

US war drums beat louder after Iran fails to meet UN deadline

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The Bush administration is intensifying the pressure on Iran following its refusal to abide by last week's UN deadline to suspend its uranium enrichment and other nuclear programs. While publicly pushing for a new UN Security Council resolution with tougher economic and diplomatic sanctions against Tehran, the US is also pressing ahead with preparations for a military attack on Iran.

After months of US bullying, the UN Security Council finally passed an initial resolution last December imposing sanctions and setting a two-month deadline for Iran to shut down its nuclear activities. Tehran, however, has insisted on its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including the production of enriched uranium for its nuclear power plants. It has rejected US allegations that it is conducting a secret nuclear program.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a formal report last Thursday—the day after the deadline passed—confirming that Iran was continuing to expand its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and construct a heavy water research reactor at Arak. The report is yet to be publicly released, but the US and international media have highlighted Iranian plans to complete the installation of 3,000 gas centrifuges in its Natanz facility by May. At the same time, the IAEA has again found no proof that Iran is seeking to build a nuclear bomb.

Washington has seized on the IAEA report to mount a new diplomatic offensive against Iran. US Undersecretary of State Nicolas Burns is due to meet in London today with senior officials from the other permanent Security Council members—Britain, France, Russia and China—as well as Germany to draw up a new UN resolution. Burns denounced Iran last week for “thumbing its nose” at the international community.

The “international community” is far from united, however. It was only reluctantly that Russia and China agreed to last December's resolution. Russia's UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin called for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, saying the goal of discussions was not a new resolution and new sanctions, but “a political outcome”. However, by refusing to openly challenge the bellicose American stance, Russia, China and the European powers provided the US actions with a thin veneer of UN legitimacy.

The Bush administration has not the slightest interest in a political settlement. American officials have made clear that the US intends to tighten the sanctions regime against Iran, with or without UN approval. According to the *Scotsman*, Burns will be pushing to widen the existing trade and economic restrictions to cover more Iranian companies and increase the number of Iranian officials placed under travel restrictions. The US also wants to impose a ban on the practice of European governments of extending loans to cover transactions

with Iran.

A *Wall Street Journal* article last week revealed that the White House wanted especially to target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), which the US claims is not only involved in nuclear weapons programs but has been supplying arms to anti-US insurgents in Iraq. Washington has provided no substantive proof for either claim. But the US has singled out the IRGC, with which Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is closely associated, as a means of fomenting internal political divisions in Tehran. US Treasury official Matthew Levitt bluntly told the *Wall Street Journal* that targeting the IRGC, “buttresses domestic criticism of the regime's cronyism”.

As far as the US is concerned, Iran's nuclear programs are simply a convenient excuse for pursuing its policy of “regime change” in Tehran. Just as it did before its illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Bush administration is fabricating evidence of Iran's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Sources at IAEA headquarters in Vienna told the British-based *Guardian* last week, “most of the tip-offs about supposed secret weapons sites provided by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies have led to deadends when investigated by IAEA inspectors”.

A diplomat with detailed knowledge of the IAEA inspections explained: “Most of it has turned out to be incorrect. They gave us a paper with a list of sites. [The inspectors] did some follow-up, they went to some military sites but there was no sign of [banned nuclear] activities. Now [the inspectors] don't go in blindly. Only if it passes a credibility test.”

The *Guardian* article also raised the distinct possibility that the some of the “evidence” has been forged. US intelligence provided the IAEA with copies of documents allegedly found by the CIA on a stolen laptop computer provided by an informant inside Iran. Tehran immediately rejected the material, which included plans for a nuclear warhead, as forged—a suspicion also held by some in the IAEA.

One official told the *Guardian*: “First of all, if you have a clandestine program, you don't put it on laptops which can walk away. The data is all in English which may be reasonable for some of the technical matters, but at some point you'd have thought there would be at least some notes in Farsi. So there is some doubt over the provenance of the computer.”

The lack of any positive evidence has not stopped the US accusations. Senior American officials still maintain it is a proven fact that Iran has plans to build a bomb. The US dismisses Iranian denials by insinuating that the work is being carried out at other secret locations. Like the WMD allegations against the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, Tehran can never prove what is essentially improvable—that it has no secret laboratories anywhere in the country.

Increasingly, exaggerated claims are being made in the US and international media about how long the Natanz plant would take to produce enough highly enriched uranium to make a nuclear device. All these allegations conveniently ignore the fact that Iran remains a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its nuclear facilities remain under IAEA inspection. In particular, the IAEA monitors the Natanz plant to ensure that it only produces the low-enriched uranium for nuclear fuel, not highly-enriched uranium for bombs.

Given the threadbare nature of case for Iranian nuclear weapons, the Bush administration is shifting its argument. In a rhetorical sleight of hand, US officials are more and more speaking about the necessity of stopping Iran, not from having nuclear bombs, but “having the capacity” to make nuclear bombs. A senior US official told the *New York Times* on Friday: “No one has defined where the red line is that we can’t let the Iranians step over.” But President Bush is determined, he said, “not to let them get one lugnut turn away from having a bomb.”

The sweeping new criteria could span anything from having an industrial enrichment capacity of 3,000 centrifuges to, as US Vice President Dick Cheney put in it in Sydney last week, having “mastered the technology”—something that Iran achieved last year in very rudimentary form. As IAEA director Mohamad ElBaradei explained to the *Financial Times* last week: “The difference between acquiring knowledge and having a bomb is at least five to ten years away. And that is why I said the intelligence—the British intelligence, the American intelligence—is saying that Iran is still years, five to ten years, away from developing a weapon.”

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice responded to a statement by President Ahmadinejad that Iran’s enrichment program was like a train “with no reverse gear”, by declaring last weekend: “They don’t need a reverse gear—they need to stop and then we can come to the table and we can talk about how to move forward.” But Rice’s offer of talks is completely empty. No longer is it enough that Iran has no nuclear weapons programs, but it must not have mastered the technology. And if it meets the new test, there is a long list of other US allegations—a state sponsor of terrorism; a supplier of arms to anti-US insurgents in Iraq, etc—that can be used as a pretext for a military confrontation.

The whole situation bears marked parallels with the lead-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq. The Bush administration’s “diplomacy” is aimed at bullying its European and Asian rivals into line as it concocts a *casus belli* and continues its military preparations for war. The underlying purpose of the US war drive against Iran is not to end an alleged nuclear threat or Iranian support for Iraqi Shiite militia, but to advance the Bush administration’s plans to secure US dominance over the key oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

A growing number of media reports point to the advanced character of US war plans against Iran.

In an article in this week’s *New Yorker* magazine, veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh wrote: “The Pentagon is continuing intensive planning for a possible bombing attack on Iran, a process that began last year, at the direction of the President. In recent months, the former intelligence official told me, a special planning group has been established in the offices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, charged with creating a contingency bombing plan for Iran that can be implemented, upon the orders of the President, within 24 hours.

“In the past month, I was told by an Air Force adviser on targetting and the Pentagon consultant on terrorism, the Iran planning group had

been handed a new assignment: to identify targets in Iran that may be involved in supplying or aiding militants in Iraq. Previously, the focus had been on the destruction of Iran’s nuclear facilities and possible regime change.” The switch in tasking has largely to do with the changing pretexts for war. Regardless of the excuse used, a BBC article last week revealed that the US military is planning a blitzkrieg against Iran’s military forces and infrastructure.

The *New Yorker* also indicated a possible timetable. The Bush administration has already stationed two aircraft carrier groups in the Persian Gulf for the first time since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. “One plan is for them to be relieved early in the spring, but there is worry within the military that they may be ordered to stay in the area after the new carriers arrive, according to several sources,” the article explained. “The former senior intelligence official said the current contingency plans allow for an attack order in the spring. He added, however, that senior officers on the Joint Chiefs were counting on the White House’s not being ‘foolish enough to do this in the face of Iraq, and the problems it would give the Republicans in 2008’.”

Another article in last weekend’s *Sunday Telegraph* revealed that Israel is negotiating with the US for permission to fly over Iraq as part of its plans for air strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities. “We are planning for every eventuality, and sorting out issues such as these are crucially important,” a senior Israeli defence official told the British-based newspaper. “The only way to do this is to fly through US-controlled air space. If we don’t sort these issues out now we could have a situation where American and Israeli war planes start shooting at each other.”

Israel’s *Haaretz* newspaper claimed that the Israeli Air Force already had permission from three Gulf states—Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates—to over-fly their air space in the event of an attack on Iran. The article cited in the weekend edition of the Kuwait-based *Al-Siyasa* newspaper, which indicated that NATO leaders had approached Turkey over the same issue. According to a British diplomat, Turkey would not make the same “mistake” as in 2003 when it refused over-flight rights to the US military en route to attacking Iraq.

The US and Israel have, of course, dismissed all of these reports, but the denials are becoming increasingly disingenuous. Over the past three years, Bush and his top officials have continually declared that “all options are on the table”—that is including military strikes—in dealing with Iran’s nuclear programs. However, when Vice President Cheney repeated the menacing threat last weekend during his visit to Australia, it no longer sounded like a distant possibility.



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