

DESIGNED TO BE REFUSED

THE PHONY US DIPLOMATIC 'OFFER' TO IRAN

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diplomacy a chance to work, and to ensure that if (**and when**) it fails, **it will not be the US that will be responsible**. The argument at the State Department is that, having thus **demonstrated its bonafides** the US will be able to persuade the rest of the world to **get tough** with the Iranians.'

The point is **not** to achieve a diplomatic solution, resolving the concerns around Iran's nuclear programme by negotiation. The point is to use diplomatic trickery to shift responsibility for the crisis away from the US and towards Iran. So far there have been considerable gains in this area, as many countries fall in line with the US demand.

CHINA

Not everyone is falling into line, however, including at least one permanent member of the Security Council. Wang Guangya, China's ambassador to the UN, said the United States should provide Iran with security assurances and drop its demand that Iran cease uranium enrichment before such talks could begin: 'I think it in a way proves that the U.S. is more serious about the negotiations than about other options, but I do hope that this offer could be less conditional,' he said.

Wang also stressed the need for the US to offer more "attractive carrots" to the Iranians, including crucial security assurances, and a pledge to allow Tehran to pursue a peaceful nuclear energy program, including a small research-and-development project on uranium enrichment. (*Washington Post*, 1 June 2006 <<http://tinyurl.com/mhdfb>>)

This seems an entirely sensible approach, but is being drowned out by US propaganda, amplified by the world's media. The US poses as a force for moderation and negotiaton, but pursues confrontation, domination and the humiliation of its enemy.

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A RICE U-TURN?

On 31 May, US Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice made a dramatic announcement regarding US policy towards Iran. After steadfastly refusing to contemplate face-to-face talks with the Iranian government over its nuclear power programme, the United States was now ready to join in multilateral talks with Iran, alongside members of the European Union.

Presented in much of the British press as a 'U-turn', there was in fact less to the offer than it appeared at first sight. The US is taking a gamble in making this offer to Iran, but the risk it is taking is that Tehran will **accept** the poison chalice being presented by Washington.

The US is only making this offer because it is confident that the Iranian government will **refuse** to accept the preconditions to negotiations that the US is trying to impose.

ENRICHMENT SUSPENSION

The Iranian government has been adamant that its uranium enrichment programme, which is entirely legal under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, must be preserved in some form in any negotiated settlement. The US is demanding that enrichment be 'fully and verifiably' suspended before it will start negotiations. In other words: 'give up your main bargaining chip before you sit down to talk'.

The *Financial Times* reported the (foreseeable) reaction under the headline, 'Rice talks offer set to **deepen** scepticism in Tehran'. The 'offer' was creating **negative** rather than positive feelings in Iranian ruling circles.

THREATENING LANGUAGE

There were two main reasons. Firstly, Condoleeza Rice's 'insistence that "all options", including threatened military strikes, were on the table will

increase the deep scepticism in Tehran over US motives and rally those in outright opposition to any talks. (*FT*, 31 May 2006 <<http://tinyurl.com/lrcms>>)

Rice had been asked in her press conference: ‘you have always refused to rule out the military option against Iran. But are you prepared to consider taking that option off the table, at least temporarily while negotiations go ahead?’ She replied: ‘The President is not going to take any of his options off the table, temporarily or otherwise.’

Rice was even more threatening: ‘we’re not going to stop work on— with our friends and allies—on what we might do if Iran makes the wrong choice.... We have options that are **very near-term options** should they not make the right choice.’ <<http://tinyurl.com/jf6nf>>

THE PRECONDITION

The second reason for Iranian concern was the suspension precondition. The *FT* reported: ‘Even those arguing that any successful negotiations over Iran’s atomic programme must involve the US are likely to reject Ms Rice’s demand that Iran first end all uranium enrichment. Iran’s bottom line for its nuclear programme appears, at the very least, to be continuing the research project resumed in January at the Natanz plant, which enriches uranium in 164 centrifuges.’

Even the most conciliatory elements in ruling circles are likely to refuse to accept the US proposal. Given the previous history of Iranian suspension during EU negotiations, which produced nothing tangible from an Iranian point of view, and cost the government considerable public anger, this was foreseeable.

The US imposed this precondition **knowing** it was likely to be rejected by even the most ‘open’ parts of the Iranian foreign policy establishment.

TIMING THE PROPOSAL

It seems entirely likely that the US proposal came when it did because of a recent hardening of the Iranian position on negotiations, increasing the chances of rejection. For some time now the idea has been in the air of negotiations between Washington and Tehran on the situation in Iraq, where the US has major troop deployment and a substantial political investment, on the one hand, and where Iran has major security concerns (as a neighbouring country) on the other.

The US has blown hot and cold on whether to hold these talks for some time. Iran was initially positive, but on 26 May the Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said they were no longer prepared to hold such discussions: ‘The American side tried to use this decision as propaganda, and they raised some other issues, they tried to create a negative atmosphere, and that is why the decision which was taken is for the time being suspended.’ (BBC, 26 May 2006, <tinyurl.com/zymmm>)

SUMMARY

The US chose a moment when Iran seemed to be moving **away** from the idea of engaging with the West, to launch a diplomatic initiative. The initiative was accompanied by **threatening language** warning of **imminent attack** options, and it demanded of the Iranians a concession which even the most conciliatory elements in Iranian ruling circles are known to regard as **unacceptable**. What conclusion can one draw other than that the proposal was made to be refused?

CONFIRMATION: THE TIMES

This indeed is the analysis, reading between the lines, of *The Times* columnist Gerard Baker (*Times*, 2 June 2006, <<http://tinyurl.com/lf67t>>)

‘the **symbolism** of Dr Rice’s gambit was more important than the substance. The State Department is now into the most critical phase yet of a delicate and high-risk game. It is a game that some in Washington feel is **destined to fail**; but, for the time being at least, the President has ruled that it is the game that the US will play. **Few people in Washington believe** Iran is going to abandon its attempts to join the nuclear club without serious international pressure or even the deeply unattractive military option. The only hope of avoiding the apocalyptic choice is a regime of eye-wateringly tight international economic and diplomatic pressure. But to achieve that, the US has to be **seen** to be working overtime on the diplomacy.’

Because of the Iraq war, the world is sceptical regarding US policy towards Iran. The opportunity is there for a propaganda victory, however, according to Baker:

‘With Iran, the US has to succeed where it largely failed in Iraq, in demonstrating to a sceptical world that the US really wants to give