

Putin Stands Up To Bush's Sabre-Rattling

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Ironically, it was George W. Bush himself who said it: "Iran is not Iraq." What the U.S. President thought he meant, he explained, was that the diplomatic process with Iran, to settle matters related to its nuclear program, has not yet been exhausted; whereas, in the case of the other Persian Gulf giant, it had. Thus, in the case of Iraq, war had become inevitable. But actions taken in several Arab and European capitals, and especially in Moscow, cast his words in a totally different light. For President Vladimir Putin, in particular, such a statement could only mean that his nation, Russia, would *not* respond, in the event of armed aggression against Iran, in the same way that it had, during the 2003 war on Iraq. Quite the contrary.

Bush repeated his line on Iran, during his European tour the week of Feb. 21, pretending, on the one hand, to give credence and support to the efforts of the EU-3 (Great Britain, Germany, and France) in their year-long negotiations with Tehran, to ensure that Iran's nuclear program would remain limited to peaceful energy purposes, in exchange for technological assistance and trade expansion. On the other hand, Bush reiterated that "all options are on the table," and, during his visit to Mainz, Germany, hysterically insisted that Iran must not gain access to nuclear weapons. (See following article.)

In the same breath, as with as much vehemence, Bush repeated his threats against Syria. In the wake of the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which had been promptly pinned on Damascus by Washington, Tel Aviv, and stooges in the Lebanese opposition, Bush turned up the rhetoric, calling on Syria to immediately withdraw its troops and secret services from Lebanon. He focussed on this issue in talks with French President Jacques Chirac, who had co-sponsored the September 2004

UN Security Resolution 1559 to that effect.

Much to Bush's displeasure, to be sure, neither of the nations he had targetted cowered in fear. On the contrary, while Arab partners moved to defuse the Syria-Lebanon crisis, and the Europeans restressed their commitment to diplomacy with Tehran, Russia stepped in, issuing unmistakable signals that it would not tolerate another unilateralist U.S. military adventure in Southwest Asia.

Diplomacy With Iran

On Feb. 18, Igor Ivanov, secretary of the Russian Security Council, stated that on the basis of respect for international norms and obligations, his country would continue its nuclear cooperation with Iran. Ivanov, who made the statements to his guest Hassan Rowhani, secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council and a nuclear negotiator with Europe, said: "As regards Iran's nuclear program, it is important that Iran should continue a constructive dialogue with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Tehran should ratify as soon as possible the additional protocol to the agreement on safeguards with the IAEA." Ivanov also expressed support for the arrangements between Iran and the EU-3 on Iran's nuclear program. Ivanov and Rowhani "also discussed questions of Russo-Iranian cooperation and a number of topical international problems," including security, terrorism, and drugs.

One day later, Russian wires reported a dramatic statement by Putin, which went far beyond anything Washington could have imagined. In his meeting with Rowhani, the Russian President said that "the latest steps from Iran *confirm that Iran does not intend to produce nuclear weapons*, and we will continue to develop relations in all spheres, including the peaceful use of nuclear energy."



President Bush (left) in talks with Russian President Putin in Bratislava, Slovakia. Russia issued unmistakable signals that it would not tolerate more unilateral U.S. adventures in Southwest Asia, whether over Iran's drive to build up its nuclear power capacity, or Syria's influence in Lebanon.

He added: "We hope that Iran will strictly adhere to all international agreements, in relation to Russia and the international community." The Russian President announced that he had accepted an invitation to visit Tehran in the near future. In addition, Russian Atomic Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev, it was announced, would go to Tehran to sign an agreement, planned for Feb. 26, on the return of spent nuclear fuels from the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran, to Russia.

Meanwhile, Rowhani travelled to Paris for talks with Chirac, obviously dealing with the nuclear issue. And the Iranian government, for its part, said it did not want the United States to meddle in the EU-Iranian dialogue. "The Islamic Republic sees no reason for U.S. participation in the discussions between Iran and Europe," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told the official IRNA news agency on Feb. 24. "If the Americans joined the talks, the best that could happen is that they would bring nothing to the negotiations and in the worst case scenario they would sabotage everything. We hope that the Europeans will continue to act independently," he said.

Support for Syria

Russia intervened as well, to demonstratively exhibit its political support for Syria, and its refusal to accept Bush's blackmail. On Feb. 15, a letter from Putin landed on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's desk, just one day after Syria had been blamed—without any evidence being presented—for the Hariri murder. The letter announced that Russia would go ahead with the sale of sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles to Syria. Putin wrote that the missiles were not the hand-held

SA-18s which Israel had been claiming could end up in the hands of terrorists, but vehicle-mounted missiles which posed no offensive threat to Israel.

At the same time, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak moved to defuse the crisis. Mubarak sent his security chief, Omar Suleiman, to Damascus, to "contain the situation," and the "find solutions." Syrian President Bashar al-Assad signalled to Moussa in talks on Feb. 21, his readiness to initiate the process of disengagement in Lebanon, as prescribed in the 1992 Taif Accords which ended the civil war.

Inside Lebanon itself, according to a Beirut source, the attitude of the opposition itself shifted significantly beginning Feb. 23. Instead of focussing its wrath on Syria, and blaming Damascus for Hariri's death, the opposition began issuing slogans that raised the question:

Cui bono? Who benefits from the murder? Why is Syria being targetted? What international forces might be implicated? At the same time, instead of demanding implementation of UN Resolution 1559, opposition figures were referring to the Taif Accords. The reason for this shift, it was explained, lies in the vast exposure of the role of the U.S. neo-conservatives, in shaping and pushing the policy for Lebanese partition, which the Hariri murder was supposed to trigger.

The exposé, first issued by *EIR*, pointed to the role of the U.S. Committee for a Free Lebanon (USCFL), whose members overlap those who drafted the infamous "Clean Break" doctrine of 1996, under the leadership of Dick Cheney and his stable of neo-cons. (See last week's *EIR*. That exposé was broadcast by the Lebanese satellite TV station, NTV, in an interview with *EIR*, along with documentary material from the USCFL's own publications. The impact was such that opposition figures began to be identified as stooges of the U.S. neo-con faction—certainly no boon to their proclaimed cause of an "independent Lebanon."

Although the moves by Russia and regional forces have upped the ante for the war party in Washington, they have not defeated it. A principled resistance, such as that led by Putin, is crucial, but not sufficient. Escalating even to the brink of World War III will not solve the crisis. What is required is a positive alternative: in effect, overthrowing the entire chessboard, and redefining the rules of the game. This means addressing the global financial-economic dynamic underlying the mad war drive out of Washington, and implementing a new world monetary and economic system, as Lyndon LaRouche has outlined.