Despite US pressure, Russia signs nuclear fuel deal with Iran

Peter Symonds
2 March 2005

The deal signed last Sunday for Russia to supply Iran with nuclear fuel has highlighted the fact that President Bush has returned empty-handed from his so-called charm offensive in Europe. For all the rhetoric about transatlantic unity, the European powers refused to budge on any major issue. Above all, no European troops were forthcoming to help the US out of the deepening quagmire in Iraq.

Just days after Bush met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Brataslava, Russia's atomic agency chief Alexander Rumyantsev flew to the southern Iranian city of Bushehr where Russia has been helping to construct the country's first power reactor. Rumyantsev signed the nuclear fuel agreement at the site and indicated that the reactor would be operational by next year.

The US has repeatedly urged Russia to end its involvement in the Bushehr project, but to no avail. At the Brataslava meeting, Bush and Putin agreed that Iran should not have nuclear weapons. But the unity ended there. Russian officials have dismissed US claims that Iran's nuclear programs, including the Bushehr reactor, are simply a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

In mid-February, Putin met with top Iranian negotiator Hassan Rowhani, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, in Moscow. The Russian president pointedly declared: "Iran's latest actions convince us that Iran does not intend to produce nuclear weapons, which means we will continue our cooperation with Iran in all areas, including the area of nuclear energy."

By signing the nuclear fuel agreement, Russia has effectively thumbed its nose to Washington. The only concession to the US was the inclusion of a clause requiring Iran to return all spent fuel rods to Russia for reprocessing. Russia's atomic energy agency noted that the small amounts of plutonium that could be obtained from spent fuel rods would be "practically useless for making a nuclear weapon".

Even so, news of the deal provoked a belligerent response in the US Congress. Leading Republican Senator John McCain denounced the agreement as "almost aberrational" and called for Russia to be excluded from the next G-8 summit of major industrialised countries in Edinburgh in July. He criticised Putin for being anti-democratic and said the Russian president was acting "like a spoiled child".

Speaking on Fox News, McCain declared: "This latest step of the Russians vis-à-vis the Iranians calls for sterner measures to be taken between ourselves and Russia. It has got to, at some point, begin to harm our relations... The United States and our European allies should start out saying, 'Vladimir, you're not welcome at the next G-8 conference'."

McCain was backed by Jane Harman, the ranking Democrat in the House intelligence committee, who told CNN: "This is the time to be tough with Russia. Iran going nuclear is a danger for the entire world, including Russia."

Washington cannot, however, count on its "European allies" to support tough measures against Russia. Emma Udwin, European Commission external affairs spokeswoman, told the media on Monday that the nuclear fuel deal was "compatible with our own approach" and in accord with international regulations on non-proliferation. "Most importantly," she added, "Bushehr will operate under the close supervision of the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency]."

Commenting to CNN, David Manning, the British ambassador to Washington, took issue with McCain's comments, saying: "Certainly we think Russia should participate [in the G-8 meeting]". He noted that Russia was due to host a G-8 meeting in 2006. Manning added that Britain—Washington's closest ally in Europe—had no problem with the Russia-Iran agreement, because it will be "under full-scope safeguards".

The disagreement over the Bushehr project points to broader differences over Iran. Last November, the so-called EU Three—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 deal was obviously aimed at preempting any attempt by the Bush administration to refer Iran to the UN Security Council for breaches of the Nuclear

© World Socialist Web Site

Non-Proliferation Treaty and possible sanctions.

During last week's tour of Europe, Bush made an effort to paper over tensions with the European powers, including on Iran. He supported a diplomatic solution, saying that "Iran is not Iraq" and declared that it was "ridiculous" to suggest that the US was planning to attack Iran. In the same breath, however, Bush reiterated that all options—that is, including military measures—were on the table.

Washington's sabre rattling is not directed primarily at Tehran, but against America's European rivals. The threats against Iran and now Syria, following on from the US subjugation of Iraq and its oil reserves, are part of broader US ambitions for unbridled domination over the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran, which is strategically located between the two regions, has the world's second largest reserves of gas and the third largest of oil.

Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs are a convenient pretext for the US to use its military muscle to assert its influence. If economic sanctions or military action were to be taken against Tehran, the main loser would be the EU, which has a burgeoning trade with Iran that reached $20 billion in 2003. The US, on the other hand, has maintained an embargo of Iran for over two decades and currently has negligible economic links.

For the time being, the Bush administration appears to have taken a step back. The White House reaction to the Russia-Iran deal was comparatively muted. Several articles have appeared in the US press mooting the possibility that Washington may join the European powers in offering economic incentives to Iran in exchange for dismantling its uranium enrichment facilities.

The US is unlikely to press for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council at the IAEA summit being held in Vienna this week. The gathering promises to be a routine affair. IAEA director Mohamed El Baradei appealed to Iran to be more open about its nuclear programs but again noted that there was no evidence that Tehran was engaged in developing nuclear weapons.

In the lead up to the meeting, the US media highlighted a 1987 offer made to Tehran by Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan to supply nuclear components as evidence of Iran's intention to build nuclear weapons. El Baradei thanked Iran for handing over the documents related to the offer and reported that Iranian officials indicated they had turned down the opportunity to buy sensitive nuclear equipment.

The low-key White House approach is in part a reflection of sharp divisions in US ruling circles. In comments to CBS this week, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski defended the Iran-Russia agreement and urged closer relations with Europe. "The Russians are actually acting in consonance with international law. The Iranians have the right to have a nuclear program," he said.

These differences, however, are purely tactical. The eruption of US militarism is not simply the product of the Bush administration but is being driven by the long-term economic decline of American capitalism manifest in spiralling US debt and the fall of the US dollar against the euro. Even though it faces a disaster in Iraq, the second Bush administration has intensified its belligerence toward Iran and Syria.

If the US is now contemplating joining the European-Iranian diplomatic efforts, it is only as a means to undermine talks and gain European support for tougher measures against Tehran. Senator McCain indicated the basic approach when he urged the White House to support European diplomatic moves as long as Europe in turn backed UN sanctions if Iran failed to comply.

Bush dismisses as "ridiculous" claims that the US is preparing for war against Iran. But in an article in the *New Yorker* in January, entitled "The Coming Wars", veteran journalist Seymour Hersh provided details of US overflights and commando missions inside Iran aimed at preparing for US air strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, or a full-scale invasion. The article also left no doubt as to the gangster mentality that dominates the most militarist wing of the Bush administration—the so-called neo-cons in the US Defence Department.

"The civilian leadership in the Pentagon has argued that no diplomatic progress on the Iranian nuclear threat will take place unless there is a credible threat of military action," Hersh wrote. "'The neo-cons say negotiations are a bad deal,' a senior official of the International Atomic Energy Agency told me. 'And the only thing the Iranians understand is pressure. And that they also need to be whacked'."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site