

US and EU-3 make another provocative move against Iran

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The Bush administration and its European allies moved one step closer to an open confrontation with Iran, following last Saturday's decision by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board to declare Tehran in breach of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The resolution sets the stage for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council for punitive sanctions if it fails to shut down its uranium enrichment program, to allow intrusive new inspections of its nuclear facilities and "reconsider" the construction of a heavy water research reactor.

Bitter divisions emerged in the IAEA meeting. Russia and China, both of which have veto rights in the UN Security Council, opposed Iran's immediate referral. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared last week that such action would lead to "unnecessary politicising" and would be "counterproductive" as Iran was already cooperating with the IAEA. Other countries such as Brazil have expressed concerns that the resolution sets a dangerous precedent for action elsewhere against enrichment programs, which are permitted under the NPT for peaceful purposes.

The so-called EU-3 (Britain, France and Germany) was compelled to water down its resolution to delay any final decision on referral to the UN Security Council to a further IAEA board meeting in November. Even then only 22 of the 34 board members voted in favour. Eleven nations, including Russia, China, Pakistan, South Africa and Brazil, abstained. Venezuela voted against. It is only the third time in two decades that an IAEA resolution has not been adopted unanimously.

The IAEA resolution has provoked an angry response in Tehran where Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki denounced it as "political, illegal and illogical". Hundreds of students gathered outside the British embassy yesterday and protested against the decision, by burning US and British flags and demanding the expulsion of the British ambassador. The Iranian parliament is debating a bill obliging the government to limit its cooperation with any IAEA inspectors and officials have warned that Iran may restart its enrichment plant at Natanz.

The US and EU-3 justified their aggressive stance by claiming in the resolution that "the history of concealment of Iran's nuclear activities" had resulted in an "absence of confidence that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes." US ambassador Greg Schulte told the media: "Iran's activities, its pattern of deception and confrontational approach are of great concern to the world community" and "an increasing threat to

international peace and security."

These statements reek of cynicism. In neighbouring Iraq, the US, with the backing of the European powers, subjected the country to ever-more intrusive inspections to prove the unproveable: that there were no weapons of mass destruction anywhere in its extensive territory. Now these same powers are seeking to perpetrate a similar fraud: to demand Iran acquiesces to an endless inspection process to prove that it has no programs capable of producing nuclear weapons.

Moreover, if Iran has a "history of concealment," Washington is directly responsible. After the fall of the Shah in 1979, the US has repeatedly attempted to block any Iranian nuclear programs, peaceful or not. Construction of Iran's nuclear power reactor at Bushehr, begun under the Shah, was discontinued when German construction firms pulled out. The US has demanded that Russia, which contracted to complete the project in the 1990s, do the same.

Since its secret uranium enrichment facilities were exposed in 2002, Tehran has complied with IAEA demands for an additional inspection protocol. It has also agreed with the EU-3 to freeze its enrichment programs on a "voluntary, non-legally binding basis" in return for talks on a package of economic incentives. Iran insisted all along that it would not give up its right under the NPT to uranium enrichment and would not allow negotiations with the EU to drag on forever, thus effectively making the freeze permanent.

The negotiations broke down last month when the EU-3 presented their final offer—closer economic and trade ties but only on the condition that Iran end its enrichment programs. The Iranian regime immediately denounced the offer as an "insult" and restarted its uranium conversion plant at Isfahan. In a speech at the UN on September 17, Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad condemned what he termed the developing system of "nuclear apartheid" in which "certain powerful states completely control nuclear energy resources and technology" and "deny access to other states".

In a joint statement last week, the EU High Representative Javier Solana, along with the British, French and German foreign ministers, decried President Ahmadinejad's speech as giving "no hint of flexibility". They sanctimoniously declared that they had negotiated "in good faith" and were willing "to explore ways to continue negotiations". The absurdity of these claims was apparent from the statement itself, which ruled out any discussion on Iran's

central demand: to maintain its enrichment facilities.

The fact that the statement was published by the *Wall Street Journal* is significant. Over the past two years, the EU has been desperately seeking to balance between its substantial economic interests in Iran and Washington's belligerent and provocative stance towards Tehran. The comment in the *Wall Street Journal* is a signal to the most militarist sections of the American political establishment that, unlike Iraq, the EU will stand unequivocally with the US in any confrontation with Iran.

No doubt the EU-3 is still hoping that a conflict can be avoided and vital European interests in Iran preserved by appeasing Washington and pressuring Iran to capitulate. Any referral of Iran to the UN Security Council still has to be ratified by the IAEA board next month. And even if the matter ends up in the UN, Russia and China, which each has a veto, have opposed the imposition of sanctions on Iran. Such calculations, however, ignore the logic of American militarism.

Iran's nuclear programs are simply a pretext for the Bush administration to press ahead, militarily if necessary, with its ambitions for economic and strategic domination in the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran not only has the world's third largest reserves of oil and second largest of natural gas, but it also stands at the strategic crossroads between the two key regions. Insofar as Washington is concerned about Iranian nuclear weapons at all, it is only because Iran would be better able to defend itself from US attack.

The Bush administration's hypocritical attitude towards possible Iranian nuclear weapons is highlighted by its attitude to its allies that already have such bombs—Israel, India and Pakistan. The US has never insisted that Israel become an NPT signatory, open up its nuclear facilities to inspection or dismantle its atomic bombs. Similarly, the limited US sanctions put in place against Pakistan and India following their nuclear tests in 1998 have been removed piece by piece. Moreover, the US itself does not feel at all bound by the NPT terms, which require existing nuclear powers to dismantle their arsenal.

Yesterday British Foreign Minister Jack Straw attempted to defuse concerns about a military confrontation with Iraq. He made light of Bush's repeated comments that "all options are on the table". "All United States presidents always say all options are open," Straw declared, "but it [military action] is not on the table, it is not on the agenda. I happen to think it is inconceivable." Whether Straw's comments are wishful thinking or outright deception, the EU-3 actions have set processes in motion over which it has little or no control.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, the crucial aspect of the IAEA resolution is that Iran has been formally declared "in breach" of the NPT, providing the excuse for punitive measures. Officially the US remains committed to taking Iran before the UN Security Council and imposing economic sanctions. Such an embargo would impact far more heavily on its European economic rivals, than on the US, as Washington has had virtually no relations with Iran for two decades.

But the Bush administration is not going to be constrained by the UN Security Council. According to an article in the *New York Times*, the White House has already begun discussing "a new

strategy" involving joint US-European action against Iran outside the UN. "If Europe exhausts the diplomatic options, it would have the leverage of diplomatic sanctions and economic sanctions," a US official told the newspaper.

A number of commentators have pointed out, however, that economic sanctions against Iran—whether imposed by the UN or unilaterally—are highly problematic. Particularly at present, any uncertainty in Iranian oil exports is likely to send global oil prices shooting above their record highs and further destabilise world financial markets.

Moreover, Iran may not wait for economic sanctions to be imposed but may retaliate with its own. Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Assefi announced on Tuesday that Iran was planning to use economic ties to punish those countries that voted for the resolution. "If the agency and the Europeans adopt a harsh attitude towards us, they will drive us to a direction and we will have no choice but to react. It is always easy to create a crisis but not easy to control it. We are giving the agency and the Europeans a very serious warning."

Referring to similar comments last week by Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ail Larijani, an article on the *Asia Times* website commented: "This is the first time the Iranian leadership has publicly established a direct, sensitive link between nuclear policy and oil. Of course, it's all part of psychological warfare. But it set alarm bells ringing. Analysts in Europe tend to agree that were Iran to resort to an oil embargo in the next few months, the barrel of oil could easily reach \$US100. According to Thierry Demarest, chief executive of TotalFinaElf, 'the world cannot live without Iranian oil'."

If a crisis over Iran's nuclear programs were to escalate into a full-blown financial crisis then it is not difficult to predict the response of the Bush administration. It would not hesitate to resort to the most reckless military adventures to defend the interests of US imperialism.



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