

White House seeks to quell talk of military strike on Iran

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The White House on Sunday sought to dampen the idea of a U.S. military strike on Iran, saying the United States is conducting "normal defense and intelligence planning" as President Bush seeks a diplomatic solution to Tehran's suspected nuclear weapons program.

Administration officials — from President Bush on down — have left open the possibility of a military response if Iran does not end its nuclear ambitions. Several reports published Sunday said the administration was studying options for military strikes; one account raised the possibility of using nuclear bombs against Iran's underground nuclear sites.

Britain's foreign secretary called the idea of a nuclear strike "completely nuts." Dan Bartlett, counselor to Bush, cautioned against reading too much into administration planning.

"The president's priority is to find a diplomatic solution to a problem the entire world recognizes," Bartlett told The Associated Press on Sunday. "And those who are drawing broad, definitive conclusions based on normal defense and intelligence planning, are ill-informed and are not knowledgeable of the administration's thinking on

Iran."

Experts say a military strike on Iran would be risky and complicated. U.S. forces already are preoccupied with Iraq and Afghanistan, and an attack against Iran could inflame U.S. problems in the Muslim world.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, in an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp., said Britain would not launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran and he was as "certain as he could be" that neither would the U.S. He said he has a high suspicion that Iran is developing a civil nuclear capability which in turn could be used for nuclear weapons, but there is "no smoking gun" to prove it and justify military action.

"I understand people's frustration with the diplomatic process," Straw said. "It takes a long time and is quite a subtle process. The reason why we're opposed to military action is because it's an infinitely worse option and there's no justification for it."

The U.N. Security Council has demanded Iran suspend its uranium enrichment program. But Iran has so far refused to halt its nuclear activity, saying the small-scale enrichment project was strictly for research and not for development of nuclear weapons.

Bush has said Iran may pose the greatest challenge



Sajjad Safari / The Associated Press

Iran's armed forces helicopters take part in a parade at the conclusion of the naval maneuvers, in the Gulf and Sea of Oman, Thursday, April 6, 2006. The Revolutionary Guards, the elite branch of Iran's military, have been holding their maneuvers — code-named the "Great Prophet" — since Friday, touting what they call domestically built technological advances in their armed forces.

to the United States of any other country in the world. And while he has stressed that diplomacy is always preferable, he has defended his administration's strike-first policy against terrorists and other enemies.

"The threat from Iran is, of course, their stated objective to destroy our strong ally Israel," the president said last month in Cleveland. "That's a threat, a serious threat. It's a threat to world peace; it's a threat, in essence, to a strong alliance. I made it clear, I'll

make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally."

Vice President Dick Cheney told the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC last month, "The United States is keeping all options on the table in addressing the irresponsible conduct of the regime. And we join other nations in sending that regime a clear message: We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stressed in an April 1 interview with

British television channel ITV that the United States is committed to diplomacy to solve the issue. "However," she added, "the president of the United States doesn't take his options off the table."

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Mark Ballesteros said Sunday that the president and State Department are working with other nations "to address diplomatically the troublesome activities of the Iranian government. And the U.S. military never comments on contingency

planning."

Stephen Cimbala, a Pennsylvania State University professor who studies U.S. foreign policy, said it would be no surprise that the Pentagon has contingency plans for strike on Iran. But he the administration's hint of military strikes is more of a show to Iran and the public than a feasible option.

"If you look at the military options, all of them are unattractive," Cimbala said. "Either because they weren't work or because they have side effects where the cure is worse than the disease."

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., criticized the administration for using "shoot from the hip, cowboy diplomacy" during an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press." He said the president should be doing more to get sanctions against Iran. He said even though the military option must be left open, "it's a terrible option fundamentally, and they know it and everybody else knows it."

The New Yorker magazine said the administration had increased clandestine activities inside Iran and intensified planning for a possible major air attack and that one option envisioned the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon to insure the destruction of Iran's main centrifuge plant, at Natanz.

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