

Bush administration targets Iran for US aggression

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The Bush administration last week clearly marked out Iran as a prime target for US aggression. While stopping short of formally declaring “regime change” in Teheran to be official policy, Washington ratcheted up the pressure over Iran’s nuclear program, repeating its unsubstantiated claims that the country was secretly building nuclear weapons.

Last Wednesday President Bush pointedly declared that “the international community” had to make “very clear to Iran that we will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon in Iran.” In Vienna, US officials were arguing that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) should condemn Iran for breaches of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and demand an intrusive new weapons inspection regime. But Washington has provided no evidence that Iran either has or is seeking to build nuclear weapons.

The IAEA statement issued the following day stopped short of completely accepting the US position, which also had the support of Britain, Canada and Australia. However, with the backing of the European powers, it did call on Tehran to answer questions about its nuclear program and to sign an additional protocol to allow the IAEA to conduct more extensive inspections. The IAEA is due to prepare a further report by September.

While termed a compromise in the international media, the IAEA statement handed the Bush administration most of what it was after. Bush’s spokesman Ari Fleischer welcomed it as an “international reinforcement of the president’s message”. At the G8 summit earlier in the month, Germany, France and Russia had already indicated their willingness to accede to US demands on Iran and North Korea, making some form of IAEA action a foregone conclusion.

The IAEA meeting followed a visit by the agency chief Mohammad ElBaradei to Iran in February. His report in early June was critical of Tehran for failing to disclose

nuclear-related facilities, including a pilot uranium enrichment project at Natanz, and the purchase of 1.8 tonnes of natural uranium. The US pounced on the report as “proof” of Iran’s malevolent intentions. Kenneth Brill, the US ambassador to the IAEA, last week declared the findings to be “deeply troubling” and argued that they provided the latest evidence of “a long-term pattern of safeguards violations and evasions” by Iran.

However, the building of nuclear facilities such as the Natanz plant does not constitute a breach of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Treaty simply obliges Iran to inform the IAEA when it activates them. Moreover, the purchase of natural uranium from China, a relatively small amount, took place over a decade ago—in 1991. Iranian leaders have repeatedly denied any intention of constructing nuclear weapons, insisting that all of their nuclear facilities are intended for power production.

The head of Iran’s atomic energy program Gholamreza Aghazadeh has declared the country’s willingness to cooperate with the IAEA. The agency has already placed monitoring equipment at the Natanz site, which Iran states is designed to produce fuel for its nuclear power plant being built at Bushehr with assistance from Russia. Tehran has, however, objected to an IAEA demand to take environmental samples from the Kalaye Electric Company, insisting that it is a non-nuclear site and that to accede will open it up to a rash of similar demands.

Like Iraq, Iran is being asked to prove the impossible—that it does not have the capacity anywhere in the country to produce a nuclear weapon. US ambassador Brill made Washington’s attitude abundantly clear when he preempted the findings of any future IAEA inspections, declaring: “The US expects the agency’s accumulation of further information will point to only one conclusion: that Iran is aggressively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.” Given Washington’s track record of lying about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, no

confidence can be placed in its assertions about Iran's nuclear capacity.

Iran has every reason to be secretive. The basic stance of successive US administrations—at least since the overthrow of America's ally the Shah in 1979—has been that any Iranian nuclear program, whether for energy production or not, is illegitimate. Washington has made every effort to thwart the completion of the Bushehr nuclear power plant which was commenced by the German company Siemens and then severely damaged during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Under US pressure, Siemens refused to repair and complete the construction, as did other European firms.

In the mid-1990s, Iran turned to Russia for assistance and signed a series of contracts to complete the Bushehr power station. Russian President Vladimir Putin has so far resisted pressure from the Bush administration to halt work on the \$800 million plant. At the same time, however, Russia is pushing Iran to sign the additional IAEA protocol and to agree to additional monitoring on top of existing guarantees, including that spent fuel rods will be sent to Russia for reprocessing.

It is evident that the most stringent guarantees by Tehran will not halt Washington's demands because, as in the case of Iraq, Iran's alleged weapons of mass destruction are simply a pretext for broader US ambitions. While US Secretary of State Colin Powell has been at pains to declare America's peaceful intentions towards Iran, other US officials have been blunter about the "military option".

US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton told BBC radio on Friday: "The president has repeatedly said that all options are on the table, but [military action] is not only not our preference, it is far, far from our minds." When pressed, however, Bolton admitted: "It has to be an option." The very fact that Bush branded Iran, along with North Korea and Iraq, part of an "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address indicates that Tehran is a prime target for preemptive military action.

The most right-wing sections of the Bush administration are pressing for "regime change" to become official US policy. The influential neo-conservatives or neo-cons associated with the American Heritage Institute have drawn up a strategy premised on an anti-government uprising, which, in the name of "democracy," would overthrow the existing government and establish a pro-US regime in Tehran.

Republican Senator Sam Brownback has introduced the

Iran Democracy Act into US Congress—the equivalent of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, which made "regime change" in Baghdad government policy. Under the Act, \$50 million would be allocated to pro-US opposition groups to funnel propaganda into Iran via radio and TV. Brownback insists, publicly at least, that "we are not for a military attack on Iran." But he has also raised the possibility that forms of "covert action" will be funded under the act and, like Bolton, insists that a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities should remain an option.

Brownback recently told the London-based *Financial Times* that he had "support at a high level from the Pentagon". "There was a substantial group in the government that was pushing to engage with the reformists [connected to President Khatami] in Iran. Now they are coming to the view that we should confront aggressively the regime in Iran," he said.

While Washington has not formally endorsed the Brownback legislation, Bush indicated some support when he cynically backed "those courageous souls who speak out for freedom"—referring to the anti-government student protests in Iran.

As with Iraq, the real reasons for the mounting US pressure on Iran lie in Washington's aims to dominate the Middle East and its vast reserves of oil. Not only is Iran a major producer of oil in its own right, but it lies directly adjacent to the oil and gas-rich areas of Central Asia. The shortest and cheapest routes for pipelines to exploit the resources of the Central Asian republics lie across Iran to the Persian Gulf.

Confronted by the threat of US aggression, Iran has every right to arm itself by every means available, including nuclear weaponry. It is surrounded on all sides by US military forces—American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US navy in the Persian Gulf and US military bases in several Central Asian republics. Moreover, the Iranian government can only conclude from the US invasion of Iraq that its efforts to comply with the IAEA demands will only lead to the same result. If diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions and covert action fails to result in a pro-US regime in Tehran then Washington will not hesitate to use the full force of its military to achieve its objectives.



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