

Editorial

Iran Deals Another Blow to U.S. Hegemony in the Middle East

On August 22, the government of Iran issued a 25-page statement rejecting incentives offered by the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China in return for suspension of its uranium enrichment program. The Iranian statement contained a counter-proposal for continuing dialogue. The Big Powers, in anticipation of Iran's position, pushed through a UN Security Council resolution on July 31 which threatened to impose economic sanctions on Iran if it did not terminate its uranium enrichment program by August 31.

However, cracks are beginning to appear in the Big Power coalition against Iran. On August 25, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that as long as Iran was willing to negotiate it was

premature to impose sanctions. French Foreign Minister Phillippe Douste-Blazy said that Iran's response was not satisfactory but that France wanted to avoid a conflict which could lead to a clash of civilizations. China has not yet issued a statement on Iran's response but is also expected to advocate a cautious approach. Meanwhile, U.S. Ambassador John Bolton stated that the U.S. would begin imposing sanctions unilaterally if the UN Security Council delayed doing so. In addition, high-ranking Israeli officials have stated that Israel may have to go it alone and slow down the Iranian nuclear industry by itself.

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The Misuse of the UN Security Council by the Big Powers

It is generally acknowledged that the response of the UN Security Council to the Israeli aggression against Lebanon has contributed to further lowering of reputation of the United Nations, particularly the Security Council, in the eyes of the vast majority of people. The United States and Britain played a most despicable role by opposing the almost universal demand for a cease fire. Instead, they openly supported the Israeli aggression and opposed any humanitarian considerations. The Canadian government, even though it is not a member of the Security Council, took the same position. The resolution that was finally agreed upon, weeks after the start of the war, did not even mildly rebuke Israel and actually left the door open for it to carry out defensive military operations within Lebanon. Even the most ardent defender of the UN Security

Council would be hard pressed to describe its response as an act of upholding international peace and security, let alone one of defending the sovereignty of Lebanon, one of the member states of the United Nations.

If it was only a matter of the UN Security Council harming its own reputation then maybe it could be ignored. Regrettably, as it stands today, the Security Council is a powerful tool of the big powers. When the United Nations was conceived by the most powerful of the victorious allied countries after the Second World War - United States, Soviet Union and Britain - they created an 11 member Security Council with five permanent members, including themselves, France and China, which had virtual control over all matters relating to international peace

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and security. The UN Charter, the founding document of the United Nations, did not give the General Assembly any real control over the Security Council or over matters relating to international peace and security. The Security Council was empowered to make decisions and undertake actions against member and non-member states, including economic, political and military sanctions, without the consent of the General Assembly. At the same time, the UN Charter made it obligatory that the member states abide by the decisions of the Security Council. The rationale was to ensure prompt and effective action.

Articles 12, 24 and 25 of the UN Charter provide the legal basis for this arrangement. Article 24 states: "In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf. In discharging these duties the Security Council shall act in accordance with the Purposes and Principles of the United Nations." Article 12 states: "While the Security Council is exercising in respect of any dispute or situation the functions assigned to it in the present Charter, the General Assembly shall not make any recommendation with regard to that dispute or situation unless the Security Council so requests." Article 25 states: "The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter."

Thus, even though the UN Charter declared as one of its principles that countries have equal rights, it also contained within it the contradictory provision that the permanent members of the Security Council would have more rights than other members of the United Nations. Not only was the Security Council made into a power separate from and above the General Assembly, but the victorious allied powers also gave themselves a veto on the Council. Any one of the permanent members could paralyze the Security Council from taking any action by using their veto, or by threatening to use it, which some analysts have called the "hidden veto". Alternatively, the big five could also gang up against other countries and

act against them, whether or not these countries were in violation of the UN Charter, while the countries subject to punishment would have no legal recourse. Given the political realities after the Second World War, the United Nations could not have come into existence without the UN Charter making this exception to the equality principle in its organization. Albeit for different reasons, the allied powers would not have agreed to any other form of organization.

Both things have happened regularly over the past 60 years. The permanent members use their veto power to control the Security Council's agenda and prevent it from discussing crises that fall within their spheres of interest. For example, the Security Council never debated the Algerian war or the partitioning of India because of the hidden vetoes of France, the Britain, nor did it take up the U.S. aggression in Vietnam or the Soviet war in Afghanistan, or the British occupation of Northern Ireland. On the other hand, the UN Security has ganged up on various countries over the years. For instance, it recently passed a resolution against North Korea for its testing of ballistic missiles. A few days later India conducted its own ballistic missile test but the Security Council did nothing about it. The question arises in many people's minds why the Security Council views the missile tests by North Korea as a threat to international peace and security while the same activity by India, USA, Russia, China, Britain and France are not threats to international peace and security. There are hundreds of other cases just like this which give rise to the perception that Security Council has a double-standard - one standard for the big powers and their friends, and another standard for everyone else - and the standard is not based on upholding the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

In 1965 the United Nations added four non-permanent members to the Security Council bringing the total membership to 15 with five permanent members with veto power and ten rotating non-permanent members that are elected for a term of two years and have no veto right. Even though it was a positive step to enlarge the Security Council, this reform did not improve the situation. Even though the UN Charter does not provide a right of veto on procedural matters, the big five insist on their right to

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set the boundaries of what may and may not be said in the Security Council. The elected members are discouraged from raising certain topics. Even when elected members challenge the veto system they are put in their place. For example, when Ambassador Peter Van Walsum of the Netherlands, one of the elected states on the Council for 1999-2000, interjected a statement about Chechnya in a Council debate on another subject, Ambassador Sergey Lavrov of Russia immediately interrupted the debate to make clear that, as a veto power, he would block any further discussion on the topic. The president of the Council ruled that Van Walsum was out of order and the matter never arose again.

One rationale for the Security Council having such great power is that it needs the freedom to act promptly and effectively in emergencies. This rationale has failed the test of time. For example, on August 1, the Security Council passed a resolution giving Iran until August 31 to stop its nuclear research and development, even though, as a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is entitled to engage in this activity. There was no urgency for such a resolution. Iran poses no danger to international peace and security. There is no evidence that it is building nuclear weapons. The only issue was that Iran had announced that it would only be ready to reply to the proposal from the Group of 5+1 on August 22. The Security Council could not wait three more weeks to hear what the Iranian government had to say. In contrast, when a real breach of the peace occurred with Israel's invasion of Lebanon, the UN Security Council was paralyzed by the United States and Britain. It took 33 days for the Security Council to agree on the terms for a cessation of hostilities.

All of this is not to say that the founding of the United Nations was a mistake. One of the positive aspects to the founding of the United Nations lay in its proclamation of a universal standard for relations among states based on respect for the equality and sovereignty of all member states irrespective of their social systems. It also proclaimed the right of all nations and peoples to self-determination including their right to choose their social, economic and political system. Finally, it proclaimed a system for the peaceful resolution of disputes between states. All member states, particularly the allied powers, were

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supposed to be bound by these new standards that arose out of the anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggle against Germany and Japan during the Second World War. Instead, the United States, Britain and France, and later the Soviet Union, took over from where Germany and Japan left off. From an instrument that was supposed to protect international peace and security, the UN Security Council became a tool of the big powers to interfere in the internal affairs of many countries and to wage war against others.

Clearly there is an urgent need for the UN Charter to be revised so that the Security Council is truly accountable to the General Assembly. Firstly, the General Assembly should have the final say on all matters relating to international peace and security. These issues are far too important for humankind to leave in the hands of a few countries to decide based on their own narrow interests, especially since the current permanent members of the Security Council have proven themselves unfit to defend the principles and purposes of the United Nations. Secondly, all members of the Security Council should be elected by the General Assembly. The status of permanent member should be abolished along with the veto. The number of seats on the Council should be expanded, with equal representation for all regions of the world, in order to ensure a wider participation and a global perspective. The domination of the Security Council by Europe and the United States should be eliminated. Thirdly, due process must be guaranteed for any state charged by the Security Council with violating a provision of the UN Charter. The accused state must be afforded the right to be present, and the right to defend itself, through all stages of the process. This should not be interpreted as a privilege granted at the discretion of the Security Council as it is today. A fair and impartial hearing based on strict rules of evidence must be guaranteed in front of the Security Council with a right of appeal to the General Assembly. Finally, any member state or group of states of the United Nations, even if they are not members of the Security Council, should be allowed to initiate an action within the Security Council. Such proposals must be accorded the same status as those originating from the members of the Security Council itself. Only in this way can the original spirit and intent of the United Nations be implemented.

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The U.S. is claiming that its only concern with Iran's nuclear industry is that it could be diverted into the production of nuclear warheads. However, this is a red herring, as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly stated that there is no evidence of any nuclear weapons program in Iran. The real motivation of both the U.S. and Israel is to prevent the emergence of Iran as a regional power capable of pursuing its own interests in the region. If Iran were to capitulate to the illegal demand of the U.S. and the UN Security Council that it end its uranium enrichment program, the U.S. would almost certainly find another reason to threaten Iran and demand more concessions. Its ultimate aim is to install a government in Iran which will support the American and Israeli goal of imposing their dictate on the entire Middle East. The Iranian government appears to clearly understand this reality and its refusal to capitulate to the U.S. can only be seen as yet another setback to U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The Israeli aggression against Lebanon was widely seen as a trial run for a potential U.S.-Israeli assault against Iran. If that is the case, then it clearly backfired as Israel did little to weaken the military capacity of Hezbollah and a lot to expose the strategic weaknesses of the Israeli Defence Forces. Some commentators are also pointing to this U.S. setback as the reason for the apparent change of heart by Russia and France regarding UN sanctions.

However, Israel's abject failure to achieve any of its aims in Lebanon and the continuing failure of the U.S. to achieve any of its aims in Iraq and Afghanistan cannot be taken as a guarantee that they will not repeat their errors in the case of Iran. In fact, both the U.S. and Israel have placed themselves in positions where they have very few options remaining. If they accept their defeat at the hands of the peoples of Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan and the defiance of the government of Iran, then the very existence of U.S. imperialism as the world's sole superpower is at stake. As for Israel, if it cannot defeat a few thousand guerilla fighters with the fourth strongest army in the world its future as a regional superpower is in question, as is its continuing usefulness as a military

outpost of the U.S. It must now reassert its strategic military might by launching a bigger aggression against its neighbours or accept the decline and eventual fall of the Zionist state itself.

There is no doubt that this dynamic is understood by the imperialist allies/rivals of the Americans. Russia and France appear to be playing a very dangerous game of big power politics - first they encourage the U.S. by supporting its anti-Iran agenda and then back off and leave the U.S. holding the bag. It appears that, as in the case of Iraq, both France and Russia would like to see the U.S. further bogged down in imperialist adventures in the Middle East and unable to defend its interests elsewhere. Russia, in particular, has nothing to lose from a U.S. war with Iran. Its economic interests in Iran are relatively small and their loss would be more than offset by the resulting increase in value of Russia's oil assets and the ability of Russia to expand its interests at the expense of the U.S. in other parts of the world. For its part, China seems interested in both appeasing the United States and maintaining its access to Iranian oil, so it is unclear what position it will ultimately take. The only thing that is clear is that China, as all of the other Big Powers, will take a position which best serves its own interests and not the interests of the Iranian or world's people.

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