

Widening rift between major powers over Iran's nuclear programs

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A foreign ministers meeting of the UN Security Council permanent members—the US, Britain, France, Russia and China—plus Germany broke up last Friday without agreeing to the Bush administration's call for the immediate imposition of tough new sanctions against Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons programs. Russia and China, which both hold a veto in the Security Council, opposed the US demands.

A joint statement announced that a new UN resolution would be drawn up, but would not be tabled in the Security Council for two months, pending reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner described the outcome as “a good compromise”, but there was no disguising the disagreements among the major powers, which could well preclude new UN sanctions.

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns told the media that the US interpreted the joint statement as a commitment by all signatories to back a third round of sanctions if there were no positive response from Iran. It sent “a very tough and strict message to Iran”. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that the agreement did not automatically mean new sanctions in November. “The statement is very ambiguous,” Lavrov said. “What we discussed today is to concentrate everything to help negotiations to succeed.”

The joint statement welcomed an IAEA agreement reached with Iran in July to systematically answer all outstanding questions about its nuclear programs. The US and its European allies have, however, been critical of the deal, formally protesting at the time that IAEA chief Mohammad ElBaradei was acting outside his brief by failing to insist on a complete shutdown of Iran's uranium enrichment program. “The IAEA is not in the business of diplomacy. It is a technical agency,” US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice curtly declared earlier this month.

The IAEA agreement not only delays the Bush administration's plans for tougher penalties against Iran, but highlights the hypocrisy of the US stance. Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is permitted to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle for peaceful purposes, including uranium enrichment. The only basis for the US demands that Iran shut down its uranium enrichment facility at Natanz was the claim that Tehran had failed to satisfy the IAEA on all aspects of its programs. Washington's hostility to ElBaradei's deal with Tehran confirms that the US is exploiting the nuclear issue as a pretext for action against Iran.

ElBaradei is due to present his report to the IAEA board of directors in late November. Another report is to be prepared by the EU's Solana, who has been asked to attempt to restart negotiations with Iran over a package of economic, security and technical incentives in exchange for halting specified nuclear programs, including uranium enrichment. In mid-2005, Tehran angrily rejected an EU package as an “insult to the Iranian people” and resumed work on its uranium enrichment facilities.

Last Friday's agreement to wait for the outcome of these reports could rapidly fall apart. French Foreign Minister Kouchner immediately announced that he intended to push for separate EU sanctions against Iran at a meeting on October 15. “We will talk about sanctions. Already we are sending a letter to our counterparts,” he told the media. Britain and the Netherlands have indicated their support, but other EU members are yet to announce their stance. Kouchner's move is in line with previous Bush administration calls for a “coalition of the willing” to apply unilateral penalties against Iran.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has warned that any separate EU sanctions could place a further UN Security Council resolution in jeopardy. The issue was the subject of sharp words between Lavrov and Rice last Wednesday, variously described by the diplomats present as “a very

blunt exchange” and “pretty rough”. The growing gulf between Russia and China on the one hand, and the US, Britain, France and Germany on the other, was evident on Friday: after the meeting of the six broke up, the US and the European powers met separately.

Behind these bitter divisions are the contending economic and strategic interests of the major powers. As was the case prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration is exploiting demands for sanctions and the threat of war as the means for undermining its European and Asian rivals, all of which have substantial trade and investment with Iran. Hoping to protect their economic position, France and Britain have unambiguously supported Washington’s aggressive stance, while Russia and China have attempted to fight a diplomatic rearguard action in the UN.

Even among the European powers, there appear to be differences. An article in the *Financial Times* last week highlighted Germany’s response to criticisms that it was dragging its feet over sanctions against Iran. German officials told the newspaper that the foreign ministry had been instructed to prepare a dossier for Friday’s meeting in New York setting out the failure of the other powers to take action. It apparently included not only a list of French corporations, such as Peugeot, Renault, Total and BNP Paribas, still active in Iran, but also noted that US businesses were trading with Iran using companies in Dubai to hide their involvement.

The refusal of Russia and China to agree to a new UN resolution will not stop the Bush administration from pressing ahead with new economic penalties against Iran, accompanied by the threat of military attack. In recent weeks, a growing stream of media leaks points to advanced preparations for US strikes on Iran. At the same time, the most right-wing sections of the US political and media establishment have been intensifying their propaganda against Iran and demands for military action.

An editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* last Thursday, entitled “Bush and Iran,” bluntly criticised the White House for condemning Iran over its nuclear programs and alleged support for anti-US insurgents in Iraq, but failing to take action. It derided the diplomatic efforts of the US State Department and dismissed UN sanctions as “notable mainly for their weakness”. The newspaper’s opinion pages have consistently acted as the mouthpiece for the most militarist faction of the Bush administration.

The editorial’s unmistakable conclusion was for a US war against Iran. “The Bush presidency is running out of time to act if it wants to stop Iran from gaining a bomb.

With GIs fighting and dying in Iraq, Mr Bush also owes it to them not to allow enemy sanctuaries or weapons pipelines from Iran. If the President believes half of what he and his administration have said about Iran’s behaviour, he has an obligation to do whatever it takes to stop it.”

Former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton delivered a similar message to members of Britain’s Conservative Party over the weekend. Bolton, previously one of the Bush administration’s leading neo-conservatives, told his audience that while military force was not an “attractive option... I would tell you I don’t know what the alternative is... If we were to strike Iran it should be accompanied by an effort at regime change... The US once had the capability to engineer the clandestine overthrow of governments. I wish we could get it back.”

In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, Norman Podhoretz, a leading figure among so-called neo-conservatives, explained that he had pressed Bush in a private meeting earlier this year to take military action against Iran’s nuclear facilities. “You have an awesome responsibility to prevent another holocaust. You’re the only one with the guts to do so,” Podhoretz said he told the president. While Bush did not indicate agreement, Podhoretz noted, he listened intently and laughed when Podhoretz spoke derisively of UN sanctions.

Bolton, Podhoretz and the *Wall Street Journal* are undoubtedly giving voice to the opinions of those in the White House around Vice President Dick Cheney. As far as this faction is concerned, the failure of America’s rivals to agree to new UN sanctions is just one more argument for unilateral US action against Iran and the acceleration of already advanced preparations for a reckless new military adventure in the Middle East.



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