

US-European tensions deepen over Iran's nuclear program

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Next week's meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board of governors over Iran's nuclear programs is looming as a tense diplomatic battleground between the US and its European rivals.

Last weekend France, Germany and Britain signed an initial agreement with Iran to freeze its uranium enrichment program in return for talks about a broader deal on economic and technical cooperation. The move was clearly aimed at preempting aggressive action by the new Bush administration, which had previously indicated it would push at the IAEA meeting for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

Washington reacted to the agreement with undisguised contempt. On his way to Chile on Wednesday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell provocatively accused Iran of "actively working" to modify its existing ballistic missiles to carry nuclear warheads. "There is no doubt in my mind—and it's fairly straightforward from what we've been saying for years—that they [Iran] have been interested in a nuclear weapon that has utility, meaning that it is something they would be able to deliver, not just something that sits there," he declared.

Powell claimed to have seen intelligence concerning Iranian missile plans, but the flimsy character of the evidence was immediately exposed in the *Washington Post*. According to unnamed US officials, Powell's allegations were based on "a single, unvetted source"—a previously unknown "walk-in" who approached US intelligence agencies with more than 1,000 pages of Iranian technical drawings and documents, including the design for a nuclear warhead and missile modifications. The CIA remained unsure about the authenticity of the documents and how the informant came into their possession, an official told the newspaper.

Powell also lent credibility to unsubstantiated claims made this week by the National Council for Resistance in Iran (NCRI), the political wing of the exile People's Mujahedeen Organisation. The NCRI claimed that Iran was producing enriched uranium at a covert Defence Ministry facility in the

north of the capital Tehran and had been given the blueprints for a nuclear weapon in the mid-1990s by Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan. No evidence was provided to support the allegations.

The parallels with the lies used to justify the illegal US invasion of Iraq are unmistakable. It was Powell who presented Washington's fabricated case to the UN Security Council in February 2003 concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction—much of it based on information concocted by exile groups. His latest comments have provoked concerns in the US that the allegations about Iran's nuclear programs simply will not be believed.

Former chief US weapons inspector David Kay, who was compelled to admit last year that Iraq had no WMDs, expressed surprise that Powell should be floating such dubious intelligence. "I thought if there was anyone in the administration that had been sufficiently burned by such sources, it would have been Powell," he said.

But the fact that the Bush administration, and Powell in particular, have made such an accusation against Iran is neither surprising nor a mistake. It is designed to send a definite political message to Europe and the rest of the world that Washington will stop at nothing, including the use of the most brazen lies, in pursuit of its interests. Coming from the outgoing Powell, often touted as the voice of moderation, the remarks make clear that the new Bush administration fully intends to pursue the same aggressive, unilateralist approach as the previous one.

Significantly, neither the White House nor Powell backed away from the latest allegation against Iran. US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli scotched suggestions that Powell had made a mistake, declaring: "The secretary did not misspeak." Commenting on Chilean television on Thursday, Powell insisted that Iran's nuclear ambitions were well known. "They shouldn't surprise anyone. I think the Iranians still have much more to do to convince the international community that they are not moving in the direction of a nuclear weapon."

A further accusation surfaced on Friday. According to a

Reuters report, unnamed diplomatic sources claimed that Iran was producing large amounts of uranium hexafluoride—the gas used in uranium enrichment—prior to the agreement signed with the European Union last weekend coming into effect this week. “It is a grave matter that will have serious repercussions when we begin our (IAEA board) meeting on Thursday,” one diplomat told the news agency.

Iran has repeatedly denied any plans to build nuclear weapons, insisting that its nuclear programs are for civilian purposes and in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. At the same time, it has declared its intention to proceed with the construction of a nuclear power plant at the southern port of Bushehr and to develop uranium enrichment facilities to provide reactor fuel.

Commenting on the NCRI claims, Iran’s nuclear negotiator Hussein Mossavian declared: “The allegation is timed to coincide with the next meeting of the board of governors of the IAEA. And every time just before the meeting there are these kinds of allegations either from the United States or terrorist groups. And every time these allegations have proven to be false.”

Just before the previous IAEA meeting in September, former US weapons inspector David Albright released satellite images of an industrial complex at Parchin, claiming it was “a logical candidate” for developing the high-explosive components needed for a nuclear weapon trigger device. The US used this vague assertion as part of the “evidence” against Iran to browbeat IAEA members into agreeing to tougher measures.

The September meeting stopped short of acceding to the US demand to automatically refer Iran to the UN Security Council if it failed to fully implement IAEA decisions. But it did call on Iran to immediately suspend its uranium enrichment program and for a full IAEA report on the country’s nuclear activities. The confidential report, completed this week, concluded: “All declared nuclear material in Iran had been accounted for, and therefore such material is not diverted to prohibited activities.”

However, the report added: “The agency is, however, not in a position to conclude that there are no undeclared nuclear materials or activities in Iran.” The rider simply underscores the fact that the US is demanding the impossible: that Iran prove it has no nuclear weapons programs anywhere within its extensive territory. Every attempt by Tehran to disprove bogus US allegations is met with further spurious claims about its nuclear facilities.

As far as Washington is concerned, all of Iran’s nuclear programs—civilian or military—are illegitimate and should be stopped. The US has repeatedly pressured Russia to pull out of its contract to complete the Bushehr power reactor—demands that Moscow has so far rebuffed.

If, in the final analysis, Iran is seeking to produce a nuclear arsenal, it has every justification for doing so. In 2002, Bush branded the country, along with North Korea and Iraq, as part of an “axis of evil”. Having subjugated Afghanistan and Iraq, the US, with its hi-tech weaponry and huge nuclear arsenal, has tens of thousands of troops positioned on two of Iran’s borders. Both the US and its ally Israel have hinted at taking pre-emptive military action.

Following the IAEA meeting in September, the Iranian regime declared that the IAEA resolution was illegal and that it would proceed with its uranium enrichment plans. Tehran has, however, come under intense pressure from Britain, France and Germany to accede to the IAEA demands. It reluctantly agreed to the deal with the EU last weekend after the three powers threatened to side with the US and refer Iran to the UN Security Council. The agreement provoked an angry response in Tehran where hardline critics pointed out that Iran had secured only vague promises of EU assistance in return for freezing its uranium enrichment program.

As far as France, Britain and Germany were concerned, it was imperative that the issue be defused before the IAEA meeting, in order to preempt possible US action. The real motivations of the US and its European rivals have nothing to do with Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs. Rather, all of these powers are engaged in an increasingly bitter competition for domination in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia and regard Iran as vital to their strategies.

For the Bush administration, a belligerent stance on Iran’s nuclear program is a useful device for thwarting Europe’s growing economic relations with Iran. In addition, by menacing Tehran, Washington hopes to extract Iranian assistance in suppressing opposition to the US occupation of Iraq, particularly from the southern Shiite population. While the US military is at present stretched to the limit, this week’s IAEA meeting provides an opportunity for the Bush administration to lay down the law to Iran and Europe, and establish the basis for far more aggressive action in the future.



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