

# The U.N. is escalating the Iran Nuclear Crisis

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On Monday evening, the United Nations Security Council voted 14-0 with one abstention to impose a fresh set of sanctions against Iran for failing to suspend its civilian nuclear fuel cycle programme. The resolution had the backing of not just the United States, Britain and France but also Russia and China. The latter two, who have made much of their official commitment to a diplomatic solution to the Iranian issue, justified their support for the latest resolution by advertising the absence of any reference to the “use of force” in its language. But this reading of the text is wilfully naïve: Resolution 1803 authorises the U.S. military to inspect all air and sea cargo into and out of Iran on board Iranian vessels if “there are reasonable grounds to believe that the aircraft or vessel is transporting goods prohibited under this resolution.” It doesn’t require much imagination to see how this enabling provision can serve as the trigger for a showdown between the U.S. — with its overwhelming naval presence around the Persian Gulf — and Iran.

Leaving aside the possibility of military confrontation, Resolution 1803 is a dishonest and provocative document that undermines not just the credibility of the Security Council but also the International Atomic Energy Agency. Just how irrelevant the IAEA and its work have been rendered is proved by the fact that the resolution’s text was prepared before the IAEA’s latest report on Iran, a point mentioned by the South African ambassador to the U.N., who made it clear his government was deeply unhappy with the draft despite agreeing to go along with it in the interest of “consensus.”

Astonishingly, the UNSC resolution takes virtually no notice of the fact that all outstanding issues which led to the Iran file being sent to New York in the first place have now been resolved. The demand, first made in 2006, that Iran suspend enrichment and reprocessing activity, was a derivative demand aimed at instilling confidence pending resolution of those outstanding issues. Now that those original issues have been resolved — and this is what the IAEA has pointed out in its last two reports — there is no basis for the suspension demand to be pressed, let alone made the basis for fresh sanctions.

When Iran was censured by the IAEA Board of Governors in September 2005 and January 2006 and declared in breach of its safeguards obligations, it was for failing to declare in a timely and complete manner a number of nuclear-related activities and procurements. Even though the IAEA has certified that no nuclear material inside Iran has been diverted for prohibited purposes, it said it was unable to certify the absence of “undeclared nuclear activities” pending investigation into those Iranian failures. Over the past six months, however, each and every one of those documented failures has been exhaustively probed. These include questions over the extent of Iranian research into the P-1 and P-2 centrifuge designs, the purpose of its experiments with Polonium-210, the source of uranium contamination at a number of research sites, the possession of a document on the casting of

uranium into hemispherical shapes provided unsolicited by the A.Q. Khan network in 1987, and the reasons behind its attempt to procure certain equipment with nuclear applications. Under each of these heads, the IAEA now says the explanations Iran provided are either “consistent with” or “not inconsistent with” information the Agency has. “Therefore, the Agency considers those questions no longer outstanding at this stage,” IAEA DG Mohammed el-Baradei’s February 22, 2008 report categorically states.

As far as the uranium metal document is concerned — at one point the Bush administration regarded this as the smoking gun of an alleged Iranian nuclear weapons programme — the IAEA says any further assessment of its significance must await “a response from Pakistan on the circumstances of the delivery of this document.” Thus, the only peg the U.S. and its allies now have to hang their charge of Iranian non-compliance on is the alleged research Tehran is said to have conducted on a nuclear warhead. And thereby hangs a tale.

It was in 2004 that U.S. officials first began speaking of this issue based on information they said they had obtained from an Iranian laptop. This laptop was provided to the U.S. by the German intelligence agency, BND. On November 22, 2004, the Wall Street Journal ran a story quoting a senior German diplomat by name as acknowledging that the source of the computer was “an Iranian dissident group.” Gareth Porter of Inter-Press Service reconfirmed this information in a report last week, quoting a German diplomatic source as identifying the group as the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI). The NCRI is the political wing of the Mojaheddin-e-Khalq, a group designated as terrorist by the U.S. State Department. On the basis of the NCRI and MeK’s links with Tel Aviv, Porter speculates that the “incriminating” laptop might well have Israeli fingerprints.

Indeed, so sceptical were both the U.S. and the IAEA of its authenticity that this so-called “laptop of death” never formed the primary, secondary or even tertiary focus of concern about Iran’s nuclear programme. The U.S. briefed the IAEA about its contents in the summer of 2005 and news reports at the time spoke of the agency’s experts being sceptical. This scepticism was official. The crucial September 2, 2005 report by Dr el-Baradei — which was to form the basis later that month for the IAEA Board declaring Iran in non-compliance with its obligations — makes no mention of the alleged studies contained in the shady laptop though its contents had been shared with Agency experts a few months earlier. Even now, the IAEA’s latest report refers to the documents as “alleged studies,” notes it has seen no evidence of the use of nuclear material in connection with the “alleged studies” and that it does not have “credible information” in this regard.

Despite this, we are now supposed to believe that these “alleged studies” — about which there is no “credible information” tying them to the use of nuclear material — is the proverbial smoking gun!

In a sense, this dishonest spin was inevitable. For as the U.S. found the IAEA knocking off the other (equally irrelevant but slightly more credible) “outstanding issues” one by one, it was forced to wheel out the laptop’s contents once again, but this time as Exhibit No. 1. Even now, the Agency’s experts are divided. Dr. el-Baradei’s report treats the laptop’s contents with justified circumspection. However, his deputy, Olli Heinonen, briefed IAEA Board members about its contents, buttressing them with more information provided by unnamed intelligence agencies. In his telling, the same documents which looked suspect two years ago now seem to paint an alarming picture. His briefing took place in Vienna on February 25, three days after the official IAEA report was released.

One week later, unnamed diplomats helpfully provided the notes they took at that briefing so that virtually identical stories on Iran's "nuclear warhead" appeared in the Washington Post, New York Times and Reuters on the eve of the crucial March 3 Security Council vote. Conveniently, dubious information that America (or perhaps the MeK or Israel) first put out thus found its way into the American press as an "IAEA briefing." After Iraq, the American press has forgotten nothing and learned nothing. And neither, it seems, has the international community, with the honourable exception of Jakarta.

### An Opportunity Lost

The irony is that in upping the ante, the Security Council has allowed a golden opportunity slip out of its hands. What the IAEA needs more than anything else is for Iran to resume its adherence to the Additional Protocol. If there is an iota of truth in the "alleged studies" — which Iran says are based on fabricated documents — the best way for the IAEA to find out is by invoking the wider powers to inspect unlisted sites that the AP confers. Iran had declared that if the UNSC lifts its sanctions now that all concrete outstanding issues have been resolved, it is willing once again to adhere to the AP. As for the enrichment issue, the Iranian offer of running its national facilities as a multinational venture (with multinational oversight) very much remains on the table. These two elements would go a long way towards assuring the international community that Iran's nuclear programme was entirely peaceful. But it seems there are more powerful interests at work, with aims that go well beyond what is stated.

Later this week, India, which blindly voted against Iran at the IAEA Board in 2005, will get another chance to redeem its place as a responsible member of the international community. Britain is likely to introduce a resolution echoing Monday's UNSC resolution and ignoring the progress Iran and the IAEA have made in resolving all outstanding issues. With their permanent seats and vetoes on the Security Council — and their delusions about "not allowing the use of force" — Russia and China can afford the luxury of censuring Iran once again. And other non-aligned countries like South Africa may well lack the political and economic heft to resist the kind of pressure that will no doubt be brought to bear. But India is a different story. It is big. It is powerful. And unlike Russia and China, geography has placed us in the same region as Iran. Under no circumstances should India allow itself to once again become party to the irrational and disastrous confrontation that Washington is foisting on our neighbourhood.

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