

Washington demands “triggers” for attack on Iran

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Even as its occupation of Iraq plunges further into disarray, the Bush administration is stepping up its drive for similar “regime change” in neighbouring oil-rich Iran. Ever since President Bush named Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, as an “axis of evil” in his January 2002 State of the Union address, the White House has maintained a barrage of allegations and threats against the Iranian regime, repeatedly accusing it of conducting a secret nuclear weapons program.

Washington’s provocative campaign reached new heights this week, with US Secretary of State Colin Powell flatly rejecting as “deficient” a European draft resolution criticising Iran for allegedly concealing various nuclear activities. Briefing reporters after meeting European Union foreign ministers in Brussels, Powell condemned the British-French-German resolution for not having “trigger mechanisms” for intervention against Iran, a country with 65 million people.

Powell added a thinly-veiled threat of unilateral military action if Washington did not get its way at today’s scheduled meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). “If a resolution [is] totally inadequate, then maybe we don’t have a resolution right now,” he said.

For the third time this year, the US has demanded that the 35-member IAEA board of governors declare the Islamic republic in “non-compliance” with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It wants the IAEA to cite the breaches to the UN Security Council, paving the way for a UN resolution to justify punitive measures.

The resistance of the EU powers reflects definite economic and strategic conflicts. European companies, together with Russian, Japanese and Malaysian firms, have multi-billion dollar contracts for exploration and drilling in Iran, which has the fourth largest crude oil reserves and the second biggest natural gas reserves in the world.

These companies have substantially supplanted the US and British firms that effectively controlled Iran’s oil and gas riches for 25 years under the Shah of Iran. The US and British contracts were revoked following the 1979 revolution that ousted the US-backed dictator. A US economic embargo on Iran since 1979 also allowed its European and Asian rivals to win large shares of the country’s substantial internal market.

The aim of any US intervention would be to instal a puppet regime that would privatise the country’s oil industry and turn it over to US-based transnationals. More broadly, along with the US occupation of Iraq and the stationing of thousands of US troops throughout the former Soviet central Asian republics, “regime change” in Iran would seek to establish unchallenged American hegemony over the Middle East and Central Asia.

Despite the complete collapse of its “weapons of mass destruction”

fabrications in Iraq, the White House is making equally unsubstantiated allegations against Iran, accusing it of secretly pursuing a massive nuclear munitions program. Last week, it rejected out of hand a draft IAEA report, which concluded that “no evidence” of such a program existed.

Instead, the Bush administration seized upon Iran’s admissions of earlier minor failures to report nuclear-related activities to the IAEA. According to the IAEA report, which was widely leaked to the Western media, Iran has admitted producing small amounts of nuclear materials, including low-enriched uranium and plutonium that could be used for nuclear weapons, while insisting that the materials were intended for peaceful purposes only.

The NPT does not ban these materials but requires signatory states to report their production to the IAEA. While plutonium can be used in nuclear weapons it also has civilian purposes, including power generation. The IAEA stated that the quantities of plutonium produced between 1988 and 1992 were far less than needed for a nuclear bomb. Overall, it concluded that it was premature to decide whether Iran had sought to build nuclear weapons.

Ali Akbar Salehi, Iran’s ambassador to the IAEA, said Iran’s failure to declare some past nuclear activities were trivial. “The failures attributed to Iran are insignificant and are at the level of gram and microgram of nuclear materials,” he said. Moreover, in the past, Iran has repeatedly stated that it intends to develop nuclear power as an alternative means of energy. It has also pointed out that its nuclear program began in 1974 under the Shah, whose policy was supported by the West.

Like any other country, Iran has every right to manufacture nuclear materials, which are required for medical research and other scientific purposes, as well as electricity generation. Moreover, given the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and Washington’s intimate backing for Israel, which has a secret stockpile of an estimated 300 nuclear warheads, Iran could justifiably conclude that it needs to acquire nuclear weapons to defend itself.

The US has been pushing the IAEA to declare Iran in breach of the NPT since last December, when it published satellite images of two nuclear facilities under construction at Natanz and Arak and accused Iran of seeking to develop a weapons capability. Iran insisted that the sites were designed solely to provide fuel for a nuclear power plant being built at the port of Bushehr.

Every attempt by Iranian ruling circles to appease the US has only led to increasingly provocative ultimatums. Washington demanded a series of IAEA inspections from February to May this year, which led to an earlier report, released on June 16. That report did not cite Iran for breaching the NPT but ordered a fresh round of inspections from

July to September.

In September, the US agreed to a European proposal to delay any formal IAEA decision until this month. The resolution set an October 31 deadline for Iran to agree to unfettered IAEA monitoring. It also required the country to prove a negative: that none of its nuclear power and medical programs were being used to produce material for nuclear weapons.

In a last-ditch effort to head off the US, Britain, Germany and France struck a deal with Teheran on October 21. Iran pledged to suspend uranium enrichment and allow extensive, short-notice IAEA inspections. In return, the foreign ministers of the three European states offered renewed trade negotiations and access to nuclear technology. Just before the October 31 deadline, Iran sent a letter to the IAEA, complying with its demands.

Washington has responded furiously to these developments. Undersecretary of State for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control John Bolton declared it was “simply impossible to believe” the IAEA’s conclusion that no proof existed of a nuclear weapons program.

Speaking in New York on the night the IAEA report was leaked, Powell referred to the Iranian regime as “hidebound clerics” and declared: “The Iranian people want their freedom back.”

It is nothing short of obscene for Washington to preach “freedom” in Iran, where the US backed a brutal military dictator—the Shah of Iran—for more than two decades.

Yet again the US media, including its so-called “liberal” wing, has fallen in behind the Bush administration’s bellicose threats, serving to legitimise, Washington’s neo-colonial ambitions.

In a November 12 editorial, the *New York Times* insisted that Iran’s agreement to undergo inspections and suspend its uranium enrichment program was “not good enough”. Despite conceding that the enriched uranium and plutonium possessed by Iran were incapable of making weapons material, it stated: “Iran has no legitimate need to pursue either enrichment or reprocessing technologies and should forswear both approaches entirely.”

Four days later, the right-wing *Washington Times* welcomed the *Times*’ editorial as a sign that a “new consensus may be emerging” on dealing with Iran. It called the IAEA report a “wake up call for anyone concerned about the acquisition of [nuclear weapons] by rogue states”.

Much of the supposed “intelligence” that the White House—and the media—are relying upon to charge Iran with building nuclear bombs comes from an Iranian exile group that the Pentagon is funding as part of its efforts to destabilise the Teheran regime. The role of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) recalls that of Ahmed Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress, which supplied most of the fabricated reports of Iraqi chemical and nuclear weapons. NCRI spokesman Shahin Gobadi this week repeated its claims that Teheran was hiding a “secret atomic weapons program”.

The right-wing Likud government of Ariel Sharon in Israel is also pushing for US intervention, as well as threatening its own strikes against Iran if the UN does not sanction punitive action. In recent weeks, media outlets have circulated reports, based on Israeli and American sources, emphasising that Israel is prepared to use force to maintain its nuclear monopoly over the Middle East.

The German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, has drawn up a plan whereby Israel would attack six nuclear facilities in Iran. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that Israel has outfitted its submarines with modified Harpoon missiles that have nuclear warheads. Two American sources

and an Israeli official cited in the report said they wanted to caution and deter Israel’s enemies.

The Zionist regime is determined to capitalise on Washington’s militarism, as well as to crush all potential sources of opposition to its own expansionist activities. Two weeks ago, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said in a lecture delivered to Israel Defense Forces commanders that Iran’s nuclear efforts constituted “the gravest danger to Israel’s existence in the future... We must do our utmost, under US guidance, to delay or eliminate the prospect of the extremist regime [in Tehran] securing weapons of this sort.”

Speaking last week in Washington, Mofaz claimed that Iran’s nuclear program could reach “the point of no return” within a year. During his visit, Mofaz held meetings with Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Richard Cheney, urging the US to lead “concentrated efforts” to prevent Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. Backed by the US, Israel has refused to sign the NPT itself.

Iranian ruling circles appear to be hoping that by making concessions, they will succeed in staving off US military intervention. They are looking for support in Europe, as well as from the Putin regime in Moscow, which has assisted in the construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor.

But, just as in the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq, the European powers are resisting US demands for UN-backed intervention, while at the same time negotiating with Washington to find a form of words that will allow the IAEA and the UN to ratchet up the pressure on Teheran.

Their draft resolution for today’s IAEA meeting reportedly charges Iran with “failures to meet safeguards obligations,” while stopping short of reporting Iran to the Security Council. No one should forget that these same powers gave their full seal of approval to the US occupation of Iraq once the criminal and bloody invasion had been carried out. In the final analysis, their positions will be determined by calculations as to how they can best defend their own sizeable commercial and strategic interests.

Whereas Britain sided with Washington in the Iraq war, the Blair government is taking a somewhat different stance on Iran. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has called for other governments to react “calmly” to the IAEA report and refused to class Iran in the same league as Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

Even if forced to accept a partial compromise with the Europeans for now, the US administration will use any resolution that is passed to justify issuing new ultimatums against Teheran. Whatever the immediate outcome of today’s IAEA meeting, the conditions are being created for escalating US aggression against Iran.



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