

Bush administration to “ratchet up pressure” on Iran

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The Bush administration’s abrupt dismissal of last Thursday’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran’s nuclear programs is one more sign that Washington has no interest in a diplomatic resolution to its confrontation with Tehran. Following Bush’s bellicose denunciations of Iran last week, the US has reiterated its intention to push for tougher UN sanctions against Tehran this month.

The IAEA report, which is due to be discussed at its board meeting beginning next Monday, sets out its latest assessment of Iran’s nuclear facilities, including the construction of a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz and a heavy water research reactor at Arak. The report also includes details of an agreement reached with Iran for a timetable to resolve by December all the questions raised by the UN agency over the past four years.

IAEA Director Mohamed ElBaradei told the media: “This is the first time Iran is ready to discuss all outstanding issues which triggered the crisis in confidence. It’s a significant step. There are clear guidelines, so it’s not, as some people are saying, an open-ended invitation to dallying with the agency or a ruse to prolong negotiations and avoid sanctions.”

Washington quickly dismissed the IAEA-Iran agreement as inadequate and insisted that Tehran comply with US demands for the suspension of all nuclear enrichment programs. US State Department spokesman Tom Casey declared last Thursday: “There is no partial credit here. Iran has refused to comply with its international obligations, and as a result of that the international community is going to continue to ratchet up the pressure.”

This response underscores the hypocrisy of US allegations that Iran is covertly seeking to build nuclear weapons. Tehran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and continues to allow IAEA inspection of the Natanz enrichment plant, which it maintains is to provide fuel for its planned nuclear power reactors. As it has repeatedly insisted, Iran has the right under the NPT to build an enrichment plant, as Brazil for instance is also doing, and to construct research reactors for peaceful purposes.

Bush officials have highlighted Iran’s failure to clarify the IAEA’s outstanding issues as “proof” of Iran’s lack of transparency and of its nuclear weapons’ plans. Some of these “issues” are based on dubious evidence supplied to the IAEA by US and Israeli intelligence. Far from welcoming Iran’s willingness to provide the documentation and access to officials required to deal with the issues, the Bush administration has branded the IAEA agreement as an Iranian ploy to gain time and implied that the IAEA is an Iranian dupe.

The US reaction recalls the lead-up to its invasion of Iraq in March 2003 when Bush officials

summarily dismissed the reports of the IAEA and other UN weapons inspectors, which stated that no “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) programs had been found and called for more time to carry out searches, as a ruse by the Hussein regime. The lies that were used as the pretext for war were quickly exposed following the invasion when the US military’s own teams failed to find any evidence of Iraqi WMDs.

Responding to the latest US criticisms, ElBaradei declared last week: “My responsibility is to look at the big picture. If I see a situation deteriorating... [and] it could lead to war, I have to raise the alarm or give my advice.” Prior to the previous IAEA board meeting in June, he frankly told the BBC: “I have no brief other than to make sure we don’t go into another war or that we go crazy into killing each other. You do not want to give [an] additional argument to the new crazies who say ‘let’s go and bomb Iran’.”

Last week’s IAEA report found that Iran’s progress in installing the gas centrifuges required to enrich uranium at its underground hall at Natanz had slowed considerably. Since the previous report three months ago, Iranian technicians had only gotten several hundred new centrifuges up and running. As of August 19, the IAEA reported that 1,968 centrifuges were operating with another 656 in various stages of assembly or testing. The IAEA verified that the level of enrichment was that required for nuclear fuel—well short of the highly enriched uranium required to build a bomb. The IAEA also reported that one outstanding issue related to plutonium experiments was already “closed” after Iran provided access to a key expert, documentation and other data.

Next week’s IAEA meeting promises to be another exercise in US bullying and arm-twisting as the Bush administration prepares for a diplomatic offensive in the UN to demand tougher punitive sanctions on Iran. The White House has already leaked plans to brand the entire Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG) as a “specially designated global terrorist” organisation. Criminalising the IRG, a major part of the country’s armed forces, would clear the way for unilateral US penalties not only against Iran, but any foreign corporation or bank that had relations with any of the IRG’s many businesses.

The US threat to brand the IRG as a “terrorist organisation” is in the first instance aimed at intimidating other UN Security Council members into passing new sanctions against Iran. Russia, China and the European powers all have substantial investment and economic interests in Iran, which could be subject to American penalties if any links were demonstrated to IRG businesses. The UN Security Council, including its permanent members—the US, Britain, France, China and Russia—has previously imposed two rounds of sanctions on Iran, but Russia and China in particular have expressed reluctance to impose harsher penalties.

US preparations for war

Iran’s disputed nuclear programs are just one element of the White House’s mounting propaganda war against Tehran. In a belligerent speech last week, Bush denounced Iran as “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism” and declared that “Iran’s active pursuit of technology that could lead to nuclear weapons” placed the region “under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust”. He condemned the IRG’s alleged training and arming of Shiite militias in Iraq, saying he had authorised the US military to “confront Tehran’s murderous activities”. In an ominous warning, the US president concluded: “We will confront this danger before it is too late.”

A lengthy commentary entitled “Will President Bush bomb Iran?” published yesterday in the conservative British-based *Telegraph* noted that the US had advanced preparations for military strikes. The article began by pointing out that top US officials, including from the Pentagon and State Department, had recently completed a four-month exercise, held under the auspices of the right-wing Heritage Foundation think tank, designed to simulate the impact of a US war with Iran.

The computer modelling found that if Iran closed the Straits of Hormuz, oil prices would double, \$161 billion would be wiped off the US GDP in a single quarter and a million jobs would be lost. The Heritage Foundation nevertheless concluded that the study’s policy proposals “virtually eliminated all of the negative outcomes from the blockade.”

The *Telegraph* article noted that Bush’s speech was “designed as a threat not just to Iran, but to America’s Western allies, along with Russia and China, who have been slow to support—or who have opposed—UN sanctions against Iran.” James Phillips from the Heritage Foundation told the newspaper: “It [the speech] is simultaneously a shot across Iran’s bows and an appeal for the international community to do more to stop or slow Iran’s nuclear program.”

The article reported that European observers, and some in the American government, believe that Bush has resolved to “do something” about Iran before he leaves office. A State Department source said: “If we get closer to the end of this administration and we are not seeing suitably tough diplomatic actions at the UN... then people will start asking the question: how do we stop our legacy being a nuclear-armed Iran?”

The *Telegraph* noted that “credible reports” indicated that “the US has stepped up clandestine activities in Iran over the past 18 months, using special forces to gather intelligence about military targets—nuclear infrastructure and airbases, and Revolutionary Guard command centres.” The article pointed out that US military plans to strike Iran with B2 bombers and cruise missiles included “up to 400 sites, only a few dozen of which are linked to the nuclear programs... first in the crosshairs would be the main centrifuge plant at Natanz.”

Yesterday’s British *Sunday Times* reported the comments of Alexis Debat from the conservative Nixon Centre who told a gathering last week that the Pentagon had drawn up plans for a three-day aerial blitzkrieg against 1,200 targets inside Iran. US military planners were not preparing for “pinprick strikes” against nuclear facilities, but for “taking out the entire Iranian military,” which Debat described as a “very legitimate strategic calculus”.

As the *Telegraph* noted, opinion polls reveal that just one in five Americans currently support the bombing of Iran. Moreover, the CIA has told the Bush administration that it has not come up with a “smoking gun” that would create domestic or international support for such a war. “Last autumn, the CIA told the White House that while it believes Iran is running a clandestine nuclear weapons program, it does not have conclusive proof. Radioactivity detection devices placed near suspect facilities did not find the expected results,” the article explained.

None of this will stop the Bush administration from using the IAEA and UN meetings this month to accuse Iran of secretly producing nuclear weapons and backing “terrorists” in Iraq and the region. Washington is once more seeking to stampede public opinion and create the conditions for another criminal military adventure.

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