

Condoleezza Rice wins the battle for US President George W Bush's ear over Iran

By Philip Sherwell in New York

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To the dismay of the hawks who long ruled Washington and to the relief of their foes, the Bush administration has sat down with another member of the once-reviled "axis of evil" this weekend.

William Burns, the number three at the State Department, attended talks in Geneva on Saturday on Tehran's nuclear programme - the first time a senior American diplomat has shared a negotiating table with the Iranians since the 1979 Islamic revolution and 444-day US embassy siege.

Just a month after the US reached a deal with North Korea over its atomic weapons, the encounter represented another remarkable thawing in tensions between Washington and countries that President George W Bush once placed in the same untouchable "rogue state" category as Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

In a further unexpected overture, the US is investigating options for opening a diplomatic interests section in Tehran, three decades after the two countries severed relations.

The diplomatic initiatives are compelling evidence that for Mr Bush's final months in the White House, it is Condoleezza Rice, the US Secretary of State, and the Pentagon chief, Robert Gates, who hold sway - not neo-conservative champion, Vice-President Dick Cheney.

Ms Rice has persuaded Mr Bush that diplomacy rather than confrontation offers his best hope of leaving office with a foreign policy "legacy" - the traditional concern of every outgoing president.

Predictably, a senior Iranian official indicated as talks began that Tehran would refuse to end its uranium enrichment project that provides fuel either for nuclear weapons or for civilian energy.

A Western diplomat described the atmosphere at the talks as "fine", but confirmed that the Iranians were unwilling to talk about suspending uranium enrichment, or even freezing it at current levels.

Nonetheless, the big news was the presence of Mr Burns. It was the first time that America had attended a meeting between Iran's nuclear officials and the international negotiating team of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany.

At the American Enterprise Institute, a bulwark of the neo-conservative thinking that ruled the roost in Washington in the run-up to the Iraq war, the meeting was viewed with resignation.

"However the Administration dresses it up, this is a big concession and very much in keeping with the North Korea deal," said Danielle Pletka, the AEI's vice president. "The Europeans must be very flummoxed that the bad cop has suddenly turned into the nice, warm and fuzzy cop.

"Rice has been pivotal in this. She's the one Bush listens to, so she is winning the day. After the North Korea deal, anything is possible. It is now very possible that the Iranians could agree to pretend not to have a nuclear weapons programme and we could agree to accept the pretence. It happened with Pyongyang so why not with Tehran?"

But Lawrence Wilkerson, the former chief of staff to Colin Powell, Ms Rice's predecessor at the State Department who lost repeated turf battles to the hardliners over Iraq, welcomed the Geneva meeting and the North Korea accord.

"I think these are both very clear signs that the Administration is serious about deploying diplomacy rather than force to tackle international crises," he said.

"Dick Cheney and his allies can still try and throw a monkey wrench into the proceedings, but these are good signs. Bush is trying to recoup something for his legacy and Condi Rice is in charge of that mission."

Dan Goure, a Pentagon consultant, said that America went into the meeting as a tactic to secure support from its European allies for tougher sanctions against Iran if it continues to enrich uranium.

"This meeting is more about mollifying the Europeans rather than any expectation of influencing Iran," he said. "Nobody in Washington imagines that Iran is going to stop its uranium enrichment programme.

"But to win European backing for tougher sanctions, the US had to show some flexibility and a willingness to meet. That's what it's done."

The signs of a more conciliatory approach towards Tehran have caused alarm in Israel. Several senior Israeli figures have indicated recently that the Jewish state would consider a go-it-alone

air strike against Iran's atomic facilities, although there is some doubt that it has the capability to mount the sort of devastating attacks that would cripple Tehran's nuclear programme.

Mr Goure said there was little enthusiasm for US military action against Iran, even if Democrat Barack Obama wins the presidency. "The Administration believes they fought the good fight in Iraq but now accepts that it will leave Iran as unfinished business to the next president," he said.

And as Mr Burns heads home from Geneva, Ms Rice is preparing to meet her North Korean counterpart. The session, which will take place on the sidelines of a Southeast Asia security conference in Singapore this week, would have been unthinkable until recently.

Story from Telegraph News:

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