

Debate over Iran's nuclear programs heats up again

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Iran's nuclear programs are once again being pushed to centre stage as a second UN deadline is due to expire next week. Under pressure from the US, the UN Security Council voted in March to strengthen sanctions on Iran and to set a 60-day deadline for Tehran to shut down its uranium enrichment and other nuclear facilities. Iran continues to reject the resolution as "illegal" and insist on its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle.

The results of a snap International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection last Sunday of Iran's enrichment plant at Natanz are likely to sharply polarise debate over a new UN resolution. According to information leaked in the *New York Times* on Monday, the IAEA inspectors "have concluded that Iran appears to have solved most of its technological problems and is now beginning to enrich uranium on a far larger scale than before".

The IAEA found that Iranian engineers had 1,312 centrifuges in operation in the large underground facility, another 300 assembled and being tested, and 300 more under construction. The most significant finding was not the number of centrifuges—an IAEA inspection last month also reported 1,312 in place—but the fact that they were in operation. "[N]uclear experts here [at IAEA headquarters in Vienna] said what struck them now was that all centrifuges appeared to be enriching uranium and running smoothly," the article reported.

If the report were confirmed, it would appear that Iranian scientists have overcome some of the technical problems that have plagued the enrichment program over the past year. The Iranian regime claimed last year that it would shortly have 3,000 centrifuges operating and would proceed with plans to put 55,000 in place. Last month Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad boasted that enrichment was already occurring on an "industrial scale". In fact, as the IAEA has previously reported, Iran has had difficulty in keeping the high-speed machines, which are prone to breakdown, operating continuously.

In comments to the *New York Times*, IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei declared: "We believe they pretty much have the knowledge about how to enrich... From now on, it is simply a question of perfecting the knowledge. People will not

like to hear it, but that's a fact." If Iran has achieved that ability then the IAEA report, due to be handed to the UN Security Council next week, will intensify the debate in Washington and among the major powers as to how to respond.

The US has repeatedly declared that "all options"—that is, including military strikes—are on the table in dealing with Iran's nuclear facilities. Vice President Dick Cheney reinforced the message last week when, standing on the deck of a US aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, he pledged that the US would "prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region". At the same time, the Bush administration, which is bogged down in a catastrophic and deeply unpopular war in Iraq, insists it is still pursuing diplomatic options over Iran.

By arguing that UN sanctions have failed to stop Iran's enrichment program, ElBaradei is seeking to reinforce his previous appeals for a negotiated end to the dangerous standoff with Tehran. "[F]rom a proliferation perspective," he explained, "the fact of the matter is that one of the purposes of suspension—keeping them from getting the knowledge—has been overtaken by events. The focus now should be to stop them from going to industrial scale production, to allow us to do a full-court-press inspection and to be sure they remain inside the treaty."

ElBaradei's views reflect the standpoint of Russia and China in particular, which from the outset have opposed punitive sanctions and have only reluctantly supported the UN Security Council resolutions against Iran. Like the European Union (EU), Russia and China have substantial economic interests in Iran, which would be seriously damaged in the event of a full economic embargo or military strikes. The EU has been the focus of recent attempts to revive negotiations with Iran, with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana due to meet again with Tehran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani on May 31.

Like ElBaradei, the European powers have hinted that a face-saving compromise might be possible, allowing Iran to keep a limited enrichment capacity or full industrial capacity under an international consortium. Earlier this month, the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany offered to suspend the current UN sanctions and negotiate, if Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment program. But the last

point—the crucial stumbling block—remains. The Iranian regime is reluctant to shut down its uranium enrichment facilities, as it did between 2003 and 2005, without any guarantees in return.

While ElBaradei's comments were aimed at bolstering the case for concessions and a deal, they may well have precisely the opposite affect. Greg Schulte, US chief envoy to the IAEA, responded by once again denouncing Iran as “a blatant case of noncompliance”. He repeated the Bush administration's unsubstantiated assertion that “Iran's leadership is actively and defiantly pursuing the technology, material and know-how to produce nuclear weapons”.

IAEA inspection teams over the past four years have uncovered no definitive proof that Iran has a nuclear weapons program. Tehran has insisted that all its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes and that its Natanz facility is to provide fuel for its nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. Media reports of the latest IAEA inspection gloss over the fact that it was at very short notice—just two hours—which Iran is not obliged to comply with. It also found that the Natanz facility was indeed enriching uranium to less than 5 percent—the level required for nuclear fuel rods, but far less than that needed to construct a nuclear bomb.

Having denounced Iran, Schulte somewhat paradoxically pulled back from endorsing ElBaradei's conclusions. “Some have argued Iran has acquired the knowledge,” he said. “We think it has not fully mastered the technology. We don't think Iran is going to be able to acquire a nuclear weapon in the near term. So we still think [there is] time for diplomacy to succeed, [backed by] targetted sanctions which seem to be having an effect, starting debate among the leadership about what is best for Iran.”

Schulte's comments reflect tactical differences within the Bush administration itself. While Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and others continue to advocate diplomatic bullying and threats, Cheney and the most militarist elements insist that the US has to press ahead with “regime change” in Iraq, including through the use of military force. If Schulte accepted that Iran had mastered uranium enrichment, then, from the warped standpoint of the White House, the conclusion would have to be drawn that diplomacy had failed and other means were needed.

The ongoing debate is not a huge secret. As the *New York Times* explained: [H]awks inside the administration say that the only position President Bush can take now, without appearing to back down, is to stick to the administration's past argument that ‘not one centrifuge spins’ in Iran. They argue for escalating sanctions and the threat, that if diplomacy fails, the United States could destroy the nuclear facilities. But even inside the administration, many officials, particularly from the State Department and the Pentagon, argue that military action would create greater chaos in the Middle East and Iranian retribution against American forces in Iraq, and possibly elsewhere.”

However, even the White House proponents of diplomacy are not opposed in principle to war on Iran. To quote the *New York Times* again: “[T]hey have argued that Iran's enrichment facilities are still at an early enough stage that a military strike would not set the country's program back very far. Such a strike, they argue, would make sense only once large enough facilities had been built.” In other words, it is a debate about timing—a delay would allow the US to maximise the pressure on Iran and enlist the support of the European powers.

Former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, bluntly set out the case for war in an interview with the British-based *Telegraph* newspaper. An unabashed militarist, Bolton, seized on the latest IAEA findings to call on the EU to “get more serious” and recognise its diplomatic efforts had failed. Iran had “clearly mastered the enrichment technology now... they're not stopping, they're making progress and our time is limited,” he declared. Economic sanctions “with pain” had to be imposed, followed, if necessary, by efforts to change the regime in Tehran and military strikes on Iran's nuclear sites.

“If we can't get enough other countries to come along with us to do that [sanctions], then we've got to go with regime change by bolstering opposition groups and the like, because that's the circumstance most likely for an Iranian government to decide it's safer not to pursue nuclear weapons than to continue to do so,” Bolton said. “And if all else fails, if the choice is between a nuclear-capable Iran and the use of force, then I think we need to look at the use of force.”

Bolton provided not a shred of evidence that Iran was actually building a nuclear bomb. As before the US-led invasion of Iraq, he justified an attack on Iran by making a bogus analogy with the Nazi regime in Germany. “If the choice is them continuing [toward a nuclear bomb] or the use of force, I think you're at a Hitler marching into the Rhineland point,” he said. In reality, the more fitting historical parallel is with the Bush administration, which is contemplating another unprovoked act of US aggression to further its ambitions for economic and strategic dominance of the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.



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