

Clinton takes hard line on Iran in run-up to talks

Bill Van Auken
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US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Friday enunciated a hard line against Iran in the run-up to talks scheduled to take place October 1 in Istanbul between Tehran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

Speaking at the Brookings Institution, a Democratic-leaning Washington think tank, Clinton warned, “We have made clear our desire to resolve issues with Iran diplomatically. Iran must now decide whether to join us in this effort.” She indicated that should the Iranian government fail to bow to US demands relating to Iran’s nuclear program, it would face intensified retaliation.

“There will be accompanying costs for Iran’s continued defiance: more isolation and economic pressure, less possibility of progress for the people of Iran,” Clinton said.

Clinton’s threat followed reports that both the United Nations nuclear inspection arm and Washington’s own intelligence agencies have concluded that there is no evidence that Iran is actively engaged in a nuclear weapons program.

The Iranian government has repeatedly insisted that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only and has rebuffed Western demands that it halt uranium enrichment and shut down other nuclear facilities that are allowed under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and have been open to inspection by UN monitors.

Clinton also used her remarks to counter criticism of the Obama administration from the Republican right and elements of the US foreign policy establishment over the decision announced Thursday to scrap plans to establish bases in Poland and Czechoslovakia as part of a missile defense shield. The administration’s critics have denounced it for “appeasement” of Moscow.

The US secretary of state insisted that the administration was not “shelving” the anti-ballistic missile system, but rather setting up a more practical one on a quicker timetable than had been proposed under the Bush administration.

“We are not reducing our capacity to protect our interests and our allies from Iran,” she said. “We are increasing that

capacity and focusing it on our best understanding of Iran’s current capacity.”

Administration officials have claimed that the system they are proposing is better suited to counter short- and medium-range missiles, which they say Iran has been developing, as opposed to intercontinental missiles, for which the missile shield proposed under Bush was designed.

“This was not about Russia,” Clinton insisted. “This was about Iran and the threat that its ballistic missile program poses.”

Many foreign policy analysts, however, have suggested that the shift in policy is about both Russia and Iran. Moscow had vehemently opposed the setting up of the missile shield in Eastern Europe, charging that it was aimed not at Iran, but at Russia, and was designed to neutralize its nuclear missile capacity, creating conditions for a US first strike.

In stepping back from this provocative plan, Washington may be seeking leverage in shifting relations with Moscow in order to win its collaboration on other issues, including the imposition of sanctions on Iran. Both Washington and Moscow have denied that there is any deal, and Russian officials have continued to insist that they see a new round of sanctions against Iran as counterproductive. This position, shared by China, would likely block a Security Council resolution escalating the action against Iran beyond the three sets of sanctions already implemented.

The International Atomic Energy Agency responded Friday to press reports on an apparently classified IAEA document entitled “Possible Military Dimension of Iran’s Nuclear Program.” The leaked document is being used in an attempt to substantiate charges by the US, Israel and France that the UN nuclear watchdog agency has been withholding incriminating evidence regarding the Iranian program.

According to the Associated Press, the document includes findings that Iran has developed ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear payloads, has sufficient information to design a nuclear device, and has “probably” tested explosives which can be used to detonate a nuclear warhead.

The IAEA replied to the reports by insisting that the agency has “no concrete proof that there is or has been a nuclear weapon program in Iran.” It further suggested that the document in question contained raw intelligence reports and allegations that could not be verified.

“Information from a variety of sources...is critically assessed by a team of experts working collectively in accordance with the agency’s practices,” the agency said. “The IAEA reiterates that all relevant information and assessments that have gone through this process have already been provided to the IAEA Board of Directors.”

This response follows a report by Mohamed ElBaradei, the outgoing director general of the agency, to its last general meeting, in which he stated, “We are not in a panic because we have not seen diversion of nuclear material in Iran. We have not seen components of nuclear weapons.” ElBaradei has spoken of “fabrications” of intelligence on the supposed Iranian weapons program, comparing it to the campaign surrounding non-existent Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” in advance of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The IAEA statement follows an article Wednesday by *Newsweek* magazine stating that US intelligence agencies are reporting to the White House that Iran has not re-started its nuclear weapons program. US agencies had previously concluded that Iran had scrapped such a program in 2003, following the US invasion that deposed the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein, which Tehran also believed could be working to develop a nuclear capacity.

Citing two unnamed US counter-proliferation officials, *Newsweek* reported, “US intelligence agencies have informed policymakers at the White House and other agencies that the status of Iranian work on development and production of a nuclear bomb has not changed since the formal National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran’s ‘Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities’ in November 2007.” It was the 2007 NIE that found Iran had stopped work on nuclear weapons, a position that the US spy agencies apparently still hold.

As the *Newsweek* report noted, “This latest US intelligence community assessment is potentially controversial for several reasons, not the least of which is that it is at odds with more alarming assessments propounded by key US allies, most notably Israel.”

The Israeli government has repeatedly leaked reports that the development of an Iranian nuclear weapon is imminent, and that Israel is preparing to launch a military attack on Iran if sanctions and other efforts by Washington and its allies fail to shut down the Iranian nuclear program.

In Washington, meanwhile, the Bipartisan Policy Center, composed of a number of prominent former Democratic and Republican officials, issued a report calling for the US to

impose punishing sanctions and prepare for a military attack against Iran if Tehran fails to heed US demands regarding its nuclear program.

“If biting sanctions do not persuade the Islamic Republic to demonstrate sincerity in negotiations and give up its enrichment activities, the White House will have to begin serious consideration of the option of a US-led military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities,” said the report.

Authored by former Virginia Democratic Senator Charles Robb, former Indiana Republican Senator Daniel Coats and retired Gen. Charles Wald, the former deputy commander of US forces in Europe, the report claims that Washington has “little time... to prevent both a nuclear-weapons capable Islamic Republic and an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.”

In the first instance, the report says, Congress should pass pending legislation that would impose unilateral US sanctions against companies that export gasoline to Iran. Because of an inadequate refining capacity, Iran is dependent upon imports for 40 percent of its gasoline, and, if effective, such sanctions could have crippling economic consequences.

The report calls for the Obama administration to impose a deadline of 60 days, and if negotiations fail to achieve US aims, the sanctions should be imposed and the US should “prepare overtly for any military option,” including the dispatch of another aircraft carrier battle group to the waters off Iran.



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