

US on the Warpath with the IAEA

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Being at the IAEA these days has once again reminded one that US diatribes are not limited to regimes and states that act contrary to US goals or even wishes. In the usual alliance of the government and the media — clearly the US media has its own interpretations of a “free” media — the Americans have launched a blitzkrieg against the IAEA and especially its head, El Baradei. The issue, which has aroused a hail of abuse is Iran’s nuclear programme. What has irked the US is the fact that the IAEA under its present leadership has proactively sought to resolve this issue peacefully by dialoguing with Iran instead of supporting the American position of seeking confrontation through provocation so that a pretext can be provided for US military action. Remember Iraq and the WMD issue?

Now we have begun to see a spate of articles targeting El Baradai in the US and US-controlled print media. Some have been downright abusive with the Washington Post labelling him a “rogue” regulator. Ah that word which has become so central to the Bush era in the US. If one is not falling in line with the US, then one is a “rogue” of one form or another. The problem arises when heads of international organisations, selected by the international community, are actually abused because they fall out of step with the US. Some UN Secretary Generals also had to suffer a similar fate, but the language now being used by the US media for Baradei goes further than earlier vilifications of international personalities.

Worse still, this time a newly resurgent rightwing leadership in countries like France are supporting this new aggression against US detractors, while British publications like The Economist continue to be predictable in their criticism. Even the EU launched an attack against Baradei in the just concluded IAEA Board meeting, which led to the IAEA Chief actually walking out for some time from the meeting. Such are the antics of the US and its European allies in international organisations today.

Why is El Baradai being abused and vilified with such vigour? What is his crime? Very simply, he has managed to get Iran back into a dialogue with a timeline for resolving the nuclear issue. The IAEA and Iran have recently agreed to operationalise an agreement with specific timeframes for moving from one stage to the next, in terms of ensuring Iran’s compliance with non-proliferation requirements under its NPT obligations and international demands as embodied in the UNSC resolution putting sanctions on Iran. And all this has been the result of the IAEA’s continuous pursuit of efforts to re-engage Iran in a meaningful dialogue. That has clearly upset the US and its allies like France, where the new rightwing leader, Sarkozy, had threatened Iran with military action if it did not do as the US and its allies demanded.

Nor is this the only disturbing aspect of the new US discriminatory approach towards non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament, which is being fast-tracked after the Indo-US nuclear deal. So one can expect many more battles within the IAEA and other disarmament fora for the future also. There is the Indo-US nuclear deal itself, known as the 123 Agreement, which has now been revised to accommodate the Indian demand that no conditionalities be put on future testing by India in terms of assurance of nuclear fuel supplies. The result is an American commitment to build up India's strategic reserves of nuclear fuel and to ensure that if the US is unable to continue its supplies of nuclear fuel, allies of the US will step in. The 123 Agreement's final stage of fruition will come after India has evolved a Safeguards Agreement format with the IAEA, and the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) has put its support behind the Agreement. Clearly, the non-proliferation regime reflected in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is now being contravened across the board by the US itself.

The first multilateral forum, which will face the follow up from the 123 Agreement will be the IAEA, since India has to evolve safeguards agreements for its civilian nuclear installations with this Agency before the US Congress can ratify the Agreement. The IAEA has a standard Safeguards Agreement for non-NPT states, signed for instance by Pakistan for its Chashma plant, which does not have a limited timeframe or any preconditions for enforcement of the safeguards — that is, no escape clause. But countries can try to add their own clauses in such an agreement, which is finally put before the IAEA Board for approval. The assumption is that India would be seeking an India-specific Safeguards Agreement with preconditions and with a limited timeframe. Another step India has to cross is approval from the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) for the 123 Agreement, which would require the NSG to make India-specific exceptions in their export controls. It is expected that India will get what it is seeking from the IAEA and the NSG.

That is why the IAEA is a critical forum for the US and India right now and one can see the US and a number of European states having intense discussions with India on the sidelines of the ongoing IAEA Annual General Conference. It is at this conference that the IAEA Chief once again, in his inaugural speech, reiterated Iran's cooperation with the IAEA and the IAEA's conclusion that it had verified that of the declared nuclear materials by Iran none had been diverted, even as El Baradei continued to bemoan the fact that Iran has shown no inclination to stop production of its Heavy Water facility at Arak and there were still outstanding issues the IAEA had with Iran. He referred to the positive development of the time bound agreement between the IAEA and Iran to resolve all outstanding issues.

That is why one should expect the US diatribes against the IAEA Chief to continue. After all, he has not played ball with US designs to up the ante against Iran — something that will further destabilise the whole region. These are certainly interesting times at the IAEA, with one international organisation proactively engaged in carrying out its internationally-sanctioned mandate in the face of a US that is increasingly oblivious to international laws and norms of behaviour. The pity is that states in Europe that traditionally stood for such norms are falling in line with the Bush Administration. Perhaps most ironic, India, which had championed an anti-imperial stance and a non-discriminatory approach to international relations has now become a symbol of such a discriminatory approach through its dubious nuclear deal with the US. Such are the ironies of international politics!

As for Pakistan, despite our vital interest being involved, we have yet to rouse ourselves out of an inexplicable lethargy to counter these developments relating to US non-proliferation policies. Surely, even if we cannot effect change and we remain in a minority, at the end of the day, we must make our position clear on such crucial issues in international fora.

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