

US turns up heat on Iran

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The Obama administration, backed by the US media, is exploiting the latest International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report—released to member states on Monday—to turn up the heat on Iran over its nuclear programs. Amid overblown press reports that Iran is building a nuclear weapon, the US and its European allies are pushing for the finalisation of a new round of sanctions against Tehran in the UN Security Council this month.

A UN vote on the sanctions resolution could take place as early as next week, according to White House spokesman Robert Gibbs yesterday. All permanent members of the UN Security Council, including Russia and China, have indicated their broad support for the sanctions. The resolution, which is still being finalised, will extend existing bans, particularly against weapon sales to Iran, and cover a wider range of individuals and companies, but will not include measures against the country's oil and gas industry.

The Obama administration has effectively dismissed an effort last month by Turkey and Brazil—both temporary Security Council members—to revive a fuel swap plan first mooted last year. Under the arrangement, Iran would exchange low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for its research reactor in Tehran, with Turkey acting as an intermediary. In what amounts to a diplomatic slap in the face to the two countries, a senior US administration official told CNN that Washington did not intend to “wait until everybody is aboard”.

The IAEA report conveniently provided ammunition for a series of distorted articles designed to heighten fears that Iran is about to acquire a nuclear arsenal. The report will be officially released only after the IAEA Board of Governors meets on June 7. But, as in the

past, it has been widely leaked to the media, which in turn seized on isolated comments torn out of context as the basis for its stories. The full report has been posted on several web sites, and is available [here](#).

The *New York Times*, for instance, headlined its article “UN says Iran has fuel for 2 nuclear weapons,” glossing over the fact that the so-called “fuel” is the low-enriched uranium that Tehran has been producing for the past four years. Only later in the article did it observe that the uranium would require further enrichment—from 5 percent to 90 percent—before it could be used as the basis for a bomb. The IAEA report contains no evidence that Iran has produced any highly enriched uranium.

The *New York Times* neglected to point out that much of the IAEA report is a repetition of previous ones. One of the report's tasks is to provide a technical assessment of Iran's nuclear program, including a physical inventory verification of the amounts of enriched uranium produced and the levels of enrichment. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran allows regular inspections of its nuclear facilities, where the IAEA also has installed cameras and various monitoring devices to ensure that enriched uranium is not diverted to other purposes.

Other articles went further, with one in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, headlined “Iran on the brink of a nuclear bomb,” claiming that Tehran was just “a short step away” from making bomb-grade enriched uranium. Likewise the *Wall Street Journal*, without any serious examination of the IAEA report, declared that Iran was just “months ... from reaching nuclear breakout capability” and berated the Obama administration for lacking “any ideas, much less a serious strategy, to stop

it”.

Tehran has repeatedly declared that it has no plans to build nuclear weapons, stating that its low-enriched uranium is to provide fuel for power reactors such as the one near completion at Bushehr. Following the collapse of the fuel swap agreement last year, Iran announced that it would manufacture its own fuel rods for the Tehran research reactor and has begun enriching uranium to the level required—20 percent.

Iran has branded previous UN resolutions illegal and insisted on its right under the NPT to develop all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing. As the IAEA detailed in its report, Tehran has also refused to implement the IAEA’s “voluntary” Additional Protocol, involving more stringent inspectors, and to discuss “outstanding issues related to possible military dimensions of Iran’s nuclear program”. As the report noted, Iran maintains that these allegations are based on forged documents.

The general conclusion to the IAEA report is virtually identical to previous ones over the past four years: “While the Agency continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material in Iran, Iran has not provided the necessary cooperation to permit the Agency to confirm that all nuclear material in Iran is in peaceful activities.” In other words, all nuclear material at Iran’s known facilities is accounted for, but Iran is still required to prove the impossible: that nowhere else in its large territory are there other, non-peaceful activities.

In reality, US pressure on Iran has little to do with its nuclear programs—most of which were started with direct US assistance under Shah Reza Pahlavi. The nuclear issue is a convenient device for mustering support to refashion a regime in Tehran more conducive to American ambitions for a dominant role in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Not only does it have huge oil and gas reserves of its own, but Iran is strategically located—a bridge between the two vital regions and adjacent to US-occupied Iraq and Afghanistan.

The US-led push for new sanctions in the UN Security Council is just the first step in the Obama administration’s strategy. Washington intends to use a fourth UN resolution to legitimise harsher unilateral penalties by its European and other allies, including tightening access by Iranian banks to the global financial system. Legislation has also been drawn up in the US Congress targeting corporations around the world that sell refined petroleum products to Iran. Cutting off Tehran’s ability to buy gasoline would have a major impact on its economy as Iran lacks refining capacity and imports about 40 percent of its gasoline needs.

The Obama administration is under pressure from more militarist sections of the US political establishment to take tougher action against Iran. The *Wall Street Journal*, for instance, in declaring that Iran was “just months away” from achieving “nuclear breakout capability”, warned of the rising risk of “violent confrontation with Tehran” unless “credible options to stop Iran are put on the table”. Given that it had dismissed the current US strategy as “naïve and unserious”, one can only conclude that what the newspaper regards as credible options are military ones. As for the White House, it continues to declare that all options, i.e. including the use of the military, remain on the table.



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