

US-sponsored IAEA resolution sets stage for confrontation with Iran

Peter Symonds

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Bowing to strong pressure from the Bush administration, the 35-member governing board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Friday issued a provocative ultimatum to Iran setting a deadline of October 31 to comply with all demands related to its nuclear program. The resolution opens the way for the involvement of the UN Security Council and economic sanctions if Teheran fails to comply, leading to a rapidly escalating confrontation with Iran.

Like the former regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Iran is being presented with an open-ended resolution demanding that it prove the unproveable: that none of its nuclear programs are being used for the production of material for nuclear weapons. Since the beginning of the year, every step taken by Iran to demonstrate that its nuclear facilities are intended for power generation is followed by new accusations and demands for even more intrusive inspections.

The latest allegation involves the discovery of minute traces of highly enriched uranium in environmental samples taken at the Iran's incomplete uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Iranian officials claim that the traces come from imported equipment that had been previously contaminated. The IAEA resolution calls on Iran to suspend all uranium enrichment activities, provide a full declaration of all imported material and components for its uranium enrichment program and to give IAEA inspectors unrestricted access to all its facilities.

Furthermore the IAEA has insisted that Iran "promptly and unconditionally" sign an additional protocol allowing for far more extensive IAEA inspections than allowed for under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As well as specific demands, the resolution also includes a catch-all clause calling on Iran to comply with "such other steps" as deemed necessary "resolve all outstanding issues involving nuclear materials and nuclear activities." It concludes by mandating a report to be presented in November to enable the IAEA to "draw definite conclusions" about Iran's nuclear programs.

Not surprisingly, Washington warmly welcomed the IAEA

resolution and warned Iran that any failure to comply would be taken as an admission of guilt. "If they wish to disrupt that [inspection] process, it can only lead the [IAEA] board and indeed the international community to conclude that in fact they are not pursuing a peaceful program," Kenneth Brill, US ambassador to the IAEA, declared.

An unnamed US official expressed Washington's satisfaction more bluntly, telling Reuters: "[T]his resolution is really tightening the noose on them [Iran]." If Teheran failed to cooperate and was declared in non-compliance, he explained, "Iran will forfeit its right to share nuclear technology for peaceful purposes". In particular, that will mean that Russia will not be able to provide fuel for a nuclear power plant currently being constructed at the Iranian port of Bushehr.

The comments highlight the fact that the Bush administration's objective is not simply to ensure that Iran complies with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As far as Washington is concerned, Iran's entire nuclear program is illegitimate. Ever since the fall of America's ally, the Shah, in 1979, successive US administrations have made every effort to prevent the completion of the Bushehr plant as part of continuing broader economic sanctions aimed at undermining the Teheran regime.

In the lead up to the current IAEA meeting in Geneva, the Bush administration had been pressing for a resolution immediately declaring Iran to be in non-compliance. While opposing such a declaration, France and Germany fell into line with the new US proposal for a deadline, effectively legitimising Washington's provocative moves. Having delayed any formal IAEA decision until November, France and Germany joined the formal sponsors of the resolution—Australia, Japan and Canada—as well as the US and Britain in strong-arming other IAEA members to support it.

The Bush administration has been placing intense pressure on Russia, in particular, not only to support a tough IAEA resolution but to end any cooperation with Iran's nuclear programs. To date Moscow has resisted. Not only would

such a move cost Russia dearly—more than 300 Russian firms have been involved in the \$800 million Bushehr project—but it would lead to an immediate cooling of Russia’s relations with Iran, which form a key component of Moscow’s strategy in Central Asia and the Middle East. Russia did, however, support the IAEA resolution as a means of appeasing Washington while simultaneously buying a little more time.

The IAEA resolution triggered an angry response from Iran with its delegates walking out of the meeting in protest. Chief representative Ali Akbar Salehi denounced the resolution, saying it was part of broader US plans in the Middle East. Nothing would satisfy Washington’s “appetite for vengeance” short of confrontation and war, he said. “It is no secret that the [Bush administration] entertains the idea of invasion of yet another territory, as they aim to re-engineer and reshape the entire Middle East region.” Salehi warned that Iran would be compelled to make a “deep review” of its relations with the IAEA.

Over the weekend, however, Teheran began to backtrack. Vice President Gholamreza Aghazadeh, who is also head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organisation, said that his country had no intention of withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and was “fully committed to its NPT responsibilities”. He said that Iran would proceed with talks over signing an additional IAEA protocol but warned that it had serious problems with the October 31 deadline and the resolution’s “venomous language”.

But the IAEA resolution has precipitated a fierce discussion in Iranian ruling circles, with right-wing sections of the Islamist regime calling for the country to follow North Korea’s example and pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty altogether. An editorial in *Hoseyn Sharia’atmadari* called for the immediate expulsion of the ambassadors of the three countries that proposed the resolution, warning that if authorities did not, “the Muslim people of Iran would do it by closing down their embassies in Tehran.”

The editorial declared: “Yesterday’s resolution of the board of directors of the IAEA leaves no doubt about the fact that the recent cacophonies over the nuclear activities of our nation are a well calculated plot aimed at toppling the Islamic Republic of Iran, using the NPT as a pressure tool.” Another hard-line newspaper, *Jomhuri Eslami*, argued: “It should be accepted that the correct way was the one North Korea chose.” It called on the government to continue the country’s nuclear programs “unabated, whether Washington likes it or not.”

Yas No, a newspaper associated with moderate President Mohammed Khatemi, also attacked the resolution, branding it as “partial, discriminatory and unusual” and declaring that

the Iranian people would not stand for it. While not disagreeing that the US was menacing the country, the newspaper blamed the Islamic hardliners for isolating Iran from potential international allies.

The sharpness of the commentary reflects legitimate concerns in Teheran that it confronts a similar fate to neighbouring Iraq where a barrage of lies about non-existent weapons of mass destruction were exploited by Washington to justify a military invasion and occupation. Iran could justifiably conclude that the only means of preventing further US diplomatic and military provocations is to press ahead with the development of nuclear weapons as rapidly as possible.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, US President Bush bracketed Iran with Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil” and the most militaristic sections of his administration are pushing for “regime change” in Iran to become US policy. The pressure being applied to Iran over its nuclear program is no more than a convenient pretext for advancing Washington’s far-reaching ambitions to secure its strategic and economic interests in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The flavour of the discussion in US ruling circles is indicated by an article in the right-wing *Washington Times* entitled, “Iran: the noose starts to tighten”. It welcomed the IAEA resolution for setting “in motion a process that could turn Iran into an international pariah state—in much the same way that Saddam’s dictatorship next door came to be understood as an outlaw regime.” The article went on to provocatively suggest that Washington should turn a blind eye if Israel decided to strike nuclear facilities in Iran, as it did Iraq’s nuclear reactor at Osirik in 1981.

Whatever the outcome of the next seven weeks, it is virtually guaranteed that Washington will use the deadline set by the IAEA to press for a more aggressive and confrontational stance against Iran.



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