

US and European powers threaten Iran

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In what has all the hallmarks of an orchestrated political provocation, the United States, Britain and France, with the support of Germany, denounced a supposedly secret Iranian nuclear plant, threatened stepped-up economic sanctions and possible military action unless the facility was immediately open to inspection.

In a joint announcement Friday morning at the G20 summit in Pittsburgh, US President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy appeared together before television cameras to issue the warning. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, who had left Pittsburgh to return home, issued her own statement of support for the threats against Iran.

Obama declared, "The Iranian government must now demonstrate through deeds its peaceful intentions or be held accountable to international standards and international law." He gave Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad six days to respond—by the time of an October 1 meeting in Geneva. His approach echoed that of George W. Bush seven years ago in citing an alleged nuclear weapons program as the basis for going to war against Iraq.

This time, however, France has joined the US and Britain in the manufacture of a *casus belli*.

Both Brown and Sarkozy made even harsher threats than Obama at their joint press conference. Brown demanded the drawing of "a line in the sand" and denounced what he called a shocking "level of deception by the Iranian government and the scale of what we believe is the breach of international commitments." This from a man who happily embraced all the lies peddled by Bush and Blair throughout the launching and waging of the war with Iraq.

Sarkozy declared, "If by December there is not an in-depth change by the Iranian leaders, sanctions will have to be taken." In what was taken by observers as a direct threat of military force, he added, "Everything, everything must be put on the table now. We cannot let the Iranian leaders gain time while the motors are running."

The plant singled out by the imperialist powers is a facility much smaller than the main Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz and has not yet become operational. Nonetheless,

Obama claimed, "The size and configuration of this facility is inconsistent with a peaceful program." According to figures supplied to the press by US Defense Department officials, Natanz has 8,500 centrifuges and room for many more, while the previously undisclosed facility, near the city of Qom, about 100 miles southwest of Tehran, can operate about 3,000 centrifuges.

This equipment is not in and of itself of military value, since the use of centrifuges is an essential part of the generation of fuel for nuclear reactors, by purifying uranium to the level of 3 to 5 percent concentration of the isotope uranium 235. Weapons-grade uranium requires a much higher concentration of U-235, as much as 75 to 80 percent.

The Iranian government sent a letter Monday, September 21, to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations agency that monitors civilian nuclear power operations, informing it of the existence of the previously undisclosed plant, but not detailing its location or scale.

IAEA spokesman Marc Vidricaire said: "I can confirm that on September 21 Iran informed the IAEA in a letter that a new pilot fuel-enrichment plant is under construction in the country. The letter stated that the enrichment level would be up to 5 per cent."

Subsequent statements from Tehran suggest that the facility is a backup for Natanz, which has been identified as a prime target for air strikes by Israel or the United States. Israeli officials have repeatedly suggested that they will undertake such a military assault by the end of this year unless Iran surrenders to the US-led pressure campaign and dismantles its nuclear program.

The plant is built into a mountainside, making it more difficult to target militarily. The location only 20 miles from Qom makes a military strike more dangerous politically as well, since the city is a long-established center of Shiite Islam with many seminaries.

The American media immediately took its lead from Obama, Brown and Sarkozy, raising a hue and cry over the Qom plant, without the slightest evidence portraying it as a factory for making atomic bombs and a danger to the world. The plant is not even in operation yet, and the maximum degree of purification of uranium achieved by Iran at any

plant is 5 percent, adequate only for a nuclear fuel cycle, not weapons production.

Citing “a US counter-proliferation official,” *Newsweek* magazine reported on its web site: “The reason why the US and other countries think this facility is probably intended for producing highly-enriched uranium for weapons is that it is too small for the kind of plant that would be needed to enrich the large quantities of uranium needed for a civilian power program....”

The opposite argument has been repeatedly made about the Natanz facility—that its size greatly *exceeds* the requirements of a civilian fuel generation plant. In other words, whatever facts are available can be twisted to suit the purpose of those who are seeking to provoke a direct conflict between the major powers and Iran, which could become the pretext for efforts to overthrow the Iranian regime and install one more amenable to the dictates of US imperialism.

US intelligence officials have readily admitted that the existence of the Qom facility has been known for a year or more. Press reports said the Bush administration specifically briefed Obama on the “secret” plant in discussions during the presidential transition. Obama in turn informed Russian President Dmitri Medvedev earlier this week, after obtaining his support for tougher sanctions.

The timing of this “revelation” demonstrates that the sudden campaign of publicity and threats is a provocation, set to coincide with the opening of the UN General Assembly session, the G20 summit, and next Thursday’s talks in Geneva between Iran and the so-called P5+1 group—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the US, China, Russia, Britain and France, plus Germany.

There has been a carefully prepared buildup to the October 1 talks, which will now feature an ultimatum from the six powers to Iran, with a deadline as early as December for the imposition of draconian economic sanctions, possibly including a ban on gasoline imports. While Iran has huge oil and natural gas reserves—the real reason for the US-led campaign—it lacks the refining capacity to fully supply its domestic market with gasoline and diesel fuel.

Over the past 10 days, the Obama administration announced a shift in its missile defense policy, abandoning Bush administration plans for missile bases and radar stations in Poland and the Czech Republic, in order to obtain Russian support for a tougher line with Iran. Then came Obama’s speech to the UN General Assembly Wednesday, followed by a Security Council session chaired personally by Obama, which adopted a general resolution opposing nuclear proliferation, and then Friday morning’s sensational announcement.

US press reports suggest that a major purpose of the

Security Council meeting and the Friday press offensive was to induce China, the last holdout among the P5+1, to drop its opposition to much tighter economic sanctions against Iran. China voted for the Security Council resolution, which passed unanimously.

High-ranking Democratic Party leaders lined up behind Obama’s bellicose posture. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the Qom plant “a clear challenge to the international community.... This facility sharpens our sense of urgency and underscores Iran’s absolute need to engage seriously with us on October 1 and take immediate steps to demonstrate the exclusively peaceful nature of their nuclear program.”

Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, issued a statement saying, “In light of Iran’s continuing deception, the international community must step up its demands that Iran halt its enrichment and reprocessing work.”

A major argument being made behind the scenes—albeit openly in the US right-wing press—is that sanctions are the only alternative to an Israeli air attack on Iran that would have incalculable consequences for the peoples of the Middle East, and the entire world

A column posted on the web site of the *Wall Street Journal*, written by Pentagon consultant Anthony Cordesman, suggested that an Israeli attack on Iran could include nuclear weapons.

“There are reports that Israel is increasing the range-payload of its nuclear-armed missiles and is developing sea-based nuclear-armed cruise missiles for its submarines,” he observed. He added, “While Iran is larger than Israel, its population centers are so vulnerable to Israeli thermonuclear weapons that Israel already is a major ‘existential’ threat to Iran.”

The *Washington Post* took note of the apocalyptic tone of the speech to the UN General Assembly Thursday by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, which its reporter described as a “final warning to the world,” saying that it “could one day be seen as a milestone in the Mideast’s march toward war.”



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