

US presses for new UN sanctions against Iran

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The US-led push for tougher sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program intensified this week with the circulation of a draft UN Security Council resolution to Russia and China. While the draft has not been made public, leaked details indicate that sanctions would target the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) as well as widening the scope of existing penalties against Iran's shipping, banking and insurance sectors.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton revealed the thinking behind US tactics during her trip last month to the Persian Gulf. Declaring that Iran was "moving towards a military dictatorship," she urged Iranian clerics and political leaders to "take back the authority which they should be exercising on behalf of the people". By imposing sanctions on the IRGC, Washington is clearly hoping to open up a rift in the ruling elites in Tehran that will produce a regime more aligned to US interests.

The US and its European allies have drawn up the draft resolution, but Russia and China, both of which hold a veto in the UN Security Council, have been reluctant to agree. US President Obama offered Russia a thinly-disguised enticement last year by agreeing to end US plans for a ballistic missile shield based in Poland and the Czech Republic. Speaking in Paris on Monday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev gave qualified support for new sanctions, but insisted that they be "calibrated and smart" and "not target the civilian population".

China remains the chief obstacle. It continues to call for negotiations, implicitly opposing further sanctions. Asked about Russia's stance, Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang declared that Beijing sought "a resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue through diplomatic means". He added: "We believe there is still room for diplomatic efforts and the parties concerned should intensify those efforts."

The Obama administration, however, is engaged in a full-scale diplomatic offensive to drum up support for new sanctions. The US has rejected Iran's call for further talks

on an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sponsored deal last year to exchange low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for its Tehran research reactor. At an IAEA board meeting on Wednesday, the US and several European allies condemned Iran for taking steps to further enrich uranium to the 20 percent level required to fuel the Tehran reactor, which produces the country's medical isotopes.

The US is also exploiting the latest IAEA report handed down last month, which for the first time raised "concerns" that Iran might have engaged in research related to the manufacture of a nuclear weapon. This tentative claim is based on dubious information provided by Western and Israeli intelligence agencies (see: "The UN nuclear agency, the US and Iran"), but is nevertheless being used to inflate fears over Iran's nuclear programs.

The US and Israel have both sent high-level delegations to Beijing over the past week to press for support for new UN sanctions. The Israeli team headed by deputy prime minister Moshe Yaalon reportedly showed Chinese officials details of Israeli intelligence in an effort to convince Beijing that Iran has ambitions to build a nuclear bomb. The *Financial Times* noted a possible lever that Israel might have used in the talks—Israel has previously sold military technology to China that has been under US and European embargo. Israel also has an unstated threat—if China refuses to back UN sanctions, Israel is prepared to strike Iran's nuclear facilities.

The US delegation headed by deputy secretary of state James Steinberg was billed as a fence-mending mission. Since the beginning of the year, Washington has taken a more aggressive stance toward Beijing on a number of fronts: the US has authorised an arms sale to Taiwan; President Obama met with the Dalai Lama last month; and the White House has been pressing China on trade and currency issues.

Concerns in the US and Europe that China might abstain or even vote against new sanctions on Iran are underlined by

the growing attention being paid by think tanks and commentators to China's relations with Iran. A lengthy report last month by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) entitled "The Iran Nuclear Issue: The View from Beijing" noted that China "is unconvinced that Iran has the ability to develop nuclear weapons in the short term and does not share the West's sense of urgency about the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran".

The report summed up China's vested interests in a good relationship with Iran, noting: "Iran is China's third largest source of imported crude oil and possesses abundant energy reserves that the rising power needs to sustain its rapid economic growth ... But China's priorities in Iran go beyond economic interests. Strong bilateral relations help to counter US dominance in the Middle East and increase Beijing's strategic leverage. China sees Iran's influence in the Middle East and Central Asia as useful in that region."

Needless to say, the ICG does not point to the obvious vested interests of the US in Iran, which run counter to those of China. Washington's overriding aim is to fashion a regime in Tehran more closely aligned with US ambitions to secure a dominant position in the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia. At present Iran and its relations with Russia and China act as a barrier to US aspirations. As Beijing is undoubtedly aware, Iran's nuclear programs are simply a convenient pretext for Washington to exert pressure on Tehran. By contrast, the US openly or tacitly accepts the nuclear arsenals of its allies—Israel, Pakistan and China's regional rival India.

At this stage, it is not clear what China will decide. Even though it voted for three previous UN Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran, China may break ranks with other UN Security Council permanent members to defend what it regards as its vital strategic and economic interests. To date, unlike Russia, the US has not offered China any significant quid pro quo to entice it to shift its stance. A veto vote by China would lead to a further deterioration of relations with the US.

The US also faces opposition from at least three temporary, non-veto UN Security Council members—Brazil, Turkey and Lebanon. As part of a trip this week to Latin America, US Secretary of State Clinton attempted to convince Brazil to support sanctions against Iran. However, speaking at a media conference on Wednesday, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva declared that it was "not prudent to push Iran into a corner" and called for further negotiations. As well as tensions with the US over regional

affairs, Brazil is sensitive to US demands that Iran halt uranium enrichment because Brazil is constructing similar facilities as part of its own nuclear program.

According to the *New York Times*, the US is pressing for a new UN resolution before May, when Lebanon will take over the presidency of the UN Security Council. At the same time, the US and its allies are preparing to impose unilateral financial and economic sanctions should the resolution fail to pass. Pressure is also being brought to bear to tighten up on existing sanctions. Japan's ambassador to the UN, Yukio Takasu, who heads the UN Security Council sanctions committee, warned this week that private companies involved in "illegal" Iranian weapons sales might also face UN penalties.

The push for a new UN resolution has been accompanied by a renewed debate in US and European ruling circles over strategy toward Iran, revolving around the use of the so-called military option. In comments reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, former White House national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski called for a policy of containment, including possible sanctions, with the long-term aim of changing the regime in Tehran. He strongly cautioned against military strikes, saying this would isolate the US more than Iran.

The Obama administration, however, continues to repeat that all options are on the table. Moreover, the US is under pressure from Israel, which has threatened its own military strikes, to take decisive action to halt Iran's nuclear programs. In this high stakes brinkmanship, which involves the key economic and strategic interests of rival major powers, the danger is that the reckless US-led push for tougher sanctions can slide into confrontation and war.



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