International talks over Iran's nuclear program collapse

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Negotiations in Istanbul over Iran's nuclear program broke up on Saturday with no agreement between Tehran and the UN Security Council permanent members—the US, China, Russia, Britain and France—plus Germany (P5+1). Such was the gulf between the parties that no further meeting was scheduled.

The US and its European allies sought to use the forum to pressure Iran into giving up most of its stockpile of enriched uranium in return for badly-needed fuel rods for the small Tehran research reactor that manufactures medical isotopes. After a similar deal in 2009 fell through, the Iranian regime insisted that it would enrich uranium to 20 percent and manufacture its own fuel rods.

Tehran, which is a signatory to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and allows its nuclear facilities to be inspected by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has repeatedly declared that it has no intention of building nuclear weapons and is enriching uranium to provide fuel for its planned power reactors.

The Istanbul talks effectively collapsed when the P5+1 countries flatly rejected Iranian demands that they recognise Tehran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and ease sanctions imposed on Iran. The purpose of the US-led sanctions is to force Tehran to comply with Washington's demands for the dismantlement of Iran's uranium enrichment facilities and several other nuclear programs.

The aim of the so-called confidence-building deal was to reduce Iran's store of enriched uranium to below that needed to potentially build nuclear weapons. Most of Iran's stockpile has been enriched to just 3.5 percent—the level needed to fuel nuclear power plants—with a further amount enriched to 20 percent—the level required for the Tehran research reactor. Highly-enriched uranium of around 90 percent is needed to build a weapon.

Following the breakdown of the talks, Iran's chief negotiator Saeed Jalali told the media that the P5+1 had pushed "dictation, not dialogue". While Iran was open to negotiation in many areas, he said, "it's no longer a dialogue but just a set of special orders and specifications". US intransigence ensured that the talks never went beyond the repetition of previously stated stances on both sides.

The reaction of the US and its allies to the collapse of the talks, along with the US and international media coverage, has been low key. European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who formally led the P5+1 delegation, expressed her disappointment at the outcome, but declared that the door remained open to further discussions.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has threatened to extend unilateral American sanctions and to press for other countries to do the same and tighten existing sanctions. But the Istanbul meeting has not been accompanied by the strident threats, including of military strikes against Iran, and lurid stories of Iran's imminent production of nuclear weapons, that were a central feature of the Bush administration. Far from diminishing the danger of conflict, however, the approach simply indicates that the Obama administration has put Iran on hold, for the time being at least, while its focus is turned elsewhere.

On a trip to the Gulf States earlier this month, Clinton declared that Iran had had "technological problems that have made it slow down its timetable". While the US

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secretary of state claimed success for the sanctions regime, American newspapers have released details of joint Israeli-US covert operations aimed at sabotaging Iran's nuclear program. Former head of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, Meir Dagan, claims that the technical problems could delay Iran's ability to build a bomb until 2015—five years longer than previous Israeli estimates.

An article in the *New York Times* on January 15, citing unnamed intelligence and military experts, provided an extended account of the US-Israeli development of the Stuxnet computer worm that allegedly wiped out about a fifth of Iran's nuclear centrifuges used to enrich uranium. Using information from the German company Siemens, the US developed the worm to infect the computers used to regulate the centrifuges and send them spinning out of control. The Stuxnet worm was tested at Israel's Dimona nuclear facility—where its own nuclear bombs have been manufactured in contravention of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty.

A more sinister aspect of US-Israeli criminal activities is the suspicious deaths over the past year of leading Iranian nuclear scientists. In January 2010, Dr Massoud Ali-Mohammadi was killed by a bomb attached to his car as he drove to work. In November 2010, Dr Majid Shahriari was murdered using a similar method. While no evidence has been provided, Tehran has accused Mossad of being responsible for the killings.

The US is keeping the pressure on Iran through sanctions. Last month, Washington unveiled new measures targetting Iran's main shipping line and its Revolutionary Guard Corps. On January 13, the US Treasury imposed penalties on 24 shipping companies, including 20 in Hong Kong, for allegedly operating as fronts for Iranian businesses involved in procurement for missile programs.

However, the chief focus of Washington's efforts to tighten sanctions is not so much Iran, but China, which has become the target of a broad and aggressive campaign by the Obama administration to undermine its influence in Asia and internationally. Last week, as Chinese President Hu Jintao was visiting Washington, Clinton told ABC television that some Chinese firms were failing to comply with UN sanctions and suggested that the US might impose penalties on them.

"We think that there are some entities within China that we have brought to the attention of the Chinese leadership that are not... as in compliance as we would like them to be," Clinton said. "And we are pushing very hard on that and we may be proposing more unilateral sanctions." She insisted that China not only had to implement UN sanctions, for which Beijing voted, but Washington's unilateral measures, to which China did not agree. "Even though technically you [China] did not sign up to our unilateral sanctions, we expect you to help us implement them," she said.

Two US senators accused China of violating sanctions against Iran and warned Obama that Congress could enact its own penalties against China. Joseph Lieberman and Mark Kirk accused China of supplying materials for Iran's nuclear and missile programs, and of assisting Iran's energy sector, including through the sale of refined petroleum products. The senators named the China National Petroleum Corporation and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation as potential targets for American penalties.

The threats against China make clear that Iran's nuclear programs are being used as a pretext by the US to undercut its rivals in the strategic, energy-rich Middle East. China, which depends heavily on oil imports from Iran and is involved in Iranian gas and oil projects, understandably refused to include Iran's energy sector in any UN resolution. Now Beijing finds that it may be punished economically for refusing to implement US measures designed to advance American interests to the detriment of China's.

The Obama administration's provocative actions are part of a pronounced shift over the past 18 months to shore up US alliances and strategic partnerships in Asia and strengthen its presence in the region—all directed at undermining its chief rival, China, now the world's second largest economy.

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