US administration rejects Iran's offer of "serious negotiations"

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The Bush administration yesterday signalled its rejection of Iran's offer of "serious negotiations," setting the stage for punitive economic sanctions and an escalating confrontation with Tehran.

The US response came just a day after Tehran issued a lengthy formal reply to a package of proposals on Iran's nuclear programs made by the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany in June. White House spokeswoman Dana Perino announced Wednesday that the Iranian response "falls short of the conditions set by the Security Council".

The US pushed a resolution through the UN Security Council on July 31 setting the end of August as the deadline for Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment programs and agree to intrusive inspection of all its nuclear facilities. Washington's ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, declared on Tuesday, prior to reading the Iranian document, that the US was prepared to "move rapidly" for a new UN resolution imposing sanctions on Iran if it failed to halt its nuclear programs.

The Bush administration has never shown the slightest interest in talks with Iran. When Bush and his officials speak of "a diplomatic solution" to the conflict, it does not entail negotiating with Tehran, but rather bullying the other members of the UN Security Council into setting ultimatums and agreeing to sanctions. The package of economic incentives drawn up with US approval to induce Iran to shut down its nuclear programs was on a "take it, or leave it" basis.

As several commentators have noted, Washington never seriously supported the joint package, refusing to include a US security guarantee in return for a halt to uranium enrichment—one of Iran's key demands. An article on the *Asia Times* website on August 24 entitled "US made an offer Iran can only refuse" commented: "The US has never been prepared to give such [security] guarantees, and thus ended what appeared on the surface to be a genuine multilateral initiative for negotiations with Iran... the history of the international proposal shows that the Bush administration was determined from the beginning that it would fail...."

While details of Iran's 21-page document have not been released, Tehran's approach is far more in line with the norms of international diplomacy. It is likely that Iran has offered to discuss a suspension of its uranium enrichment activities, as proposed by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki last week, but is unwilling to give up what it regards as its bargaining chips in advance of negotiations. US officials flatly rejected Mottaki's comments, insisting that nothing short of complete compliance with the UN resolution was acceptable.

Iran has repeatedly stated that its programs are not for nuclear weapons, but nuclear power. It has insisted on its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to research and develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes, including uranium enrichment, and branded the UN resolution passed last month as "illegal". Tehran has previously offered not only to ratify the so-called additional protocol allowing highly invasive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), but also to discuss additional safeguards to ensure its nuclear programs are not used for weapons purposes.

While it cannot be ruled out that sections of the Iranian regime have ambitions to become a nuclear power, the Bush administration has not offered any evidence to support its claims that such weapons programs are underway. Three years of IAEA investigations have failed to uncover any proof that Iran is constructing an atomic weapon. US claims that Iran has previously not declared all nuclear facilities ignores the fact that for more than two decades Washington has attempted to block every Iranian nuclear program, including the completion of its power reactor at the port of Bushehr.

The Bush administration's aggressive stance against Iran's nuclear activities has only ever been a pretext for its broader aim of "regime change" in Tehran, as part of its ambitions for US dominance throughout the resource-rich Middle East and Central Asian regions. As veteran journalist Seymour Hersh explained in a recent article in the *New*

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Yorker, the US was intimately involved in the Israeli offensive in southern Lebanon, which the White House regarded as the preparation for a wider war against Iran and Syria.

Well aware that the US is casting around for a *casus belli* for possible military action against Iran, the other major powers have only reluctantly supported the US stance in the UN. Earlier this year, Britain, France and Germany fell into line with US calls for sanctions, no doubt hoping to protect their interests in the Middle East by retaining a say in any measures imposed against Tehran. Russia and China have opposed any punitive action against Iran and only supported last month's UN resolution when it was modified to exclude automatic sanctions. Unlike the US, which has had virtually no economic relations with Tehran since the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi in 1979, all the other powers have substantial economic interests in Iran.

In the wake of Iran's announcement on Tuesday, these divisions have again opened up. US officials were due to meet informally with their European counterparts on Wednesday in New York to discuss the Iranian proposal and their response. Russia and China, which did not attend, have both initially called for further negotiations with Tehran. While French Foreign Minister Phillipe Douste-Blazy declared it was "now or never" for Iran to cooperate, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement reiterating its call for "a peaceful resolution... through diplomatic talks".

The Bush administration's aggressive strategy remains unchanged: to pressure the UN Security Council into imposing provocative sanctions against Tehran and to increase funding for Iranian opposition groups to undermine and destabilise the Iranian regime, while at the same time preparing for military action against Iran and Syria. Even while nominally supporting the joint international package of incentives offered to Iran, discussions continued in the Pentagon as the best means for attacking Iran.

In an article in the *New Yorker* last month entitled "Last Stand", Seymour Hersh again detailed the debates in the White House and Pentagon over the efficacy of massive air strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, cities and infrastructure. Quite apart from Bush's public warnings, Hersh noted: "There was an unspoken threat: the US Strategic Command, supported by the Air Force, has been drawing up plans, at the President's direction, for a major bombing campaign in Iran."

There is no doubt that Israel's humiliating failure to achieve a quick victory of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon was a major setback not only to Tel Aviv, but also to Washington. The Israeli offensive, despite its overwhelming and merciless use of force, failed to destroy Hezbollah's ability to fight back and as a result boosted its prestige and that of Iran in Lebanon and throughout the region. The American position in the Middle East has also been weakened by the deepening disasters confronting the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as concern over the impact of any war on Iran on oil prices and the world economy.

Hersh pointed to the concern in the US about the potential dangers. "Inside the Pentagon, senior commanders have increasingly challenged the President's [military] plans, according to active-duty and retired officers and officials. The generals and admirals have told the Administration that the bombing campaign will probably not succeed in destroying Iran's nuclear program. They have also warned an attack could lead to serious economic, political and military consequences for the Middle East."

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that the White House will not adopt a reckless and criminal course of military action in Iran, as it did in neighbouring Iraq. The thinking of the most hawkish elements of the Bush administration was outlined by Michael Ledeen from the right-wing American Enterprise Institute. In an article on August 14, he berated the critics of the invasions of Iraq and Lebanon for "a failure of strategic vision" and declared that a broader regional campaign against Iran and Syria was required.

"Israel cannot destroy Hezbollah by fighting in Lebanon alone, just as we cannot provide Iraq and Afghanistan with decent security by fighting only there. The destruction of Hezbollah requires regime change in Damascus. Security in Iraq and Afghanistan requires regime change in Damascus and Tehran. Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq and Afghanistan are not separate conflicts. They are battlefields in a regional war," Ledeen declared.

Ledeen's remarks graphically set out the logic of unending military aggression that is inherent in the US doctrine of "preventative war" and plans for hegemony throughout the Middle East.

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