

# US calls for tougher sanctions on Iran

James Cogan  
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The Bush administration, with the support of Britain, France and Germany, has announced its intention to seek additional economic sanctions against Iran, in the wake of the Iranian government's refusal to bow to demands that it freeze uranium enrichment. The lack of any rhetorical heat in the US response, however, provides a further sign that the White House is looking, for the time being at least, to ease the tensions that surround Iran's nuclear program.

In June, the so-called P5+1 Group—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia, plus Germany—sent a proposal to Iran which hinged on Tehran agreeing to suspend its uranium enrichment and other nuclear facilities. The offer promised steps toward the normalisation of relations, including by the US, which has maintained an economic embargo and not had diplomatic relations with Iran since 1979.

On July 19, Iran gave no formal reply to the proposal at a meeting in Geneva over its nuclear program, which was attended for the first time by a senior US diplomat, William Burns. According to the *Washington Post*, Bush acted on the advice of Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates in deciding to send Burns to last month's talks, signalling a shift away from confrontation, and overriding the objections of Vice President Dick Cheney.

Following the talks, EU Foreign Secretary Javier Solana, who has been appointed by the P5+1 as their spokesman in the negotiations, announced that Tehran had a two-week deadline to respond. The deadline came and went last weekend.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad restated on Saturday that Iran “would not retreat one iota” from its right to develop a civilian nuclear power industry. Earlier in the week, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared on state radio: “They [the major powers] know the Iranian nation is after using nuclear power to provide electricity but they say because this work gives you capability, we will not allow it... The Iranian nation... does not pay attention to such talk and will continue with its path.”

The Iranian regime has not closed the door on diplomacy however. Ahmadinejad made conciliatory remarks during a joint press conference on Sunday with Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, declaring that Iran was “serious” about holding further talks. “We seek negotiations based on legal principles, leading to practical outcomes,” he stated. “We hope that others will be ready to discuss different regional and international issues and move toward peace and security.”

Iranian representative Saeed Jalali sent Solana a written response to the major powers yesterday. According to initial reports, it does not differ markedly from the statements of Ahmadinejad and Khamenei. The one-page letter made no mention of accepting a so-called freeze-freeze proposal—no expansion of uranium enrichment in return for no expansion of sanctions to allow for a limited period of initial talks to establish the basis for formal negotiations. The offer still requires that

Iran freeze its uranium enrichment completely for full talks to take place.

Instead, the Iranian letter reportedly referred to “questions and ambiguities” in the P5+1 offer and stated that “mutual clarification can pave the way for a speedy and transparent negotiating process with bright prospects”. An unnamed western official told Reuters the letter said “absolutely nothing”. A US official described it as “more obfuscation and delays”.

Iran has insisted that it has no ambitions to develop nuclear weapons, only power generation. Russia is assisting Iran to construct a nuclear power facility at Bushehr that will be able to generate an estimated 20,000 megawatts by 2020. Fuel for the plant is being developed at a uranium conversion facility in Isfahan and a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz.

Under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is entitled to pursue these projects. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has had access to Iran's facilities and has found no evidence of a weapons program. The US National Intelligence Estimate assessed last December that Iran had “halted its weapons program in 2003” and, even if it restarted one, would not be able to assemble a nuclear weapon before 2015.

Despite this, the major powers and Israel are determined to prevent the Iranian regime completing the development of a nuclear power industry that could be converted to military uses. The Bush administration continues to claim that Iran is intent on building nuclear weapons, latching onto the IAEA reports that Iran has not completely clarified outstanding questions over earlier nuclear programs and anomalies.

As a result, Iran is currently subjected to a range of economic and diplomatic sanctions. Richard Grenvill, spokesman for the US mission to the United Nations, declared on Sunday that the Bush administration would ask the UN Security Council to impose even harsher measures.

Grenvill stated: “It is clear that the government of Iran has not complied with the international community's demand to stop enriching uranium and isn't even interested in trying. They leave the Security Council no choice but to increase the sanctions, as called for in the last resolution passed.”

US State Department spokesman Gonzago Gallegos claimed on Monday that Russia and China were in agreement that “in the absence of a positive response we have no choice but to pursue further measures”. The threatened new sanctions include moves to freeze the European and Asian assets of Iran's state-owned Bank Melli, restrictions on the sale of parts needed to maintain the country's oil and gas industry and, possibly, steps to curtail Iran's ability to import refined petroleum products. This last measure would have a severe economic impact as Iran lacks the refining ability to meet its own domestic demand and currently imports as much as 40 percent of its

fuel requirements.

Noticeably absent in the US statements was any reference to the option of military strikes. The US has very real motives for wanting to ease tensions for now. In the lead up to the November presidential election, the US economy is reeling from the impact of the banking crisis and higher fuel prices, which have in part been caused by the instability in the Middle East due to US threats of war. Each week brings further evidence that the US is sliding into recession.

George Friedman, the founder of the intelligence company Stratfor and a figure with close connections to Bush's Republican Party, told the *Barron's* newsagency this week that military strikes on Iran had been taken off the agenda because it "could drive crude oil prices to more than \$300 a barrel, which even over a short period would be cataclysmic to the global economy and stock markets". Friedman opined that the threats of US or Israeli air strikes were most likely "psychological warfare" to secure a diplomatic cave-in by Tehran.

The other key argument against any attack on Iran is the consensus that has emerged in US ruling circles that the relative stability of the US occupation in Iraq has created conditions for troops to be withdrawn and sent to bolster the US/NATO force fighting a growing insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal region. In the event of strikes on its nuclear facilities, the Iranian regime could radically destabilise Iraq, either by encouraging rebellions among the Iraqi Shiite population or by the dispatch of its own troops across the border to attack US forces.

In a Sunday column, the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius reported that the Bush administration has taken steps to "dissuade" Israel from carrying out its threats of a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. According to Ignatius's sources, the US director of national intelligence, Mike O'Connell, and the Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, both informed the Israelis in June that the US would oppose any over-flight of Iraq by Israeli aircraft—the shortest and safest route for an attack on Iran.

An official told Ignatius: "There is uniformity across the US government about the way to proceed with Iran. Everyone from this White House, including the vice president's office, is in agreement that the military option is not the best option at this point, and we should pursue diplomatic and economic pressures."

The stress on diplomacy is also due to the recognition in Washington that factions within the Iranian leadership are open to some sort of accommodation with the US. Under conditions in which the regime is already struggling to contain a rapidly growing and restive working class, the country is being severely affected by global inflationary pressures. Overall, prices have risen 28 percent, with food costs increasing this year by 45 percent. The price of rice, a staple, has soared a staggering 238 percent.

While high fuel prices have given Iran a temporary bonanza from oil revenues and allowed Ahmadinejad to placate discontent with social spending, the sanctions and insecurity are preventing any major inflows of desperately needed investment into the country's crumbling infrastructure, particularly in the oil and gas industry. French conglomerate Total Oil announced last month that it was suspending investment plans in a major Iranian gas field on the grounds it was "too risky". An end to the nuclear stand-off could open the way for a series of projects to proceed.

While a war with Iran appears unlikely in the short-term, the possibility is by no means off the agenda. The political situation inside Israel is a factor in play. Inequality and poverty has skyrocketed over recent years and the political establishment is beset with accusations

of corruption. Nationalist hysteria, directed at an alleged external Iranian enemy, has become a means for the ruling elite to try and stave off domestic unrest.

The rhetoric has the potential to escalate into action, embroiling the US and other powers in a conflict whether they want it or not. Numerous figures within the Israeli political establishment advocate pre-emptive strikes on Iran with the claim that the Iranian regime is seeking nuclear technology in order to destroy the Zionist state. Shaul Mofaz, the country's deputy prime minister and potentially the next prime minister, declared in Washington last week that "Israel will not let a second Holocaust happen". In June, Mofaz stated an Israeli attack on Iran was "unavoidable".

The most dangerous and reckless warmongers, however, are still to be found in the Bush White House and the Pentagon. The architects of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the lies over "weapons of mass destruction" still aspire for regime change in Tehran that will place the huge energy resources and potential markets of Iran at the disposal of the American financial and corporate elite.

Recent revelations by journalist Seymour Hersh point to the criminal and conspiratorial lengths that have been considered to provoke a war. According to Hersh's sources, Cheney and his aides discussed plans earlier this year to fabricate an Iranian attack on US forces, following the near clash in January between Iranian and American vessels in the Straits of Hormuz.

Hersh told Faiz Shakir of ThinkProgress.org this month: "The one [plan] that interested me the most was why don't we build four or five boats that look like Iranian PT boats; put Navy Seals on them with a lot of arms; and next time one of our boats goes to the Straits of Hormuz, start a shoot-up. Might cost some lives and it was rejected because you can't have Americans killing Americans. That's the level of stuff we're talking about. Provocation...."

While Hersh's claim cannot be substantiated, Cheney and the layers who advocate confrontation calculate that an incident in the Persian Gulf would stampede opinion behind a military strike on Iran. At present, however, the thrust appears to be moving in the opposite direction, with a consensus forming that Iran has to take a back seat while US imperialism focuses on pressing economic problems at home and a deteriorating strategic situation in Afghanistan.



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