

US pushes for new sanctions against Iran

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The Obama administration pressed for rapid agreement on new punitive UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programs at a meeting on Wednesday of the so-called P5+1 group—the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany. While the US pushed for a full arms embargo and measures targetting Iranian energy investment, shipping and finance, China and Russia both indicated opposition to key aspects of the draft resolution.

President Barack Obama used the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington this week to line up support for new UN penalties. The US pointedly did not invite Iran to the gathering despite the fact that it is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, unlike other attendees such as Pakistan, India and Israel, all of which have substantial nuclear arsenals. Tehran has repeatedly denied that it is planning to build an atomic bomb.

Obama's meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao on Monday was crucial to ensuring that the P5+1 meeting went ahead. Beijing has opposed a new round of sanctions, and since the beginning of the year has effectively boycotted talks on the issue. A phone call between the two presidents on April 1 had signalled a tentative deal linking Chinese support for renewed P5+1 meetings in return for Washington easing pressure on Beijing to revalue its currency.

Following the phone conversation, the White House denied any such quid pro quo. But Hu immediately confirmed his previously uncertain attendance at this week's nuclear summit and two days later US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner announced a three-month delay in a report due on April 15 to decide on whether to brand Beijing a "currency manipulator". After meeting Obama on Monday, Hu indicated that China would continue to take part in P5+1 negotiations, having attended an initial meeting last week.

The US and its European allies are pressing for new UN sanctions before the end of the month, but face continuing disagreements from China and Russia. The draft US resolution to Wednesday's meeting proposed to extend the

present partial arms embargo to a total ban on the import and export of weapons by Iran. Russia, which is a major arms supplier to Iran, objected and, with China, proposed that new sanctions be restricted to ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

Washington wants to bar new foreign investment in Iran's energy sector, which was opposed by Beijing. China relies on Iran for about 11 percent of its oil imports and has signed substantial deals to develop Iranian oil and gas fields. Support for energy sanctions would cut across these investment plans and risk retaliation by Iran in restricting or cutting off oil exports to China.

The US and international media focusses attention on the economic concerns of China and Russia in opposing UN sanctions, but remains silent on Washington's aggressive pursuit of its own vested interests. By intensifying pressure on Tehran over its alleged nuclear weapons program, the US is seeking to fashion an Iranian regime more amenable to US plans. Washington not only has an eye on Iran's huge oil and gas reserves, but recognises that the country is a pivotal link in broader US ambitions to dominate the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates hinted on Wednesday that the Obama administration would be prepared to accept a significant weakening of its UN sanctions resolution in order to ensure the support of China and Russia. Pointing to the broader US tactics, Gates said: "What is more important about the UN resolution is less the specific content of the resolution than the isolation of Iran by the rest of the world." A new UN resolution, he added, would act as a "launching pad" for economic strictures that are much tougher than those adopted by the world organisation.

Gates's comments recall the tactics of the Bush administration in the lead-up to its illegal invasion of Iraq. Despite the fact that none of the UN resolutions authorised military action, Bush claimed international support for his lies about weapons of mass destruction to justify unilateral

aggression against Iraq. Having already voted for three rounds of UN sanctions and considering a fourth, China and Russia are paving the way for Obama to take more aggressive economic and potentially military measures against Iran. Neither country has directly challenged Washington's claims about Tehran's nuclear programs.

While Obama and his officials are stressing the "urgency" of action against Iran, two top US defence officials—Defence Intelligence Agency director Lieutenant General Ronald Burgess and Joint Chiefs of Staff vice chairman General James Cartwright—gave a more muted assessment in congressional testimony on Wednesday. According to the two men, Iran had the capacity to produce enough highly enriched uranium for at least one nuclear weapon within a year, but would need two to five years to manufacture a workable bomb. Neither Burgess nor Cartwright contradicted the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran had ended any nuclear weapons research in 2003.

Even before a new UN sanctions resolution, US threats of tough unilateral action are having an impact. The US Congress is pressing ahead with legislation to enforce an embargo against Iran's imports of gasoline and diesel by penalising companies around the world that sell to Iran. A bipartisan group of 363 House representatives wrote to Obama this week declaring that Iran's nuclear programs posed "a severe threat to American national interests" and urging him to impose "crippling" sanctions against Tehran without waiting for agreement in the UN.

Concerned about potential US penalties, a number of corporations have halted their sales of refined petroleum products to Iran. In March, the Anglo-Dutch giant Royal Dutch Shell announced that it had stopped supplying gasoline. Two of the world's largest independent trading companies—Glencore and Vitol—have taken a similar decision. This month LUKOIL, Russia's second largest oil company, ended gasoline sales. Malaysia's state-owned oil company Petronas stated yesterday that it had halted shipments to Iran last month.

However, Chinese companies have boosted their sales to Iran. According to Reuters, state-run Chinaoil has sold two cargoes of gasoline totalling 600,000 barrels to Iran this year. Previously the company had dealt through intermediaries. Sinopec is also preparing to sell to Iran for the first time in six years. The sales, which are not subject to any UN ban, are likely to increase tensions between Washington and Beijing, particularly if the Obama

administration agreed to the Congressional demands.

The imposition of a unilateral US embargo on refined petroleum sales to Iran would be a highly provocative step that would escalate frictions in the Persian Gulf and raise the possibility of a US naval blockade to enforce such measures. Sections of the American political establishment are pushing for more aggressive measures. In a US Senate hearing, Republican Senator John McCain demanded that the Obama administration take tougher action. The US kept pointing a loaded gun at Iran, he said, but had failed to "pull the trigger".

While pushing for UN sanctions, the Obama administration has repeatedly declared that all options—that is, including a military attack—are "on the table". An article in the Scottish-based *Sunday Herald* last month reported that the US was moving large numbers of bunker-busting bombs to its base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, within striking distance of Iran's nuclear facilities. Last week, the Pentagon's latest Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) declared for the first time that nuclear weapons could be used against non-nuclear states that were not in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—a menacing threat against Iran and North Korea.

Whatever Washington's exact intentions, its reckless brinkmanship has the potential for spilling over into military conflict that would have catastrophic consequences in Iran and internationally.

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