

UN General Assembly meets under shadow of US threats against Iran

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The UN General Assembly meets this week under the shadow of menacing demands by the US and its allies for tough new UN sanctions against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons programs. The Bush administration's "diplomacy", in which the French government has been playing a very visible role, is aimed in the first instance at bullying Russia and China into line by threatening to impose US and EU penalties on Tehran. In the background, the rising drumbeat of war is unmistakable.

The tensions flared into the open during a meeting in Moscow between the French and Russian foreign ministers last week. Since coming to office in May, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has adopted a more belligerent stance toward Iran, aligning his government more closely with the Bush administration. Just days before arriving in Moscow, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner warned on French TV that it was "necessary to prepare for the worst... and the worst is war."

In his joint press conference with Kouchner, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly repudiated the suggestion of war. "We are convinced that no modern problem has a military solution, and that applies to the Iranian nuclear program as well," he said. "We are seriously concerned about increasingly frequent reports that military action against Iran is being considered."

Lavrov also criticised French efforts to press for unilateral EU sanctions outside of any agreement in the UN Security Council. "If we decided to act collectively on the basis of consensual decisions in the UN Security Council, what good does it do to take unilateral decisions?" he exclaimed.

Behind this pathetic appeal for a return to UN consensus, Lavrov obviously feels double-crossed, particularly by France, which Moscow had previously counted upon to help rein in Washington. Far from playing down the differences, Kouchner responded by declaring: "Contrary to my friend Sergei, I believe that we must work on sanctions, on precise sanctions, to show that we are serious. If there is no third resolution in the UN, we will maybe be forced to use them."

By the standards of international diplomacy, the tone of

the press conference was decidedly frosty. Both sides are well aware that the turn by the EU to join the US in imposing unilateral economic sanctions on Tehran opens up the prospect of joint military action against Iran. In the course of last week, Kouchner toned down his warnings of war, declaring that "everything should be done to avoid war". But this formula is not markedly different from that of the Bush administration, which declares that it supports "diplomacy", while refusing to negotiate directly with Iran and insisting that all options, including the military one, are "on the table".

President Sarkozy delivered a similar message last Thursday when he flatly declared Iran's efforts "to obtain an atomic bomb" were "unacceptable". While declaring that France "does not want war", Sarkozy did not rule it out. The developing alignment was on display in Washington the following day. At the joint press conference after talks with Kouchner, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice commented: "I think there's essentially no difference in the way that we see the situation in Iran and what the international community must do."

Efforts by the UN Security Council permanent members—the US, France, Britain, Russia and China—plus Germany to agree to new sanctions against Iran have been floundering for months. The previous UN resolution mandated the end of May as the deadline for Iran to shut down its nuclear facilities—in particular, its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. Tehran has repeatedly declared that it is not engaged in building nuclear weapons and insisted on its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium to provide fuel for its planned nuclear power reactors.

Russia and China have both opposed demands for any immediate new sanctions and supported an agreement reached last month between the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA) and Iran to resolve outstanding questions about its nuclear programs. The Bush administration has bitterly opposed the deal and publicly castigated IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei, accusing him

last week of “muddying the message” to Iran by not including a halt to uranium enrichment in the agreement. For his part, ElBaradei warned once again of the dangers of war, telling the Associated Press: “I would hope that everybody would have gotten the lesson after the Iraq situation, where 700,000 innocent civilians have lost their lives on the suspicion that a country has nuclear weapons.”

As in the case of Iraq, the US claim that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons is based on a flimsy concoction of supposition, half-truths and outright lies. The Bush administration’s objections to the IAEA-Iran agreement are completely hypocritical. Its justification for demanding that Iran freeze uranium enrichment—a legitimate activity under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—was that Tehran had previously covered up its nuclear activities and failed to fully satisfy the IAEA on all of its activities. Now that Iran has agreed to clarify the IAEA on outstanding issues by the end of the year, the US opposes the process for wasting time. Washington’s unwillingness to wait simply confirms that it is working to its own agenda and timetable, which includes the “option” of military strikes on Iran while Bush still holds office.

Senior officials of the UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany met on Friday in an effort to bridge the schism in their ranks. A terse statement by US Undersecretary of State Nicolas Burns described the talks as “serious and constructive” but gave no details. In the course of this week, the six powers are due to hold further discussions, with a meeting of foreign ministers to be held on Friday. But with no signs of any agreement, the US and France are pressing ahead with unilateral sanctions. Britain, the Netherlands and Italy have already indicated support for imposing EU penalties on Iran. And while there have been indications of German opposition to new sanctions, German officials have downplayed any divisions between the major EU powers.

Underscoring Russia’s opposition to the US-led campaign to isolate Iran, Russian President Vladimir Putin is due to visit Tehran on October 16—his first to Iran—as part of a summit of Caspian states. Iran’s Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited Moscow last week and a meeting of the Iran-Russia Joint Economic Commission has been scheduled. Iranian and Russian officials have also held talks during the past week over the completion of Iran’s nuclear power reactor at Bushehr. Moscow has previously delayed the provision of fuel for the reactor, in large part to indicate its support for UN Security Council measures against Tehran.

Behind the conflicts between the major powers over Iran, fundamental economic and strategic interests are at stake. Russia, China and the European powers all have a major

economic stake in Iran. Last year Germany was Iran’s largest trade partner, exporting \$5.7 billion worth of goods to the country. But under pressure from Washington, Berlin has scaled back its provision of export credits. German exports to Iran in the first half of this year slumped by 17 percent. According to the *International Herald Tribune* last week, German exporters are concerned that China, which has rapidly expanded its trade with Iran, will fill the void.

France’s shift toward Washington highlights the mercenary considerations at stake. In 2003, the French government opposed the US invasion of Iraq and refused to support a UN resolution sanctioning the war. Its posturing quickly proved shallow as France joined other UN Security Council members in providing a veneer of legitimacy to the occupation after the event. Now, however, France under Sarkozy is actively drumming up support in Europe for the Bush administration’s campaign against Iran.

The new orientation is clearly motivated by an understanding that France will share in the spoils of US military adventures in the Middle East. Last month, the US oil giant Chevron signed a deal with Total of France to prospect and develop the huge Majnoun oilfield in southeast Iraq, near the Iranian border. Majnoun is estimated to be Iraq’s fourth largest oil field, with reserves of more than 12 billion barrels. Rights over the field had previously been awarded by Saddam Hussein to the French energy company Elf, but the contract was nullified by the US occupation.

As for the US, after nearly three decades of economic sanctions, its trade and investment with Iran is negligible. If the standoff over Iran’s nuclear programs were peacefully resolved and Tehran established normal relations with the rest of the world, the major losers would be American corporations, which have been compelled to watch on the sidelines as their European and Asian rivals established footholds in Iran over the past decade. The Bush administration’s escalating denunciations of Iran and preparations for war are a desperate attempt to once again use military muscle to establish untrammelled American strategic and economic dominance in this key resource-rich region.



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