

US heightens threats against Iran

Peter Symonds
25 September 2009

The US and its European allies have exploited this week's UN session to threaten tough new sanctions against Iran ahead of a meeting on October 1 between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) and Tehran over its nuclear programs.

US President Barack Obama focussed attention on Iran by yesterday pushing a resolution through the UN Security Council on nuclear non-proliferation. While non-binding and largely a compilation of previous measures, Washington will undoubtedly use the resolution to justify future actions against Iran and North Korea.

Adding weight to the US-sponsored resolution, Obama chaired the Security Council session—the first time for a US president. Speaking after the vote, he declared that the UN body had “the authority and responsibility” to act against violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and enforce its resolutions on Iran and North Korea.

While Obama sanctimoniously spoke of a world free of nuclear weapons, France and Britain underscored the real thrust of the resolution—to set the stage for punitive measures against Iran. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown told the Security Council: “Today, I believe we have to draw a line in the sand... As evidence of its [Iran's] breach of international agreements grows, we must now consider far tougher sanctions together.”

French President Nicolas Sarkozy warned: “There comes a time when stubborn facts will compel us to take a decision if we want a world without nuclear weapons.” Speaking dismissively of negotiations, he declared: “I support the extended hand of the Americans [to Iran], but what good have proposals for dialogue brought the international community?” He concluded by calling on the Security Council to “have [the] courage to impose sanctions together”.

All of this involves breathtaking hypocrisy. Iran has repeatedly denied building nuclear weapons and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has found no evidence that it is doing so. Yet the US and the European powers are targetting Iran for further sanctions while ignoring the fact that close American allies—Israel, India and Pakistan—have refused to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and already have nuclear arsenals.

The Security Council resolution passed unanimously—that is,

with the support of the five permanent members, the US, Britain, France, China and Russia. Each of these powers maintains large stockpiles of nuclear weapons despite NPT requirements that they be reduced and eventually eliminated. The cynicism surrounding the nuclear debate only demonstrates that it is a convenient device for advancing definite economic and strategic interests.

Like his predecessor Bush, Obama is exploiting the nuclear issue to fashion a regime in Iran more supportive of the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and American ambitions to play the dominant role in the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia. Britain and France are backing the US as the best means for advancing their own interests in these key regions. Russia and China only reluctantly supported previous UN sanctions on Iran, fearful that aggressive US actions would undermine their own strategic positions.

An Iranian statement yesterday declared its willingness to “engage in serious and constructive negotiations” as long as the talks did not include “futile and illegal demands of the past years”. Tehran has repeatedly insisted that it will not give up its rights under the NPT to engage in all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle and has branded as “illegal” UN resolutions calling for the shutdown of its uranium enrichment facilities.

The most significant shift toward new sanctions against Iran followed talks between the US and Russian presidents on Wednesday. Speaking at a joint press conference with Obama, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev opened the door for further punitive measures by declaring: “Russia's position is clear. Sanctions rarely lead to productive results, but in some cases sanctions are inevitable.”

Earlier this month, Russian officials had ruled out any new UN measures against Iran. Despite Washington's denials, Medvedev's declaration is a quid pro quo for Obama's announcement last week that the US would not proceed with plans to build an anti-ballistic missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. In return for removing a threat to Russia's nuclear arsenal, Washington expects Moscow to take a tougher line on Iran.

Speaking on CBS's “Face The Nation” on Sunday, Obama said the decision to revamp the missile shield “was not to negotiate with the Russians”. He then tacitly admitted that it had been part of the calculations, saying: “If the by-product of it is that the Russians feel a little less paranoid and are now willing to work

more effectively with us to deal with threats like ballistic missiles from Iran or the nuclear development in Iran, you know, then that's a bonus."

White House officials were clearly elated over Medvedev's comments. Michael McFaul, Obama's senior adviser on Russia, told the media: "It wasn't that long ago where we had very divergent definitions of the threat and definitions of our strategic objectives vis-à-vis Iran. That seems to me to be a lot closer, if not almost together. I think we're at a different place in US-Russia relations."

The shift by Russia places pressure on China to also fall into line. However, a Chinese foreign ministry statement issued yesterday declared: "We believe that sanctions and exerting pressure are not the way to solve problems and are not conducive for current diplomatic efforts on the [Iran] nuclear issue."

However, the extent of Chinese opposition remains unclear. European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said on Tuesday that he did not expect Russia and China to oppose new sanctions if Iran refused to freeze its nuclear programs. On Wednesday, the P5+1 foreign ministers met on the sidelines of the UN gathering to discuss next week's meeting with Iran.

Reading from a joint statement after the meeting, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband declared: "We expect a serious response from Iran and will decide, in the context of our dual track approach, as a result of the meeting, on our next steps."

In what could be the opening shot of a public campaign to pressure China, the British-based *Financial Times* published a front-page story on Wednesday highlighting increased sales of petrol to Iran by Chinese companies. One of the sanctions being pressed for by the US is a ban on the sale of all refined oil products to Iran. While it has huge oil reserves, Iran lacks refinery capacity and is compelled to import about 40 percent of its petrol needs.

To date, UN sanctions on Iran have been limited, focussing on individuals, banks and companies alleged to have links to the country's nuclear programs. In addition, Washington has bolstered its own economic blockade and pressured European and Asian banks to cut financial ties with Iran or face restricted access to the US banking system.

However, the imposition of a fuel embargo and other broad sanctions would have a crippling impact on the Iranian economy and dramatically heighten tensions. Any attempt by Iran to circumvent the sanctions could be used as the pretext for a full-blown US naval blockade, which would be an act of war. It should be recalled that Washington set the war in the Pacific in motion in 1941 by imposing a fuel blockade on Japan.

The danger of war is underscored by Israel's continuing threats of military action against Iran's nuclear plants. In his address to the UN, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared:

"The most urgent challenge facing this body today is to prevent the tyrants of Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons." The destabilising role of nuclear-armed Israel in region was highlighted by last week's UN Human Rights Council report citing Israel for war crimes during its military offensive in the Gaza Strip last December and January.

Israel's military chief Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi reiterated on Monday that "Israel has the right to defend itself, and all options are on the table." The remarks came a day after Russian President Medvedev said Israeli officials had reassured him that Israel was not planning to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Ashkenazi's remarks were reinforced by Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Danny Ayalon who declared: "In any event, he [Medvedev] is certainly not authorised to speak for us and there is no change whatsoever in Israel's policy."

Former US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski made clear on Sunday that any Israel attack should only take place with Washington's authorisation. "We are not exactly impotent little babies," he told the *Daily Beast*. "They are going to fly over our airspace in Iraq. Are we just going to sit there and watch?... If they fly over, you go up and confront them. They have the choice of turning back or not." While he does not speak for the White House, Brzezinski did advise Obama during the presidential election campaign and remains influential.

Brzezinski's remarks underline the reckless brinkmanship involved in the US moves toward a showdown with Iran. A positive outcome to the October 1 talks is highly unlikely: Iran has declared that it will not negotiate over its nuclear program, but the major powers are insisting on a "serious response" and preparing for harsh new sanctions. Through its latest UN resolution, the US is setting the stage for an escalating confrontation with Iran that has the potential to spiral dangerously out of control.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact