US, Europe step up pressure on Iran

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The United States and the three main European powers, Britain, France and Germany, are stepping up their demands on Iran to curtail its nuclear research and development program in advance of a September 23 deadline, which coincides with the opening of the annual meeting of the United Nations General Assembly.

Foreign policy officials from the four countries, together with representatives of China and Russia, met Wednesday in Frankfurt, Germany, and issued a statement demanding that Tehran respond to offers of trade and financial incentives in return for suspension of its uranium enrichment program.

The group of six, comprising the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany (hence the informal name P5+1), has conducted three years of on-and-off negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, which the US and Europe claim is aimed at building an atomic weapon. The UN Security Council has adopted three rounds of economic sanctions against Iran over the same period of time.

Volker Stanzel, political director of the German Foreign Ministry, issued the joint statement on behalf of the six participating countries, calling on Iran to "be aware of the urgent need to restore confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear program through full cooperation with the international community."

Officials of the US and the three European powers pushed for a sharper criticism of Iran's response to the last statement issued by the P5+1 group in April, but they encountered resistance from both Russia and China, which oppose the expansion of US influence in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, and have extensive commercial relations with Tehran.

The impetus for a harder line against Iran has come primarily from the European powers, particularly Germany. On Monday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the September deadline for progress in negotiations on the nuclear program was "very serious." Merkel met with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and French President Nicolas Sarkozy in the run-up to the Frankfurt meeting.

At a press conference with Netanyahu, Merkel called for economic sanctions "in the energy, financial and other important sectors" if Iran did not comply with Western demands, adding, "We will not only have to think about [sanctions], but discuss within the international community how to enforce them." At a joint appearance with Merkel, Sarkozy declared, "Germany and France will be united in calling for a strengthening of sanctions."

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that no additional sanctions would be needed if Russia and China would cooperate in implementing the existing ones. "Russia and China are absolutely essential in this," he said. "What we have to do is work much more closely with Russia and China to convince them to share our perception on the necessity to really act on this issue."

In an effort to deflect this renewed pressure, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, said Monday that Iran has made a new offer of talks on the nuclear issues, although he gave no details. While US and European officials dismissed the statement, made on Iranian television, it apparently served its purpose, giving China and Russia a basis for opposing any stronger statement from the P5+1.

The US State Department said that any new Iranian proposal would be treated "seriously" but that none had yet been received. President Obama sent a letter to the Iranian government in April offering direct talks without preconditions, with an informal deadline of September 15, one week before the General Assembly meeting. There were unconfirmed reports from Iran that

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Obama sent a second letter to Iran in August reiterating the offer.

Stanzel of the German foreign ministry responded to Jalili's statement, saying that Iran had only until the September 23 deadline to actually begin a new round of nuclear talks. This was followed by an Iranian declaration that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would travel to New York to deliver a speech to the General Assembly on that date. This would be his first major foreign trip since his contested reelection last June 12.

Ahmadinejad dismissed the threat of new sanctions, declaring, "No one can impose any sanctions on Iran any longer," according to the official IRNA news agency. Iran's representative at the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, said that any new talks with the P5+1 group would not be about the nuclear program, but about broader security issues. "Iran's nuclear issue can only be examined at the IAEA," he said.

The IAEA, or International Atomic Energy Agency, a United Nations body charged with monitoring compliance with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, has largely rebuffed the US-Israeli campaign against Iran. In a report issued August 28, the agency confirmed that Iran has not suspended its uranium-enrichment activities—which are perfectly legal under the non-proliferation treaty—but urged Iran to provide new assurances that these activities were not directed towards building a nuclear bomb.

Iran reached an agreement last month with the IAEA to allow inspectors to return to its heavy water plant near Arak, which is under construction, and to increase camera monitoring at its main nuclear facility at Natanz.

Mohamed ElBaradei, the outgoing director general of the agency, flatly declared that claims of an Iranian nuclear threat had been exaggerated. He told the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* that despite the lack of evidence of a nuclear weapons program, "somehow, many people are talking about how Iran's nuclear program is the greatest threat to the world. In many ways, I think the threat has been hyped."

The increased diplomatic activity takes place against a background of threats by Israel of military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, backed by increasingly strident rhetoric from right-wing neo-conservative circles in the United States, as well as sections of the Obama administration itself.

Both Vice President Joseph Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have suggested a more aggressive stance against Iran than Obama's rhetoric might indicate. Biden said that the US could not prevent an Israeli attack—a factually ludicrous assertion, since any air strike would have to pass through US or NATO-controlled airspace, either in Turkey, Iraq or the Persian Gulf.

The usual editorial voices of the ultra-right, like the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, and former Bush administration UN Ambassador John Bolton, have openly called for US-backed Israeli air strikes, while denouncing Obama's fig leaf of diplomacy as a postponement of the inevitable confrontation.

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