

Obama warns of new sanctions against Iran

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The Obama administration is preparing for a new round of sanctions against Iran after Tehran called for modifications to an agreement reached last month in Vienna to transfer the bulk of its low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for further enrichment and processing into fuel rods for a research reactor.

Talks are due to take place in Brussels today between members of the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—to discuss Iran’s failure to ratify the Vienna deal. Speaking in South Korea yesterday, President Barack Obama said: “Our expectations are that over the next several weeks we will be developing a package of potential steps that we could take that indicate our seriousness to Iran.”

Iran only took part in the Vienna negotiations after weeks of intense pressure by the US and its European allies, including threats of harsh sanctions. At the G-20 summit in September, backed by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Obama revealed the existence of a “hidden” Iranian enrichment plant near the city of Qom, fuelling sensational media speculation that Tehran was secretly making a nuclear weapon. Iran had already informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its Fordo plant, which was still under construction and far smaller than its main enrichment plant at Natanz.

At high-level talks in Geneva on October 1, Iran agreed to IAEA inspections of the Fordo facility and in principle to the arrangement to manufacture its enriched uranium into fuel rods. The US, Russia and France later met with Iran in Vienna and after three days of intense negotiations on technical details finalised a draft agreement on October 21 for ratification by all parties. While the three major powers signed off on the arrangement, Iran asked for more time to consider it.

The deal involved a considerable concession on Iran’s part. While details have not been made public, the agreement reportedly involved shipping 1.2 tonnes of Iran’s existing

stockpile of 1.5 tonnes of low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment, then to France for fabrication into fuel rods. From Washington’s standpoint, the deal would exclude any possibility that Tehran could manufacture a nuclear weapon for at least a year—the estimated time required to rebuild the stockpile. Tehran has repeatedly denied plans to build an atomic bomb.

For Iran, however, the agreement offered few tangible benefits other than the fuel rods, which it insisted it had a right to purchase on the international market. The deal provoked immediate criticism inside Iranian ruling circles, including from opposition leaders such as failed presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi, who accused “the serving sons of the nation” of “openly humiliating themselves in front of the US”.

While the rhetoric involved a degree of political posturing, the opposition did reflect legitimate concerns that Iran would again be double-crossed. Last weekend, Iranian parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani declared that Obama was no better than Bush. He pointed in particular to two events on November 12—Obama’s decision to renew US injunctions against financial dealings with Iran, and a move by US prosecutors to seize the property in the US of companies accused of transferring money to Iran. Larijani, who is considered close to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, previously accused the West of trying to steal Iran’s enriched uranium.

Obviously under intense domestic pressure, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki declared this week: “We will definitely not send our 3.5 percent enriched uranium out of the country.” He did, however, hold out the prospect of a “simultaneous swap” of Iran’s enriched uranium for fuel rods if it took place on Iranian soil. In an interview with the *Hindu* on Monday, Mottaki said: “We believe that with the continuation of the diplomacy going on now, it is possible to reach an agreement and compromise.”

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has ruled out any

amendment to the Vienna agreement. During his Asian tour over the past week, Obama tried to secure Russian and Chinese support for harsher measures against Iran. After meeting with Obama in Singapore on Sunday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared that “unfortunately, so far at least, Iran appears to have been unable to say yes” to the enrichment deal. Hinting at possible Russian support for sanctions, he added: “The alternative would be an approach that would involve increasing pressure on Iran to meet its international obligations.”

However, in the lead-up to the P5+1 talks today, Russian foreign ministry spokesman Andrei Nesterenko denied that discussions were taking place on new sanctions against Iran. “We believe that we have every chance of implementing the Geneva agreements in full,” he said. It is quite possible that Moscow is attempting to exert strong pressure behind the scenes to force Tehran to accept the enrichment deal. On Monday, Russian energy minister Sergei Shmatko announced further delays in the supply of fuel for the Russian-built power reactor at Bushehr, provoking angry responses in Tehran. Russia is also holding up the supply of sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles that it has sold to Iran.

In Beijing, Obama failed to secure any public support from China for new sanctions. After meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Tuesday, Obama emphasised at a joint press conference that “our nations are unified” on Iran. If Tehran did not prove its nuclear program was peaceful, he warned, “there will be consequences.” President Hu, however, did not respond, failing to mention Iran in his remarks.

Indicating the preparation for a renewed confrontation, the ongoing campaign in the US and international media against Iran’s nuclear program has been raised a notch. An IAEA report finalised on Monday following an IAEA inspection of Iran’s Fordo enrichment plant on October 25 was leaked to the press, giving rise to headlines such as “Iran could have more secret nuclear sites” in the *Guardian* and “Nuclear report on Iran arouses new suspicions” in the *New York Times*.

In fact, the report confirms Iranian declarations about the plant: it will only be completed by 2011; it has a capacity for only 3,000 centrifuges; and no centrifuges have been installed to date. An Iranian letter cited in the report explained that the decision to build a second underground enrichment plant was due to “the augmentation of the threats of military attacks on Iran”. While insisting the plant should have been declared from the outset, the IAEA did

acknowledge that Iran did not consider itself bound by the “subsidiary arrangements” requiring such declarations. Instead, Tehran informed the IAEA about the plant prior to completion, as required under other provisions of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

The US and European powers have already indicated their readiness to proceed with tough sanctions without the support of the UN Security Council or Russia and China. Punitive measures could include a crippling ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran. Even though it has huge reserves of oil and gas, Iran lacks refinery capacity and has to import about 40 percent of its gasoline requirements.

At the same time, the Obama administration has not ruled out a military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. Indicating the discussion taking place in ruling circles in the US and Europe, former British ambassador to Iran Robert Dalton warned on the BBC on Tuesday against military strikes, saying “an attack in the absence of an imminent threat from Iran would be illegal and would make the world a more dangerous place.”

More ominously, the DEBKAF file web site, which has close links to Israeli intelligence, reported on Monday that “two high-ranking teams of American CIA and DIA intelligence officials are conferring with their opposite numbers in Israel, in line with President Barack Obama’s strategy for applying military heat to Iran as well as diplomatic pressure for an accommodation on its nuclear program.” The article pointed to US-Israeli collaboration on all levels, from President Obama’s office down, on “a comprehensive scale ... practically unknown in recent years”. Israel has previously warned that it will use all means, including military attack, to block Iran’s nuclear programs.

In the coming weeks, the US confrontation with Iran is likely to escalate. President Obama previously announced that Iran had until December to resolve outstanding issues over its nuclear program.



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