

US presses ahead with UN sanctions against Iran

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The Obama administration introduced a resolution into the UN Security Council on Tuesday to impose new sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programs. The US claims to have the support of all permanent Security Council members, including China and Russia. It is seeking to extend existing bans, notably against weapon sales to Iran, and to cover a wider range of individuals and companies.

The resolution cuts directly across an agreement brokered by Brazil and Turkey on Monday to revive last year's arrangement for Iran to exchange much of its low-enriched uranium for fuel rods for its research reactor in Tehran. The US proposed that deal, which also involved Russia and France, but it foundered amid widespread scepticism in Iran that Washington and Paris could be trusted. For the latest agreement, Turkey offered to act as an intermediary for the exchange.

Not wanting to alienate Turkey and Brazil, both of which are temporary Security Council members, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to their "sincere efforts" but nevertheless criticised the arrangement's "amorphous deadline" and declared that it was "not acceptable to us and to our partners". Addressing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday, Clinton said the US, with the agreement of China and Russia, was proceeding with "a strong sanctions resolution" that would send "an unmistakable message" to Iran.

From the outset, the Obama administration's offer of talks with Iran has been little more than a ploy designed to gain the support of the other major powers, particularly Russia and China, for greater pressure and harsher punitive measures against Iran. The proposed nuclear exchange was only ever a temporary measure to remove

most of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium in return for fuel rods and the prospect of broader negotiations. Having secured the support of Russia and China for new sanctions, the US is no longer interested in the deal.

Brazil and Turkey reacted angrily to what was an obvious diplomatic slap in the face. Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had flown to Tehran on Monday for the official signing. Both countries viewed the deal with Iran as an opportunity to play a greater role on the international stage. Brazil is also concerned that the measures taken against Iran could affect its own nuclear program, which includes the construction of a uranium enrichment plant.

The head of the Turkish parliament's foreign relations committee, Murat Mercan, predicted that the UN sanctions resolution would not be voted on. A vote would "create tensions" and would be "dangerous," he said. Marco Aurelio Garcia, a special adviser to the Brazilian president, declared that sanctions would be "totally ineffective". As a protest, Brazil did not take part in UN Security Council discussions on Tuesday on the new sanctions. It is unlikely, however, that either country will vote against the resolution when it is put to the vote.

The draft resolution extends existing UN sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes against a broader range of companies and individuals, particularly those associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. It would prohibit the sale of heavy weapons to Iran in eight categories, including attack helicopters, warships and missiles. The ban on missile sales will impact on Russia, which had signed a deal with Iran to supply sophisticated S-300 air defense missile systems. In the face of US

opposition, Moscow had already delayed delivery.

The resolution includes a new ban on Iranian investment abroad in nuclear enrichment plants, uranium mines and nuclear-related technology. The measure appears to be aimed against possible Iranian ventures with Venezuela and Zimbabwe. The sanctions would require countries to inspect ships or planes headed into or out of Iran suspected of carrying banned materials, but not permit the forcible boarding of ships.

The draft does not contain any sanctions against Iran's oil and gas industry, nor the sale of refined petroleum products to Iran. While the country has huge energy reserves, it lacks refining capacity and has to import around 40 percent of its gasoline. China in particular strongly opposed any measures that would interfere with its investments in Iranian energy projects or its purchase of Iranian oil. Iran is now the third largest supplier of oil to China after Saudi Arabia and Angola.

The resolution specifically declares that nothing in it should be construed as permitting the “use of force or the threat of force”. The clause was undoubtedly included at the insistence of Russia and China, which are well aware of the ongoing threat by the US and Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Both also recall the way in which the Bush administration exploited UN Security Council resolutions against Iraq to justify the US invasion in 2003.

The decision by Russia and China to cautiously back another UN resolution is the product of Realpolitik. Russia first indicated its support for further sanctions last year after the Obama administration put an end to the planned US anti-ballistic missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Moscow had bitterly opposed the deployment. Beijing, which boycotted talks earlier in the year, shifted its stance after the Obama administration in April announced a three-month delay to a report on whether to brand China a “currency manipulator”.

These cynical manoeuvres only confirm that the US confrontation with Iran is not primarily about its nuclear program. Tehran has repeatedly denied any intention of building nuclear weapons, but has insisted on its right under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty to all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle—including uranium enrichment. It has branded previous UN sanctions as “illegal” and declared its intention to expand its uranium enrichment

facilities to provide fuel for nuclear power reactors. Washington's main aim is to refashion a regime in Tehran more conducive to US ambitions for a dominant position in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The US push for a new UN resolution is just the first step in intensifying pressure on Iran. By legitimising new penalties, it would assist US efforts to win support for far harsher sanctions by the US and its allies outside the UN framework. A *Washington Post* article noted yesterday that the US, Britain, France and Germany regarded UN action as the weakest of three steps against Iran—the other steps being a European Union resolution, and tough unilateral sanctions by individual countries.

As the *Washington Post* explained: “Nothing can happen without the imprimatur of a new UN resolution, because some European countries will not act on sanctions without UN approval. Diplomats said that some of the sanctions were [initially] proposed with the full knowledge they would be removed by the Russians and Chinese—but then could be revived in an EU resolution. Individual country sanctions could follow, and would be led by the United States and like-minded nations.”

Such measures are unlikely to influence Iran, which has previously declared that it will ignore additional sanctions. The Obama administration is under pressure from the US Congress to take much tougher action, including a crippling ban on the sale of gasoline and diesel to Iran. At the same time, while downplaying the possibility of an immediate strike against Iran, the White House refuses to rule out the “military option”—the plans for which are well advanced.



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