

# US ambassador to UN warns of “painful consequences” for Iran

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In a provocative speech to an influential pro-Israeli lobby group on Sunday, US ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, bluntly threatened Iran with “painful consequences” if it failed to accede completely to Washington’s demands to shut down its nuclear programs.

Bolton told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference that there was an urgent need to confront Iran’s “clear and unrelenting drive” for nuclear weapons. “The longer we wait to confront the threat Iran poses, the harder and more intractable it will become to solve... we must be prepared to rely on comprehensive solutions and use all the tools at our disposal to stop the threat that the Iranian regime poses.”

Bolton’s belligerent remarks were directed as much against the UN and America’s own allies, as against Iran. With Tehran on the verge of being formally referred to the UN Security Council for punitive sanctions, the US ambassador warned that a failure by the body to act against Iran would “do lasting damage to the credibility of the council”. He emphasised that the US was not solely reliant on the UN and could take other measures against Iran—a pointed reminder of Washington’s unilateral invasion of Iraq.

Coming on the eve of a key International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting on Iran, Bolton’s speech was obviously aimed at pressuring Russia, China and the European Union to accepting Washington’s demands. The message was clear: if the major powers failed to support referral to the UN and tough UN measures, the US would go it alone and use “all tools at our disposal” to end the alleged Iranian nuclear threat. US President Bush and other senior officials have repeatedly declared that all options, that is, including military action, are “on the table”.

At its previous meeting in early February, the IAEA board voted to “report” Iran to the UN but held off implementing the decision for a month to allow for further negotiations. Since then there has been a flurry of diplomatic activity, particularly over a Russian proposal for a joint uranium enrichment program with Iran on Russian soil. Unlike the

US, Russia as well as China and the EU countries all have major economic interests in Iran that would be threatened by economic sanctions or war. None of them, however, is prepared to challenge Washington.

Bolton’s comments set the tone for the IAEA meeting that began on Monday. American officials promptly scuttled a tentative Russian compromise that would have permitted Iran to continue limited, small-scale research into uranium enrichment in return for a lengthy moratorium on industrial scale enrichment and the resumption of intrusive IAEA inspections of Iranian nuclear sites. After meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov did an abrupt about face and publicly denied that any such Russian proposal existed. More pressure was applied when Lavrov flew to Washington for further talks with Rice and, in a break with usual protocol, Bush himself.

US Vice-President Richard Cheney reinforced Bolton’s threats in his own address to AIPAC conference on Monday. “The Iranian regime needs to know that if it stays on its present course, the international community is prepared to impose meaningful consequences. For our part, the United States is keeping all options on the table in addressing the irresponsible conduct of the regime. And we join other nations in sending that regime a clear message: We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon,” he declared.

The choice of venue was significant. Both Bolton and Cheney chose to deliver speeches at the AIPAC conference despite the fact that two of its lobbyists have been indicted for receiving highly classified Pentagon information and passing it on to an Israeli diplomat. The documents came from the Defence Department’s top Iran specialist Lawrence Franklin and related to US strategy towards Iran. Like the US, Israel has threatened military action to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities. Bolton and Cheney were among kindred spirits at the AIPAC conference with its rabidly pro-Israeli and anti-Iranian audience.

No one in the Bush administration has offered any conclusive evidence that Iran is building nuclear weapons.

Tehran has declared that it is interested solely in a nuclear power industry and insisted on its right as a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty signatory to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. As in the case of Iraq, the Bush administration is simply exploiting allegations of weapons of mass destruction as a pretext for furthering its ambition to dominate the oil-rich Middle East. If Tehran were to turn around and agree to all of the IAEA conditions, Washington would rapidly invent a new excuse to confront Iran.

Yesterday, for instance, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld provocatively accused Iran of sending its Revolutionary Guards into Iraq to foment violence. "They have been putting people into Iraq to do things that are harmful to the future of Iraq," he said. He offered no evidence for the claim nor did he explain why Iran would be involved when Shiite fundamentalist parties sympathetic to Tehran dominate the Iraqi government. When asked whether the Iranian regime was responsible, Rumsfeld offhandedly declared: "Of course. The Revolutionary Guard doesn't go milling around willy-nilly."

US Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte piled on further accusations, repeating claims by British and US officials that Iran was supplying sophisticated bombs to anti-occupation insurgents. "Tehran has been responsible for at least some of the increased lethality," Negroponte said, by providing improvised roadside bombs with "explosively formed projectiles" capable of penetrating the thickest US vehicle armour.

All of these unsubstantiated claims serve to whip up a climate of fear at home as well as to provide a pretext for action against Iran in the international arena. It is in this poisonous atmosphere that members of the IAEA board of governors will vote sometime this week to refer Iran to the UN Security Council where the pressure is already mounting for what Cheney called "meaningful consequences". If it fails to get what it wants in that forum, then as Bolton declared, the US will take unilateral action of its own.

There is clearly an internal debate underway in the Bush administration over the methods to be used. The most right-wing figures like Bolton and Cheney have made little secret of their support for military means.

In private talks with a group of British MPs last week, Bolton openly discussed possible strikes against Iran. As reported by Labour MP Eric Illsley to the *Guardian* newspaper, Bolton told the group: "They [Iran] must know everything is on the table and they must understand what that means. We can hit different points down the line. You only have to take out one part of their nuclear operation to take the whole thing down."

Publicly the White House maintains that military action is

a last resort. However, there is a continuing stream of leaks from military and intelligence sources in the US, Israel and elsewhere, indicating that detailed planning is underway for possible air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.

An article in the *Jerusalem Post* on February 20 reported that Washington had "put out feelers" to the governments in two of Iran's neighbours—Georgia and Azerbaijan—about the possible use of military bases and airfields in the event of a US attack on Iran. While the report was officially denied, the possibility cannot be ruled out. Late last year CIA head Porter Goss visited Turkey to seek political, intelligence and logistical support for a potential attack on Iran.

The British-based *Times* newspaper in an article on March 5 entitled "NATO may help airstrikes on Iran" noted the comments of Major General Axel Tüttlemann, head of NATO's airborne Early Warning and Control Force, during a visit a fortnight ago to Israel. Speaking of possible NATO involvement in a strike on Iran, he declared: "We would be the first to be called up if the NATO council decided we should be." At the very least, Tüttlemann's remarks reflect discussions taking place in NATO headquarters in Europe.

Citing unnamed Israeli officials, the same story reported that Israeli special forces are operating inside Iran searching out the country's nuclear facilities. "We found several suspected sites last year but there must be more," an Israeli military intelligence source said. The Israeli units were operating from a base inside northern Iraq, with US approval. Similar details emerged in an extensive article by US journalist Seymour Hersh entitled "The Coming Wars" published in the *New Yorker* in January 2005.

Of course these "leaks" serve a number of purposes. Like the comments of Bolton and Cheney, they ratchet up the pressure not only on Iran, but also on US rivals in Europe and Asia to fall into line with Washington. In the final analysis, however, this military planning demonstrates that the Bush administration is prepared to plunge into another reckless adventure with no regard for its consequences and despite the ongoing disaster in Iraq.



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