

Threat of US-led sanctions against Iran

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14 September 2009

With time running out on a US-imposed deadline, Iran's nuclear programs are again moving to international centre stage. The Obama administration warned last month that the US would press for tough new sanctions against Tehran unless it responded positively to an offer for negotiations on the nuclear issue by the end of September.

The US agreed last Friday to take part in talks involving the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany (P5+1) with Iran after Tehran released a five-page proposal on Wednesday. US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley, however, spoke dismissively of the Iranian document, declaring that the US was simply taking part in the meeting to "test Iran's willingness to engage".

A breakthrough is unlikely even if the talks go ahead. The US and its European allies are demanding that Iran shut down its uranium enrichment and other nuclear facilities, which Iran has repeatedly rejected. Last week President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad again vowed not to give up Iran's rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to produce nuclear fuel. Tehran's proposal makes no reference to the country's nuclear programs.

Washington's decision to take part in the meeting appears aimed more at pressuring Russia and China, than at any serious negotiations with Iran. Both countries have veto rights in the UN Security Council and have indicated their opposition to any further sanctions. The US and the European powers are pressing for the P5+1 meeting with Iran to be held before the opening of the UN General Assembly session next week, with an eye to using the UN gathering to intensify pressure on Tehran.

Last week, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned against punitive measures against Iran, saying: "Some of the sanctions under discussion, including oil and oil products, are not a mechanism to force Iran to co-operate, they are a step to a full-blown blockade and I do not think they would be supported by the UN Security Council."

Under pressure from Washington, the UN Security Council has already imposed a series of sanctions against Iranian companies and individuals allegedly linked to the country's nuclear programs. In addition, the US has imposed its own unilateral financial sanctions and has pressured other countries to follow suit. What is now under discussion is a ban on the export of refined oil products to Iran—a move that would have a crippling economic impact as the lack of refining capacity means Iran has to import about 40 percent of its petrol needs.

Within the US, the media and political establishment are gearing up for a confrontation with Iran over its alleged nuclear weapons. Last Thursday, the *New York Times* featured the overblown claim that US intelligence agencies had concluded that Iran had "created enough nuclear fuel to make a rapid, if risky, sprint for a nuclear weapon". The article provided no evidence that Iran was planning to enrich nuclear fuel to weapons-grade material or that American intelligence agencies had revised their 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Tehran had abandoned plans for nuclear weapons in 2004.

The newspaper's claim was in line with comments by the US ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Glyn Davies, who told the organisation's annual gathering last week that Iran had a "possible breakout capacity". While insisting on

exercising its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has repeatedly rejected claims that it intends to build nuclear weapons and has dismissed alleged evidence provided to the IAEA by Western and Israeli intelligence agencies as fabrications.

The *New York Times* followed up last week's article with an editorial on Saturday entitled "That September Deadline," backing new sanctions against Iran, if talks failed. "American and European officials say they are now developing a more persuasive list of sanctions if Tehran continues to resist; a ban on new energy investment in Iran and a possible cutoff of gasoline exports to Iran are two leading possibilities," the editorial declared. "If Washington and Europe cannot get Russia and the Security Council to go along, they must be ready to move on their own this time."

Last Thursday, the Democrat chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Howard Berman, warned that he would proceed with legislation imposing US sanctions on Iran's petrol imports. "Thus far Iran has thumbed its nose at President Obama's generous offer to engage. If Iran does not reverse course... I will mark up my bill next month and begin the process of tightening the screws on Iran." Berman was speaking as pro-Israeli lobby groups held an "Advocacy Day on Iran" demanding tougher US action.

The Obama administration is under pressure from Israel, which has declared that it will not tolerate a nuclear-armed Iran and issued thinly veiled warnings of air strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities. In an unusual move last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a secret trip to Moscow on a private jet. While no details have been released, he reportedly urged the Russian government not to proceed with the sale of advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran—a potential obstacle to an Israeli air raid.

Even without an Israeli attack, American moves to impose punitive sanctions against Iran run the risk of heightening tensions in the Persian Gulf and provoking military conflict. The logic of a ban on exports of petroleum to Iran is that it must be enforced—either by

pressuring exporting countries into line or, should that fail, imposing a blockade on Iran. The Obama administration has not ruled out US strikes on Iran's nuclear installations.

As if to underscore that such options are under consideration, France's military chief, General Jean-Louis Georgelin, declared on Thursday that a military intervention was no longer a viable option. Answering a question at the Atlantic Council in Washington, he said: "It is very difficult to plan a military operation in Iran, because we are not sure in one shot to be able to solve a problem and if you fail in one shot, it is a catastrophe."

On Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin also warned against military action, saying any attack on Iran would be "very dangerous, unacceptable". It would encourage Islamic extremists, he said, and "lead to an explosion of terrorism". He added: "I doubt very much that such strikes would achieve their stated goal."

The intensification of pressure on Iran underscores the fact that Obama's stance toward Tehran is not fundamentally different from that of the Bush's. Washington is seeking to fashion an Iranian regime that is more amenable to US ambitions to establish economic and strategic dominance over the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Obama's offer of talks on the nuclear issue has always been backed by the threat of economic punishment and military attack if Iran failed to agree to the US terms.



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