

US sends senior diplomat to nuclear talks with Iran

Peter Symonds
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The Bush administration's announcement on Wednesday that a senior US diplomat will participate in international talks in Geneva tomorrow with Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili marks a shift, albeit tentative at this stage, in White House policy toward Tehran. Bush officials have previously insisted that Iran had to shut down its uranium enrichment and other nuclear facilities before the US would take part in any discussions with it on the nuclear issue.

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns will join European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana in the meeting where Jalili is to deliver Tehran's formal response to a package of incentives offered last month to resolve the nuclear standoff. All permanent members of the UN Security Council—the US, France, Britain, China and Russia—along with Germany (the so-called P5+1) will now have representatives present. Washington has previously refused to take part in such meetings, despite backing the package.

Washington has been at pains to point out that Burns will hold no separate bilateral talks with Jalili and that US attendance is a “one-off”. Burns's brief is to set out the US position—that Iran must suspend uranium enrichment before any negotiations of substance can take place—and to listen. Following statements by Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama that Bush's decision vindicated his own call for talks with Iran, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino commented: “The substance [of the policy] remains the same, but this is a new tactic.”

But for all the caveats, the presence of Burns—third ranking official in the State Department—at the meeting does indicate a change in emphasis. “The point that we're making is that the United States is firmly behind this diplomacy, firmly behind and unified with our allies and hopefully the Iranians will take that message,” US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared yesterday. European officials told the *International Herald Tribune* that the “mere presence of an American at the table would help still the oratory of those calling for military action against Iran”.

The *Washington Post* reported that the decision took place

at the top level. “Bush accepted Rice's recommendation [to send an envoy] at the closely held meeting, which also included Vice President Dick Cheney, national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley, White House chief of staff Joshua B. Bolten and Burns,” it stated. Bush overrode objections by Cheney, who has been pushing for US military action against Iran, either directly or indirectly in support of a strike by Israel.

Any move toward a diplomatic deal with Iran still confronts large obstacles. EU foreign policy chief Solana has proposed a short-term temporary “freeze-freeze” under which Iran would halt any expansion of its nuclear facilities and in return the major powers would hold off any further UN sanctions against Tehran. The purpose would be to lay the basis for substantive further talks. The US continues to insist, however, that serious negotiations can only take place if Iran suspends uranium enrichment—a condition that Tehran has repeatedly rejected.

However, the US and Iran have both made several small but significant gestures to indicate that talks may be possible. For its part, the US agreed to include a pledge to refrain from the use of force as part of the P5+1 incentives—a move that would, formally at least, remove the US “military option” from the table. Rice reinforced the offer by sending a letter signed by her along with the political and economic package. In his initial written response, Iran's foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki, while ignoring the issue of uranium enrichment, declared a willingness to “find common ground through logical and constructive actions”.

According to the British-based *Guardian*, another US diplomatic gesture is in the offing, with the White House expected to announce next month setting up a US interests section in the Swiss embassy in Tehran. It would be the first time that American diplomats have been stationed in Iran since the severing of diplomatic ties following the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi and ensuing US embassy hostage crisis in 1979. Tehran has signalled that it does not oppose such a step outright.

While this diplomatic house of cards could easily collapse,

there are strong pressures on Tehran and Washington to come to an accommodation. Despite high world prices for its oil, the Iranian regime is confronting a mounting economic and social crisis at home that has been compounded by UN, US and European sanctions, which have hampered access to much-needed investment and to the international finance system. The EU recently imposed new sanctions on major Iranian banks and the French oil giant Total pulled back from plans for a \$10 billion project to develop the huge South Pars gas field in Iran.

As for the Bush administration, it has already relied heavily on Iranian assistance to deal with anti-occupation Shiite militias in Iraq. Despite the continuing refrain from Washington that Tehran is arming and training anti-US insurgents in Iraq, the offensives by US and Iraqi government forces in Basra and Baghdad from March onward against the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr would have ended in humiliating debacles without Iranian aid. Intense Iranian pressure was brought to bear on Sadr to call on his fighters to put away their weapons and allow US and Iraqi troops into what had been Mahdi Army strongholds.

As it seeks to stabilise its occupation of Iraq, the US is facing a growing insurgency in Afghanistan where over the past two months more American soldiers have died than in Iraq. Moreover, the rising tensions with Pakistan over the infiltration of so-called Taliban fighters is raising the prospect of further US air strikes inside Pakistan, border clashes and potentially a dangerous new conflict with Pakistan itself. Faced with resistance from its NATO allies to sending more soldiers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen indicated this week that the Pentagon was looking to increase US troop numbers in Afghanistan. The US navy has already redeployed the aircraft carrier the USS Abraham Lincoln from the Persian Gulf to waters off Afghanistan to boost its capacity for air strikes.

As US strategic focus shifts, the importance of an accommodation with the Iranian regime increases. Indicating the opposition in the US military top brass to a new war against Iran, Mullen recently explained that “opening up a third front right now would be extremely stressful on us... That doesn’t mean we don’t have capacity or reserve, but that would really be very challenging.” In recent weeks, Mullen has been involved in top-level talks with his Israeli counterparts, with Iran at the top of the agenda. According to most reports of the closed-door meetings, Mullen’s assignment was to restrain Israel from any attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. One more sign of the shifting emphasis was the comparatively restrained response by the Bush administration to the Iran’s missile tests earlier this month.

The US is clearly looking for Iranian assistance in both Iraq and Afghanistan, where Tehran also has longstanding political ties and influence. The meetings between the US and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad that began last year have no doubt been a venue for discussing more than just the security situation in Iraq. For its continuing help however, Tehran clearly wants a quid pro quo that would end the protracted confrontation over its nuclear programs, move toward normalising relations and above all end the constant threat of a massive US attack.

The decision to dispatch Burns to the Geneva talks is a sign that Rice has been given the go-ahead, at least for the time being, to explore the possibilities. The Bush administration has already warned that Iran’s failure to agree to shut down its nuclear facilities and negotiate on the incentives package would result in a new push in the UN Security Council for tougher sanctions. And while emphasising his support for multilateral diplomacy, President Bush nevertheless reaffirmed on July 2 that “all options are on the table”.

It is worth noting the response of former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton to the announcement of Burns’s trip. He branded the decision as “a complete capitulation,” saying: “Just when the administration has no more U-turns to pull, it does another. This is further evidence of the administration’s complete intellectual collapse.” As well as a reminder that a section of the US political establishment and the White House is still bent on war with Iran, the extreme bitterness of his comments indicates that Burns’s visit is not just a ploy but may be the start of a more fundamental shift in policies.



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