

US continues to pressure Iran after Geneva talks

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Following international talks in Geneva yesterday, US President Obama repeated Washington's threats against Iran, warning that the US was "prepared to move towards increased pressure" if Tehran failed to take "swift action" to meet its nuclear obligations. The talks involved senior officials of the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalali.

The US backed by Britain and France ratcheted up the pressure on Iran last Friday with a melodramatic "revelation" that it had a secret uranium enrichment plant near the city of Qom. Tehran had already informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the facility, which is still under construction, four days earlier. Washington has set a deadline of December for negotiations, warning of severe sanctions if Tehran refuses to bow to its demands.

During the talks, Jalali reiterated Iran's intention of shortly opening up the Qom plant to IAEA inspectors and again insisted that his country's nuclear programs were for peaceful purposes. Tehran maintains that it has met its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to notify the IAEA 180 days before beginning operations. IAEA chief Mohammed ElBaradei is due in Tehran tomorrow to discuss access for inspectors to the Qom facility.

Iran also agreed in principle to an IAEA plan to transfer most of its existing stock of low-enriched uranium to Russia then France for further enrichment and processing into fuel rods for a small reactor near Tehran that produces medical isotopes. Currently the uranium stock has been enriched to 4 percent—the level required for a nuclear power reactor—but the fuel rods for the Tehran reactor require 20 percent enrichment.

If the plan proceeds, it would underscore Iran's

declaration that it is not building a nuclear weapon. The US media has repeatedly described Iran's store of low-enriched uranium, produced at its existing Natanz facility, as "enough to build a bomb". In fact, weapon-grade uranium must be enriched to around 90 percent. If the bulk of its stock were moved to Russia, it would take Iran months to rebuild its supply inside the country.

In the course of yesterday's meeting, Jalili also held one-to-one talks with US Undersecretary of State William Burns over lunch. The encounter was the highest-level diplomatic contact between Iran and the US since the 1979 Iranian revolution and the first on the nuclear issue. Under the Bush administration, the US and Iranian ambassadors in Baghdad held several meetings, but limited to American efforts to ensure Iranian support for the US-led occupation of Iraq.

According to US State Department spokesman Robert Wood, Burns told his Iranian counterpart that Iran had "to take concrete and practical steps that are consistent with its international obligations". The discussion also involved "a frank exchange on other issues, including human rights." As well as being Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Jalili is secretary of the country's powerful national security council, which answers directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

All sides described the Geneva talks as "constructive". European foreign policy chief, Javier Solani, said that all parties had "agreed to intensify dialogue in the coming weeks" and to hold a second meeting before the end of October. Despite the positive spin on the meeting, however, the reaction of the Obama administration highlights Washington's confrontational approach to the negotiations.

Even as he described the talks as "a constructive beginning", Obama laid out new deadlines for Iran, insisting that the IAEA had to be given "unfettered access... within two weeks" to the "covert nuclear facility" near Qom. "We

are not interested in talking for the sake of talking,” Obama said, warning again that “our patience is limited”. Like the Bush administration in the lead up to the Iraq war, Obama meets concessions by Iran with fresh ultimatums.

Prior to the Geneva meeting, the Obama administration was engaged in intense efforts to cajole and bully other members of the P5+1 to back tough UN Security Council measures against Iran. Current sanctions, which were reluctantly backed by Russia and China, are largely targeted against individuals and companies connected to Iran’s nuclear program. The punitive measures now being actively discussed in Washington include broad sanctions that could hit Iran’s access to finance, trade credits and insurance and block much-needed imports of refined petroleum products.

In a move calculated to secure Russian support, Obama recently announced modifications to the planned US anti-ballistic missile shield, including the scrapping of bases in Poland and the Czech Republic that have been bitterly opposed by Moscow. After meeting with Obama last Thursday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev strongly hinted that Moscow might back tough sanctions against Tehran. The statement was aimed at putting Iran on the defensive as it has previously counted on China and Russia to block such measures.

While the Geneva talks were held behind closed doors, several articles noted a shift in the Russian stance. Based on its inside sources, the British-based *Times* commented: “Russia was said to be instrumental in bringing Iran’s attention back to the nuclear issue when it attempted to veer off its well-trodden narratives about historic injustices. Moscow seems to have shifted the burden of avoiding sanctions from Western shoulders onto Iranian ones.”

This sordid Realpolitik, in which the fate of the Iranian people is a pawn in cynical horse-trading over competing economic and strategic interests, underscores the fact the present confrontation is not primarily about Iran’s nuclear program. Rather it is the pretext for a US campaign to fashion a regime in Tehran more conducive to Washington’s ambitions for economic and strategic dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia. Easing off on the US anti-missile system in Eastern Europe is simply the quid pro quo for Russian assistance in American plans over Iran.

Amid the scare campaign in the American media over Iran’s “secret” nuclear plans, isolated articles have appeared proposing a deal with Tehran to normalise relations in return for mutual security assurances. A comment on Tuesday in

the *New York Times* by Flynt and Hillary Leverett, two critics of the Bush administration, warned about the dangers of confrontation and called for a strategic volte-face with Iran along the lines of President Nixon’s rapprochement with China in 1972.

After noting the parallels between the aggressive stance of Bush and Obama towards Iran, the Leveretts wrote: “Instead of pushing the falsehood that sanctions will give America leverage in Iranian decision-making—a strategy that will end either in frustration or war—the administration should seek a strategic realignment with Iran as thoroughgoing as that effected by Nixon with China. That would require Washington to take steps, up front, to assure Tehran that rapprochement would serve Iran’s strategic needs.”

It is necessary to ask, however, who would be the primary beneficiaries of a grand strategy to normalise relations with Iran. As in the case of Iraq, the European powers along with China and Russia already have well-established diplomatic and economic ties with Iran, including contracts to exploit its huge reserves of oil and gas. The US, which cut off all relations with Tehran shortly after the Iranian revolution, would be compelled to start from scratch. By constantly fuelling tensions, even at the risk of war, the US is able to undermine the relations of its rivals with Iran as it seeks to establish a regime in Tehran more amenable to its own interests.

That is why an escalating campaign of threats and provocations by the US and its allies over the coming months is more likely than an all-embracing plan to ease tensions and establish diplomatic and economic relations with Iran.



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