

US and EU powers greet Iranian offer with threats and bullying

Keith Jones
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The US and its European allies have given a decidedly chilly response to a very public attempt on the part of Iran to revive an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) brokered deal that would allow Teheran to keep the country's only nuclear research reactor in operation, and would thereby ensure the country's supply of vitally needed medical isotopes.

Under the proposed deal, Teheran would ship 70 percent or more of its current stock of low-enriched uranium out of the country so that it could be upgraded from 3.5 to 20 percent enriched and made into fuel rods.

France's Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said the Iranian offer, which came in the form of televised remarks by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Tuesday, looked like an attempt "to buy time." "I'm perplexed and even a bit pessimistic," said Kouchner. Later Wednesday, French Prime Minister Francois Fillon vowed that France, which currently presides over the UN Security Council, will press for new "strong sanctions" against Iran. "It is not too late to stop Iran from acquiring military nuclear capacity through political ways, but the time is pressing," declared Fillon.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said that if Iran has any proposals to make it should submit them forthwith to the IAEA in Vienna: "It is up to Iran to show an end to its refusal to negotiate... In the past two months and years, we have seen a lot of maneuvering by Iran and that is why only actions count, not words."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel previously declared February the "decisive" month for resolving the impasse between the great powers and Iran over its nuclear program, adding that Germany would press for the European Union to impose additional sanctions on Iran if the UN failed to act.

Washington's first reaction to Ahmadinejad's remarks was to demand that Iran accept the original IAEA-brokered deal without modification. The US, declared State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, is "not prepared to change the deal. We are not interested in renegotiating it."

Later this was modified, but only slightly: "If Iran has something new to say," said a White House official, "we are prepared to listen."

In the days before and after Ahmadinejad's offer, the US went out of its way to ratchet up diplomatic, economic, and military pressure on Teheran.

Last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared the time had come to "move away from" the US's purported policy of "engagement" with Teheran and towards "pressure and sanctions." This pronouncement was coupled with a blunt warning to China that it risks "economic insecurity and diplomatic isolation" if it fails to join the other P5 + 1 powers (the permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) in supporting and imposing further sanctions against Iran.

Subsequently, the Obama administration let it be known that in preparation for a possible war with Iran it has expanded its deployment of land- and sea-based missile defence systems in the Persian Gulf region. The US has erected new Patriot missile batteries in four Gulf States—Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain—and will at all times henceforth have ships stationed in the Persian Gulf that are equipped

with Aegis missile defence systems.

In the 24 hours following Ahmadinejad's television appearance, the US condemned Iran's launching of a new rocket capable of delivering satellites as "provocative" and tartly dismissed an Iranian proposal to exchange three Americans arrested last summer in Iran after they crossed over from Iraq for several Iranians held in US prisons.

The US is currently circulating a document among members of the UN Security Council outlining options for a fourth round of UN sanctions against Iran. These reportedly would target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Over the past decade, the IRGC has become a major player in Iran's economy and it is routinely denounced by the US for providing support to Hezbollah and Hamas.

Last year Hillary Clinton and other US officials repeatedly spoke of imposing "crippling sanctions against Iran," which was widely interpreted to mean a world embargo on gasoline exports to Iran. Despite its vast reserves of oil, Iran currently imports up to 40 percent of its gasoline due to a lack of refining capacity.

If the Obama administration is now advocating "targeted" or "smart" sanctions instead of a gasoline embargo, this is for two reasons. First, it calculates that it could not get the support of Moscow and especially Beijing for such an aggressive measure. Washington wants to maintain for as long as possible the appearance of international unity against Iran, so as to help legitimize in the eyes of the American people any unilateral action, including a possible military strike, it might take against Iran at a later date.

Second, it recognizes so belligerent an action could undercut its efforts to exploit the deep fissures that have opened up within the Iranian regime over last June's presidential election.

Like the neoconservative Republican administration that preceded it, the Obama administration insists that Iran cannot be allowed to exercise its rights as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop a full-cycle civilian nuclear program, because its intentions are at best "suspect." And like George W. Bush, Obama has threatened Iran with war, saying that "no options are off the table" when it comes to thwarting Iran's nuclear program. Yet the IAEA has repeatedly said it has no proof the Islamic Republic has, or even ever had, a nuclear weapons program and even the US's myriad intelligence agencies concluded, in their 2007 National Intelligence Assessment, that Iran had abandoned its alleged weapons program in 2003.

In a nationally televised interview February 2, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that Iran has no objection to sending its low-enriched uranium (LEU) out of the country for upgrading and then waiting "four to five" months for the foreign processing to be completed.

He also dismissed concerns that the great powers might renege on any commitment to process Iran's LEU and return the newly-enhanced nuclear materials to Teheran in a timely fashion.

"We have no objection to the swap," said Ahmadinejad, "but the West's wrong behaviour led to the delay."

“We had proposed the swap be made in three phases, but they [the P5 +1] said it could not be done for technical reasons.”

“Some people inside Iran,” continued Ahmadinejad, “expressed concern over the deal saying if we deliver our LEU, they would not deliver the fuel. Now I ask what could possibly happen if they [the West] reneged on their promise? They would be disgraced and the international climate would change in our favor and allow us to openly continue our activities.”

Iran’s government initially signaled acceptance of the deal that the IAEA brokered in talks between Teheran and P5 + 1 in early October. But it withdrew its support after the deal was attacked by both conservative politicians close to the Islamic Republic’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, such as parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, and by leaders of the Green Revolution bourgeois opposition, including its chief spokesman Hossein Mousavi.

Those opposed to the deal pointed to the long history of great power duplicity in their dealings with Iran, the refusal of the US and the other powers to relax in any way the economic sanctions against Teheran, and the crowing in Washington. The Obama administration had touted the deal, saying it would forestall for at least a year any Iranian plans to develop a nuclear weapon by forcing Teheran to hand over most of its existing LEU stockpile. The US and its allies could then use this year, the administration argued, to bully Iran into surrendering to its demand that Teheran forsake its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to a full-cycle civilian nuclear programs.

To appease its domestic critics, the Ahmadinejad-Khamenei regime subsequently tried to modify the IAEA deal. It proposed, for example, that Iranian LEU be held in escrow by the IAEA on Iranian soil, pending the turning over to Teheran of a commensurate amount of 20 percent enriched uranium. But the Obama administration was adamant that no changes could be made to the original, tentative deal.

Later Ahmadinejad claimed that Teheran would proceed on its own to enrich uranium to 20 percent. This was immediately denounced by Washington and its allies as a step that would bring Iran to the threshold of a nuclear weapon. In fact, it is all but universally conceded that to build a deployable weapon, uranium enriched to more than 85 percent or more would be required.

There are serious doubts whether Iran has yet developed the expertise to enrich uranium to the 20 percent level.

But the technical issue is clearly secondary.

Iran’s clerical-bourgeois establishment has been roiled by the unrelenting US pressure, the world economic crisis which sent oil prices plummeting, and the deepening social contradictions within Iran.

US and US-led UN sanctions have had an increasingly debilitating impact on Iran’s economy. According to the Chairman of the Commerce Commission of the Tehran Commerce Chamber, foreign investments in Iran tumbled 96 percent in the Iranian calendar year 1387 (March 2008-March 2009). While the world economic crisis undoubtedly played a major role in this, the US, with increasing support from its European allies, has been increasingly successful in choking off vitally needed investment in Iran’s oil energy industry by exploiting its dominance of the world financial system.

Recently Ahmadinejad won approval for a plan to phase out \$100 billion worth of subsidies on energy, food, and other vitals goods and services. Long advocated by his Green Revolution critics, this measure is expected to send Iran’s inflation rate well into the double-digits and will have a devastating impact on the working class and rural poor.

According to Stratfor, a geopolitical think tank with close ties to the US military-intelligence apparatus, the Iranian government has recently sought to reopen negotiations with the US. In this regard the Feb. 1- 2 of visit of Ahmadinejad’s Chief of Staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaie, to Switzerland would appear highly relevant. The ostensible purpose of Mashaie’s trip was to discuss the treatment of Iranians living in

Switzerland. But since the breaking off of diplomatic relations between Iran and the US, shortly after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Swiss embassy in Teheran has served as the US’s diplomatic representative in Teheran and the Swiss government has frequently acted as an intermediary.

Shortly before he left for Switzerland, Mashaie, reports Press TV said, “it was time for Washington to realize it needed Tehran’s help if it wanted to ‘get out of the quagmire it has made in Iraq and Afghanistan’.”

The US occupations of two of Iran’s neighbors are a critical part of the ongoing pressure that Washington is exerting on Teheran to bow before its strategic dominance of the Middle East.

Teheran nonetheless clings to the hope that it can use its considerable political, cultural and economic influence in both countries as bargaining chips in reaching an accommodation with Washington on less onerous terms.

Over the past two decades, Republican and Democratic administrations alike have rejected Teheran’s repeated overtures. Confronted with economic decline at home and the growth of powerful competitors abroad, the US ruling class considers the Iranian bourgeoisie’s attempt to establish itself as the dominant power in the Persian Gulf an unacceptable challenge to its predatory interests.

Moreover, the split within Iran’s clerical-bourgeois elite that exploded to the surface over last June’s presidential election has further emboldened Wall Street and Washington.

In recent weeks the US press has been full of op-ed piece and editorials demanding that the Obama administration even more forcefully promote “regime change” in Iran.

Meanwhile, the US Senate defied the express wishes of the Obama administration late last month and passed legislation which, if reconciled with a similar House bill, would compel the administration to initiate a gasoline export embargo against Iran, using the threat of sanctions against any foreign-based company that defies the ban to compel international compliance.



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