

# US-backed UN resolution heightens tensions with Iran

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Months after the expiry of a UN deadline for Iran to suspend its nuclear programs, the US finally pushed a resolution through the UN Security Council on Saturday imposing a series of sanctions on Tehran. While the resolution represents a compromise, there is no doubt that the Bush administration will exploit it to the hilt to fuel tensions with Iran.

Acting US ambassador to the UN Alejandro Wolff declared that the Security Council had sent an “unambiguous message that there are serious repercussions” for Iran’s refusal to shut down its uranium enrichment programs. “If necessary, we will not hesitate to return to this body for further action if Iran fails to take steps to comply,” he warned.

The resolution invoked Chapter 7 of the UN Charter making its provisions binding on all member states, but under Article 41, which explicitly excludes the use of armed force. It bans the import and export of ballistic missiles and materials and technology used in uranium enrichment or reprocessing, and freezes the assets of 10 Iranian companies and 12 individuals allegedly involved in nuclear and ballistic missile programs. A committee can add further names.

Russia, with the backing of China, had opposed the imposition of sanctions after Iran refused to comply with an August 31 deadline to halt enrichment. Both countries, which hold a veto in the Security Council, joined other members in a unanimous vote, after extracting several concessions. The resolution excludes sanctions against a nuclear power plant being constructed at Bushehr by Russian firms. The US and European governments also agreed to water down a mandatory travel ban on Iranians said to be involved in nuclear activities.

The resolution, which imposes a 60-day deadline, sets the stage for an escalating confrontation with Tehran. The UN Security Council is due to meet again in two months to consider a report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iran’s nuclear programs. Tehran, however, has already declared that it will not comply and intends to accelerate its enrichment program. The Iranian

parliament voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday to require the government “to revise its cooperation” with the IAEA.

Iran has insisted all along that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes. It has not withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has allowed IAEA inspectors to monitor its facilities, including its uranium enrichment test plant at Natanz. IAEA reports over the past three years have found no positive evidence that Iran has any nuclear weapons program.

The hypocritical nature of Washington’s condemnations of Iran is underscored by the fact that Congress recently ratified a nuclear agreement with India, exempting it from US anti-proliferation provisions and allowing the sale of nuclear technology and fuel. India, like two other US allies—Pakistan and Israel—has refused to sign the NPT and has built a substantial nuclear arsenal. Under the accord, the US has removed what remains of the limited sanctions imposed on India when it exploded a nuclear bomb in 1998.

Iran’s alleged weapons programs are simply a pretext for the Bush administration to pursue its aim of “regime change” in Tehran as part of its broader ambitions to secure US dominance over the resource-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. US demands for tough sanctions against Iran cut directly across the economic interests of its rivals—not only Russia and China, but the European powers and Japan. None have voiced any principled opposition to US aggression, however, and have gone along with the UN resolution in an effort to moderate its impact.

Nevertheless, the White House has made clear that it will not confine its actions to the UN. Commenting on the resolution, US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said he hoped it “would open the way for further action outside the Security Council”. He declared: “We don’t think this resolution is enough in itself. We’re certainly not going to put all of our eggs in a UN basket.”

The US is engaged in an extensive operation to bully international agencies, foreign governments and corporations into severing financial ties with Iran. The US Treasury blacklisted the Tehran-based Saderat Bank in

September, claiming it serviced terrorist groups. The implicit threat to foreign banks and institutions doing business in Iran is that they may be excluded from the US banking system. The Swiss bank UBS, as well as the European banks HSBC and Credit Suisse, have already cut or scaled back their operations in Iran.

The US is threatening to penalise the Chinese National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) after it signed a \$16 billion natural gas deal with Iran on December 22. The Bush administration can take action under the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanction Act, which prohibits foreign firms that invest more than \$10 million in the Iranian energy sector from raising capital in the US. Any action against CNOOC, which is listed on the New York stock exchange, would be the first use of the Act's provisions against a foreign company.

The Bush administration's willingness to take unilateral action against Iran is not limited to economic penalties. In February, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requested an additional \$75 million to support Iranian exile groups and political opposition inside Iran. A new Iranian Affairs office to promote "regime change" has been established under the supervision of Vice President Dick Cheney's daughter, Elizabeth Cheney.

The White House has rejected the recommendation of the top-level Iraq Study Group report for talks with Iran and Syria to seek assistance in suppressing the anti-US insurgency in Iraq. Far from negotiating with Tehran, the administration has drawn up military plans against Iran and declared that it is keeping all options on the table. Bush and his officials have repeatedly accused Iran of arming and assisting Shiite militia in Iraq, adding another pretext for an attack.

Veteran journalist Seymour Hersh has published a number of articles in the *New Yorker* during the past two years providing details of the Pentagon and Bush administration's preparations for an assault on Iran, including the possible use of nuclear weapons. His latest article last month entitled "The Next Act: Is a damaged Administration less likely to attack Iran, or more?" cites a number of US intelligence and military sources who point to the ongoing push for military action.

According to Hersh, many in the White House and Pentagon insist that "getting tough with Iran is the only way to salvage Iraq". A Pentagon consultant complained: "It is a classic case of 'failure forward'. They believe that by tipping over Iran they would recover their losses in Iraq—like doubling your bet." Another government consultant told Hersh that for some advocates of military action "the goal in Iran is not regime change but a strike that will send a signal that America can still accomplish its goals. Even if it does not destroy Iran's nuclear network, there are many who

think that 36 hours of bombing is the only way to remind the Iranians of the very high cost of going forward with the bomb."

The second consultant, who has close ties to the Pentagon civilian leadership, pointed out that the US has been collaborating with Israel over the past six months in supporting a Kurdish armed group—the Party for Free Life—in fomenting opposition inside the Kurdish regions of Iran. Its activities include spying on "targets inside Iran of interest to the US". The Pentagon has also established covert links with Kurdish, Azeri and Baluchi tribal groups as a means for undermining the central government's authority in northern and southeastern Iran.

The US has a substantial military presence in two of Iran's neighbours—Afghanistan and Iraq—as well as a huge naval presence in the Persian Gulf and military bases in several Gulf states. An article in the *New York Times* last week reported that Defence Secretary Robert Gates was expected to approve the deployment of a second aircraft carrier group to the Gulf. While denying that the move was in preparation for offensive action against Iran, senior American officials told the newspaper that the deployment was "to make clear that the focus on ground troops in Iraq has not made it impossible for the United States and its allies to maintain a military watch on Iran".

In a December 27 editorial, the *Wall Street Journal*, which is aligned with the most militarist sections of US ruling elite, contemptuously dismissed the UN Security Council resolution. "As his Presidency grows shorter," it concluded, "Mr Bush is going to have to decide how much longer he can afford to let diplomacy dominate his Iran strategy. The mullahs in Tehran have made clear their determination to build a nuclear weapon; the West has yet to show any comparable determination to stop them."

The logic is obvious. With two years left in office, the Bush administration must end its diplomatic manoeuvres in the UN and launch a new military adventure against Iran.



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