



## Can Multilateralism End the Nuclear Standoff with Iran?

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**Theme:** Iran's nuclear case will be sent to the United Nations Security Council.

**Summary:** Meeting in an emergency session on 4 February, the 35-nation decision-making board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) voted by an overwhelming margin to send Iran's nuclear dossier to the United Nations Security Council. The move, which marks an important turning point in international diplomacy towards Iran, initiates a process that could end in punitive sanctions for Tehran if it fails to convince the world that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes only. The United States and several other countries believe Iran is trying to build a nuclear weapon. The decision to report Iran to the Security Council reflects a backroom compromise between the United States, Britain and France, which want immediate action on Iran, and Russia and China, which are seeking a delay. As a result, the Security Council will not decide on any concrete action until early March in order to give Iran a one-month grace period to comply with IAEA demands. In any case, it remains far from certain whether the often feckless Security Council will be able to prevent the need for military action to change Tehran's behaviour, and thereby turn Iran into a showcase example of effective multilateralism.

### **Analysis:** *The Nuclear Stand-off*

The decision to report Iran to the United Nations Security Council represents a major diplomatic victory for the United States, which has laboured for more than two years to secure support for such action from Europe, China and Russia. It also marks the failure of efforts by Britain, France and Germany, known as the G3, to employ so-called 'soft power' diplomacy as an alternative to American 'hard power' to coax Iran into complying with the IAEA. By referring Iran to the Security Council, which has responsibility for keeping peace and security in the world, the United States hopes the threat of tough punitive measures, international isolation and a possible military intervention will persuade Iran to end the nuclear stand-off. The resolution, which recalls Iran's 'many failures and breaches of its obligations', gives Tehran precise guidelines on how it can work to regain international confidence that its nuclear programme is purely civilian.

The core issue surrounding the current impasse involves Iran's uranium enrichment programme. Although the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) legally permits Iran to produce low-grade uranium to generate electricity, it is building facilities that can also produce the high-grade uranium used in nuclear weapons. After three years of inspections, the IAEA is still unable to verify Iranian claims that its enrichment programme is only for peaceful purposes. This is because Iran has failed to produce key documents requested by

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the IAEA, and has refused to allow UN inspectors to meet with relevant individuals and to visit numerous military sites.

Thus the United States and a growing number of other countries believe Iran is using its civilian nuclear power programme as a cover to build nuclear weapons. Their suspicions were bolstered when on 31 January the IAEA released a startling four-page report that suggests Iran worked on nuclear warhead designs under a secret programme code-named the Green Salt Project (Green salt is another name for uranium tetrafluoride, a precursor product used to make nuclear bombs). This would imply a 'military-nuclear dimension', the report said. In November 2005, the IAEA reported that the black market had offered to help Iran shape uranium metal into 'hemispherical forms', which would suggest the making of nuclear bomb cores.

In an interview with *Newsweek* magazine on 23 January, Mohamed El Baradei, Director-General of the IAEA, said that 'if they have the nuclear material and they have a parallel weaponisation programme along the way, they are really not very far, a few months, from a weapon'. Thus the United States wants to prevent Iran from developing a complete nuclear fuel cycle, which would enable Tehran to produce the fissile material needed to build a nuclear bomb.

Iran agreed to a temporary suspension of all its uranium enrichment and reprocessing in November 2004, after a dissident group disclosed that Tehran had been running a covert programme to make nuclear fuel in breach of the NPT for almost two decades. Iran also agreed to accept a voluntary IAEA inspection regime while it tried to build international confidence that the programme is only for peaceful purposes. During these inspections, the IAEA put seals on a number of questionable devices so that Iran would not be able to use them. But in early January 2006, Tehran removed some of those seals and reopened a massive underground enrichment facility in the central Iranian city of Natanz, in violation of the November 2004 agreement which was brokered by the G3. This act, by which Iran crossed a diplomatic red line, had the effect of pushing Europe, China and Russia closer to the American position. It also triggered the emergency meeting of the IAEA that reported Iran to the Security Council.

The best solution to the current stand-off involves a US-backed Russian proposal in which Moscow would enrich the uranium for Iran at a facility in Russia, and then send the low-grade material to fuel Iran's power plants for electricity. This arrangement would allow Iran to have the nuclear energy it says it wants, while avoiding the possibility of making weapons-grade uranium. But so far the Iranians have balked at this proposal, possibly out of national pride, or maybe because they want to make bomb-grade fuel. If Moscow can coax Tehran into accepting the deal within the next month, then Iran may be able to avoid censure in the Security Council.

#### *What Happens Next?*

Iran responded to its referral to the Security Council by saying that it would re-start full-scale work on uranium enrichment and put an end to intrusive IAEA inspections of its facilities. This has raised some fears that increasing the pressure on Iran will provoke Tehran into doing exactly what the United States wants to avoid: a full-scale enrichment programme that is hidden from international monitors.

But unless Iran does something highly provocative, such as withdrawing from the NPT (which commits it to not obtaining nuclear weapons), sanctions or any other punitive measures may remain months away. Indeed, referral to the Security Council is just the first step in a protracted process that will seek to increase the pressure on Iran incrementally over time and assess progress at each new stage. In any case, there appears to be little agreement between the United States and other key countries on what should happen once the Security Council is in a position to take action.

The first step will probably involve an appeal from the Security Council to Iran to abide by IAEA recommendations. It may also ask the IAEA to submit periodic reports to the Security Council on what, if any, progress has been made. Moreover, it could grant the IAEA enhanced powers to conduct intrusive inspections in Iran. If that does not work, the United States might then try to get a resolution demanding that Iran comply and threatening actions, such as sanctions, if it does not. There are also options outside the Security Council, such as a group of like-minded countries (Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States) doing group sanctions or travel bans on certain Iranian officials. Military action probably would not be contemplated until the end of this process, if at that time Iran still refuses to cooperate with the IAEA.

Reporting Iran to the Security Council is not without risks. Iran, which exports 2.5 million barrels of oil a day, could use these exports as a weapon in its dispute with Europe and the United States, and thus send oil prices soaring. Tehran could also create trouble for American forces in neighbouring Iraq, where Washington has already accused it of aiding the insurgency. And Iran could retaliate against Israel by increasing its support for Shiite Hezbollah terrorist activities from southern Lebanon.

Moreover, if the Security Council fails to respond effectively, as was the case with Iraq, the United States could again decide to take matters into its own hands. Although there is now a general strategic consensus over Iran, the Europeans are ambivalent about pushing a tough sanctions policy, which both China and Russia would be likely to oppose. If this basic consensus breaks down, therefore, Washington could invoke Chapter Seven of the UN Charter and justify military strikes by declaring that Iran is a danger to international peace and security. For its part, Israel has said repeatedly that it might resort to a military strike if diplomatic efforts fail to prevent an Iranian nuclear capability. Thus there is no guarantee that the current multilateral approach towards Iran will avoid a military confrontation.

#### *American Domestic Political Pressure Builds*

Iran, which is trying to realign the balance of power in the Middle East, poses a major threat to American interests. In the four years since Bush first highlighted the dangers of Iran's nuclear programme by labelling it part of the 'axis of evil' in his 2002 State of the Union address, Iran has emerged as the biggest international challenge now facing the White House. Thus Bush used his 2006 State of the Union address to reiterate his opposition to Iran's possession of nuclear weapons. 'The Iranian government is defying the world with its nuclear ambitions –and the nations of the world must not permit the Iranian regime to gain nuclear weapons–. America will continue to rally the world to confront these threats', he said. And most Americans seem to agree.

Some 85% of Americans see Iran as a threat to the United States, according to a Gallup poll released on 27 January. Overall, 80% of Americans say Iran is trying to develop its

own nuclear weapons. In another poll conducted by Fox News, almost half of Americans say Iran is more of a threat today than Iraq was before the US invasion. And according to the Washington Post-ABC News poll released on 31 January, seven in 10 Americans would support international economic sanctions as a way of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Moreover, a surprisingly large number of Americans say they would support US military strikes to stop Tehran from getting a nuclear bomb. In a Los Angeles Times-Bloomberg poll published on 27 January, 57% of Americans said they would support bombing Iran's nuclear sites.

This sentiment has already worked its way into domestic politics, in which senior political leaders are publicly taking a more hawkish public line over Iran. In the face of bipartisan criticism over his handling of Iran, on 13 January Bush escalated his rhetoric by saying that Iran 'poses a grave threat to the security of the world'. Republican Senator John McCain, who is likely to make a bid for the presidency in 2008, said Iran is the 'single greatest challenge since the end of the Cold War, aside from the overall war on terror, and the one with the least options'.

Speaking to the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy on 4 February, McCain said that 'with a nuclear deterrent, Iran would feel unconstrained to threaten anyone. It would induce Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and others to reassess their defence postures'. Every option must remain on the table, he added. 'There is only one thing worse than military action. That is a nuclear armed Iran' he said.

On 2 February John Negroponte, the US director of national intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee that the danger that Tehran 'will acquire a nuclear weapon and the ability to integrate it with ballistic missiles that Iran already possesses is a reason for immediate concern'.

The concern over Iran is bipartisan. On 19 January Democratic Senator Evan Bayh blamed the White House for allowing the situation with Iran to become a crisis. Deferring management of this crisis to the Europeans, he said 'has certainly been damaging to our national security'. And on 18 January Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton, who is widely expected to run for president in 2008, accused the Bush Administration of losing critical time in dealing with Iran because it has 'outsourced' US foreign policy to other countries while standing on the sidelines. She said that US policy must be clear and unequivocal, and also said that a nuclear Iran would be a threat to the state of Israel.

Indeed, a growing number of Americans are worried about the security of Israel. Thus, in the face of increasing domestic political pressure, on 1 February Bush became the first American president ever to say unequivocally that the United States would defend Israel if necessary. 'Israel is a solid ally of the United States. We will rise to Israel's defence, if need be', he said. After Israel was founded in 1948, it sought a military alliance with the United States, but it was rebuffed by several American presidents, partly out of fear of offending Arab countries. Since then, Israel has established the principle of securing its own defence, including a nuclear deterrent, backed by large weapons sales by the United States.

US allies in the Persian Gulf have also joined the call for tougher action on Iran. In a major shift in policy, Saudi officials and other Gulf leaders have recently called for Iran to abandon its nuclear activities, without demanding that Israel disarm first. Indeed, a nuclear

Iran may ultimately pose a greater threat to most Gulf States than does a nuclear Israel. On 15 January Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, warned that Tehran's nuclear ambitions 'threaten disaster in the region'. Saudi Arabia fears that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, the balance of power in the region will shift decisively from Riyadh to Tehran. Gulf States also worry that a nuclear Iran would feel emboldened to stir up fellow Shiite Muslims in neighbouring countries, leading to civil unrest.

The Pentagon has more than enough air power to destroy Iran's known nuclear facilities. US military experts believe that it would take only three or four days of 'surgical' air-strikes to destroy the approximately 500 primary targets dispersed throughout the country. Indeed, military strikes could set back Iranian nuclear ambitions by many years. So why is the White House committed to diplomacy?

#### *Regime Change as a Non-Military Solution?*

The paradox of Iran is that its people are probably the most pro-American in the Middle East. Seventy percent of today's Iranians are below the age of 30 and have little memory of the anger that spawned the US-hating Islamic theocracy in 1979. Moreover, these Iranians are frustrated by the revolutionary regime's failure to make good on promised political freedoms and economic prosperity. Government mismanagement, chronic inflation and unemployment are turning Iranians against their own regime, and with it, its anti-Americanism. In a recent survey, nearly three-fourths of the Iranians polled said they would like their government to restore dialogue with the United States. Washington cut diplomatic ties with Iran after militant students stormed the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and took Americans hostage for more than one year.

After nearly three decades in power, therefore, the Iranian regime is trying to use Western opposition to Iran's nuclear programme to generate national unity and purpose. Indeed, by tapping into a sense of victimisation, in which other countries are allowed to have atomic technology while Iran is not, the nuclear programme has now become fused with Iran's national identity. In this context, Iran's nuclear policy is predicated on a mixture of ideology and nationalism that appears largely immune to threats and sanctions. This is being reflected by Tehran's pursuit of an aggressive and confrontational approach in its foreign policy.

Focussing on the Iranian government's increasingly strident threats against Israel, for example, on 2 February Negroponte said that 'the regime today is more confident and assertive than it has been since the early days of the Islamic Republic'. Indeed, the Iranian leadership does not seem to care what the international community thinks, and views the diplomatic cat-and-mouse game with Europe as an opportunity to fracture western unity. As a result, many analysts believe that the Iranian regime is not likely to back down soon, and that it is already braced for UN sanctions or worse.

Such an uncompromising stance has populist appeal. Indeed, the majority of Iranians now believe their country is entitled to nuclear technology. Therefore, as a matter of national pride, any US military intervention risks turning a mostly pro-American Iranian public against the United States, and thus rallying the regime's domestic opponents into the arms of its mullahs.

In this context, the White House has embarked on a strategy of rallying pro-reform and pro-American sentiments in Iran. In his State of the Union address on 31 January, Bush

said that Iran 'is a nation now held hostage by a small clerical elite that is isolating and repressing its people'. Then, in a thinly veiled call for regime change in Iran, Bush said: 'Let me speak directly to the citizens of Iran: America respects you, and we respect your country. We respect the right to choose your own future and win your own freedom'. The US State Department provided audio of the speech in Farsi that was beamed by exile networks from the United States into Iran. Voice of America radio also broadcast a simultaneous translation.

This would suggest that the White House has decided to pursue the goal of affecting political change in Iran. It remains unclear, however, whether this involves a policy of pursuing overt or covert action to support internal opposition. In 2005 the US State Department awarded US\$3 million to non-governmental organisations working on Iran, the identities of which remain classified. Bills proposed in Congress would raise that sum significantly in 2006. In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute on 2 February, Republican Senator Sam Brownback called for a tenfold increase in US aid to US\$100 million to support democratic change and human rights in Iran. 'Regime change can happen from within Iran and I am confident that the Iranian people can champion their own future if given half a chance', he said.

If multilateralism fails to reverse Iranian nuclear ambitions, therefore, the White House seems to have concluded that the only non-military answer in Iran is regime change.

**Conclusion:** Because the Iranian leadership fears internal unrest more than external pressure, the White House is pursuing a strategy that will augment multilateral diplomacy with efforts aimed at changing the Iranian regime. If this approach fails, Washington may conclude that the only thing worse than military action is a nuclear-armed Iran.