

US pushes for new sanctions against Iran

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The Obama administration is pressing for the rapid imposition of new punitive UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programs. As a pretext, the US seized on Sunday's announcement by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that the country would begin enriching uranium to the 20 percent level needed to fuel its research reactor in Tehran.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates told Fox News on Monday that Washington would press for new sanctions within "weeks, not months". The deadline was reiterated yesterday by Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morell who added: "In all his meetings he [Gates] discussed this sense of urgency."

At a joint press conference with Gates on Monday, French Defence Minister Herve Morin stressed that France was in "complete agreement" with the US, saying there was no option other than more sanctions. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner denounced Ahmadinejad's announcement as "real blackmail", adding: "The only thing that we can do, alas, is apply sanctions, given that negotiations are not possible." French President Nicolas Sarkozy later declared that Iran should face "strong sanctions".

The US/European push for new sanctions has been prepared for some time. President Obama initially set the end of December as the deadline for Iran to accept a deal sponsored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ship the bulk of its low-enriched uranium to Russia and France for further enrichment and processing into fuel rods for the Tehran reactor. The US subsequently delayed any action to coincide with France taking over this month as president of the UN Security Council from China, which has resisted further sanctions.

The renewed push is being accompanied by a strident campaign in the US and international media accusing Iran of taking a further step toward building nuclear weapons—an allegation that Tehran has repeatedly denied. Iran has a

stockpile of uranium enriched to around 4 percent, but is preparing to enrich it to the 20 percent required for the Tehran reactor's fuel rods. Weapons-grade uranium requires enrichment to about 90 percent or higher.

To raise suspicions about Tehran's plans, US officials questioned Iran's ability to transform the enriched uranium into reactor fuel rods. The US ambassador to the IAEA, Glyn Davies, told the *New York Times* that Iran could not fabricate reactor fuel in time to ensure an uninterrupted supply of medical isotopes. "This calls into question the true motivation of going from 3.5 percent to 20 percent enrichment," he said.

The US, however, has deliberately placed Iran in this position and could justifiably be accused of blackmail. The Obama administration backed the IAEA fuel-swap deal last year in order to eliminate most of Iran's present stockpile of enriched uranium. But it refused point blank to amend the agreement after the Ahmadinejad administration proposed changes to counter widespread criticism in Tehran. Last week Washington dismissed out of hand statements by Ahmadinejad that Iran was still open to finalising the deal.

In other words, the US has left Iran with no other options but to agree to the arrangement and face further criticism at home, or to try to manufacture fuel rods itself. If it is unable to do so, the impact will be severe. A major function of the Tehran Research Reactor is to produce medical isotopes for an estimated 850,000 kidney, heart and cancer patients. If the reactor is not refuelled, the isotopes will have to be imported, making them more expensive and their supply more uncertain.

The US already has the support of most of the so-called P5+1—the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany—for further sanctions. Along with Britain and Germany, Russia has indicated its backing. The Russian foreign ministry issued a statement declaring that Iran's actions "raise doubts" about the purpose of its nuclear programs. Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of presidential

Security Council, hinted at support for sanctions, saying: “Political-diplomatic methods are important for a resolution, but there is a limit to everything.”

China, which wields a veto in the UN Security Council, has continued to resist further punitive measures. In Europe for the Munich security conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told the media: “To talk about sanctions at the moment will complicate the situation and might stand in the way of finding a diplomatic solution.” The foreign ministry issued a statement urging all sides to conclude the IAEA deal.

The international media continues to highlight the substantial economic interests that China has at stake in Iran. The *Financial Times* published an article yesterday reporting that China had overtaken the European Union as Iran’s largest trading partner, if transshipments via the Gulf States were taken into account. Total Iran-China trade is estimated to be at least \$36.5 billion and Iran accounts for 11 percent of China’s energy needs.

It is certainly true that China is acting in its self-interest by resisting sanctions on Iran. But the US is doing likewise. After 30 years of unilateral sanctions, the US has little investment in or trade with Iran. Sanctions would therefore impact most heavily on Washington’s European and Asian rivals. At the same time, the US is aiming to fashion a regime in Tehran more conducive to its economic and strategic ambitions in Iran and throughout the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The sanctions regime proposed by the Obama administration is also determined by its political objectives. Initially, US officials proposed “crippling” sanctions, including a ban on the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran, which relies on imports for about 40 percent of its gasoline needs. Now Washington is focussing on Iran’s central bank, the Revolutionary Guard Corps, shipping firms and the energy sector as possible targets and cynically declaring that it wants to avoid hurting ordinary Iranians.

The main purpose of these more refined sanctions is to avoid alienating sections of the middle class that backed opposition figures, including defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi. An article in *Wall Street Journal* yesterday summed up the challenge to the US as weaving “together three disparate [policy] strands: engagement with the regime in Iran, economic sanctions against the same regime and at least subtle support for those opposing the regime”.

American support of Ahmadinejad’s opponents is not so subtle. Large marches of pro-government and opposition supporters are expected in Iran tomorrow to mark the anniversary of the 1979 revolution that brought the Islamic regime to power. Leaving no doubt where they stand, the US and EU issued a joint statement on Monday, demanding the Iranian government “end its abuses against its own people [and] hold accountable those who have committed abuses”.

In tailoring its punitive measures, the Obama administration is also compelled to keep Israel, the chief US ally in the Middle East, onside. Like the US, Israel has repeatedly threatened to take military action to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed power. Responding to Iran’s decision to produce more highly enriched uranium, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared: “Iran is racing forward to produce nuclear weapons. This means crippling sanctions and these sanctions must be applied right now.”

In his comments in France, Gates declared that he still wanted “to try and find a peaceful way to resolve the issue”. Earlier in Italy, he described Iran’s actions as “disappointing” then added: “I believe there is still time for sanctions and pressure to work.” The obvious implication is that should sanctions fail, the only option left is the military one. Such threats serve multiple purposes, including reassuring Israel and obliquely warning China of worse consequences if it fails to support sanctions.

Such reckless brinkmanship can easily spill over into actual military conflict that threatens to embroil the broader region. That danger is heightened as Iran becomes the focus of sharpening rivalry on the international stage between the major powers—especially the US and China.



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