

Washington seeks to bully UN Security Council over Iran

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Having pressured the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into referring Iran to the UN, the Bush administration is engaged in a new round of diplomatic thuggery aimed at obtaining a UN Security Council statement as the fig leaf for aggressive action against Tehran.

The US is backing a draft drawn up by Britain and France that amounts to an ultimatum to Iran to end all uranium enrichment activity within a fortnight or face unspecified consequences. The fourth in a series of meetings involving the five permanent UN Security Council members—the US, Britain, France, China and Russia—broke up yesterday without any agreement.

The Bush administration has made clear that it intends to act against Iran, with or without UN support. Its ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, spelled out Washington's contempt for the body in an interview on Monday with Fox News. He declared that Iran was "a real test for the Security Council," demonstrating that it was not just Tehran but the UN that had to measure up to US demands.

In language that recalls the lies and threats employed before the US invasion of Iraq, Bolton provocatively declared: "If the UN Security Council can't deal with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, can't deal with the greatest threat we have with a country like Iran—that's one of the leading state sponsors of terrorism—if the Security Council can't deal with that, you have a real question of what it can deal with."

Bolton, it should be remembered, has long denounced the UN as an inadequate vehicle for pursuing US global interests and advocated aggressive, unilateral action along the lines of the illegal US invasion of Iraq. Notoriously, he declared in a speech in 1994 that if the top ten floors of the UN headquarters in New York were to disappear, the world would never miss them.

Without providing an iota of evidence, Bolton speaks as if Iran is on the verge of obtaining nuclear weapons in order to create alarm at home and to stampede the UN into bowing to US demands. But his claims are at odds with the report prepared by IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei—the formal basis of the reference to the UN Security Council—which provided no conclusive evidence of Iranian nuclear weapons programs. Iran insists that all its nuclear activities are aimed at the development of civilian power reactors.

Bolton reiterated to Fox News that Washington was prepared to use military means to stop Iran's nuclear programs, saying: "The use of force is certainly an option that's out there." In recent weeks, a steady stream of media leaks has indicated that the

Pentagon has been actively engaged with NATO and the Israeli armed forces in drawing up detailed military plans for possible strikes on Iran. In comments yesterday, Bolton declared that Washington's patience was running out and that the "negotiating process will not be indefinite".

Speaking to a congressional committee last week, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns emphasised that the Bush administration was not relying on the UN, but had already been sounding out "a number of nations" over their willingness to impose sanctions on Iran. "[I]t's going to be incumbent upon our allies around the world, and interested countries, to show that they are willing to act, should the words and resolutions of the United Nations not suffice," he said.

As the London-based *Financial Times* noted: "Analysts in Washington said that Mr Burns's remarks reflected a broad expectation in the Bush administration that it would not be able to persuade Russia and China on the [UN] Security Council to back meaningful sanctions, and that the US would look to forming an ad hoc alliance, as with the 'coalition of the willing' for Iraq."

To date, the Bush administration has failed to pressure Russia and China to even agree to the draft statement being circulated this week. After talks with other permanent members broke up yesterday, China's UN ambassador Wang Guan-gya insisted to the media that the Security Council "should not close the doors for diplomatic activities" and should "reinforce" not "replace" the IAEA as the means of resolving the crisis.

Russia and China have both emphatically rejected the imposition of sanctions or military action against Iran. Yesterday Moscow was still attempting to resurrect a proposal involving the operation of a joint Russian-Iranian enrichment plant on Russia soil. The US, however, effectively scuttled the deal last week when it ruled out allowing Tehran to retain any enrichment research activities inside Iran, no matter how limited or closely monitored.

The Bush administration has no interest in a negotiated compromise. Despite signs from Tehran that it may be looking for talks with the US, on Monday Bolton rejected any possibility, declaring: "I don't think we have anything to say to the Iranians." For Washington, Iran's alleged nuclear programs are just a pretext for the aggressive pursuit of US ambitions for predominance in the Middle East and Central Asia.

In mid-February, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ratcheted up the US campaign for regime change in Iran by requesting an additional \$75 million to fund anti-Tehran

propaganda and finance opposition groups inside and outside Iran. An article in the *Washington Post* last week revealed that the US State Department has rapidly elevated Iran to a top priority, expanding the dedicated staff from two to ten and initiating a Farsi language training program.

Richard Haass, State Department policy director during Bush's first term, told the *Washington Post*: "The upper hand is with those who are pushing regime change rather than those who are advocating more diplomacy." Along with the State Department's diplomatic activities, there is no doubt that the Pentagon and CIA are already engaged in more sinister action, including inside Iran itself, to encourage opposition and to identify potential targets for military attack.

The Bush administration's plan to destabilise Iran is generating resistance in Moscow and Beijing as well as apprehension among US allies in Europe and Asia. As in the case of Iraq, Washington's main objective in the present confrontation with Tehran is to establish its economic and strategic dominance at the expense of its major rivals. The destabilisation of the Tehran regime threatens to undermine contracts, trade and investment worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Iran not only has the world's fourth largest reserves of oil and second largest of natural gas but lies at a key strategic crossroads between the two resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Even Washington's close allies, such as Britain and Japan, stand to suffer huge economic losses from comprehensive economic sanctions or war against Iran. In a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London this week, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw echoed the Bush administration's "regime change" rhetoric, declaring that Iranians "deserved better" than a government that was taking the country "in the wrong direction". At the same time, however, he reiterated that military action against Iran was "inconceivable"—putting Britain out of step with the US.

A brief look at the economic interests at stake in Iran is enough to reveal the source of the tensions in the UN Security Council.

Europe: Since the opening of relations with Iran in the mid-1990s, the EU has become Iran's largest trading partner with 35 percent of total market share, ahead of Japan with 12.3 percent and China with 9.1 percent. EU exports to Iran have doubled since 1999. Despite relying on Iran as a major source of oil and related products, the European countries had a significant trade surplus with Iran in 2004. The efforts of the EU-3—Britain, France and Germany—since 2003 to negotiate a deal with Tehran to end nuclear stand-off were primarily aimed at a further expansion of the economic relationship with Iran.

Japan: Iran is the third largest exporter of oil to Japan, accounting for about 15.9 percent of its oil needs. In February 2004, Japan's Inpex Corp signed a major deal with Tehran for 75 percent of development rights of the huge Azedegan oil field, one of the largest in the Middle East with estimated reserves of 26 billion barrels. The Japanese government, which is the majority shareholder in Inpex Corp, has repeatedly spurned US demands to repudiate a deal that would provide Japan with substantial, secure oil supplies. Japanese officials have voiced concerns that China would fill the gap if Inpex pulled out of the deal.

China: Iran accounts for some 14 percent of China's oil imports and is its number two supplier after Saudi Arabia. China's state-owned Sinopec Group has signed a \$70 billion deal to develop Iran's Yadavarn oil field in exchange for a 25-year contract to purchase Iranian liquified natural gas (LNG). Dozens of Chinese construction firms, employing thousands of Chinese workers, are active in Iran, including North Industries Corp (Norinco) which is building underground rail links in Tehran. China is also collaborating with Iran in the development of oil reserves in the Caspian Sea.

Russia: Moscow has had a highly profitable economic relationship with Iran. Russian companies, employing tens of thousands of people, have nearly completed Iran's first nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. The project was estimated to be worth \$US1 billion and another \$5 billion in future contracts are in the offing as the Iranian regime plans to build other power reactors. Russia is also a major supplier of military hardware to Iran. In February, despite US objections, Moscow announced a deal to supply 30 Tor M-1 surface-to-air missiles at an estimated cost of \$700 million. The sophisticated missile systems are capable of identifying up to 48 targets and firing at two simultaneously up to a height of 20,000 feet.

India: New Delhi and Islamabad have signed a deal with Tehran for the construction of a \$7 billion gas pipeline from Iran via Pakistan to India. Both countries have come under pressure from Washington to tear up the deal, which has been an important component of the so-called peace process between the two South Asian rivals, and to look for energy supplies from other sources.

In an article obviously backgrounded by White House officials, Monday's *Financial Times* claimed that US officials were looking for "creative ways" of addressing the "energy worries" of China, Japan and India. "The US is searching for a viable energy framework that would persuade such thirsty customers to halt planned investments in Iran's energy sector or even contemplate the shock of a sudden break in oil exports," its Washington correspondent stated. Even the writer was sceptical, however, concluding "so far, US moves seem to be having the opposite effect".

In fact, the US confrontation with Iran is having precisely the planned effect. Having maintained a complete embargo on Iran for over two decades, the US has nothing to lose and everything to gain by destabilising the Iranian regime and its economic arrangements with Washington's rivals in Europe and Asia. The quagmire in neighbouring Iraq and the deep political crisis in the US itself, far from inhibiting the Bush administration, are far more likely to act as a spur to new and reckless action against Iran.



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