

US to join Iran at international talks: another round of threats and ultimatums

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Despite widespread media speculation of a “shift” in US policy toward Iran, the announcement this week that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will take part in a regional conference with her Iranian counterpart does not represent any softening of the US stance. Amid a mounting confrontation with Iran, the US will undoubtedly use the forum to heighten, not lessen, the tensions with Tehran.

As White House spokesman Tony Snow bluntly told the press: “There is no crack. A number of people have been characterising US participation in a regional meeting as a change in policy; it is nothing of the sort.” State Department spokesman Sean McCormack reinforced the message, declaring that, contrary to news reports, US policy on Iran was not “going wobbly, shift, turnabout, change”.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who has been pushing for such a conference for some time, yesterday formally announced that the first stage of discussions, involving lower-level officials, will be held on March 10 in Baghdad. The Iraqi government has invited all neighbouring countries, including Iran and Syria; members of the Arab League and Organisation of Islamic Unity; and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council as well as a variety of international organisations.

The first phase would set the stage for a further meeting to include Rice and the Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers as well as the representatives of other countries and organisations. State Department spokesman McCormack hinted that informal discussion with Iranian diplomats might be possible, but only on the issue of Iraqi security. Asked if talks would take place on the standoff over Iran’s nuclear programs, he reaffirmed the US demand that Tehran first shut down its uranium enrichment facilities.

The proposal for regional talks is not exactly new. In late 2004, then US Secretary of State Colin Powell took part in the first meeting of the International Compact on Iraq at the Egyptian resort of Sharm El Sheik but exchanged only small talk with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi. Last year Iranian and American officials announced plans for the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, to meet with Iranian

officials over Iraqi security. But the meeting fell through after Iraqi leaders objected to Khalilzad effectively supplanting the role of their “sovereign” government and suggested a regional forum instead.

The Bush administration intends to use the upcoming meetings to aggressively pursue its allegations that Iran and Syria have been supporting anti-US insurgents in Iraq. Since President Bush declared in his January 10 speech on Iraq that the US would “seek out and destroy” networks providing arms and training, American soldiers have been rounding up Iranian officials allegedly involved. According to an article in this week’s *New Yorker* by Seymour Hersh, up to 500 Iranians, including aid workers, have been detained at any one time.

Yet, the Bush administration has provided no evidence that the Iranian regime is directly involved in supplying arms to Shiite militia in Iraq. Last weekend, US soldiers laid out a display of weapons allegedly seized from Shiite militia, pointing to the made-in-Iran parts used in roadside bombs, known as explosively formed penetrators (EFP). As the *New York Times* report noted, however, other items clearly did not come from Iran, but were made in Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere in the Middle East.

More unsubstantiated accusations were made by Defence Intelligence Agency Director Michael Maples at a US Senate hearing on Tuesday. Without tabling any evidence, Maples claimed that Iran was training Iraqi Shiite militia in the use of EFPs in Lebanon and Iran, adding that Hezbollah was also involved. Newly installed US intelligence chief Mike McConnell, who was also present, admitted, however, there was no direct proof that senior Iranian leaders were involved, saying only it was “probable”.

The “case” against Iran—Iranian parts for roadside bombs, undisclosed “intelligence” about Iranian involvement, lurid tales about the “elite” Quds Forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and speculation that top leaders in Tehran are “probably” involved—is about as solid as the concoction of lies that was used to justify the criminal invasion of Iraq. Yet, as State Department spokesman

McCormack made clear, Iranian-made weapons will be “certainly at the top of our list” at the upcoming international conferences.

The Bush administration does not engage in “diplomacy” in the normally accepted meaning of the word. Rice will not be attending the conference to negotiate with Iran and Syria, or any other participant for that matter, but to lay down the law and issue a series of demands and ultimatums. She has spent the past weeks lining up an anti-Iranian alliance of “moderate” Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, to add further weight to US threats.

Off the record, American officials are perfectly clear about the purpose of US involvement in the conferences. The *New York Times* reported: “One senior administration official said that while some Bush officials have advocated looking for ways to talk to Iran and Syria, they did not want to appear to be talking to either country from a position of weakness. By ratchetting up the confrontational talk, the administration official said, the United States was in more of a driver’s seat.”

Even if one accepts at face value that the US is merely involved in an elaborate game of brinkmanship, the Bush administration’s actions are utterly reckless. The US military has stationed two aircraft carrier groups in the Persian Gulf and stepped up patrols by warplanes along the Iraq-Iran border. These provocative moves have been accompanied by an escalating propaganda campaign against Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program and its support for “terrorist” Hezbollah, as well as the supply of arms to Iraqi insurgents. All this could easily spiral out of control into military conflict.

The Bush administration has no intention of negotiating in good faith with Iran or Syria. While announcing Rice’s attendance at the upcoming conference, the US is intensifying the pressure on UN Security Council members to impose tougher sanctions on Iran over its nuclear programs. Harsher economic penalties would of course heighten Iran’s economic difficulties. That is not the sole purpose of a new UN resolution, however. As in the lead up to the war on Iraq, Washington will undoubtedly exploit the growing list of resolutions to provide a thin veneer of legitimacy to any military aggression against Iran.

In the meantime, US participation in the international conference on Iraq is a ploy that serves several political purposes. It is aimed at dulling the growing sense of alarm among working people in the US and internationally about a catastrophic new war in the Middle East and enlisting the active support of the Democrats. While no more than an empty gesture, the White House will no doubt claim that it gave the opportunity for diplomacy to work. Former Democrat congressman Lee Hamilton, who co-chaired the

Iraq Study Group, immediately jumped on board, declaring Rice’s decision was “a very positive move” and a “huge change” in the Bush administration’s approach to the Middle East.

At the same time, the Bush administration used the prospect of its participation in the conference to bully its puppet regime in Baghdad into accepting US plans to exploit Iraqi oil. As the *New York Times* explained: “Iraqi officials had been pushing for such a meeting for several months, but Bush administration officials refused until the Iraqi government reached agreement on pressing domestic matters, including guidelines for nationwide distribution of oil revenue and foreign investment in the country’s immense oil industry, administration officials said.”

The US blackmail appears to have worked. On Monday, the Iraqi cabinet finally agreed, after months of bitter wrangling over the division of revenue, to pass legislation to provide the framework for international, that is mainly American, corporations to open up new oil fields. On the same day, plans for the international conferences were announced and the next day Rice confirmed her attendance. Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari described Rice’s decision as “very significant”. He had previously publicly warned of the dangers of Iraq becoming drawn into a US confrontation with Iran.

For the Bush administration, Rice’s participation in the planned conference is nothing more than a useful manoeuvre that could be easily reversed. At the same time, the main thrust of US policy continues: the menacing build up for a new military adventure against Iran.



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