

Failing on Iran

By Gareth Porter | December 5, 2006

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's months-long diplomatic effort to get five other powers to agree to a tough UN Security Council resolution on sanctions against Iran now seems certain to fail thanks to Russian and Chinese resistance.

Who in Washington will benefit from that failure? Vice President Dick Cheney and other hardliners, who have been anticipating that such a development would help them persuade President George W. Bush to begin the political and diplomatic planning for an air attack on Iran.

For more than seven months, Rice has based her Iran strategy on the premise that a coalition of the five permanent UN Security Council members (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China) plus Germany (P5 + 1) could reach an agreement to impose significant penalties on Iran for its refusal to bow to the demand to end uranium enrichment. As recently as September, both Rice and Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, who coordinates Iran policy, publicly expressed confidence that the coalition would "stay together."

But the coalition strategy has been swimming against a powerful geopolitical tide. Russia and China have no interest in a weakened Iran, and have been signaling for months that they are not on board with Rice's strategy. In May, Rice tried to trade off the Bush administration's concession of agreeing to join direct negotiations with Iran for a commitment by the other five powers in the coalition to pass sanctions enforceable under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. But Russia and China blocked that plan, and the proposal to Iran from the P5 + 1 group contained no reference to sanctions.

Now Russia, with apparent Chinese support, is insisting that any resolution on Iran's nuclear program fall well short of sanctions aimed at punishing the regime in Tehran.

Last month, the Europeans circulated a draft that would have required that countries prevent the sale and supply of a long list of equipment, technology, and financing to all of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, including dual-use items and related technologies. It would have required that states "prevent the supply, sale, or

transfer" of such technologies, ban travel by Iranian officials connected with either program, and freeze Iranian assets.

But the draft did not characterize Iran's nuclear program as a threat to international peace and security, as Rice wanted. Furthermore, it would have allowed Moscow to continue its assistance to Iran for the construction of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant.

As reported by the *Washington Post* on October 25, Rice proposed amendments to the draft that would have closed both those loopholes. When the Europeans rejected her suggestions, U.S. Ambassador John Bolton threatened to withdraw U.S. support from the resolution. But the British, French, and Germans held firm.

The Russians, however, were insisting on a much narrower set of restrictions than those provided in the European draft. In early November, the six nations were deadlocked on the scope of the resolution. Now the European Union has circulated a draft that would prohibit only export of the most dangerous items that could be used to make a nuclear weapon or a ballistic missile, according to a November 30 report by Bloomberg's Bill Varner.

But the EU draft retains the same travel ban and asset freeze to which Russia had objected previously. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made it clear Friday that Moscow would support "sanctions aimed at preventing nuclear materials and sensitive technologies from getting into Iran" but objects to sanctions aimed at individuals, such as travel bans and the freezing of assets abroad. "Russia is against punishing Iran," he declared.

Russia's position on Iran sanctions appears to ensure that the resolution will not even be as strong as the commitment already undertaken by the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, which includes every country known to possess the technologies needed to produce nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles.

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The imminent collapse of Rice's coalition on Iran sanctions reflects the fundamental conflict of interest between Russia and the Bush administration, not only on Iran's nuclear program but also on broader geopolitical issues.

Celeste A. Wallander of Georgetown University and Robert Einhorn of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted interviews with 20 current and former Russian defense officials and analysts on Russian views on proliferation. Wallander wrote in a recent policy paper that Russia has no intention of helping to create new nuclear states but will not "risk political relationships with important regional powers" to support U.S. nonproliferation efforts.

Russian officials view the Iranian nuclear issue primarily in geopolitical terms, Wallander writes, and they doubt that the United States really cares about proliferation per se. They believe Washington should fix the "demand side" of the proliferation problem—the Iranian insecurity and fear of U.S. policy—instead of focusing primarily on the "supply side" of the problem, according to Wallander.

China's interests on the Iran issue parallel those of the Russia. Beijing has been seeking to strengthen its strategic partnership with Russia, particularly since the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and overt strategy of using alliances with Japan, India, and South Korea as leverage on Beijing. Both China and Russia appear to view the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a vehicle for countering U.S. power across Asia. In 2005, Moscow and Beijing signaled their joint interest in cooperation with Iran against U.S. pressures by inviting Iran to become a member of the SCO.

Rice appeared to concede that the United States would not get agreement on the kind of sanctions on Iranian officials for which she has been pushing. On December 1, she said she was for "maintaining unity, but I am also

in favor of action. We will just have to look at what the options are."

Rice was given the Iran portfolio when she became secretary of state in January 2005 and has apparently sought to move administration policy away from the option of using military force. She even indicated privately to a few figures outside the administration earlier this year that she hoped her move to offer talks with Iran in the context of EU-Iran talks on the nuclear issue would result in broader U.S.-Iran negotiations.

But Rice's diplomatic track on Iran was narrowly constrained from the beginning by a broader Bush administration policy of refusing any diplomatic compromise with Iran. Cheney and then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld apparently agreed to let Rice go down that track in early 2005 because they knew that any diplomatic effort through the UN Security Council to get sanctions against Iran would end in failure and that such a failure was a necessary prelude to any use of force.

According to an October 2 article by neoconservative Lawrence F. Kaplan in the *New Republic*, aides to Cheney have been convinced from the beginning that Rice's Iran strategy would not be an obstacle to their own plans because they knew that it would fail. These aides insisted that the administration is not yet prepared politically for a shift to the military track, according to Kaplan. But if Rice's diplomatic effort becomes a highly visible failure, Cheney and his allies in the administration are poised to begin the process of ratcheting up pressure on Bush to begin the political planning for an eventual military attack on Iran.

Gareth Porter is a historian and national security policy analyst who writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book is Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (2005).

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