

US pressure builds ahead of talks with Iran in Vienna

Peter Symonds
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In the lead-up to international talks next Monday on Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium, the Obama administration has been intensifying pressure on Tehran. Gathering support for tough new sanctions on Iran has been a central issue during the visit of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Europe this week.

In a joint press conference with British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, Clinton again warned that the US expected action by Iran following its meeting with the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—on October 1. “Words are not enough,” she said. “The international community will not wait indefinitely for evidence that Iran is prepared to live up to its international obligations.”

The Obama administration's involvement in talks with Iran has been accompanied by the constant threat of what US Defence Secretary Robert Gates described last month as “severe additional sanctions against Iran”. Provocative new measures under discussion include a crippling ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, which, despite its huge reserves of oil and gas, has limited refining capacity and imports around 40 percent of its gasoline.

To underscore the threat, the British government on Monday ordered financial-services companies to end all transactions with Iran's Bank Mellat and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, alleging their involvement with Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The ban was imposed unilaterally, rather than under UN resolutions, as part of US-led efforts to cut Iran off from the international financial and banking system.

A key objective during Clinton's trip was to consolidate Russian support for tougher sanctions on Iran. Last month

Obama announced the modification of the planned US anti-missile systems, scrapping bases in the Czech Republic and Poland that had been bitterly opposed by Russia. In what was clearly a quid pro quo, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev hinted that Moscow might support punitive new measures against Iran, saying that “in some cases, sanctions are inevitable”.

In a media conference with Clinton yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov underscored Moscow's reluctance to back further sanctions while negotiations were underway. “At the current stage, all forces should be thrown at supporting the negotiating process. Threats, sanctions, and threats of pressure in the current situation, we are convinced, would be counterproductive,” he said.

US officials, however, claimed to have received private reassurances during a meeting between Clinton and Medvedev. The Russian president was “quite clear that while pleased with the Geneva results [October 1 talks] he expects Iran to implement them and if they don't there should be sanctions,” a senior American official told reporters.

At the meeting in Geneva, Iran reportedly agreed in principle to a plan to send most of its existing stock of low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment and then to France for fabrication into fuel rods for a research reactor in Tehran that produces medical isotopes. If implemented, the proposal would end sensational claims that Iran has “enough enriched uranium to build a bomb.” In fact, Tehran has enriched uranium only to about 3.5 percent—far short of the 80 to 90 percent levels required for nuclear weapons—and has repeatedly denied any plans to construct a bomb.

The meeting next Monday in Vienna is designed to

thrash out details of the plan. The US has already made clear that it will adopt an aggressive stance. A senior Obama administration official told the *Washington Post* on Sunday that the US regarded the deal as a key test of Iran's intentions. "If they reject it, it is another data point that says, 'Look, these guys are not serious'." Ali Shirzadian, a spokesman for Iran's Atomic Energy Agency, has warned that if talks failed, "Iran will enrich uranium to the 20 percent level needed [for the Tehran reactor] itself."

Iran also agreed at the Geneva talks to open its recently declared enrichment plant near the city of Qom to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. President Obama seized on the Qom facility at the G-20 summit on September 25 to dramatically ratchet up pressure on Tehran. An intense campaign in the US and international media denounced Iran's "secret" plant as proof that it intended to build nuclear weapons. Iran had already declared the incomplete facility to the IAEA four days previously, in accordance with the terms of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty that require notification 180 days before a plant becomes operational.

The first IAEA inspection of the Qom plant is scheduled for October 25. A further high level meeting between the P5+1 and Iran is to take place before the end of October. President Obama has declared that December is the deadline for the conclusion of any negotiations with Iran. Clinton reiterated in Moscow yesterday: "In the absence of any significant progress, we will be seeking to rally international opinion behind additional sanctions."

The fact that Washington is already engaged in intense diplomatic efforts to reinforce existing sanctions and line up new ones indicates that the Obama administration is intent on exploiting the upcoming talks to pressure Russia and China to support tougher measures, rather than negotiating with Tehran in good faith. The imposition of new sanctions, particularly a crippling ban on gasoline and diesel sales to Iran, would rapidly intensify the confrontation with Iran.

While it has deliberately soft pedaled the prospect of a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, the Obama administration has not ruled out the option. The US maintains close collaboration with the Israeli government, which has repeatedly warned of military strikes against Iran's nuclear plants. The US and Israeli militaries are

currently engaged in joint military exercises—code-named Juniper Cobra—specifically to test missile defence systems in the event of war. More than 1,000 American troops and some 15 US missile warships are involved.

The military option is openly discussed in the US media. An article in Sunday's *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Diplomacy in the lead on Iran nuclear issue—for now" discussed in some detail contingency planning by the US and Israel for attacking Iran's nuclear sites. Citing unnamed American officials, the newspaper indicated that plans involved multiple missile strikes and bombing raids, with the possible dispatch of US special operations units inside Iran to provide precise targetting information.

"If you're going to have an effective campaign to go in and throw [Iran's nuclear program] back years, you're talking about a massive, massive effort," a former senior US intelligence official told the *Los Angeles Times*. The article highlighted the development of a new range of bunker-buster bombs that could be used against Iran's underground facilities. Yesterday, while denying Iran was the target, the Pentagon announced it was speeding up delivery of a huge 15-tonne bomb—the massive ordnance penetrator—that could be fitted to the B-2 Stealth bomber.

Despite Obama's talk of "engagement", all the signs point to a rapid escalation in the confrontation with Iran over the next three months. As in the case of the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, allegations about Iran's plans for a nuclear arsenal are simply the pretext to advance US ambitions for economic and strategic dominance in the energy rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran is a prime target, not only because of its own huge reserves of oil and gas, but its strategic position adjacent to the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.



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