

Iran's challenge to the Bush Doctrine

By Roger Howard

Regime change is more likely to spread a threat than destroy it.

RECENT press reports have left little doubt where George W Bush, if re-elected in November, will be tempted to train his sights. A senior White House aide said last week that the US president, fresh from toppling the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, may well decide to orchestrate regime change inside Iran.

Although such a policy purports to bring democracy to Iran and end its alleged links to Al Qaeda, there can be no doubt that it would primarily be a response to Iran's nuclear challenge. Topple the mullahs' regime, neo-conservatives have long argued, and we can replace it with a new order that, being sensitive to Western security concerns, would renounce any ambition to develop a warhead.

Unfortunately, such an argument is based on very questionable logic. Iran's nuclear aspirations long predate the advent of Islamic revolution in 1979, and any new government replacing the current order would doubtless pursue a warhead just as energetically as the mullahs. The vast majority of ordinary Iranians would also continue to strongly support such a programme, seeing the bomb as both a matter of national prestige and self-defence.

But besides being unconvincing, the argument that regime change is a fitting response to the threat of nuclear proliferation is also blatantly self-contradictory.

This is most obviously because

any threat to topple a regime clearly presents exactly the sort of threat a bomb is supposed to guard against. It is therefore likely to either accelerate any existing nuclear programme or provide a good reason for starting one. This happened after the 1991 Gulf War, when the Iranians responded to the sudden mass arrival of US troops in the region by dramatically stepping up their plans to develop new missile capabilities.

At the moment, it's still far from certain that the Iranians

position to do so. The scenes of anarchy in Baghdad that followed in the days after the disappearance of Saddam Hussein in April 2003 illustrate a much larger danger — a regime's arsenal at risk of being spirited away as its authority begins to break down. Moreover, regime change in Iraq, like the former Soviet Union, also created a financial crisis that makes formerly state-employed scientists vulnerable to the approaches of countries that are eager to pay for their knowledge and experience.

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really want to develop a warhead at all — rather than just having the capability to put one together later — or just how far off they are from doing so. But there can be no doubt that any threats to topple the regime will give its leaders the strongest possible incentive to create a working nuclear deterrent as soon as possible and perhaps even pass nuclear technology into the hands of third parties who could work against American interests on their behalf.

Moreover, any regime change within Iran risks creating a power vacuum in which all governmental assets are potentially at risk of being seized by anyone in a

Since the fall of Saddam, the US State Department has been forced to draw up plans for a \$16 million programme that aims to prevent scientists selling their skills and experience to other governments.

In the longer term, another danger can sometimes arise from political fragmentation, although this is unlikely in the particular case of Iran. In such a scenario the outside world would have to deal with several authorities that possess nuclear warheads, thereby making the task of drawing up, enforcing and monitoring international agreements proportionately more difficult. A comparison can

clearly be drawn here with the disintegration of the Soviet Union into several republics, each of which possessed its own advanced nuclear facilities and most of which have since enforced international agreements on arms exports with only sporadic efficiency.

In this respect there is arguably a built-in contradiction in the Bush doctrine. Except in the most extreme circumstances, regime change is at least as likely to augment the danger to the United States as to eliminate it because of the risks of creating a power vacuum in the immediate term and political fragmentation in the longer term. Regime change is more likely to spread a threat than destroy it.

For those who recognise that a measure as radical as "regime change" should only be an absolute last resort, there are other ways of meeting the Iranian nuclear challenge. The United States can withdraw much of its military presence in the region, thereby removing some of the incentive to develop such a warhead. The US can also put much more pressure on Tel Aviv to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and reduce the size of its arsenal, which undoubtedly causes serious concern in Iran and the wider Muslim world. Intelligence surveillance of both Iran and its Middle Eastern protégés can be made more of a priority, and Tehran can be told in no uncertain terms that any bid to pass nuclear materials to them would be considered an act of war.

Such measures are surely a much more realistic way forward than any bid to carry out regime change. COURTESY ANTI-WAR