M.J. Rosenberg noted, the bill was "designed to tie the president's hands on Iran policy." And, as with the case of the 2002 Iraq War Resolution, the language to such nonbinding resolutions can easily be incorporated into binding legislation, citing the precedence of what had been passed previously.

There is enormous significance to the resolution's insistence that containment, which has been the basis of U.S. defense policy for decades, should no longer be U.S. policy in dealing with potential threats.

While deterrence may have been widely accepted as an effective response to the thousands of powerful Soviet nuclear weapons mounted on intercontinental ballistic missile systems aimed at the United States, the view today is that deterrence is somehow an inadequate strategy to deal with a developing country without long-range delivery systems that may someday have the capability of developing small crude nuclear devices.

Indeed, this broad bipartisan consensus against deterrence marks the triumph of the neoconservative first-strike policy, once considered on the radical extreme when first articulated in the 1980s.

This dangerous embrace of neoconservative military policy is now so widely accepted by both parties in Congress that the vote on the resolution was taken under a procedure known as "suspension of the rules," which is designed for noncontroversial bills passed quickly with little debate. Indeed, given the serious implications of this legislation, it is striking that there was not a single congressional hearing prior to the vote.

Deterrence, when dealing with an actual nuclear arsenal, is a risky and immoral strategy. The international community indeed has an interest in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, as well as forcing India, Pakistan and Israel to disarm their already existing arsenal. All reasonable diplomatic means should be pursued to create and maintain a nuclear-free zone in that volatile region.

However, the idea that deterrence against Iran would not work because the country's clerical leadership -- who control the armed forces -- would decide to launch an unprovoked nuclear attack against Israel or the United States that would make possible the physical destruction of their entire country resulting from the inevitable massive nuclear retaliation is utterly ridiculous.

The far more realistic threat to worry about is the enormous devastation that would result from a U.S. war on Iran.

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