

US and European allies provoke confrontation with Iran

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The Bush administration with the support of the so-called EU-3—Britain, France and Germany—has seized on Iran’s decision to restart its uranium conversion facility at Esfahan as the pretext for condemning Tehran and threatening UN economic sanctions. Once again Washington and its allies, with the backing of the international media, are conducting a campaign of provocation and lies that will ultimately lead to open confrontation if Iran does not completely capitulate.

The crisis came to a head last weekend after Tehran rejected an EU offer of economic incentives in return for foregoing key uranium enrichment programs. Newly-installed President Mahmood Ahmadinejad denounced the long-delayed package as “an insult to the Iranian people”, demanded an apology from the EU-3 and made clear that Iran would resume operations at Esfahan. The initial steps towards restarting uranium conversion took place on Monday—under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) supervision.

These moves provoked a chorus of condemnations and threats. Britain, France and Germany all claimed that Iran’s actions breached an agreement reached in November 2004 to freeze uranium enrichment activities and warned that Iran would be referred to the UN Security Council. French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy described Tehran’s decision to be “grave and troubling”. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer declared in alarmist terms that Iran faced “disastrous consequences” if it acquired an atomic weapon.

An editorial in the *Washington Post* on Tuesday went one step further, declaring that the refusal to accept the EU-3 offer was proof that Iran intended to construct a nuclear bomb. “Now there is no further room for obfuscation, and no further reason to give Iranians the benefit of the doubt. The real aim of the Iranian nuclear program is nuclear weapons, not electric power... What remains to be seen is whether the Europeans will come through, as they have promised they would, with a tough-minded push for sanctions.”

Iran’s blunt rejection of the European proposal is no such proof at all. From the outset, Iran has insisted that its nuclear programs are for civilian purposes and that, under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it has the inalienable right to develop every aspect of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. Faced with the threat that the EU would

support Washington’s demand for economic sanctions, Tehran agreed last November to freeze its uranium enrichment programs, temporarily, while negotiations took place.

At that time, the EU-3 pushed for a deal to avert UN sanctions and preserve burgeoning economic ties with Iran, a major source of oil for Europe. In March, however, the Bush administration, which previously rejected any negotiations, agreed to cooperate with the EU-3 in their talks with Tehran. The meaning of such “cooperation” was all too obvious—in return for minor US concessions to Iran, the Bush administration extracted a pledge from the EU-3 to support UN sanctions if the talks failed.

The Iranian government has insisted that its rights under the NPT had to be part of any agreement and that it would not allow talks—and thus the freeze on its nuclear programs—to drag on indefinitely. The Bush administration, however, has consistently ignored the terms of the NPT and demanded that Tehran end all uranium enrichment. As a result, the final EU-3 package, reviewed and approved by Washington, amounted to nothing more than a provocation: behind a smokescreen of so-called economic and technical incentives, the deal was based on a continuing Iranian freeze on uranium enrichment.

It is hardly surprising that Tehran immediately rejected last week’s offer as an insult. “The proposal is extremely long on demands from Iran and absurdly short on offers to Iran, and it shows the lack of any attempt to even create a semblance of balance,” an official statement declared. Iran is in the process of building a nuclear power reactor at Bushehr and has plans to build other reactors. Without enrichment facilities, it would be left dependent on European or other countries for crucial supplies of nuclear fuel.

As for any US-EU security assurances to Iran, these are completely worthless. The Bush administration has never retracted its infamous denunciation of Iran as part of an “axis of evil”, and continues a relentless campaign of provocations and threats. The latest by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld took place this week in the midst of the current crisis. Without providing a shred of evidence, he accused Tehran of allowing weapons to be smuggled to anti-US insurgents in Iraq, and concluded with a menacing warning, “ultimately, it’s a problem for Iran”.

Washington now has two large armies stationed in countries directly bordering Iran—Iraq and Afghanistan—as well as basing arrangements in Central Asian countries on its northern borders. While currently pushing for economic sanctions against Tehran, the Bush administration has not ruled out “the military option” and has encouraged its ally Israel, which has threatened military strikes against Iran’s nuclear facilities. In January, veteran journalist Seymour Hersh reported in an extensive article entitled “The Coming Wars” that the US military had already sent covert commando teams inside Iran to scout out targets and prepare for possible air strikes or even a full-scale invasion of Iran.

In this regard, the belligerent conclusion of the *Washington Post* editorial is highly significant. The collapse of negotiations, it stated, “means that there is no excuse for Europe and the United States not to act in tandem; neither should they take any option off the table. It is no longer possible to consider the Iranian nuclear threat as anything but deadly serious.” Coming from a leading representative of the so-called liberal press, these comments signify that a certain consensus has been reached in Washington that all measures, including military strikes and outright war, should be used against Iran.

If Iran is secretly engaged in a nuclear weapons program, it would be completely justified, given the repeated threats by the US, which is armed to the teeth with the complete range of sophisticated weaponry, including a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons. The Bush administration has already waged an illegal war of aggression to subjugate Iraq as part of its ambitions to secure untrammelled hegemony in the resource-rich region. Iran, as well as having huge oil and gas reserves of its own, stands at the strategic crossroads between the Middle East and Central Asia.

The fact that the US military is bogged down in a quagmire in Iraq and is reliant on a police military regime headed by Shiite parties with longstanding ties to Tehran offers no protection to Iran. Tehran’s attempts to ingratiate itself with Washington by giving tacit support for the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have only been met with US denunciations and threats. Washington’s aim is not closer collaboration with the current government in Iran but a new pro-American regime that will carry out US dictates.

The utter hypocrisy of Washington’s condemnations of Iran’s nuclear programs was underscored by the remarks on Tuesday of Iran’s chief IAEA representative Sirus Naser. Speaking at an emergency IAEA meeting, Naser noted that the day was the anniversary of atomic bombing of Nagasaki. As the only country ever to use a nuclear bomb “to kill and maim and turn to ashes millions in a split second,” he declared, “the United States is in no position whatsoever to tell anyone and to preach to anyone as to what they should or should not do in their nuclear program.”

Washington’s decision to unleash atomic weapons on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was

conditioned above all by its resolve to establish its unchallengeable global dominance in the aftermath of World War II. The Bush administration’s insistence that Iran, as well as North Korea, give up all nuclear programs that have even the potential, no matter how remote, to be used to construct atomic bombs is motivated by the same objective. The White House is determined to maintain its military superiority, particularly against any potential target of US attack.

That is the only explanation for the obvious double standards that underpin US nuclear policy. While demanding the Iran dismantles its uranium enrichment program, the Bush administration tacitly or openly approves the nuclear activities of its close allies. It is an open secret that Israel, which has refused to sign the NPT, has a store of nuclear weapons and missiles capable of hitting targets throughout the Middle East, including Iran. In the case of India, the Bush administration has just removed the remaining US sanctions put in place following the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998. As for its own nuclear arsenal, far from reducing it as required under the NPT, the Bush administration is augmenting it with a new generation of “bunker-buster” weapons that could be used, for instance, against Iran’s underground nuclear facilities.

Washington’s contempt for international law in general and the NPT in particular has provoked concern among other NPT signatories attending the emergency IAEA meeting in Vienna this week. If the US and its European allies are able to effectively rewrite the NPT by forcing Iran to give up its right to uranium enrichment then the nuclear programs of countries such as Malaysia, Argentina and Brazil would also be put into question. A joint statement issued by Malaysia, on behalf of other so-called non-aligned countries, affirmed the “basic and inalienable right of all member states to develop atomic energy for peaceful purposes.”

This half-hearted opposition has to date prevented the IAEA emergency meeting from reaching agreement on a resolution referring Iran to the UN Security Council. The EU-3 has confined itself to promoting a draft statement calling for the resumption of talks and the freeze on Iran’s enrichment program. Tehran has also held out the prospect of renewed negotiations. Whatever happens in the short-term, however, the present course of events confirms that Washington and its allies are intent on confrontation with Iran, regardless of the potentially disastrous consequences.



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