

US threatens Iran with harsh sanctions

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As President Obama's December deadline for negotiations with Tehran runs out, the US is pressing for tough new sanctions against Iran, both through the UN Security Council and unilaterally. The stepped-up campaign follows the failure of an agreement reached in Vienna in October to ship Iranian low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for manufacture into fuel rods for a research reactor in Tehran.

Obama set the stage last week when he declared in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech that nations like Iran and North Korea could not be allowed to "game the system". As he escalated the US-led war in Afghanistan and maintained the huge US nuclear arsenal, the president hypocritically declared: "Those who seek peace cannot stand idly by as nations arm themselves for nuclear war."

Talks on punitive measures against Iran were due to take place today involving the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—the so-called P5+1—but have been put off. According to a US official, China indicated it would be unable to take part in a P5+1 meeting before the end of the year, citing scheduling difficulties. Well aware that the US is exploiting the nuclear issue for its own strategic purposes, both Russia and China have been resistant to further UN sanctions.

The US and its European allies nevertheless continue to intensify their campaign. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called on Monday for tougher measures against Iran, saying that the US offer of discussions on its nuclear programs had "produced very little". Last week, France's ambassador to the UN, Gerard Araud declared that his government would introduce a new UN sanctions resolution "as soon as possible" if Iran did not agree to the Vienna deal.

Under the arrangement, Iran would have exported most of its low-enriched uranium, thereby eliminating any possibility that it could produce a bomb. At least a year would be required to build the stockpile. Iran has repeatedly insisted that it has no plans to build nuclear weapons, but agreed to the "confidence building" step as a means of obtaining fuel rods and the prospect of wider talks to end existing sanctions.

While Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publicly supported the proposal, the final agreement provoked harsh criticism across the political establishment in Tehran, reflecting fears that Iran would be doubled crossed. Attempts by the Iranian

regime to offer a compromise—exchanging enriched uranium for fuel rods in smaller amounts on Iranian soil—were flatly rejected by Washington, further fuelling suspicion and opposition in Tehran.

Tensions escalated late last month after a US-backed resolution was adopted by an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) meeting, censuring Iran for failing to halt its nuclear programs and disclose earlier the Qom uranium enrichment plant. Ahmadinejad responded by announcing plans to build 10 new enrichment plants to supply fuel for Iran's planned power reactors, and to manufacture fuel rods for the Tehran reactor, which produces medical isotopes.

The US-led push for sanctions has been accompanied by an intensifying campaign in the international media, including new "revelations" in the London-based *Times* that Iranian scientists had conducted experiments into neutron sources aimed at producing the trigger for a nuclear bomb. The report was based on an undated document in Farsi that according to unnamed "foreign intelligence agencies" was written in early 2007.

The *Times* article has all the hallmarks of a planted story designed to whip up public concern about Iran's nuclear programs. It is also aimed at undermining a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) issued by US intelligence agencies in late 2007 that concluded that Iran had shut down any nuclear weapons program in 2007. The 2007 NIE has been bitterly criticised in the US, Europe and particularly Israel, by those pushing for tougher measures, including military action, against Iran.

Iran dismissed the *Times* story as "baseless". An article in the *New York Times* on Wednesday made clear that the unauthenticated Iranian document was not new but "had been sloshing around [intelligence agencies] for well over a year," according to one American official. "If, in fact, the document's on the level, it shows the Iranians at some point were interested in testing a [nuclear initiator]. That's not a warhead or the core of a bomb."

Like other documents provided to the IAEA by intelligence agencies supposedly revealing Iran's weapons studies, there are considerable doubts about the authenticity of this one. It is worth recalling that key documents used by the Bush administration to justify its unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003—involving Iraq's alleged purchase of uranium from Niger—were found to be forgeries.

However, none of this has stopped the London *Times* from inflating its latest “exposure” into a possible pretext for war. International Institute for Strategic Studies analyst Mark Fitzpatrick told the newspaper: “The most shattering conclusion is that, if this was an effort that began in 2007, it could be a *casus belli*. If Iran is working on weapons, it means there is no diplomatic solution.”

While the Obama administration is pushing for tough sanctions via the UN Security Council, the US Congress is passing a series of bills that would allow the White House to act unilaterally. The House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly on Tuesday for the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, which would enable the US administration to punish foreign individuals and companies selling or shipping gasoline to Iran. While it has large reserves of oil and gas, Iran lacks refining capacity and has to import about 40 percent of its gasoline.

Similar legislation is before the US Senate but has been delayed by a White House request for revisions. The delay is purely tactical. While it supports the thrust of the bill, the Obama administration is looking for a further UN resolution to bolster the case against Iran before ratchetting up unilateral US measures. Among the foreign corporations that could be hit by the US legislation are Chinese companies that sell gasoline to Iran.

The Congressional measure underlines the real purpose behind the campaign against Iran’s nuclear programs, which is to fashion a regime in Tehran more amenable to US economic and strategic interests. While the US has maintained an economic blockade of Iran since the fall of the Shah in 1979, its European and Asian rivals have developed close economic ties with Tehran. Washington’s pressure on Tehran over the nuclear issue is aimed not only at refashioning US relations with Iran, but at cutting across the interests of other major powers.

Ominously, the escalating campaign against Iran is not limited to economic sanctions, but includes discussion of the “military option” that both the US and Israel have refused to rule out. Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak reiterated the threat on Monday, declaring that although there was still time for diplomacy, tough sanctions were needed to persuade Tehran to give up its uranium enrichment capacity. He then added that Israel recommended “to all players not to remove any options from the table”.

The *Wall Street Journal* published a comment on Wednesday by former French intelligence official Olivier Debouzy advocating open preparations for “a massive air and missile attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities” as the means for bullying Iran into submission. “The idea here is simple, and has been expressed many times by the theoreticians of deterrence: When one plans for war, when one deploys forces and rehearses military options, one actually conveys a message. Deterrence is about dialogue,” he explained. Such a high stakes gamble can easily slide into war.

Similar ideas were expressed by former Democratic Senator Charles Robb, former Republican Senator Daniel Coats and retired Air Force general Charles Wald at a recent forum in New York entitled “What now for the United States and Iran?” The three men co-authored a report published by the Bipartisan Policy Center in September advocating “biting sanctions” and the preparation for a military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

As reported by the *New York Times*, Robb told the gathering: “We want to support what would seem to be a more hawkish approach as a viable alternative to an approach that hasn’t worked.” General Wald, who was air commander in the initial stages of the US wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, added: “We have the [military] capacity and Iran is vulnerable. It’s totally false that we cannot attack Iran’s nuclear sites.” Coats explained that the aim was to threaten Iran militarily in order to “leverage the sanctions”.

Rather than these proposals being at odds with the Obama administration’s strategy, they form a continuum. A Bipartisan Policy Center report produced in 2008 outlined the basic approach that the White House has taken since Obama assumed office—diplomatic engagement designed to consolidate international support followed by hefty sanctions, with the military option as a last resort. The coincidence is not accidental. A central figure in drawing up the report was Dennis Ross, well known for his pro-Israeli views and links to the notorious neo-cons, who is now Obama’s top national security adviser on Iran.

Like the Bush administration, Obama has not taken any options off the table and is recklessly setting course for a conflict that would not only further inflame the region but risk drawing in the major powers.



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