

US-EU deal on Iran: a step towards confrontation, not a negotiated settlement

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Far from representing a softer US stance on Iran's nuclear programs, the Bush administration's decision earlier this month to "cooperate" in the European Union (EU) negotiations with Iran has only increased the likelihood of a breakdown in discussions and open confrontation.

The latest round of talks in Paris between Iran and the EU Three—France, Germany and Britain—broke up this Wednesday without any agreement. Despite efforts to put a positive spin on the outcome, the only concrete decision was that negotiations would continue. Iran has repeatedly declared that it will not allow talks to drag on indefinitely.

The basis for negotiations is an agreement signed last November between Iran and the EU Three just prior to a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board of governors. With the US demanding Iran's referral to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions, Iran agreed to suspend all uranium enrichment and plutonium separation activities in return for discussions with the EU over a comprehensive economic, technical and security pact.

Iranian negotiators warned at the time that the country's enrichment program would be restarted if there were no sign of progress in negotiations. In the formal statement, Iran once again declared that its nuclear programs were for peaceful purposes, including the generation of nuclear energy, and reaffirmed its commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

For their part, the European powers recognised Iran's rights under the Treaty. These include the right to pursue all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle—including uranium enrichment and the reprocessing of spent fuel rods. In negotiations, however, the EU Three have insisted, under pressure from Washington, that Iran go beyond "objective guarantees" outlined in last November's agreement and give up completely this right to engage in uranium enrichment. It is precisely on this point that the talks remain deadlocked.

In this context, the Bush administration reached an agreement with the EU Three on March 11 over talks with Iran. The deal was very much a two-edged sword: Washington offered to make economic concessions to Tehran to assist in negotiations, but the Europeans agreed in return to support referral to the UN if Iran restarted its uranium enrichment activities in the course of negotiations.

In reality, the US conceded very little: a promise to drop longstanding objections to Iran's application to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and to allow the sale of much-needed spare parts for civilian aircraft. The initial application for WTO membership is, however, only the first step of a lengthy process, which the US could block at any stage. Any US sale of spare parts to Iran would be strictly monitored on a case-by-case basis.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice emphasised that the US would not join the negotiations. "The Europeans have a strategy. And we are supporting that diplomacy. But this is most assuredly giving the Europeans a stronger hand, not rewarding the Iranians," she said. In other words, as far as Washington is concerned, the key issue remains the threat

of UN sanctions, not economic "rewards" for Iran.

The token character of the US offer to Iran is further underscored by Washington's determination to tighten the economic screws on Tehran. One of the chief objectives of Rice's recent trip to India and Pakistan was to pressure the two countries into abandoning plans to build a \$4.2 billion pipeline to transport Iranian gas through Pakistan to supply India's growing energy demands. The cancellation of the project would be a serious blow to Iran as well as to India and Pakistan.

The European powers are now caught in a bind. There is less room for the EU to manoeuvre in negotiations with Iran and greater opportunities for US diplomatic intervention and thuggery. In the event of a complete breakdown, the EU is committed to taking Iran to the UN Security Council where Washington will push for tough measures. Undoubtedly the European governments were well aware of these considerations, but once again chose to appease Washington, rather than risk conflict.

The European countries have a great deal at stake in the negotiations with Iran, which is a key EU trading partner and a major source of oil. Any trade embargo or military action against Iran would have significant economic consequences for Europe, but virtually none for the US, which has maintained an economic blockade of Iran for two decades. In the final analysis, the Bush administration's aggressive stance is aimed more at its European rivals than Iran, and establishing US economic and strategic domination in the oil rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Within Iran, there were few illusions about the meaning of the US-EU deal. Iranian negotiator Sirus Naseri rejected the US concessions as "too ridiculous to be called an offer". He told CNN that it was "like trading a lion for a mouse". Turning the tables on Washington, he angrily exclaimed: "Would the United States be prepared to give up its own nuclear fuel production against a cargo of pistachios delivered in truckloads?"

Naseri's remarks highlight several issues. Within Iran, the country's nuclear program is a highly sensitive political topic. The obvious hypocrisy of Washington's accusations that Iran is secretly building nuclear weapons angers many Iranians. The Bush administration demands that Tehran end its nuclear activities but turns a blind eye to the fact that Israel, its chief ally in the Middle East, has completely ignored the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and built nuclear weapons.

In an article on the *Asia Times* website, commentator Kaveh Afrasiabi explained that any Iranian cave in to the US demands would have immediate political ramifications. "Without doubt, the political backlash inside Iran will be tremendous, and [Iranian negotiator] Rowhani and others involved in such a humiliating bargain will be the immediate political casualties, sure to be replaced with more hawkish politicians more apt to emulate North Korea's path—of exiting the NPT and excluding any outside inspection of nuclear facilities."

With Iranian presidential elections due in June, there is no doubt that the nuclear issue will be seized on to stir up nationalist sentiment. Iran's conservative supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei set the tone in a TV

broadcast this week accusing the US of seeking any excuse to start a war. “If this nation is tested by a bitter experience,” he declared, “I will wear battle fatigues and will be ready to sacrifice myself at the head of the nation.”

Despite Washington’s claims, there is no conclusive evidence that Iran aims to produce nuclear weapons—a fact that the IAEA has confirmed on the basis of its inspections. The IAEA has criticised Iran for failing to inform the body of some of its nuclear facilities. Such secrecy is, however, understandable given determined US efforts over two decades to prevent the country from gaining access any nuclear technology. Washington has repeatedly pressured Russia to abandon its contract to complete the construction of Iran’s nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. The project was begun in the 1970s, with US encouragement, under the dictatorial regime of America ally Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi.

An article in the latest issue of the US-based *Foreign Affairs* magazine, reflecting disquiet in US ruling circles with Bush’s foreign policy, acknowledged that Iran had some justification for seeking a nuclear arsenal.

“After all, now that Washington has proved willing to put its provocative doctrine of military pre-emption into practice, Iran’s desire for nuclear weapons makes strategic sense. And Tehran cannot be entirely faulted for rushing to acquire them. When the Bush administration invaded Iraq, which was not yet nuclearised, and avoided using force against North Korea, which already was, Iranians came to see nuclear weapons as the only viable deterrent to US military action,” it stated.

Iranian negotiator Naseri’s offer to give Washington “a cargo of pistachios” in exchange for its nuclear fuel facilities can be dismissed as a rhetorical flourish. But it raises another issue that is all but ignored in the international media.

When the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty came into force in 1970, it was a two-sided affair. Countries that did not have nuclear weapons agreed to foreswear their development as long as they could pursue nuclear programs for peaceful purposes. On the other hand, those that were part of the “nuclear club”, including the US, agreed to progressively get rid of their nuclear arsenal.

In its highly selective and aggressive demands on countries such as Iran and North Korea, the Bush administration, deliberately ignores its legal responsibility for dismantling its own huge stockpile of nuclear weapons. Former chief weapons inspector in Iraq, Richard Butler, drew attention to the US double standard in a recent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. After noting that the nuclear weapons states had pledged at a 2000 review conference to step up the elimination of their arsenals, he wrote:

“The Bush administration has not only refused to adhere to its obligations under the treaty and the additional promise of 2000, but has now embarked on what is anathema under the treaty—the production of a new generation of nuclear weapons. These are the new, more compact, nukes the administration says it needs for the so-called war on terrorism. It beggars belief that the administration appears to believe it can succeed in restraining Iran while it proceeds to violate its obligations.”

In fact, the US actions point to a more obvious and sinister conclusion: the Bush administration is not interested in “restraining Iran”, but forcing its complete capitulation through any available means. The Bush administration’s nuclear policy is entirely in line with its strategy of maintaining America’s global military hegemony and undermining or destroying any potential challenge. The new generation of “nukes” are not aimed at “terrorists” but for use against protected underground bunkers such as those developed by countries like Iran to defend itself from US aggression.

It is no surprise that the Bush administration is already pushing for a fundamental revision of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in line with its present stance on Iran. A recent article in the *New York Times* noted that Bush proposed last year to amend the Treaty to bar most countries

from producing their own nuclear fuel. Just prior to announcing this month’s US-EU deal over Iran, Bush called for changes to the treaty that “close the loopholes that allow states to produce nuclear materials that can be used to build bombs under the cover of civilian nuclear programs.”

As for Iran, the Bush administration has reiterated again and again that all options, including the military one, are on the table. While the White House has nominally agreed to allow EU talks with Iran to run their course, there is no guarantee that it will not resort to unilateral military action—or give the green light to Israel to attack Iran. On the day the US-EU agreement was announced, Vice-President Richard Cheney told Fox News: “At the end of the day, if the Iranians don’t live up to their obligations and their international commitments to forego a nuclear program, then obviously we’ll have to take stronger action.”

Days later, an article in the British-based *Sunday Times* on March 13 revealed that Israel’s inner cabinet had secretly met last month on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s ranch in the Negev desert and gave “initial authorisation” for an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. Israeli military forces have used a mock-up of Iran’s uranium enrichment plant at Natanz to practice attacks with commando units and F-15 fighters armed with bunker-busting bombs.

According to the *Sunday Times*: “The plans have been discussed with American officials who are said to have indicated provisionally that they would not stand in Israel’s way if all international efforts to halt Iranian nuclear projects failed.” Israeli officials have of course denied the story, just as US spokesmen ridiculed a recent article in the *New Yorker* by veteran journalist Seymour Hersh outlining the Pentagon’s preparations, including spy flights and commando missions inside Iran, for a US attack on Iran.

For all its denials, there is no doubt that the Bush administration is prepared to use whatever means are necessary, including a full-scale assault on Iran, to pursue its ambitions for economic and strategic domination in the Middle East.



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