

# US steps up threats against Iran over nuclear programs

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The US administration has responded belligerently to the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran's refusal to suspend its nuclear programs by calling for a third UN resolution and tougher penalties. The report, which was sent to IAEA member states on Wednesday, sets the stage for a further heightening of tensions in the Persian Gulf, where the US navy provocatively began a major exercise the same day.

Washington had already pressured the UN Security Council into passing resolutions in December and March demanding that Iran halt its uranium enrichment facilities, stop construction on a heavy water research reactor and allow more extensive IAEA inspections. The most recent resolution targetted 15 individuals and 13 organisations, including a major Iranian bank. It also imposed sanctions on the Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is not directly connected to Iran's nuclear programs, but which the US accuses of arming anti-occupation militia in neighbouring Iraq.

The major European powers—Britain, France and Germany—lined up uncritically behind the Bush administration to back the March resolution. While objecting to particular measures, China and Russia refused to challenge the central thrust of the US-sponsored measure aimed at justifying Washington's continuing campaign to isolate and cripple the Iranian regime and establish the pretext for future military action. Under American pressure, South Africa, Indonesia and Qatar withdrew their proposed limited amendments and voted for the resolution.

This is the "international community" constantly invoked by US officials when demanding that Iran comply with American demands. "The world has spoken and said no nuclear weapons programs," Bush declared on Thursday, indicating that the US would again be strong-arming the other major powers "to strengthen our sanction regime". Referring in particular to China and Russia, Bush stated: "The first thing that these leaders have got to understand is that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilising for the world."

Bush asserts as fact that Iran's nuclear programs are designed to produce weapons, but his administration has provided no proof. The IAEA report simply confirmed what Tehran has been publicly declaring: that it will continue to expand its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz in order to produce fuel for its planned nuclear power reactors. The most recent inspection of the Natanz facility a fortnight ago found that 1,312 gas centrifuges were operational, another 300 were being tested and some 300 were under construction. Samples tested by IAEA inspectors found the uranium was being enriched to around 5 percent—the level required for nuclear fuel—not the 80-90 percent needed to construct an atomic bomb.

Iran has repeatedly insisted on its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to engage in all aspects of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. As in its previous reports over the past four years, the IAEA found no positive evidence that Iran was engaged in weapons programs. It merely stated, in the negative, that it could not "provide assurances about... the exclusively peaceful nature" of the country's nuclear programs. IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei told the media on Thursday that it would take Iran three to eight years to manufacture a nuclear weapon, assuming it was seeking to do so.

For the Bush administration, allegations over Iran's "nuclear weapons programs" are a convenient pretext to intensify pressure on Tehran, justify its barely concealed campaign for "regime change" and threaten military action. Earlier this week, ABC News revealed that Bush had signed a formal finding this year authorising the CIA to implement covert plans to destabilise the Iranian government.

At the same time, the White House hypocritically insists it is pursuing diplomatic avenues to resolve the conflict. Its claims are belied, however, by its reaction to an appeal by ElBaradei for a compromise. Following the recent IAEA inspection, he told the *New York Times* that Iranian scientists appeared to have overcome previous problems in running gas centrifuges. "[F]rom a proliferation perspective," he said, "the fact of the matter is that one of the purposes of

suspension—keeping them from getting the knowledge—has been overtaken by events.” Rather than continuing to insist on a complete halt, ElBaradei proposed diplomatic efforts to contain the program and allow Tehran to save face by maintaining limited uranium enrichment.

US, British, French and Japanese officials met with ElBaradei yesterday to formally protest these comments, which they declared ran counter to US resolutions insisting that Iran halt all uranium enrichment activities. The criticism was aimed not only at hauling the IAEA chief into line, but at preempting any moves, particularly by Russia and China, to push for a settlement that would allow a pilot plant or a full scale enrichment facility run by an international consortium. While other powers continue to hold talks with Iran, the Bush administration has flatly refused to negotiate over the nuclear issue unless Tehran first freezes its enrichment activities.

The most ominous sign of the Bush administration’s intentions was this week’s display of US naval power in the Persian Gulf. Two aircraft carrier groups led by the USS John C. Stennis and USS Nimitz already in the region were joined by a third battle group, including an attack submarine and five large surface ships led by the amphibious assault ship Bonhomme Richard. Nine warships from this huge armada passed through the Strait of Hormutz on Wednesday in broad daylight. Usually the US navy conducts the passage at night.

While a US official tried to reassure the media that this was not “a chest-thumping thing”, the aim was obviously to menace Iran. International markets certainly understood the message, sending oil prices to \$71 a barrel. The previously unannounced war games will extend over two weeks and include air, surface and submarine exercises. The two aircraft carriers have 140 warplanes as well as cruise missiles and some 17,000 sailors and marines. The manoeuvres will culminate in an amphibious landing exercise in Kuwait, not far from Iranian territory.

US officials continue to publicly insist that there are no plans to bomb Iran, but the most militarist elements of the Bush administration make no secret of their support for a new military adventure. Two weeks ago, Vice President Dick Cheney stood on the deck of the USS John C. Stennis and declared: “We’ll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating the region.” Despite public denials, a series of media leaks over the past two years makes clear that the Pentagon has already drawn up detailed plans for a massive air war against Iran.

Former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, no longer constrained by office, increasingly appears to be acting as the de facto public spokesman for the advocates of war both inside and outside the White House. Speaking to Fox News

on Thursday, he berated the European powers for not being serious. “Over the past several months, they’ve wanted sanctions without pain. They don’t want to interfere with their trade and investments for Iran. That won’t work, and until they get serious, that won’t solve the problem.”

Bolton called for “a dramatic ramp up of pressure, and if we can’t get that quickly from the Europeans, unfortunately we’re going to have to do something else like regime change, or, as a last resort, a use of force by the United States.” For good measure, he also lashed out at ElBaradei, branding him as “an apologist for Iran right from the start”. “One thing we have to do very clearly in the IAEA is tell the director general there to sit down and stop trying to interfere with our efforts to prevent proliferation.”

*Time* reported yesterday that next week “a group of powerful neo-conservatives—including some of those who were most active in promoting the invasion of Iraq—plan to gather for an all-expenses-paid conference entitled ‘Confronting the Iranian threat: the way forward’ at a luxurious resort in the Bahamas.” The select group of 30 or so invited guests includes the current US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad and his wife, Undersecretary of State Paula Dobriansky and four other serving Bush administration officials. Sponsored by the right-wing Foundation for Defence of Democracies, the meeting is intended “to bring together a wide range of experts to examine all options for dealing with Iran”.

It is in this climate that middle-level American and Iranian officials are due to hold bilateral talks in Baghdad on Monday—for the first time in years. The meeting will focus exclusively on enhancing the security of US occupied Iraq and will undoubtedly be dominated by unsubstantiated American allegations that Tehran is supplying weapons and training to anti-US militia inside Iraq. Any discussion over Iran’s nuclear programs has been ruled out in advance—leaving the White House free to aggressively intensify diplomatic, economic and military pressure on Tehran in the coming weeks.



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