

US pushes through IAEA censure of Iran's nuclear programs

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A US-backed resolution passed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Friday censured Iran for failing to halt its nuclear programs and disclose construction of a new uranium enrichment plant near the city of Qom. The IAEA resolution sets the stage for an intensifying confrontation between Iran and the US and its European allies over the coming month.

The 25 to 3 vote for the resolution was the product of intense lobbying by the Obama administration in recent weeks, particularly of Russia and China, which have been reluctant to take tough action against Iran. Malaysia, Cuba and Venezuela voted against and six countries—Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey—abstained.

Tehran reacted angrily. Iran's IAEA ambassador Ali Asghar Soltanieh described the resolution as “hasty and undue” and warned it could “damage” relations with the IAEA, indicating that Iran might further limit its cooperation with the UN body. Tehran stopped abiding voluntarily by the IAEA's Additional Protocol and other measures after the collapse of negotiations with European powers and an IAEA vote to refer Iran to the UN Security Council in February 2006.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Sunday announced plans to build 10 new uranium enrichment plants to supply the 250 to 300 tonnes of nuclear fuel needed annually for Iran's planned power reactors. He told the Iranian media that work would begin at five sites in the next two months and five more at an unspecified time. Iran has repeatedly insisted that its nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes and that it has no plans to build an atomic bomb.

Ahmadinejad indicated that Iran would study enriching uranium up to the 20 percent level required for its Tehran research reactor, which produces medical isotopes. To date, Iran's plant at Natanz has manufactured only about 1.5 tonnes of enriched uranium to the 3.5 percent level required for power reactors. Uranium enriched to around 90 percent is needed for making nuclear weapons.

Iran reached an agreement in Vienna in October to export most of its stockpile of enriched uranium to Russia then France for further processing and manufacture into rods required for the Tehran reactor, which is about to run out of fuel. The US backed the deal as a means of reducing Iran's store of low-enriched uranium and thus guaranteeing it could not produce fissile material for a bomb. At least a year would be required to rebuild the stockpile.

However, the deal provoked sharp opposition in Tehran, including from opposition figures such as failed presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, reflecting real fears that Iran would again be double-crossed. Facing mounting criticism, President Ahmadinejad was compelled to back-pedal. After lengthy delays, the government suggested a simultaneous exchange of enriched uranium for fuel rods on Iranian soil—a proposal that the IAEA rejected outright. The US had already ruled out any alteration to the deal. The virtual collapse of the arrangement has been followed by further US warnings leading up to last Friday's IAEA vote.

The resolution calls for the IAEA head to report to a UN Security Council session, which the US will undoubtedly exploit to press for harsh new sanctions

against Iran. The Obama administration has previously warned of “crippling” penalties that could include a ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, which depends on imports for 40 percent of its gasoline.

According to Saturday’s *Wall Street Journal*, US officials have been meeting with members of the G-7 bloc and close allies like South Korea and Australia to discuss the next steps. “Discussions have focussed on eight ‘baskets’ of areas that could be targeted, including Iranian banks, shipping companies, insurance firms and energy assets,” the newspaper reported. “US officials said they have also focussed on the assets of Iran’s elite military unit, the Revolutionary Guard.”

At this stage, Russian and Chinese backing for UN sanctions is not guaranteed, even though the two powers have voted for three previous UN resolutions that contained limited penalties. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev hinted at possible support in September in a clear quid pro quo for President Obama’s announced changes to the US anti-ballistic missile shield in Europe, which Moscow has bitterly opposed. In a move designed to pressure Tehran, Moscow has delayed delivering sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles sold to Iran as well as nuclear fuel for its nuclear power reactor at Bushehr.

A pamphlet by Keith Jones

Beijing has previously opposed further sanctions. During Obama’s trip to China this month, President Hu Jintao maintained a pointed silence on Iran during their joint press conference. Behind the scenes, however, Washington has been pressing Beijing to take a stronger stance. The *Washington Post* reported last Thursday that senior White House officials from the National Security Council—Dennis Ross and Jeffrey Bader—travelled to Beijing on a “special mission” prior to Obama’s arrival.

The character of the discussions makes clear that Washington is preparing not just for punitive sanctions, but also for military action. An unnamed senior administration official told the *Washington Post* that Ross and Bader had warned Beijing that Israel regarded Iran’s nuclear program as an “existential issue and that

countries that have an existential issue don’t listen to other countries”. The obvious threat was that if China did not support tough penalties, Israel would bomb Iran. Any Israeli strikes would require the tacit support of the US, which has not ruled out military action of its own.

China is clearly concerned that supporting tough sanctions would cut across its economic relations with Iran, which is now its second largest supplier of oil. Military action would obviously precipitate a crisis and impact on China’s oil imports. The *Washington Post* noted that US officials had been leaning on its allies in the Persian Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to provide China with alternative sources of supply.

This manoeuvring underscores the fact that the US is exploiting Iran’s nuclear programs as the pretext for advancing its ambitions for economic and strategic dominance in the energy-rich region. Tough sanctions or military action will not only hit Iran, but European and Asian rivals that have built up close relations with Tehran. China in particular has been attempting to establish independent sources of energy, such as Iran, to avoid having to rely on American allies like Saudi Arabia and therefore being under Washington’s thumb.

The US is intent on ratcheting up the pressure on Iran. Washington’s involvement in negotiations with Tehran was aimed more at ensuring international support for further action against Iran, than in reaching any genuine agreement. From the outset, Obama set December as the deadline for significant progress in negotiations. Speaking yesterday, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs described Ahmadinejad’s plans for new enrichment plants as “another serious violation” of UN Security Council resolutions and bluntly warned that “time is running out for Iran”.



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