

US “diplomacy” on Iran: thuggery and threats of military aggression

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Despite the continuing American military build up in the Persian Gulf, President Bush and his officials insist the US is not planning a military strike against Iran. In an interview with C-Span on Monday, Bush repeated what has become a mantra. He dismissed warnings of war as “people speculating” and declared that the US seeks to “solve the issue diplomatically”. Nevertheless, he reiterated that “the military is the last resort”.

Bush’s claims are simply absurd. The White House has flatly ruled out negotiations with Iran unless Tehran complies with US demands in advance and shuts down its nuclear programs. Just two months ago, the US administration rejected the recommendation of the top-level Iraq Study Group (ISG) to seek a political solution to the war in Iraq, including through direct talks with Iran and Syria.

At the time, former US Secretary of State James Baker, who chaired the ISG, publicly chided the Bush administration, by pointing out one of the elementary rules of international diplomacy: one talks to one’s enemies, not just one’s allies. Baker’s remark simply underscores the fact that the Bush administration is not engaged in diplomacy—at least, not in the usually accepted meaning of the word—but in international gangsterism.

Over the past six years, US “diplomacy” on Iran has consisted of ultimatums and threats against Tehran, combined with a concerted effort to bully and strong-arm other countries—the European Union, Russia and China in particular—into backing the American campaign. Unwilling to challenge Washington, its rivals followed a policy of appeasement, manoeuvring to avoid an open confrontation with Iran, but, in the end, voting for a UN Security Council resolution last December that the US will exploit to justify military action.

For all its rather empty anti-American bluster, the Iranian regime has repeatedly sought an accommodation with the US and other major powers. Protracted talks with the so-called EU-3—Britain, France and Germany—broke down primarily because it became clear that the European powers

could not deliver a guarantee from the US to end its threats and move to normalise relations with the US. All of Tehran’s direct overtures to Washington have been contemptuously rebuffed.

An article in this week’s *Newsweek* magazine confirms that Iran quietly assisted the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Prior to the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, “American and Iranian officials met repeatedly in Geneva.” One US official who was present told the magazine: “In fact, they were impatient. They’d ask, ‘When’s the military action going to start? Let’s get going!’” Following the toppling of the Taliban regime in Kabul, Tehran played a key role at the UN conference in Germany in helping to install the US puppet Hamid Karzai as the new Afghan president.

Far from using the opportunity to normalise relations with Tehran, President Bush notoriously chose to brand Iran in his 2002 State of the Union speech as part of an “axis of evil” with Iraq and North Korea. Nevertheless, in the lead-up to the US invasion of Iraq, as *Newsweek* explained, “low-level meetings between the two sides had continued even after the Axis of Evil speech”. For all the latest unsubstantiated claims that Iran is arming anti-US militias in Iraq, Washington relied heavily on Tehran to ensure that the major Iraqi Shiite parties supported the invasion in 2003 and subsequently participated in the US occupation administration.

Comments last week by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice before the House Foreign Relations Committee have focussed attention on one little-reported, but highly significant Iranian offer to the US for comprehensive talks to settle all outstanding issues. The proposal came in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq as the Bush administration seized on revelations about Iran’s nuclear facilities to escalate tensions with Tehran. Iran’s top leadership passed a memo via the Swiss ambassador in Tehran to the US State Department outlining a plan for negotiations.

Extraordinarily, Rice, who was Bush’s national security

adviser at the time, denied any knowledge of the memo last week. Under questioning in Congress, she declared: “I have read about this so-called proposal from Iran. I think I would have noticed if the Iranians had said, ‘We’re ready to recognise Israel.’... I just don’t remember ever seeing any such thing.”

Other US officials have been equally dismissive. Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage acknowledged reading the document, but told *Newsweek* that the administration “couldn’t determine what was the Iranians’ and what was the Swiss ambassador’s” in the proposal. Parrotting the same line, State Department spokesman Tom Casey declared on Tuesday: “This document did not come through official channels but rather was a creative exercise on the part of the Swiss ambassador.”

Stung by the criticisms, ambassador Tim Guldemann provided the *Washington Post* with details of his involvement. In an article published yesterday, Guldemann explained that he had told the State Department that the Iranian proposal had been reviewed and approved at the highest levels in Tehran by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then president Mohammad Khatami, and then-foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi. “I got the clear impression that there is a strong will of the regime to tackle the problem with the US now and to try it with this initiative,” Guldemann wrote in a cover note, which was faxed with the document on May 4, 2003.

Whether or not Rice and other US officials are lying about the offer, the incident reveals that the Bush administration was simply not interested in negotiations with Tehran. The document, which is now available at the *Newsweek* website, makes clear just how far the Iranian regime was prepared to go. While seeking security guarantees and an end to the two-decade US economic embargo, Tehran was willing to discuss “full transparency” on its nuclear programs, assistance in politically stabilising Iraq, ending support for Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah, and recognising Israel as part of a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell told *Newsweek* he had met fierce opposition to any diplomatic overtures to Iran and its ally Syria. “My position in the remaining year and a half [of Bush’s first term] was that we ought to find ways to restart talks with Iran. But there was a reluctance on the part of the president to do that,” he explained. Powell rejected claims that his diplomatic efforts were failures. “I don’t like the administration saying, ‘Powell went, Armitage went... and [they] got nothing,’” he said. “You can’t negotiate when you tell the other side, ‘Give us what a negotiation would produce before the negotiations start’.”

That is exactly the Bush administration’s current stance: an offer to negotiate, but only after Iran has unconditionally

shut down its uranium enrichment plant and other nuclear programs. This is not a proposal to talk but an ultimatum backed by increasingly open threats of military aggression and the assembling of a huge armada of warships in the Persian Gulf. By buckling to US pressure and voting for the UN Security Council resolution in December, the EU, China and Russia have given the US war drive a fig leaf of international legitimacy.

The Bush administration’s provocative stance against Iran is in marked contrast to the deal struck this week in Beijing over North Korea’s nuclear programs. Unlike Tehran, Pyongyang had not only withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and expelled international inspectors, but last year exploded a primitive nuclear device. Yet the White House has sought to neutralise the conflict, offering to meet North Korean officials face-to-face and reaching a comprehensive agreement—at least temporarily—before Pyongyang agreed to any of the US demands.

The North Korean deal does not reflect any fundamental change of course by the US. Whatever the immediate tactical reasons for the arrangement with Pyongyang, it is clear that the Bush administration can now focus its full attention on its top priority: Iran. Despite the obvious contradictions, the White House has no intention of replicating the talks over North Korea, by offering comprehensive negotiations with Iran. Instead the US is busy manufacturing new allegations against Tehran that could serve as a pretext for war.

The long string of accusations against the Iranian regime are simply a convenient cover for US ambitions to establish its dominance over Iran as part of broader plans for American hegemony throughout the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. That is the real purpose behind the Bush administration’s diplomacy and the reason for its gangster character.



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