

A “New Diplomatic Offensive”?

By Jim Lobe | March 5, 2007

Two weeks after making major concessions for a nuclear accord with North Korea, the administration of President George W. Bush said last week it was prepared to sit down with Iran and Syria as part of a regional conference to stabilize Iraq. In testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—widely considered the leader of the “realist” faction within the administration—announced that Washington will join a “neighbors’ meeting” convened by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and scheduled for the first half of March, to be followed by ministerial talks in April.

“I would note that the Iraqi government has invited all of its neighbors, including Syria and Iran, to attend both of these regional meetings,” Rice said. “We hope that all governments will seize this opportunity to improve relations with Iraq and to work for peace and stability in the region.”

She also described the proposed regional talks that would explicitly embrace Iran and Syria as consistent with a key recommendation last December of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), a bipartisan task force co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN). The recommendation had previously been all but rejected by Bush.

“This is one of the key findings, of course, of the ISG, and it is an important dimension that many in the Senate and in the Congress have brought to our attention, and I’ve had very fruitful discussions about how to do this,” said Rice, who referred to the Iraqi initiative as a “new diplomatic offensive”—a phrase lifted directly from the ISG’s report.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack later stressed that the proposed talks would be confined to Iraqi security, reconstruction, and national reconciliation, although he did not rule out bilateral talks on other issues. At the same time, he insisted that direct talks with Iran on its nuclear program remained conditional on Tehran suspending its uranium enrichment.

Both sets of talks, according to Rice, will also include members of the UN Security Council Permanent Five (P-5). The P-5—Britain, Russia, China, France, and the United States—are currently engaged in discussions over possible sanctions against Tehran for rejecting their

demand that enrichment be suspended. Talks may also include members of the Group of Eight. That would set up at least the theoretical possibility of Rice and her counterparts from Russia, China, Britain, France, and Germany—all of which have long urged Washington to sit down with Iran—holding informal discussions on nuclear issues with Tehran’s representatives in April.

Last Tuesday’s statements came amid growing public and congressional concern about the administration’s intentions toward Iran, particularly in light of its recent deployment of two aircraft carrier groups to the Persian Gulf and charges by Bush and other senior officials that Tehran is secretly providing explosive devices to its allies in Iraq who have allegedly killed some 170 U.S. soldiers there since 2004.

A number of analysts, including some retired military and intelligence officers, have told reporters that they believe the administration may be trying to provoke an incident that would provide a pretext for Washington to attack Iran’s suspected nuclear sites and other targets as early as April. This could both set back Tehran’s nuclear program and limit its ability to retaliate against the United States or U.S. regional allies.

Such speculation has been vigorously denied by senior officials, particularly Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Peter Pace. Yet Vice President Dick Cheney and other hawks have continued to insist that “all options are on the table” in dealing with Tehran’s nuclear program and its alleged support of anti-U.S. militias in Iraq.

At the same time, Democrats, including leading presidential candidates Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Sen. Barack

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Obama (D-IL), and Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DL), as well as some influential Republicans, such as Sen. John Warner (R-VA) and Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NB), have been pressing the administration hard to talk directly with Iran and Syria. This could help stabilize Iraq and thus permit Washington to begin extracting its troops from what most analysts, and an ever-larger majority of the public, have come to see as a quagmire.

Any diplomatic engagement with Iran, however, has been strongly opposed by administration hawks, particularly in Cheney's office and the National Security Council, as well as their mainly neoconservative supporters outside the government, who led a carefully orchestrated effort to discredit the ISG even before it released its recommendations in early December 2006.

But the hawks suffered a major defeat over the past month when, at Rice's behest, Bush authorized direct bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea for the first time. Bush then signed off on a multilateral accord whereby Pyongyang agreed initially to shut down its main nuclear facility and permit the return of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in exchange for economic aid, the lifting of some financial sanctions, and the launch of a process that, if completed, would lead to U.S. diplomatic recognition—effectively giving up on the “regime change” strategy urged by the hawks.

Hawks have complained that Rice short-circuited the normal policymaking process by going directly to Bush to gain approval of the North Korea initiative without any major interagency review, which would have given them an opportunity to modify or shoot down the deal.

The question now is whether Rice's endorsement of the ISG's call for engaging Iran—even if it is nominally at the Iraqi government's initiative and within the narrow framework of Iraq's security—marks a similar strategic

shift that could reverse the recent trajectory toward confrontation with Tehran, or whether it represents a mere tactical maneuver designed to soothe an increasingly anxious Congress and preempt any move on its part to rein in the administration.

On this question, some critics were cautiously optimistic last Tuesday, with Hagel calling the proposed meetings “an important first step” and Biden expressing the hope that “clearer heads in the administration are beginning to prevail.”

More skeptically, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada also described the announcement as “a first step, but ... not enough on its own. Our national security requires a robust diplomatic effort in the Middle East, and the Bush administration cannot again settle for mere half measures,” he said.

Noting recent changes in key policymaking positions that have favored realists over administration hawks, as well as strong indications that the military brass is “very, very, very opposed ... to picking a fight with Iran,” one acute observer of U.S. policy suggested that last week's statements could indeed signal a strategic shift.

“Since President Bush has shown the ability to change his mind, if not his heart, on North Korea,” noted Chris Nelson, publisher and editor of the insider newsletter the *Nelson Report* last Tuesday night, “one must ask if Rice's announcement today shows that the President realizes ... at a minimum ... that if he has a chance to resolve Iraq, it cannot come while pursuing a crisis with Iran. One crisis at a time, in other words.”

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