

US prepares to escalate conflict with Iran

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The Bush administration has reacted aggressively to Iran's refusal to halt its nuclear activities, with threats of punitive sanctions and an escalating, open-ended confrontation. A UN Security Council resolution passed on July 31, under pressure from Washington, set August 31 as the deadline for Tehran to shut down its uranium enrichment facilities and comply with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolutions.

US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, branded Iran's failure to stop enrichment as "a red flag" issue and demanded that the Security Council now impose sanctions. While some US officials have hinted that any measures against Iran would be graduated, Bolton indicated that "a very tough sanctions resolution" was also an option as a first step.

More ominously, Bolton again raised the prospect of military action against Iran. In an interview with CNN, he said: "We're exercising a lot of diplomatic activity to try and resolve this peacefully. That's our objective but no President charged with defending the American people takes the military option off the table."

In a speech at an American Legion convention on Thursday, President Bush sounded the same menacing refrain, warning: "It is time for Iran to make a choice.... We will continue to work closely with our allies to find a diplomatic solution—but there must be consequences for Iran's defiance, and we must not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon."

The references to "diplomacy" are completely misleading. The Bush administration has refused to meet, let alone negotiate with, Tehran. The White House rejected out of hand Iran's offer on August 22 to hold "serious negotiations" over a package of proposals made in June by the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany to end the nuclear standoff.

One of Iran's key demands is for a security guarantee, which necessarily must come from the US. American officials have ruled that out and repeatedly heightened fears of an attack on Iran by declaring that "the military option is on the table". Far from being willing to reach a

negotiated solution, the Bush administration increased funding this year for Iranian opposition groups and other activities aimed at "regime change" in Iran.

Iran, which is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), insists that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes. Tehran branded the UN resolution as "illegal" for cutting across Iran's rights under the NPT to research and develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment. Iran has a small cascade of 164 centrifuges operating at a pilot enrichment plant at Natanz.

Despite a lack of evidence, Bolton told the media yesterday there was no doubt Iran was seeking to build a nuclear bomb. "There's simply no explanation for the range of Iranian behaviour which we've seen over the years other than that they're pursuing a weapons capability," he said. The US media has highlighted claims in an IAEA report sent to the UN on Thursday to have found new traces of highly enriched uranium at a waste storage facility.

While it cannot be ruled out that sections of the Iranian regime have ambitions to build nuclear weapons, over the past three years the IAEA has failed to find any conclusive evidence of covert weapons programs. IAEA inspectors have previously found miniscule traces of highly enriched uranium, but later confirmed that the source was contaminated equipment bought from Pakistan. The conclusions of the latest IAEA report, like previous ones, were stated in the negative: that the IAEA could not verify "the correctness and completeness of Iran's declarations" that its programs were for peaceful purposes.

The chief purpose of Washington's "diplomacy" is to bully its European and Asian rivals into backing its ultimatums and threats against Iran. The alleged Iranian nuclear weapons programs are simply the pretext for US actions against Tehran. What Washington is seeking to avoid above all is a negotiated settlement to the dispute that leads to a relaxation of diplomatic tensions and the economic opening up of Iran. Such a result would only

benefit the EU powers, Russia, China and Japan—all of which have significant economic interests in Iran—to the detriment of the US—which has maintained sanctions on Iran for two decades. The only means for establishing US dominance in Iran is for an aggressive policy of “regime change” in Tehran.

All the major powers backed the July 31 UN resolution to send an ultimatum to Tehran, but divisions have quickly reemerged following Iran’s defiance of Thursday’s deadline.

Russia, which only reluctantly voted for the resolution, has voiced its opposition to sanctions. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared yesterday: “We have to take into account the experience of the past and we cannot ally ourselves with ultimatums, which all lead to a dead end.” He called for further efforts to draw Iran “into dialogue, and not isolation and sanctions.” China, which also has a veto on the UN Security Council, is likely to follow suit.

Speaking at a meeting of EU foreign ministers, Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, declared “this is not the time or place” for sanctions. “For the EU, diplomacy remains the No. 1 way forward,” he insisted.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana is due to meet Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani in the next few days for talks over Iran’s offer of “serious negotiations”. “This does not mean that Iran has indefinite time,” Solana said. “We hope that at the next meeting, or couple of meetings, we have enough knowledge [about Iran’s position] to see if formal negotiations can start.”

US ambassador Bolton indicated that Washington had agreed to wait until Solana concluded his talks before pushing for UN sanctions. A meeting of the UN Security Council permanent members—the US, France, Britain, China and Russia—along with Germany, has been scheduled in Berlin for September 7 to discuss the next steps.

But there are growing signs of US impatience with the diplomatic process. An editorial in yesterday’s *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, entitled “Europe blinks again” contemptuously dismissed Solana’s efforts. It declared: “After years of futile bargaining with the Iranians, after years of offering up ever sweeter incentives only to be rejected by the mullahs, after years, in short, of getting diplomatic sand kicked in their faces, they hear ‘no’ [from Tehran] and still think it means ‘maybe’”.

Similar frustrations were voiced in Murdoch’s London-based *Times*. “So what now? Iran has defied the UN order to stop its most controversial nuclear work. It looks as if

there will be a fudge by the European Union, dragging the US along behind. At yesterday’s deadline, which was supposed to be the climax of this long-running stand-off, Europeans blinked first.” The commentary pointed to the US-Israeli debacle in Lebanon as a significant factor, explaining: “In the strained attempts to muster a UN force to keep the peace between Israel and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, few want to pick a new fight.”

The Bush administration, however, has previously indicated that it is prepared to put together a new “coalition of the willing” to impose sanctions on Iran, if its demands are blocked in the UN Security Council. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* last weekend revealed that the US Treasury was pressuring European and Japanese banks to restrict their business with Tehran. Treasury spokeswoman Molly Millerwise told the newspaper there had already been results, including Swiss banking giant, UBS AG, cutting off of relationships with Iran.

At the same time, agitation for a military strike against Iran continues. An editorial in Murdoch’s *Australian* entitled “A nuclear Iran is not an option” declared that if the UN fails to impose sanctions, “a military strike against Iran’s nuclear program might be the West’s only option.” It concluded: “The process of international diplomacy must still be given more time. But the world cannot wait forever. Thwarting the mad Iranian regime’s nuclear ambitions by any means necessary should be a project that unites the world.”

The editorial’s rhetoric reflects rather the madness of the Bush administration. Having created one disaster after another—in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon—through its reckless militarism, Washington is considering plans for another military adventure against Iran that will inevitably have even more catastrophic consequences.



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