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The next war

Washington's hawks seem to be doing all they can to provoke Iran into a conflict



Marching into another war? Members of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, an Iranian opposition group, marched in Washington D.C. on June 21, advocating for regime change in Tehran. National Security Advisor John Bolton and President Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, have voiced support for the controversial group.

BY ANDREAS ZUMACH

During the critical final phase of the negotiations over the nuclear deal with Iran in March 2015, John Bolton published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* titled "To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran."

When President Donald Trump named Bolton his new national security advisor in March 2018, the next day's *The New York Times* editorial column included the following passage:

"The good thing about John Bolton ... is that he says what he thinks. The bad thing is what he thinks. There are few people more likely than Mr. Bolton is to lead the country into war."

Is this bleak fear now becoming a reality?

At the very least, the danger of war between the US and Iran – with the potential participation of Saudi Arabia and Israel – is greater than at any time since 1979, when the Islamic revolution deposed the pro-American shah and the revolutionary students occupied the US embassy in Tehran for over a year. The attacks on six oil tankers in the Persian Gulf since mid-April – the exact circumstances and perpetrators of which are still unclear – as well as the mid-June

downing of a US drone flying extremely near or, in fact, in Iranian air space provide a preview of how such a war might begin.

Since the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May last year, it has been waging an economic war with increasingly harsh sanctions against Tehran as well as illegal secondary sanctions to force foreign companies and third-country nationals to abandon trading with Iran. The effects on the Iranian population have been devastating.

Iran's comparatively moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, is facing ever-increasing pressure from two sides. While the younger generations welcome reform and hope that the nuclear deal will improve the country's economic situation, as well as their own outlook on life, the hardliners in Tehran have always been against the deal and now feel vindicated by the Trump administration's bad-faith withdrawal.

It is quite possible that Tehran could soon undergo regime change. However, the shift would not be towards a more democratic government with a greater appreciation of human rights, as Bolton and other anti-Iran ideologues in Washington are said to be angling for. –The result of

either the demise of Rouhani or, at the latest, the next presidential election in 2021 would rather be a victory for the hardliners in Tehran.

All signs point to further, seemingly unavoidable escalation, as the three European parties to the nuclear deal – France, the UK and Germany – have, besides offering up empty rhetoric, done nothing effective to enable Iran to continue selling oil or to maintain access to the international financial system. Fear of US sanctions has prevented the Europeans from even ensuring that Iran can purchase medicine and other humanitarian goods that are critical to survival.

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Meanwhile, China, Russia and India have demonstrated how US sanctions can be circumvented. But this alone cannot suffice to keep the Iranian side in full compliance with the treaty. Iran's announcement that at the beginning of July it would resume enriching uranium beyond the level of purity required for energy production and beyond the 3.67-percent cap permitted by the treaty could be followed by further breaches of the agreement as a way of exerting pressure on the Europeans.

Berlin, London and Paris have made it expressly clear that such violations would make Tehran, not Washington, responsible for the collapse of the agreement. But would they join an alliance to carry out military strikes, an eventuality that President Trump has said is still "on the table"?

The memory of the war of aggression carried out by the US and the UK in violation of international law is painfully fresh. The Iraq war and its catastrophic humanitarian consequences have cost more than one million Iraqi lives. The war and the subsequent eight-year occupation of Iraq by the US created a fertile ground for the proliferation of the terrorist organization known as Islamic State (IS). A war with Iran would most likely have even more dev-

astating effects – for Iranians, for their neighbors across the entire Middle East and for the rest of the world.

How Russia and China would react in the case of a military escalation of the conflict between the US and Iran is hard to predict. The only certainty is that the two UN Security Council veto powers will reject any US resolution to request international legitimation for military action against Iran.

Russia and China have considerable interests in Iran. For Russia, Iran is an important sales market for industrial goods in the fields of energy production, civil aviation and railway transportation, for arms and for nuclear technology; Russia built the Bush-ehr nuclear power plant in southwest Iran. The two countries also have identical interests in keeping the world oil market open. Their cooperation in military and nuclear matters is proving to have strategic significance.

While military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in the Syrian conflict has been limited, their interventions using aircraft and ground troops have ensured, at least for the time being, the political survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Russia has been the first country to be granted the right to use an Iranian air base – Noje, in

the western province of Hamadan – for strikes against IS in Syria.

A planned tripartite meeting between top Russian, US and Israeli security experts in Jerusalem at the end of June has nourished speculation that a potential deal might be in the works. It is said that Iran will terminate its military presence in Syria in return for the US and Israel recognizing the Assad regime. It looks to be a very tall order.

In recent years, Russia has provided Iran with a S-300 surface-to-air missile system. This will give Tehran additional defensive weapons as well as reconnaissance capabilities in the event of possible air strikes or missile attacks by the US. The delivery of offensive weaponry that Iran could use to attack US ships or military bases in the Gulf region appears for now to be off the table, as would be direct military intervention by Russia in a possible war between Iran and the US.

The same goes for China. Beijing is above all interested in reliable deliveries of oil and natural gas. Iran is also poised to become an important transit country for China's One Belt, One Road initiative. ■

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Saving the bond

that the spirit of Alexander Hamilton is enjoying a resurgence in the United States. Hamilton, one of the US founding fathers, co-author of the constitution and the first secretary of the treasury, was a mercantilist and, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, an opponent of "entangling alliances." According to Corn, America's elites feel that maintaining the liberal world order has reached the threshold of diminishing utility. "Americans are exhausted by the global leadership role," concurs *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. He quotes two studies; according to the first, 20 percent of those surveyed were traditional internationalists, while the second found only 9.5 percent. In Brooks' view, Donald Trump is the exponent of a fundamentally changed mood, attitude and foreign policy stance: No more constraints by rules and allies.

This analysis chimes with the view Sigmar Gabriel, German foreign minister from 2017–2018, articulated in his recent book *Zeitenwende in der Welt-politik*. "Regarding US policy," he argues, "we have been relying on something we thought would eternally endure. But the pendulum won't simply swing back.... We have to make Europe a global actor. This also calls for an enhanced capability to act militarily. In a world full of fiends and carnivores, a political vegetarian won't be taken seriously."

He has a point there, a sore point. As Alina Polyakova and Benjamin Haddad have underscored in *Foreign Affairs*, the current crisis in the trans-Atlantic relationship isn't merely the result of a White House hostile to Europe; it is first and foremost the consequence of the power asymmetry between the United

States and Europe. The EU is an economic titan, yet it lacks *Weltmachtfähigkeit* – the capacity to act decisively in the global arena. The rise of China is one reason why America is primarily looking to the Pacific, no longer to the Atlantic. Leadership fatigue is another. But it is Europe's weakness, indecision and internal discord that makes decoupling an option free of cost.

The realization that Europe is no longer America's priority, that the US defense umbrella has become leaky and Washington's trade policy vexatiously selfish has shocked the Europeans into a bout of self-inspection. With friends like these, who needs enemies, European Council President Donald Tusk said last fall. Trump "has made us realize that if you need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of

your arm." Meaning, Europe is more or less on its own – a feeling German Chancellor Angela Merkel had likewise given vent to in a Bavarian beer tent.

The question is what Europe, wracked by Brexit, Franco-German incompatibilities, East European orneriness and populist afflictions everywhere, can do to manage the transition from a playground of other powers to a self-confident and self-reliant global actor. It will have to deepen its financial and social union, lest increasing inequality amongst member countries lead to further, perhaps fatal disruption. Carving out a greater role for the euro must secure Europe's financial sovereignty. Moreover, the Brussels community must enhance the dynamism and the innovatory power of its economies, if it does not want to be crushed between the US

and China. Rising and multiplying security challenges necessitate building up the EU's military muscle by making planning and procurement more European, more connected and more capable. And in foreign policy, the EU must learn to speak with one voice if it wants to have any impact at all on international relations.

None of this will be easy; all of it will take time. But first steps have been taken. More is bound to follow, once the EU's new leadership has settled in.

Norbert Röttgen (CDU), the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Bundestag, shares this assessment. "The repercussions of Trump's tenure will outlast his term of office, and the United States will be a different country for it," he writes. "To save the trans-Atlantic alliance, both sides must make a

significant effort. The United States needs to understand that to blame and threaten allies while withdrawing from multilateral agreements provides no basis for cooperation and trust. Europe, for its part, needs to develop a common foreign and security policy, and that will, at the very least, require real investments in its defense capabilities. If both sides do their part, the relationship could emerge from the current crisis more balanced and therefore stronger."

It will be the task of American and European statecraft in the next few years to build a new relationship in a rapidly changing world order. We must all hope our leaders, our political elites and our voters are up to the task. ■

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