

US, EU set to refer Iran to the UN Security Council

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The US and European Union (EU) have set course for a full-scale confrontation with Iran, following steps by Tehran on Tuesday to restart its uranium enrichment facilities. The foreign ministers of the EU-3—Britain, France and Germany—met yesterday in Berlin and called for an emergency meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to discuss referring Iran to the UN Security Council for possible punitive sanctions.

The Bush administration, which has been clamouring for such action for more than two years, immediately backed the decision. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice yesterday condemned Iran's "provocative actions" and its "dangerous defiance of the entire international community". She declared last week that the US had the votes on the 35-member IAEA governing board to ensure the issue was taken to the UN Security Council.

The US and EU joined forces last September to push through an IAEA resolution declaring Iran "in breach" of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), but held off immediate UN action due to opposition from Russia and China. The resolution called on Iran to shut down its uranium conversion plant, accept new intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities and "reconsider" the construction of a heavy water research reactor.

The case for UN action against Iran is just as flimsy as it was four months ago. While claiming its right under the NPT to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle—including uranium enrichment—Tehran has repeatedly insisted that it has no intention of building nuclear weapons.

Neither the EU nor the US has provided any concrete evidence that Iran is building a nuclear bomb. Instead, the EU-3 statement yesterday asserted that its decision was "about Iran's failure to build the necessary confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program" and its "documented record of concealment and deception".

The secrecy surrounding Iran's nuclear programs is quite understandable given the long history of US attempts to stymie any Iranian nuclear activities, including the completion of a nuclear power plant at Bushehr. As for "building necessary confidence," Iran is being set the impossible task of proving a negative—that none of its nuclear facilities, now or in the future, will be used for other than peaceful purposes.

After its construction of a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz was revealed in 2002, Iran has been compelled to jump through a never-ending series of hoops. In 2003, Tehran signed an additional protocol allowing for IAEA inspections of all its nuclear facilities.

In November 2004, Iran, under considerable pressure from the EU, reluctantly agreed to freeze its uranium enrichment program to allow for discussions on a broad economic, technical and security agreement.

From the outset, Iran insisted that it would not allow the EU talks to drag on indefinitely and make the temporary freeze, de facto, a permanent one. Negotiations effectively ended last August when newly installed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denounced the long-delayed EU package as "an insult to the Iranian people" and declared his intention to restart the uranium conversion plant at Esfahan. The EU-3 now declares that Iran breached its "international obligations" under the November 2004 agreement, conveniently ignoring the fact that Iran only ever agreed to a freeze on a "voluntary, non-legally binding basis".

The entire process bears a close resemblance to the lead up to the US-led invasion of Iraq. Just as non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" were the pretext for an illegal war on Iraq so the Bush administration is exploiting Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program to further its economic and strategic domination in the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asia. The chief target is not so much Iran but the United States' rivals in Europe and Asia, which over the last decade or so have established close economic relations with Tehran.

Washington's bellicose stance against Tehran cuts directly across European economic interests in Iran, as well as those of Russia, China and Japan. Any economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on Iran will have no direct effect on the US, which has maintained an economic blockade of the country for more than two decades. But the sanctions will have a serious impact on EU countries, which are heavily dependent on Iran for oil and have expanding trade links with Tehran.

At every point, however, the EU has sought to appease Washington. In a bid to engage the US directly in the talks with Iran, the EU-3 made a deal with the Bush administration last March: the US would "cooperate" with the EU-Iranian talks, but in return the EU-3 agreed to back Iran's referral to the UN if negotiations failed. This lop-sided arrangement put all the cards in the American hand: Washington offered very few concessions to Iran and at the same time insisted that nothing less than a permanent shutdown of Iran's uranium enrichment program was acceptable, effectively ensuring that the talks would collapse.

As a result, the EU, which had been hoping to avoid a confrontation, has been caught in a trap of its own making.

Speaking after yesterday's meeting in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier declared that negotiations with Iran "had come to a dead end". It would be more correct to say that the EU's strategy of appeasement has reached a dead end. Unwilling to challenge the Bush administration, the EU-3 is now compelled to refer Iran to the UN.

There is as yet no agreement on what action to take against Iran. In addition, France and Britain, along with Russia and China, have veto rights in the UN Security Council. Yet, there is also a certain logic to events. The Bush administration is calling the tune, and whatever their disagreements, the EU, Russia and China are dancing to it. The *Washington Post* reported that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov personally phoned US Secretary of State Rice on Tuesday to reassure Washington that Moscow would not block Iran's referral to the UN. Behind the scenes, China and Russia are both engaged in frantic efforts to pressure Tehran to resume the EU talks.

Imperialist hypocrisy

All the accusations against Iran reek of breathtaking hypocrisy. Three of the four main instigators of action against Iran—the US, Britain and France—have large arsenals of nuclear weapons. The US, the only country to have ever used a nuclear weapon, has the capacity to obliterate all Iran's major cities in a matter of minutes. All three are signatories to the 1970 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, yet none have carried out their NPT obligations to progressively get rid of their nuclear weapons.

Moreover, the Bush administration has glaring double standards when it comes to its allies. Washington insists that Iran not only comply with the NPT but agree to highly restrictive measures that are not contained within the treaty. At the same time, the US studiously ignores the fact that Israel, India and Pakistan have refused to sign the NPT and have developed their own nuclear weapons. In the case of India, Washington is seeking to forge a close strategic alliance with New Delhi and last year agreed to remove the last of the limited sanctions put in place following the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests.

The Bush administration never tires of branding Iran as "a dangerous threat" to international peace. But it is the US that has waged wars of aggression to subjugate Afghanistan and Iraq, destabilising the Middle East and heightening tensions throughout the world. While Iran poses no serious military threat to the US, the US has large armies in two of Iran's immediate neighbours—Iraq and Afghanistan. It has branded Iran as part of "an axis of evil" and fully backs the Israeli regime, which has threatened to strike unilaterally against Iran.

The provocative stance taken by the US and EU has triggered anger and opposition inside Iran, strengthening the hand of the theocratic regime. President Ahmadinejad, a right-wing populist, has declared that Iran will not back down or be bullied by the major powers. Former president and senior cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani stated yesterday that Iran would resume uranium

enrichment to "break the colonial taboos regarding our peaceful nuclear energy [program] since the West's opposition to our peaceful nuclear energy is rooted in their colonial mentality".

The *World Socialist Web Site* gives no political support whatsoever to the reactionary ruling theocracy in Iran. Nevertheless, Iran has every right to arm itself against the danger of imperialist aggression. While claiming to back a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, US President Bush has declared again and again that "all options"—that is, including military aggression—are on the table.

The open contempt in right-wing US circles for the European diplomatic efforts were spelled out in editorial comment entitled "Unserious Consequences" in the *Wall Street Journal* on Wednesday. "What we are really witnessing is a demonstration of what happens when Iran's provocations are dealt with in a manner that suits Europe's feckless diplomatic 'consensus'. After more than two years of nonstop diplomacy and appeasement, the world is no closer to resolving its nuclear standoff with Iran. But Iran is considerably closer to acquiring the critical mass of technology and know-how needed to build a nuclear weapon," it declared.

After noting "an increasing number of credible reports that Israel is well along in planning a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear sites", the editorial commented: "It should not be Israel's lot to safeguard the security of the West in the face of a common threat, as it did when it destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor at Osirak in 1981. But if we're going to avoid this grim scenario, both Europe and the US need to threaten, and apply, stiffer penalties against Iran than they have suggested so far."

The newspaper did not spell out the penalties, but it left no doubt that military measures should not be precluded. A recent report in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* provided evidence that the Pentagon is already engaged in preparations for a possible strike on Iran. With the US military bogged down in a deepening quagmire in Iraq, a US attack on Iran is more difficult and therefore less likely. However, given the Bush administration's record of reckless military adventures, it certainly cannot be ruled out.



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