

US dismisses IAEA report of “progress” over Iran’s nuclear programs

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The Bush administration has rapidly rejected the findings of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report finalised on Thursday, which found that Iran had made “substantial progress” towards clarifying outstanding questions about its nuclear programs.

The US confirmed its intention to press ahead with another UN Security Council resolution demanding that Iran halt its uranium enrichment and other nuclear programs. The US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, declared that Washington would like to see more “biting” sanctions against Tehran than those imposed under UN resolutions passed last December and in March.

The debate surrounding the latest IAEA report is not simply a rerun of previous arguments. Behind Washington’s demands for tougher UN sanctions is the barely concealed threat of a unilateral US military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities. In response to a declaration last month by Russian President Vladimir Putin that there was “no objective evidence” that Iran was building nuclear weapons, US President Bush warned that Iran should be prevented from having the knowledge to make a bomb “if you’re interested in avoiding World War III”.

Russia and China have both opposed the imposition of a new round of UN sanctions. Beijing declared on Thursday that it supported Iran’s right to a peaceful nuclear-energy program and preferred to see Iran answer questions about its nuclear ambitions through negotiations with the IAEA. US ambassador Khalilzad responded by declaring: “I don’t think China would want to be in a position to cause a failure of diplomacy to deal with this issue.” In the lexicon of the Bush administration, “a failure of diplomacy” has only one meaning—a turn to military force.

From the outset, the White House has bitterly criticised the “work plan” agreed in August between the IAEA and Tehran to answer all remaining questions about Iran’s nuclear programs. The US registered a formal complaint against IAEA chairman Mohamed ElBaradei for allegedly exceeding his authority, but bided its time after Russia and China refused to immediately agree to a new UN resolution.

The reason for the US opposition is obvious: if the outstanding issues were to be resolved, the formal case against Iran—that it has previously failed to fully disclose its nuclear activities—would collapse.

The lack of objective evidence of any Iranian nuclear weapons program has, however, not prevented the Bush administration from ramping up its propaganda campaign against Tehran. Bush officials routinely equate the “capacity” to make a nuclear weapon with Iran’s progress in uranium enrichment at its Natanz plant—an activity that it permitted under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) to which Iran is a signatory. Moreover, if one were to follow Bush’s declaration that Iran must be denied the “knowledge” to make an atomic bomb then all nuclear research and activity would have to be banned.

The superheated rhetoric from the White House finds its reflection in the international media with the London-based *Times*, for instance, responding to the IAEA report with a headline “Iran could build atom bomb within one year, says nuclear watchdog”. In fact, the IAEA made no such statement, but simply reported that Tehran had 3,000 gas centrifuges operating at its Natanz facility. This figure—the estimated number of centrifuges needed to produce enough highly-enriched uranium for one bomb—has increasingly been promoted by the US and Israel as the “red-line” for action against Iran.

In recent comments to *Le Monde*, IAEA director ElBaradei declared that Iran was three to eight years away from being able to produce a bomb and constituted no immediate threat. Even ElBaradei’s estimate assumes that Iran switched its Natanz plant to the production of highly-enriched uranium. Currently the facility is subject to IAEA monitoring which shows that Iran is only producing the low-enriched uranium required for power reactor fuel.

This week’s IAEA report will only be released publicly after a meeting of the IAEA board of governors due next week. The Bush administration has nevertheless seized on parts of the report to repeat its condemnations of Iran and demand a complete shutdown of its nuclear facilities. The

US envoy to the IAEA, Greg Schulte, criticised Iran's cooperation with the IAEA as "selective and incomplete", adding: "Iran has not met the world's expectation that it would disclose information on both its current and past programs."

In its article entitled "UN losing grip on Iran nuke plan", CNN, which received a leaked copy of the report, highlighted the IAEA's remark that since early 2006 it "has not received the type of information that Iran had previously been providing" and that its "knowledge about Iran's current nuclear program is diminishing." It also cited the IAEA's contention that Iran's "cooperation has been reactive rather than proactive. As previously stated, Iran's active cooperation and full transparency are indispensable for full and prompt implementation of the work plan."

The reference to "diminishing" knowledge and the call for greater cooperation are hardly new. Similar comments have been inserted in every IAEA report over the past two years. It is during this period that the US has been pressing for UN sanctions to which Iran has responded by limiting IAEA access to its nuclear facilities. In February 2006, Tehran ended its voluntary implementation of the IAEA's additional protocol for more intrusive inspections, after the IAEA Board referred Iran to the UN Security Council.

As other media agencies have pointed out, the latest IAEA report is "mixed" in its assessment of Iran's nuclear programs—calling for greater cooperation on the one hand, but at the same time acknowledging that Iran has provided access to individuals and responded satisfactorily to IAEA questions. Large portions of the report are said to clarify details of Iran's acquisition of centrifuges through the so-called black market network of Pakistan's top nuclear scientist Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan. The "work plan" is not due to be concluded until next month.

The Bush administration's highly selective use of the IAEA report, as well as its belligerence towards EIBaradei, recalls the campaign of lies about Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction prior to the US-led invasion in 2003. As in the case of Iraq, the White House alleges that Iran has secret nuclear programs that are hidden from the IAEA. Each step by Tehran to answer the IAEA's concerns is met with new questions and demands from Washington. The process is endless as it is impossible for the Iran to prove a negative: that nowhere in its large territory are there secret facilities.

An Associated Press article on Wednesday reported that the US, Britain and France had prepared their rebuttal of the IAEA report well in advance. Each country has been privately circulating a document setting out dozens of new questions that the IAEA had to investigate.

France wanted a full "chronology of contacts" between

Iran and the Khan network and demanded to know why Iran was producing centrifuge components at military facilities. Britain impugned the IAEA, repeatedly questioning its conclusions by asking "what has Iran told the Agency that has given the Agency confidence that Iran's declaration in this regard is now correct and complete?" The US demanded "access to all individuals ... facilities, equipment [and] materials" that can shed light on the suggestions that early enrichment activities were more developed than Tehran admits to and were linked to the military.

In another move that smacks of the Bush administration's dirty tricks, the *New York Times* published an article yesterday claiming that Iran had been prevented from buying "nuclear-related materials at least 75 times over the past nine years because of suspicions that the purchases could have been used for building bombs." The confidential information from the Nuclear Suppliers Group had been conveniently leaked to the newspaper by "a diplomat from a country interested in exposing the extent of Iranian efforts to acquire dual-use items that can be converted to weapons production."

Conveniently buried at the end of the article was the fact that "the nuclear-related materials" covered a range of items from nickel powder and electron microscopes to a mass spectrometer and lasers, all of which have a large number of varied applications. Again there is a parallel with Iraq. Prior to 2003, the US administration notoriously used UN bans on so-called dual-use items to cripple the Iraqi economy and infrastructure.

The rising temperature of US propaganda against Iran has nothing to do with its alleged nuclear weapons programs, or the other pretext for a new war that is being drummed up—Iranian "meddling" in Iraq. Rather, with a little more than a year left in office, the Bush administration is actively preparing for a military confrontation with Iran.

The aim of any US military attack against Iran is not simply to destroy its nuclear facilities but to further US ambitions to secure a dominant strategic and economic role throughout the resources rich-regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The sharpening tensions with Russia and China are a warning that a new conflict has the potential to escalate into a far broader war involving the major powers.



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