

Nuclear threat in Gulf as U.S. considers attacking Iran

By Rex B. Wingerter

WASHINGTON

The Reagan White House is reviewing plans that call for a full-scale assault against Iran's military and economic installations in the event of an Iranian attack on U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf, according to Defense and State Department observers. The plans reportedly call for the complete destruction of Iran's naval and air forces. American B-52 bombers may also be ordered against Iran's vital oil-pumping station at Kharg Island. U.S. foreign policy observers also point out that a U.S. attack against Iran has the potential of escalating into a conflict with the Soviet Union—a conflict that would involve the threat, if not the reality, of nuclear battle.

Old scores: At least part of the eagerness to attack Iran, said one knowledgeable source, comes from wanting to "settle old scores with Iran, such as the U.S. hostages, the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut and U.S. Embassy in Kuwait." Most of the agitation for an Iranian strike arises from mid-level Pentagon officials, but support also can be found among their State Department counterparts. "What you hear in some parts of the Defense and State Departments to describe what they would like to do to Iran," continued this source, "are words like 'Rolling Thunder' and 'Arc Light.'" These names were Pentagon codes for the air war against Southeast Asia during the '60s. "Arc Light" exclusively described B-52 bombing runs against Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The kind of Iranian action that would trigger a U.S. military response is unclear. An attack against U.S. ships or Kuwaiti oil ships that the White House wants to put under U.S. flags would almost certainly ensure U.S. military retaliation. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger hinted in early June that the U.S. would launch a pre-emptive attack on Iran's Silkworm missiles after they became operational along the Strait of Hormuz, a 30 to 50-mile-wide

orders, as when they recently attacked a Norwegian tanker on its way to pick up Iranian oil. "Would the White House order U.S. air strikes against Iran if some Revolutionary Guard speedboat strafed a U.S. ship?" asks Axelgard. "I don't know and I'm not convinced that they do, either," he concludes.

"The Reagan administration," says Yahya Sadowski, a specialist on the Mideast at the Brookings Institution, "has absolutely no sense of what its specific objectives are in the Gulf." He points to conflicting U.S. justifications for expanded military presence in the Gulf. "Protecting the sea lanes, fending off Soviet encroachment, deterring an Iranian attack against our Arab Gulf allies and re-establishing U.S. credibility following the Iran-contra affair," Sadowski points out, "have all been invoked. No one is quite exactly sure why we are getting so involved."

Sadowski also believes that this confusion, coupled with Congress' reluctance to get involved in the Gulf following the attack on the *USS Stark*, "provides an enormous temptation for Iran to launch one blistering-quick strike against the U.S." Decision-makers in Tehran probably know that such an attack would cost them dearly. But they may think it worth it if it disrupts U.S. support for Iraq and ends what some Iranian leaders think is a U.S.-Soviet effort to isolate Iran and end the war on terms favorable to Iraq. "After seeing how the U.S. quickly evacuated from Lebanon after the bombing of the Marine barracks," Sadowski notes, "Iran may gamble to take similar action in an attempt to force the 'Great Satan' out of the Gulf."

The Soviet factor: Further complicating and exacerbating the current crisis, however, is a deeper and larger U.S. agenda for the Gulf. The region not only holds important oil resources but "it has become a key strategic theater in U.S.-Soviet rivalry," according to Joe Stork, editor of *MERIP Middle East Reports*. "The enormous U.S. military buildup in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf," says Stork, "accomplished largely under the cover of the Iran-Iraq war, includes numbers and quality of aircraft, radar and nuclear blast-hardened command posts more advanced than those of NATO."

Scott Armstrong, a former *Washington Post* investigative reporter who now monitors the administration as the head of the National Security Archive, suspects that the U.S. has turned Saudi Arabia into a base from which to project U.S. power against the Soviet Union. Former U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig said in 1981 that the U.S. seeks to prevent in the Gulf "a change in the status quo." Any challenge to Gulf stability, such as domestic uprisings, regional conflicts or a Soviet invasion would be met "with a full range of power assets," Haig told a Senate subcommittee.

These "power assets" range from the intervention of U.S. conventional forces to the use of nuclear weapons. Spearheading any conventional conflict is the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF), established by the Carter administration and renamed and reorganized under the Reagan administration as the Central Command. Its operational responsibility was expanded to include a geographic area spanning from Pakistan to the Persian Gulf to Egypt. Its force was expanded by more than 50 percent under Reagan and now comprises 300,000 men drawn from the four branches of the U.S. armed services.

Most of these troops remain based in the U.S., but a significant number are stationed in the region. And in addition to Central Command forces, 5,000 troops are in Turkey and about 1,500 are in Egypt. An aircraft carrier "battle group" with 4,000 Navy personnel and 1,800 Marines is now permanently deployed in the Indian Ocean, as are at least five U.S. warships in the Persian Gulf.

In addition to these forces, the U.S. has overseen the development of an elaborate air defense network integrating Saudi Arabia and the lower Gulf states. At a time of crisis, this network will guide U.S. intervention forces into the Gulf. Defense specialist Anthony Cordesman estimated that from 1980 to 1985, the military armaments and supplies purchased by Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states reached at least \$50 billion. Stork calculates that by 1990, the Pentagon plans to have spent some \$14 billion on military bases and facilities in the region. "It is

the largest construction program of its kind since the end of the Vietnam War," Stork observed.

Saudi Arabia and Oman stockpile military equipment and supplies for U.S. forces and permit U.S. warships and aircraft to use their facilities. But Washington overtures for permanent, large-scale bases in the region have repeatedly been rebuffed. Some observers suspect that the White House may be currently exaggerating Iran's threat to the Gulf in order to scare Saudi Arabia into giving the U.S. its long-sought Saudi base.

Pentagon planners hope local insurgencies or regional threats can be extinguished by local, pro-Western Arab forces but are ready to intervene with U.S. power, including nuclear weapons. "Washington's Cold-War perspective," argues Stork, "which interprets that change anywhere in the world is the consequence of Soviet Union machinations has made the nuclear option integral to the Pentagon's defense of the Persian Gulf monarchies."

The RDF, for example, hinged on the use of the U.S. nuclear arsenal to oppose any Soviet moves in the Gulf. Because RDF forces would not be strong enough to stop a Soviet "thrust into northern Iran," a key 1980 Pentagon analysis urged that U.S. "consider using 'tactical' nuclear weapons in any conflict there." U.S. troops in the region act as a "trip-wire." If those troops would be confronted by Soviet forces Washington would escalate the conflict by using nuclear threats, explained Stork.

Nuclear reality: The reality of nuclear war planning for the Persian Gulf was made clear in April 1980. In response to what the military magazine *Armed Forces Journal* described as "clear but ambiguous" indications of a Soviet military buildup along the border of northern Iran, the Joint Chiefs of Staff debated the first use of tactical nuclear weapons. Defense Secretary Harold Brown was told by the Joint Chiefs that the U.S. had "no other" military option to prevent the Soviets from moving south, according to *Armed Forces*. But 1980 was not the first time the U.S. showed its willingness to go to nuclear war with the Soviet Union over the Persian Gulf. It has "been contemplated by American planners since 1949," and has continued into the '80s, writes Joshua Epstein in his book *Strategy and Force Planning: The Case of the Persian Gulf*.

Epstein points out that during the Nixon administration the joint chiefs proposed a scenario in which nearly 200 nuclear weapons would be fired into the southern region of the Soviet Union. The Carter administration considered planting nuclear mines in Soviet roadways leading to Iran, according to Epstein. And the Reagan administration, Epstein maintains, has reviewed plans to launch nuclear strikes against targets in the southern Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union, sensitive to Washington's readiness to pull the nuclear trigger, has acted with cautious restraint in the region. But two Soviet commercial ships in the Gulf have been recently attacked by Iranian forces, and if it happens again the Kremlin may feel obliged to retaliate. The U.S., however, may interpret such a strike as a precursor for a full-scale Soviet invasion of Iran and be tempted to flex its nuclear muscle.

Similarly, the Kremlin could interpret any major U.S. assault against Iran as a cover for launching a war against the Soviet Union. Because the U.S. Central Command has nuclear as well as conventional capabilities, any U.S. attack on Iran would greatly exacerbate Soviet security fears. Moreover, the U.S. could do little to allay Soviet suspicions about U.S. intentions because, as Epstein points out, "few of America's forces are not capable of delivering nuclear weaponry of some sort."

Cooler heads: But calls within the Defense and State departments for a massive military strike against Iran have not gained complete support within the Reagan administration, particularly among those policy-makers sensitive to U.S.-Arab political relations. Frank Carlucci, national security adviser, and Robert Oakley, the NSC's Near East and South Asian affairs director, oppose such plans. Joining them is Richard Murphy, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs. Cold-War hawks such as Henry Kissinger and Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA) also oppose direct U.S. military involvement in the Gulf. But while cooler heads may prevail this time, the shadow of nuclear war still hangs over the Persian Gulf. □

Rex B. Wingerter is a Washington-based attorney and frequent contributor to *In These Times*.

INSIDE STORY

"choke point" at the mouth of the Persian Gulf.

"But what would happen," asks Fred Axelgard, a fellow at Georgetown's Center for Strategic and International Studies, "if Iran engaged us in low-level action?" Iran recently acquired about 40 small speedboats armed with hand-held, rocket-propelled grenades as well as machine guns. Crewed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, these speedboats have already attacked oil tankers, killing crewmen and starting fires. Some Mideast observers suspect that zealous Revolutionary Guards sometimes overstep their

CONTENTS

Inside Story: The U.S. and "old scores" with Iran	2
Nuclear freeze movement closes ranks	3
In Short	4-5
Can the U.S. save the Teamsters from the mob?	6
Gays and the government—the AIDS battle	7
Basketball in black and white	9
Little resolved in Italian vote	10
German peace movement's new option	11
Did Reagan steal the 1980 election?	12-13
Editorial	14
Letters/Sylvia	15
Ashes & Diamonds by Alexander Cockburn	16
Viewpoint: A regional perspective of apartheid	17
In Print: <i>Misunderstanding Media</i>	18
<i>Hold On, Mr. President</i>	18
<i>Inventing Reality</i>	19
Media Beat	20
In the Arts: Devil-may-care cinema	20
Documenting distribution dilemmas	21
Classifieds/Life in Hell	23
Big Science—a matter of money	24

By John B. Judis

WASHINGTON

The freeze movement closes ranks

ON NOVEMBER 20 IN CLEVELAND, THE country's two largest peace organizations, SANE and the Nuclear Freeze Campaign, plan to merge under a single leadership. Peace activists are publicly heralding the merger as a new dawn for the movement, which has been semi-dormant for the past three years. "It could lay the groundwork for a renaissance," says Richard Healey, the executive director of *Nuclear Times*.

But privately some movement leaders express grave reservations about the merger. One Washington activist says, "They have invested an awful lot of time and energy in a process that could produce a whole that is less than the sum of its parts."

Both groups' leaders rest their merger hopes on the fact that the organizations have complementary strengths and weaknesses. The Freeze has always had a strong local presence, but a weak and impoverished national organization. Its initial headquarters in St. Louis was described as a "clearing-house," and at one point the organization had three different and equally ineffectual headquarters in St. Louis, Deerfield, Mass., and Washington, D.C. Until last fall, it did not even have a national membership list.

Many in the Freeze believe they need stronger national organization and leadership, and hope to get it from SANE. SANE was founded in 1957 to lead the battle against atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. In 1977, when David Cortright, a former draft resister, became its director, the organization had only one half-time staff person, 4,000 members and \$40,000 in debts. In 10 years, through the organization's leadership in the MX fight and neighborhood canvassing, Cortright has built SANE into a financially self-sustaining group with 150,000 dues-paying members and 40 staff members.

But SANE's members are organized through mailing lists rather than chapters; they contribute money, but not necessarily time. If the Freeze can use SANE's funding base and national staff, SANE can use what still remains of the Freeze's state and local organizations.

But skeptics believe that both organizations have the kind of disabilities that a merger is unlikely to overcome, and are especially worried about SANE's role in the new organization.

Freeze without the freeze: The Freeze Campaign's problems over the past three years don't stem primarily from its lack of a national leadership. The group has not lacked a leader but an issue like the original freeze idea—now defanged by the administration—that evokes broad popular support. The freeze disarmed opponents by its very simplicity, setting the terms of debate and establishing its proponents as advocates of peace and its opponents as advocates of war. But by calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, Reagan has been able in the past three years to refocus the national debate on Star Wars.

The Freeze Campaign has never recovered from the debilitation of its key issue. Some chapters have branched out into broader foreign-policy concerns, attacking administration policy on Central America or South Africa, while others have focused on the need for a comprehensive test ban—an issue with

great merit but little apparent resonance with the general public.

In 1982 the Freeze was omnipresent. Now it is simply another political group with a list of issues and a shifting membership. It has strong chapters in New England and the Midwest, but is virtually invisible in places where it used to be very strong. "The Freeze died [when the steam went out of] the freeze proposal," says Barbara Epstein, a historian and leading nuclear arms foe in the Bay Area.

But the freeze still has some punch. Its most important outgrowth is Freeze Voter, a separate organization that mobilizes on behalf of congenial candidates. It played a significant role in electing pro-arms control senators in 1984 and in 1986. Yet its success lay partly in its arm's-length relationship with the Freeze itself. Based in Washington, Freeze Voter developed into a highly centralized and professional operation that was able to deploy the Freeze's network of supporters on behalf of candidates like Illinois' Paul Simon or Colorado's Tim Wirth.

A money-making machine: SANE, on the other hand, is financially healthy, but some arms-control proponents question whether it can provide effective leadership to a new national organization. Since 1984 SANE has been seized by internal upheavals triggered by personnel and political disputes. The upshot is that SANE, which just four years ago was the most respected and feared arms control lobby on Capitol Hill, is now seen as irrelevant. "I hate to say it, but they have no impact," says Robert DeGrasse, an aide to Rep. John Spratt, a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

What occurred in SANE in recent years remains so shrouded in controversy that it is difficult to disentangle facts from opinions. In 1985 a bitter dispute erupted between Cortright and staff members over his promotion of an Hispanic woman with whom he had been linked romantically. Over the next year and a half the organization's principal lobbyists and research director quit. Cortright claims that the real issue was not favoritism but affirmative action: "No one says, 'I am against affirmative action,' so they will justify their feelings on other bases."

At the same time as SANE was losing the people who had run its MX lobby, it was turning away from Capitol Hill. In 1984 Marcus Raskin, co-founder of the Institute for Policy Studies and a prominent '60s anti-war leader, became co-chairman of SANE's board. Raskin says he has pressed SANE to "move beyond an incrementalist view specifically tied to arms control toward a comprehensive disarmament program." Raskin also favored what he calls "mass organizing" over SANE's previous lobbying approach. He draws a contrast between "Washington politics as defined by playing the game within the 40-yard line on both sides against a more grassroots view."

At the height of the MX fight, SANE had two full-time and one half-time lobbyists working on Capitol Hill and a "grassroots lobby network" in congressional districts that could be mobilized to pressure House and Senate members. Now it has a single lobbyist whom it shares with the Freeze and, according to a knowledgeable source, its

grassroots network is "underused and falling apart."

Raskin and Cortright defend the organization's new approach by pointing to its stand on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). In 1985 SANE and its chief SDI lobbyist were working with other arms control lobbyists to cut funding for the program, but SANE's board of directors voted that September not to back funding for the program. A compromise proposal to advocate no funding but to work for reductions was turned down. The board's new position, Raskin says, made the organization "able to lay out a clear position to Congress. Otherwise it is a fog."

But the new position also made it impossible for SANE to play any role in the debate on Capitol Hill. SANE found itself unable to back even Rep. Ron Dellums' proposal to reduce funding to \$1.1 billion for research. "Basically, SANE took itself out of the battle," one House staff member says.

SANE abandoned its focus on lobbying without adopting a new strategy that made sense to some of its key staff. It took strong stands on other foreign policy issues like contra aid without developing an effective program against it. "I didn't have any sense

The country's two largest peace organizations, SANE and the Freeze Campaign, plan to merge next November under a single leadership.

of what we were doing on any level," says Ed Glennon, who resigned as SANE's research director in January 1986. Some people in the Washington arms-control community believe that SANE's principal activity has become raising money for itself. "They've become a money-making machine," says one respected arms control activist.

A new president: According to SANE's Cortright, the idea for a merger came in Geneva in 1985 when he and SANE board member Cora Weiss, director of the River-

side Church Disarmament Project were riding in a taxi with Jane Grunenbaum, who was then the Freeze director. After the leaders returned home, they began formal talks.

The two organizations have been able to agree on a credo and a complicated structure of chapters and state organizations. Earlier this month they staged a joint action in Washington—a "test-ban caravan" to rally support for banning nuclear tests. But they have had difficulty agreeing on national leadership. Freeze leaders have advocated a strong president for the new organization with authority over the two co-directors, the Freeze's Carolyn Cottom and SANE's Cortright.

Originally, the two groups had planned to name the new president by April, but the decision has been postponed until July. Freeze leaders have pressed the organization to hire former Rep. Bob Edgar. According to knowledgeable sources, SANE has balked at Edgar and is backing Rev. William Sioane Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church in New York and a close associate of Weiss.

One Freeze leader explained the difference this way: "Coffin is operating on a plane of rhetoric. Edgar has been operating more on a plane of how do we deliver results. As a human being, he is always well dressed. Coffin is rumpled. Edgar can talk to a Methodist church or a Republican men's club and get people to listen. Here is a guy who has been elected as a Democrat from a decidedly Republican district. Edgar speaks to the unconverted. Coffin fires up the faithful."

In talking to Freeze and SANE leaders, one also senses a continuing difference in the kind of organization they want. When Raskin describes the political scope of the new organization and its emphasis on "mass organizing," he seems almost to be describing a new '60s-style, left-wing party. When Freeze leaders talk, they are describing a highly diverse and non-partisan organization whose overwhelming focus will remain nuclear arms.

William "Chip" Reynolds, Freeze Voter's director, says, "I happen to believe that there is a very diverse constituency of people who are interested in stopping the nuclear arms race. It does not consist solely of people on the left. We've got to find a way to branch out to that largest and broadest constituency on this one political issue." □

