

The political issues behind the Iranian nuclear confrontation

The Editorial Board
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The escalating confrontation between Iran and the major powers over Tehran's nuclear programs raises crucial political issues.

Once again the Bush administration is recklessly setting the course for military conflict. Again, the European powers, Russia and China, caught between Washington's demands and their own economic interests in Iran and the Middle East, have chosen to appease the US. While economic sanctions are currently under discussion, the White House has repeatedly made clear that "all options", including a military attack, are "on the table".

The EU-3—Britain, France and Germany—have called for an emergency meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to refer Iran to the UN Security Council for punitive sanctions. Russia and China are yet to finally agree. However, at a meeting on Monday in London, all five concurred with the US that Iran had to "return to full suspension" of its uranium enrichment activities, thus providing the pretext for increasingly aggressive measures against Tehran.

The entire rationale for UN action against Iran, recycled endlessly in the international media, reeks of cynicism and hypocrisy. All five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China—have nuclear weapons and have failed to meet their obligations as signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to dismantle their huge nuclear arsenals.

There is nothing benign about these stockpiles. Rather their purpose is to bully, threaten and ultimately be deployed against smaller, weaker powers, as the incendiary comments of French President Jacques Chirac last Thursday make clear. Speaking at a nuclear submarine base in Brittany, Chirac warned that France would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons against any state that sponsored a terrorist attack against vital French interests. "The flexibility and reactivity of our strategic [nuclear] forces allow us to respond directly on the centres of power," he declared.

A glaring double standard is applied to Iran, which is being menaced with economic sanctions and military strikes over its nuclear programs, while US allies—Israel, India and Pakistan—already have nuclear weapons. Other countries, such as Brazil, either have built or are currently constructing uranium enrichment plants, which are not outlawed under the NPT.

Just as it used Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, the Bush administration is exploiting the Iranian "nuclear threat" to advance its ambitions for untrammelled domination of the resource-rich region. Iran, which has the world's third largest reserves of oil and the second largest reserves of natural gas, sits in a key strategic position astride the Middle East, Central Asia and the increasingly important Indian subcontinent. Even if the Iranian regime were to abandon all nuclear

programs and completely demolish its nuclear facilities, Washington would invent another pretext for its provocative actions, which are aimed at establishing US ascendancy in the region over America's European and Asian rivals.

In opposing the predatory activities of US imperialism in the Middle East, however, the *World Socialist Web Site* does not give any political support to the reactionary theocratic regime in Tehran nor to any attempt on its part to acquire nuclear weapons. The Islamic Republic established following the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979 represented the interests of dissident sections of the bourgeoisie, not those of the working people who brought down the hated dictatorship. The clerical powerbrokers have maintained their rule for three decades through ruthless repression, directed above all against any independent movement of the working class.

In response to the latest threats, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has declared that his government will defy the UN Security Council and proceed with plans to develop uranium enrichment. In a press conference last weekend, he condemned what he called the "medieval attitude" of "bullies" and issued vague threats that "a time might come that you would become regretful, and then there would be no benefits in regretting." In a veiled reference to the danger of skyrocketing oil prices, he declared: "They confront us and deal with us in very harsh and illegal language, but ultimately they need us more than we need them."

No one should mistake Ahmadinejad's bravado for a genuine struggle against imperialism. The aim of this limited challenge is to pressure the major powers for a more advantageous relationship for the Iranian bourgeoisie and to bolster Iran's position as a regional power. For the past two years, Tehran has been seeking to use the nuclear issue to manoeuvre between the US and the European powers for a formal agreement with the EU for closer economic and political relations, in return for concessions on its nuclear programs.

Ahmadinejad obliquely referred to "war criminals" who back Israel and those who "fight wars in other countries in order to get security for themselves". But, for all its posturing against the Bush administration, the Iranian regime is an accomplice to the US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite its formal opposition, Tehran cooperated with the US-led invasion of Iraq, calculating that the defeat of its regional rival would only strengthen its own position. In Iraq itself, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which is closely aligned to the Iranian regime, openly backed the invasion and now forms a central component of the US puppet regime.

Ahmadinejad blandly declared last weekend that "our goal is the peaceful use of nuclear technology" and again asserted Iran's rights

under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle. Whatever his public statements, however, the president is connected to the most right-wing elements of the theocracy, who insist that Iran has to have not only nuclear power plants, but nuclear weapons as well. The construction of nuclear weapons is viewed as the means to establish Iran as a regional power in the Middle East, just as the Indian government is attempting to do in South Asia.

There are no doubt those in the Iranian regime who calculate, or rather miscalculate, that if Iran had nuclear weapons the US would be compelled to come to terms with Tehran in the same way that it did New Delhi after its 1998 nuclear tests. However, a few crude Iranian nuclear weapons would not seriously deter US aggression. In fact, the construction and testing of an Iranian nuclear weapon would only heighten the danger of a military strike or all-out war by the US and its allies, with devastating consequences.

The danger of imperialist war will not be ended through the acquisition of nuclear weapons by countries like Iran and North Korea and bloodcurdling threats to incinerate millions of innocent working people, in Israel or South Korea or elsewhere. Such threats play directly into the hands of US imperialism. Washington has exploited the outrage produced by Ahmadinejad's openly anti-Semitic statements, denying the Nazi Holocaust and calling for the state of Israel to be "wiped off the map", to justify the current international action against Iran.

Ahmadinejad's reactionary appeals to nationalism and xenophobia cut directly across the only practical and progressive strategy for combatting the eruption of US militarism: the development of a broad global offensive against war and imperialist oppression by the international working class, based on the struggle for a socialist program. The natural allies of working people in Iran are workers throughout the Middle East, including Israel, as well as in the United States, Europe and internationally, not nationalist demagogues like Ahmadinejad or any other faction of the Iranian bourgeoisie.

The surprise victory of Ahmadinejad in last year's presidential poll was itself the product of a deepening economic and social crisis in Iran for which no faction of the capitalist class has any solution other than to place the burden onto the backs of working people. His populist appeals to "put Iran's oil wealth on people's tables" struck a chord with workers and young people who are increasingly disenchanted with the corrupt theocratic regime that has brought enormous wealth to a few at the expense of the vast majority.

Ahmadinejad's win reflected above all the political bankruptcy of the so-called reformists led by former president Mohammed Khatami, who came to power in 1997. Khatami promised to improve living standards and establish basic democratic rights, but did neither. He responded to every significant movement of workers and students by immediately closing ranks with the conservative hand-liners to crack down on dissent. At the same time he sought to open up the Iranian economy to foreign investors and, to that end, improve relations with Europe and the US, even as Washington invaded neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq and threatened military intervention against Iran itself.

While Ahmadinejad capitalised on popular disgust towards the "reformers," he has no solution to the social and economic catastrophe confronting millions of Iranians. Despite its large reserves of oil and gas and the current high price of oil, the Iranian economy is suffering from high inflation, a lack of investment and decrepit infrastructure. According to an estimate by the National Iranian Oil Company, the oil

industry desperately needs \$70 billion over the next 10 years to modernise the country's dilapidated infrastructure.

UN economic sanctions on Iran will intensify the country's deep social crisis. The population is very young—nearly 50 percent is under the age of 20 and 70 percent is under 30. The official unemployment rate is 16 percent, but other estimates put the figure twice as high. Only half of the one million new job-seekers entering the market each year find work. According to a government study in 2004, joblessness among 15- to 29-year-olds was set to skyrocket to 52 percent in less than two years.

The fact that the Iranian ruling class is compelled to rely on Ahmadinejad is a sign of the political impasse that it has reached. Unable to address the needs and aspirations of the Iranian masses, it is forced to turn to a populist demagogue to whip up anti-Semitism and chauvinism to divert attention from the government's failure to solve the social crisis at home and its manoeuvring with imperialism abroad. The climate of national emergency will undoubtedly be exploited to further wind back what limited democratic rights exist in Iran and crack down on dissidents, including various minorities.

As the confrontation with US imperialism and its allies deepens, the regime in Tehran may well decide that it has no alternative but to embark on the course of developing, testing and stockpiling nuclear weapons. There is no doubting the very real dangers posed by the Bush administration, which has enunciated and aggressively acted upon its doctrine of preventive war with reckless indifference to the consequences and contempt for international law. While insisting Tehran restrict its nuclear activities, the US is openly flouting the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by developing a new generation of "bunker-buster" nuclear weapons that are aimed precisely at the type of protected underground facilities that exist in Iran.

The working class, however, cannot give any support to the building of an Iranian nuclear weapon, which would inevitably be justified through a frenzied nationalist campaign to defend the Iranian state and the so-called Islamic revolution. The threat of nuclear war is not an answer to imperialist aggression, but a recipe for a nuclear holocaust in the Middle East and beyond. The only realistic alternative to the predatory policies of imperialism and the danger of nuclear war is the program of revolutionary class struggle.

What is required is the construction of a broad, politically independent movement of the international working class that tackles the root cause of war and social inequality: capitalism and the outmoded nation state system. In opposition to all forms of nationalism, racism and chauvinism, workers must unite their struggles to reconstruct the economic system on socialist lines to meet the social needs of humanity as a whole, rather than the profits of a tiny handful. That is the program advocated by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International and fought for by its sections around the world.



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