

On “farewell tour” of Europe: Bush steps up threats against Iran

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In a joint communiqué issued after a summit meeting in Slovenia Tuesday, the US and the European Union threatened to impose new and tougher sanctions against Iran, going beyond those approved by the United Nations Security Council, if the government in Tehran does not bow to demands that it halt its uranium enrichment program.

The meeting came on the first day of George W. Bush’s final tour of the European continent as US President. The six-day, six-nation visit is expected to yield little else in terms of substantive agreements. With barely seven months left in the White House, most European governments see Bush as a lame duck whose departure cannot come soon enough.

As for the population of Europe, Bush remains a deeply hated figure because of the war of aggression against Iraq, the Guantánamo prison camp, torture and other issues. One recent poll showed 77 percent of Europeans disagreeing with his policies. The European media has noted the relative absence of fanfare accompanying the visit—no US flags flying in Slovenia, for example—and that some leaders seem anxious to avoid being seen with the American president in public.

“In truth, the US-EU summit is only being held because it is on the schedule,” a Brussels diplomat told *Spiegel Online*. “Of course there are possible areas of cooperation, like climate protection. But everyone is already looking beyond the Bush era.”

Before Bush set out from Washington, American officials were also at pains to stress that little was expected from his junket. “I don’t think you’re going to see dramatic announcements on this trip,” commented Bush’s national security advisor Stephen Hadley last week.

The document produced by the US-EU summit represented a laundry list of general statements of principle regarding various world “hot spots,” including Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kosovo, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Burma, Tibet, Sudan and Somalia. It also took in climate change, world hunger, the crisis in the world financial markets, alternative energy, free trade and global health and education.

On some issues, the attempt to paper over substantive differences with diplomatic phrases was painfully obvious. Thus, in a section on climate change, it affirmed that the US and Europe would proceed “in accordance with our respective

policies,” that is, with Europe seeking to meet a target of 20 percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and Washington rejecting any such commitments as a drag on the US economy.

On the “common fight against terrorism,” the document pledges to “ensure that efforts to combat terrorism comply with our obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law, refugee law and humanitarian law.”

Under conditions in which multiple efforts are under way to extradite CIA agents in connection with forced abductions, “extraordinary rendition” and torture of supposed terrorist suspects from European countries, what followed was a remarkable understatement: “We agree that the fight against international terrorism raises important legal questions....Our dialogue contributes to a better mutual understanding of our respective legal frameworks and helps us work together more effectively.”

It is significant that given the extraordinary breadth of the statement, the only section of the communiqué attracting significant media attention was that dealing with Iran. It demands that the Tehran government “comply with its international obligations concerning its nuclear activities, including the full and verifiable suspension of enrichment and full cooperation with the IAEA [International Atomic Energy Association].”

It proclaimed support for a carrot-and-stick “dual track strategy,” promising incentives in return for Iran’s compliance while threatening strict enforcement of UN sanctions as well as “additional measures” in the face of Iranian defiance.

EU foreign policy head Javier Solana is set to visit Tehran together with British, French, German, Russian and Chinese officials this weekend to offer economic aid and technical assistance for a restricted civilian nuclear program in return for Iran dropping its uranium enrichment activities.

The communiqué pledged to “take steps to ensure Iranian banks cannot abuse the international banking system to support proliferation and terrorism.”

At a press conference after the US-EU summit, Bush did all of the talking on the Iran question, while Slovenian Prime Minister and President of the European Council Janez Janša

and the president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso stood by silently. While the American president insisted that Washington and the European governments were “on the same page” in relation to Iran, neither of the EU representatives chimed in to support this assertion.

In apparent reference to Barroso’s and Janša’s silence, Bush quipped, “This is ‘Ask George’ day.”

EU officials have indicated that Europe is prepared to implement new sanctions. The EU’s external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero Waldner, told reporters that the new measures could include the freezing of Iranian assets and funds. The specific target would apparently be Iran’s largest bank, the state-owned Bank Melli.

The Iranian media reported that the government in Tehran is already pulling assets out of European banks and investing some of them in gold and other commodities in preparation for possible sanctions.

How far Europe is prepared to go in abetting the US campaign against Iran remains to be seen. Major European companies have significant financial interests in Iran, and there are concerns that sanctions could lead to the cutting off of Iranian oil under conditions of a deepening energy crisis that has provoked a wave of strikes by truckers, fishermen and farmers across the continent.

Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft Laufenburg, a Swiss power firm, for example, recently negotiated a 25-year deal with Iran to import Iranian natural gas to Europe. The Swiss government has estimated that the deal could be worth \$42 billion. Meanwhile, Edison International of Italy has signed a contract with the National Iranian Oil Company to drill for gas in the country’s Persian Gulf waters.

European big business no doubt also fears that if it withdraws from the Iranian market its place will be taken by others seeking new energy supplies, including China, India and Malaysia.

Nonetheless, Bush is seeking to exploit the EU’s apparent willingness to consider further sanctions to pursue his own “dual track strategy.”

The administration has engaged in a steady drumbeat over the supposedly imminent threat posed by Iran’s nuclear program, even though the National Intelligence Estimate produced by Washington’s own intelligence agencies last December concluded that Iran had dropped any programs related to nuclear weapons in 2003. For its part, the IAEA has indicted that it has seen no evidence that Iran is currently engaged in developing nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Washington has charged Tehran as a state sponsor of terrorism, referring to its alleged role in Iraq, as well as its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, both political parties and social movements with mass support.

The combination of these charges is starkly reminiscent of those floated by the administration in the run-up to the invasion

of Iraq in 2003. As during that period, the administration wants to present an image of seeking multilateral and diplomatic avenues for solving the purported problem, while preparing for military action.

Washington has concluded that it has little hope of getting additional sanctions approved on the United Nations Security Council, because of opposition from both Russia and China; thus, the importance of the EU. “The emphasis is now shifting from the security council to the European Union,” stated one EU diplomat quoted in the British *Guardian*.

While Bush refrained from repeating his habitual insistence that the military option remains “on the table” in relation to Iran, he did comment on a starkly explicit threat of military action coming from Israel.

Last Friday, Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz issued the most direct threat yet of a unilateral and unprovoked military strike against Iran. If Tehran continues with its nuclear program, he said, “We will attack it.” Mofaz added, “The sanctions are ineffective. Attacking Iran, in order to stop its nuclear plans, will be unavoidable.” Mofaz, a former Israeli Defense Forces chief of staff and former defense minister, is part of the security cabinet and fully informed of Israeli military preparations.

Meanwhile, an Internet site with close ties to Israeli intelligence indicated that war planning against Iran is well advanced. “The Israeli Air Force has set up an Iran Command to coordinate operations with the ballistic missiles and air and missile defense brigades which deploy the Arrow and Patriot anti-missile missile systems,” reported the site, *DEBKAF*.

During the news conference in Slovenia, Bush defended Israel’s provocative threat. “You’d be a little nervous too if a leader in your neighborhood announced that he’d like to destroy you,” he said, an apparent reference to statements by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad predicting Israel’s demise.

Over the weekend, a White House spokesman declined to answer whether Washington would support such an Israeli attack, declaring he would not talk about “hypotheticals.”



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