

# US administration slams door on negotiations with Iran

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The Bush administration has emphatically ruled out any direct talks with Tehran, despite an overture from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an open letter from top Iranian official Hassan Rohani and an appeal by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan over the past week.

The US stance highlights the absurdity of President Bush's declaration, repeated last Tuesday, that his administration is engaged in "diplomacy" as "the first and most important option" to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear programs. As far as the political gangsters in the White House are concerned, "diplomacy" consists of issuing ultimatums, backed by the threat of war, and bullying opponents and allies alike into acceding to US demands.

Bush's comments came just one day after Ahmadinejad sent an 18-page letter addressed to the US president—the first direct, public contact between the two countries since the overthrow of the US-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979. If the US were at all serious about diplomacy, it would have seized on the long, rambling and occasionally barbed document as an opening for negotiations.

Stratfor, a conservative thinktank with close links to the US intelligence establishment, assessed the letter as an Iranian effort at reestablishing relations with the US. "Embedded in passages that would seem to be completely unobjectionable to any audiences at home [in Iran] can be found key phrases and hints, letting the other side know that one is ready to make concessions in exchange for reciprocity. Thus, tensions can be defused without anyone actually appearing to be compromised.... It will be interesting to see how the Americans write back."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice dismissed the letter out of hand as "nothing new". Bush declared that Ahmadinejad had failed to address the main question—"when will you get rid of your nuclear program?" In other words, what is required of Tehran is nothing short of complete capitulation. The White House also rejected an open letter from Hassan Rohani published last Tuesday on the *Time* web site. Rohani, who was Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator, is currently the representative of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the country's powerful Supreme National Security Council.

Rohani's tightly-drafted letter pointed out that Iran has no reason to build nuclear weapons, has repeatedly declared it is not doing so and that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after three years of inspections has found no evidence to the contrary. "What is, then, the motive for the rush to heighten the situation and create a crisis? Could it be that the extremists all around see their interests—however transient, domestic and short-sighted—in heightened tension and crisis?... It is high time to cease sensationalism and warmongering, pause and think twice about where we are heading," he declared, before setting out a series of Iranian proposals for resolving the dispute.

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack declared: "We've seen it. I think there really isn't anything new in it." Washington also rejected a further offer from the Iranian president last Thursday to negotiate and an appeal the following day by Kofi Annan for the US to "come to the table and join the European countries and Iran to find a solution".

In comments to CNN on Sunday, former US President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski scathingly declared: "It's really ironic. We are not negotiating with Iran, but we are negotiating. Who are we negotiating with? We are negotiating with the negotiators with Iran. And it's an absurd situation." He pointed to the double standards of the Bush administration's willingness to engage in multilateral talks with North Korea, which claims to have manufactured nuclear weapons, but not with Iran.

Reflecting concerns in US ruling circles about the recklessness of the Bush administration's actions, Brzezinski warned against "pumping up an atmosphere of urgency" when "the earliest, by most intelligence analyses, the Iranians will have nuclear weapons is approximately five years, more likely 10. Some even say 15." He called for negotiations with Iran, but the appeal, like all the others, fell on deaf ears.

The Bush administration's aim is not a negotiated deal with Iran over its nuclear programs, but "regime change" and the installation of a pro-US puppet administration in Tehran. Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs are simply the pretext for advancing Washington's broader ambitions to dominate the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran, with its own huge reserves of oil and gas, is strategically

located between the two regions and between US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.

Washington's "diplomacy" is not directed primarily at Tehran, but rather at bullying its European and Asian rivals into sanctioning and supporting its actions. Having pressured the EU, Russia and China into referring Iran to the UN Security Council, the US is now pressing for a binding Chapter 7 resolution declaring Tehran's nuclear programs to be "a threat to international peace and security" opening the door for punitive sanctions and military action against Iran.

Negotiations between the permanent members of the UN Security Council—the US, Russia, China, France and Britain—plus Germany ended last week in considerable acrimony. With the exception of the US, which has maintained an economic blockade on Iran since 1979, all the major powers have investments and economic interests in Iran that would be undermined by sanctions or a military attack. Russia and China in particular have opposed any UN resolution that would provide the pretext for punitive measures against Iran.

According to the Hong Kong-based *Standard*, the meeting of six foreign ministers on May 8 was described by one US official as "a pretty extraordinary session and everyone's been talking about it in private since." What was to be a polite 30-minute chat in Rice's suite before dinner turned into a two-hour slanging match before the ministers sat down to "shrivelled sea bass" and further bickering in front of top officials.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov "repeatedly complained" about the remarks of US Vice President Richard Cheney during a trip the previous week to Lithuania, in which he provocatively attacked Moscow over restrictions on democratic rights and its use of oil and gas as "tools of intimidation and blackmail." Lavrov accused US officials of undermining European efforts to resolve the Iranian crisis and threatened to veto the draft resolution drawn up by Britain and France, with US backing, if it were brought to the UN Security Council.

In his state of the nation address last Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin openly castigated the Bush administration's hypocrisy over "democratic rights", declaring: "Where is all the fervour about the need for human rights and democracy, when it comes to the need to realise their own interests? Here it seems everything is possible, there are no restrictions." He obliquely warned that "the use of force [by the US against Iran] ... could be more disastrous than the initial threat".

Underlining the sharpness of tensions, Putin called for a rebuilding of the Russian military to "preserve the strategic balance of forces". After pointing out that the US now spent 25 times Russia on its armed forces, he declared, to the applause of Russian parliamentarians: "Their house is their fortress. Good for them. But that means we must make our own house strong and firm. Because we see what is happening in the world. As

they say, 'Comrade Wolf knows whom to eat'. He eats and doesn't listen to anyone. And judging by appearances, he has no intention of listening." The bitterness of US-Russian relations reflects the intensity of the scramble for resources and strategic position, particularly in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Following the collapse of the New York meeting of foreign ministers, the six powers agreed to allow the European countries a fortnight to draft a new UN Security Council resolution that would offer Iran a package of economic and political incentives to end its uranium enrichment program, as well as outlining punitive measures if it failed to do so. Such a proposal is unlikely to gain the support of Russia and China as it would commit them to actions that they previously opposed in the event that Iran declined the "incentives". Last weekend, Ahmadinejad indicated that Tehran would reject any package that required it to shut down its enrichment facilities.

The Bush administration has already made abundantly clear that it intends to proceed against Iran, with or without the support of the UN Security Council. US ambassador to the UN John Bolton bluntly declared on May 2: "If for whatever reason the council couldn't fulfill its responsibilities, then I think it would be incumbent on us, and I am sure we would press ahead to ask other countries or other groups of countries to impose those sanctions." If the US fails to achieve its objectives through sanctions, as is almost certainly the case, then Bush and other top US officials have repeatedly declared that "all options [that is, including US military action] are on the table".

The relentlessness of the US pursuit of Iran's nuclear programs is not a measure of the threat posed by Iran, but of the political and economic crisis confronting US imperialism. Confronted with deepening military quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan and profound hostility to its policies at home, the Bush administration is recklessly preparing for a new criminal military adventure both to divert public attention, to intimidate its international rivals and to consolidate its grip in the Middle East. Putin's remarks make clear Washington's militarism will sooner or later produce a reaction from its rivals, who are determined to defend their vital interests, thus sowing the seeds for far broader and even more catastrophic conflicts.



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