

US prepares for military confrontation with Iran

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An article in the Scottish-based *Sunday Herald* last weekend provided an ominous reminder that the Obama administration has retained what is euphemistically described as the “military option” against Iran—that is, massive, unprovoked US air strikes.

The newspaper reported that the US military was moving 387 bunker-buster bombs, from California to the US base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, in preparation for a possible attack on Iran. Superior Maritime Services was contracted in January to transport 10 containers of munitions, including 195 smart Blu-110 bombs and 192 huge 2,000 pound Blu-117 bombs, which are designed for use against hardened or underground structures.

The *Sunday Herald* cited Dan Plesch, director of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy (CISD) at the University of London, who said: “They are gearing up totally for the destruction of Iran. US bombers are ready today to destroy 10,000 targets in Iran in a few hours.” According to a CISD study in 2007, the Pentagon’s war plans, drawn up under the Bush administration, would not only target Iran’s nuclear facilities but its air defences, military and industrial capacity.

None of the analysts interviewed by the newspaper described a US attack as imminent. But Plesch commented: “The US is not publicising the scale of these preparations to deter Iran, tending to make confrontation more likely. The US... is using its forces as part of an overall strategy of shaping Iran’s actions.”

However, President Obama’s “overall strategy” appears increasingly in disarray. Having set the end of last year as the deadline for Tehran to meet US demands, the White House has been waging a sustained diplomatic offensive this year to secure a UN resolution imposing tough new sanctions on Iran. The US not only needs the agreement of UN Security Council members, but is seeking support from Arab allies in the Middle East and attempting to ensure that Israel does not take unilateral, preemptive military action of its own against Iran.

On Wednesday, Obama declared again that the US would pursue “aggressive sanctions” against Iran. However, as the *Financial Times* pointed out yesterday, the effort to build a consensus for UN sanctions “is looking increasingly under stress”. Any resolution “is unlikely to reach the 15-member Security Council before June,

if then”. The main opponent is China, which has repeatedly dismissed calls for fresh sanctions, reiterating as recently as Thursday its commitment to “a peaceful solution through diplomatic means”. By refusing to consider further sanctions, Beijing has encouraged other UN Security Council members, including Russia, Turkey, Brazil and Lebanon, to maintain an ambivalent position.

Washington had been exploiting the so-called P5+1 grouping—the permanent UN Security Council members, the US, Britain, France, Russia and China, plus Germany—as a forum to pressure Beijing into line. However, no face-to-face meeting of the group has taken place since January and none is scheduled. In recent weeks, top-level delegations have visited Beijing—including from Israel, the US and, this week, British Foreign Secretary David Milliband. They have attempted without success to cajole and pressure China to agree to tough new penalties against Tehran. Beijing’s opposition is a significant factor in the increasingly tense relations with Washington over a range of issues.

The American and international press has highlighted the Chinese economic interests at stake in Iran. In 2009, China became Iran’s top trading partner, with bilateral trade worth \$21.2 billion, up from \$14.4 billion three years earlier. Although Beijing still relies on Saudi Arabia and Angola for more than half its oil imports, it has increased Iran’s share to 11.4 percent and is investing heavily in oil and gas projects there as well as other infrastructure. China National Petroleum and its subsidiary Petrochina last year agreed to invest more than \$8 billion in one gas and two oil projects.

Shining a media spotlight on Chinese interests only underscores the fact that the US confrontation with Iran is not about its alleged plans to build a nuclear weapon. Rather, Washington is exploiting the issue to block the interests of its European and Asian rivals and to further its own ambitions for dominance in the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia. Tehran has repeatedly declared that it has no intention of building a bomb, but is determined to develop a nuclear energy program.

Washington’s diplomatic efforts are running into obstacles on other fronts. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s trip to Moscow this week has turned into a debacle. In what can only be

described as a calculated diplomatic snub, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia and Iran would complete the process of starting up the long-delayed, Russian-built power reactor at Bushehr within months. In a joint press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Thursday, Clinton criticised the plan as “premature” because “we want to send an unequivocal message to the Iranians”.

Clinton was obviously hoping for Russian support for stronger sanctions. Last year Obama shut down the planned US anti-ballistic missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, which was bitterly opposed by Moscow, hoping for Russian support for sanctions against Iran in return. However, Lavrov made clear that Moscow would only back sanctions that were “not aggressive”—an obvious reference to Obama’s remarks on Wednesday—and did not target the Iranian population or have humanitarian consequences.

The sharp tensions between the US and Israel, which erupted last week during US Vice President Joseph Biden’s visit, also cut across Washington’s strategy on Iran. Israel’s announcement of new Jewish settlements—while Biden was in Israel—was a direct rebuff to US efforts to restart talks with Palestinian leaders and provoked a furious response from Biden and Clinton. The US is not concerned in the slightest about the fate of Palestinians. But by undermining the sham peace process, Israel is damaging intense US efforts to enlist the support of Arab allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, to back sanctions against Iran, and weaken Syrian ties with Iran.

If the UN Security Council fails to pass new sanctions, the US has already raised the prospect of further unilateral penalties. Over the weekend, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, who was hosting a meeting of EU foreign ministers, tentatively declared that there would be “consensus enough” for unilateral EU sanctions, if a UN resolution were not passed. The US Congress is also considering far-reaching legislation to allow the US administration to penalise foreign companies selling refined oil products to Iran or engaged in providing insurance, reinsurance or shipping for such trade.

Even if finally put in place, unilateral US or European sanctions are fraught with difficulties. Action against the sale of gasoline would potentially have a severe impact on the Iranian economy, which imports 40 percent of its requirements due to a lack of refining capacity. But such a measure would inevitably provoke widespread popular opposition in Iran under conditions where Washington is still hoping to encourage political opposition and some form of regime change in Tehran. Moreover, Chinese corporations might increase their sales of gasoline and diesel to Iran, as is already taking place. Congressional sanctions against Tehran could provoke a further sharpening of tensions with Beijing.

As Obama’s diplomatic campaign becomes bogged down, a debate has opened up in US ruling circles over the future course of action. Sections of the foreign policy establishment are proposing

a policy of “containment” in the event that the US fails to prevent Iran building a nuclear weapon. An extensive essay entitled “After Iran Gets the Bomb” in this month’s issue of the influential *Foreign Affairs* magazine argues for aggressive policies to isolate Iran. Far from easing tensions in the Middle East, a strategy of “containment” would only heighten them.

The authors—James Lindsay and Ray Takeyh—call for the consolidation of US military alliances in the Middle East along the lines of the Central Treaty Organisation established in 1955 by the US, Britain, Turkey, Pakistan and Iran to counter Soviet influence. Washington would offer security guarantees to, and bolster the military capacity of, its allies, as well as laying down a series of three “red lines” that Tehran would cross at its peril. Chillingly, the article insisted that “it should also be made clear that the price of Iran’s violating these three prohibitions could be US military retaliation by any and all means necessary, up to and including nuclear weapons”.

The alternative being canvassed—but not so openly discussed—is to dramatically intensify action to compel Iran to accede to US demands. The case is argued in today’s *New York Times* by Howard Berman, the Democrat chairman of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs. He declares: “It is foolhardy to believe that the West could contain or deter Tehran were it to acquire the bomb. A nuclear-armed Iran would usher in a dangerous new era of instability in the Gulf and Middle East... If recalcitrant governments seek to block or dilute the ability of the United Nations to take strong swift action, then we Americans will have no choice but to act on our own.” He calls for Obama “to focus our efforts on the pressure track” and declares that Congressional sanctions legislation will be ready in a matter of weeks.

What is left unsaid is that the only “option” left, should sanctions fail to bring Iran to heel, is the military one. The transfer of bunker-buster bombs to Diego Garcia, along with a string of visits by top US generals to the Middle East in recent weeks and US assistance to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to bolster anti-missile systems, are all evidence of the advanced nature of US preparations for a military attack on Iran. While the outcome of the current debate in Washington is not yet clear, no one can rule out a reckless new US military adventure against Iran as the Obama administration seeks to extricate itself from a mounting political crisis both at home and abroad.



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