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Cheney Says U.S. Is Sending 'Strong Signal' to Iran

Michael Abramowitz

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Vice President Cheney said the deployment this month of a second aircraft-carrier task force to the Persian Gulf delivered a "strong signal" of the United States' commitment to confront **Iran's** growing influence in the region.

Countries in the Middle East "want us to have a major presence there," Cheney said in a Newsweek interview published online yesterday. Referring to the deployment of the carrier USS John C. **Stennis**, Cheney said, "That sends a very strong signal to everybody in the region that the United States is here to stay, that we clearly have significant capabilities, and that we are working with friends and allies as well as the international organizations to deal with the Iranian threat."

When the **Stennis** arrives in the Persian Gulf next month, the United States will have two carrier groups stationed there for the first time since the 2003 Iraq invasion.

The deployment is one of several recent steps by the United States to oppose **Iran**, which administration officials say is responsible for growing instability in the region. Other actions included a program to kill or capture Iranian agents operating inside Iraq as well as moves to squeeze the country financially.

In the interview, Cheney declined to speculate about possible military strikes against **Iran**. "We are doing what we can to try to resolve issues such as the nuclear question diplomatically through the United Nations, but we've also made it clear that we haven't taken any options off the table," he said.

The Newsweek interview was the third granted to the media this month by the vice president, who had been relatively quiet since Republicans lost both houses of Congress in November's midterm elections. Despite increasing GOP criticism of the White House on Iraq, Cheney said he thinks President Bush has shored up his position with his Republican base in the past week, and he evinced little concern about the prospect of resolutions formally condemning the president's plan to send another 21,500 troops to Iraq.

"Most members on our side of the aisle recognize that what's ultimately going to count here isn't sort of all the hoorah that surrounds these proposals so much as it's what happens on the ground in Iraq. And we're not going to know that for a while yet," said Cheney, who also offered a veiled shot at one of the president's strongest GOP critics, Sen. Chuck Hagel (Neb.).

"Let's say I believe firmly in Ronald Reagan's 11th Commandment: Thou shalt not speak ill of a fellow Republican," Cheney said. "But it's very hard sometimes to adhere to that where Chuck Hagel is involved."

In an appearance yesterday on ABC's "This Week," Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-Del.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, dismissed suggestions from administration officials that his resolution condemning the military buildup would embolden the enemy.

"It's not the American people and the United States Congress who are emboldening the enemy," he said. "It's the failed policy of this president, going to war without a strategy, going to war prematurely, going to war without enough troops, going to war without enough equipment and, lastly, now sending 17,500 people in the middle of a city of 61/2 million people with bull's-eyes on their back, with no plan."

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