

Iran: No Guarantees

By Gareth Porter | August 29, 2006

Before Iran gave its formal counteroffer on August 22 to ambassadors of the six countries trying to negotiate with Tehran on its nuclear enrichment program, the George W. Bush administration had already begun the process of organizing sanctions against Iran. In fact, Washington had already held a conference call on sanctions on August 20 with French, German, and British officials, the *Washington Post* reported.

Thus ends what appeared on the surface to be a genuine multilateral initiative with Iran on the terms under which it would give up its nuclear program. But the history of the P5 + 1 proposal (put forth by the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and China) shows that the Bush administration was determined from the beginning that it would fail and thus bring to a halt multilateral diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program.

Britain, France, and Germany, which had begun talking with Tehran on the nuclear issue in October 2003, had concluded very early on that Iran's security concerns would have to be central to any agreement. It has been generally forgotten that the November 14, 2004 Paris Agreement between the EU and Iran included an assurance by the three European states that the "long-term agreement" they pledged to reach would "provide ... firm commitments on security issues."

The European three (E3) had tried in vain to get the Bush administration to support their diplomatic efforts. In a joint press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in July 2005, French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy referred to the need to "make sure ... that we discuss with [the Iranians] the security of their country. And for this, we shall need the United States."

The E3 and the Bush administration agreed that the P5 + 1 proposal would demand that Iran make three concessions to avoid UN Security Council sanctions and to begin negotiations on an agreement with positive incentives: the indefinite suspension of its enrichment program, agreement to resolve all the outstanding concerns of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and resumption of full implementation of the Additional Protocol, which calls for very tight monitoring of all suspected nuclear sites by the IAEA.

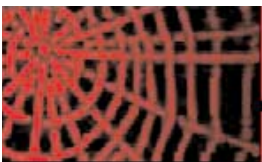
That meant that Tehran would have to give up its major bargaining chips before the negotiations even began. The Europeans wanted security guarantees from Washington to be part of the deal. Douste-Blazy said that if Iran cooperated, it could be rewarded with what he called an "ambitious package" in several economic domains as well as in "the security domain."

The E3 draft proposal, which was leaked to ABC News and posted on its website, included a formula that fell short of an explicit guarantee. However, it did offer "support for an inter-governmental forum, including countries of the region and other interested countries, to promote dialogue and cooperation on security issues in the Persian Gulf, with the aim of establishing regional security arrangements and a cooperative relationship on regional security arrangements including guarantees for territorial integrity and political sovereignty."

That convoluted language suggested there was a way for Iran's security to be guaranteed by the United States. But the problem was that it was still subject to a U.S. veto. In any case, as Steven R. Weisman of the *New York Times* reported on May 19, the Bush administration rejected any reference to a regional security framework in which Iran could participate.

Rice denied on Fox News May 21 that the United States was being "asked about security guarantees," but that was deliberately misleading. As a European diplomat explained to Reuters on May 20, the only reason the Europeans had not used the term "security guarantees" in their draft was that "Washington is against giving Iran assurances that it will not be attacked."

In light of these news reports, a public comment by Iran's UN Ambassador Javad Zarif on May 27 was particularly revealing. Zarif declared that the incentive package "needs to deal with issues that are fundamental to the



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resolution” of the problem. “The solution has to take into consideration Iranian concerns.”

Zarif seems to have been saying that Iran wanted to get something of comparable importance for giving up its bargaining chips in advance and discussing the renunciation of enrichment altogether. His statement, which departed from Iran’s usual emphasis on its right to nuclear technology under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, suggested that Tehran was at least open to the possibility of a “grand bargain” with Washington such as the one it had outlined in a secret proposal to the Bush administration in April 2003.

The partners of the United States in the P5 + 1 made one more effort to convince Rice to reconsider the U.S. position at their final meeting in Vienna on June 1 to reach agreement on a proposal. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov revealed in a talk with Russian media the following day, the issue of security guarantees for Iran had been raised by the U.S. negotiating partners at the June 1 meeting.

But the Bush administration again rebuffed the idea of offering positive security incentives to Iran. In the final text of the proposal, the European scheme for a regional security system was reduced to an anodyne reference to a “conference to promote dialogue and cooperation on regional security issues.”

The Europeans, Russians, and Chinese knew this outcome doomed the entire exercise to failure. In the end, only the United States could offer the incentives needed to make a bargain attractive to Iran. A European official who had been involved in the discussions was quoted in a June 1 Reuters story as saying, “We have neither big

enough carrots nor big enough sticks to persuade the Iranians, if they are open to persuasion at all.”

Despite the desire of other members of the P5 + 1 for a genuine diplomatic offer to resolve the disputes over Iran’s nuclear ambitions, the Bush administration’s intention seemed to be just the opposite. Bush’s objective appeared to be to free the administration from the constraint of multilateral diplomacy. The administration perhaps reckoned that, once the Iranians had rejected the formal offer from the P5 + 1, Washington would be free to take whatever actions it might choose, including a military strike against Iran. Thus the June 5 proposal, with its implicit contempt for Iran’s security interests, reflected the degree to which the administration has anchored its policy toward Iran in its option to use force.

As Washington now seeks to clear the way for the next phase of its confrontation with Iran, Bush is framing the issue as one of Iranian defiance of the UN Security Council, rather than U.S. refusal to deal seriously with a central issue in the negotiations. “There must consequences if people thumb their noses at the UN Security Council,” Bush said on August 21.

If the E3, Russia, and China allow Bush to get away with such a highly distorted version of what happened, the world will have taken another step closer to general war in the Middle East.

Gareth Porter writes for the Inter Press Service, which published an earlier version of this article. Porter is the author of Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (2005).

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