US menaces Iran over Strait of Hormuz

Peter Symonds
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The Obama administration has issued what amounts to a threat of war against Iran following comments by senior Iranian officials that Tehran would close the Strait of Hormuz in response to an embargo on its oil exports. To reinforce the point, the US navy sent two of its warships—the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis and the guided-missile destroyer USS Mobile Bay—on a "routine transit" through the strategic waterway where the Iranian navy is currently holding exercises.

The growing tensions in the Persian Gulf are the result of provocative steps by the US and its European allies towards blocking Iranian oil exports. President Obama is about to sign a measure into law that would freeze the US assets of foreign financial institutions doing business with Iran's central bank—moves that would seriously impede Iranian oil exports. At the same time, Britain and France are pressing the European Union to adopt an embargo on the import of Iranian oil.

Any restriction on Iran's energy exports would seriously damage the country's economy, which is already under pressure from previous sanctions imposed both unilaterally by the US and its allies and by the UN Security Council.

The value of the Iranian currency has fallen by about 20 percent against the US dollar in the past few months. Last week, the US Treasury Department continued to tighten the economic noose around Iran by blacklisting 10 companies in Malta accused of acting as fronts for the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines.

Confronting potential economic chaos, Iranian vice president Mohammad-Reza Rahimi warned on Tuesday: "If they impose sanctions on Iran's oil exports, then even one drop of oil cannot flow from the Strait of Hormuz." The US Defense Department and the Navy's Fifth Fleet, which is based in the Gulf State of Bahrain, both issued statements warning that any step to inhibit "freedom of navigation" through the waterway would "not be tolerated"—a tacit threat of military action.

The US and international media immediately seized on Rahimi's remarks to paint Iran as the belligerent power. However, it is the Obama administration that has been deliberately heightening tensions with Iran, setting the stage for a possible military confrontation. The threatened oil embargo is itself an act of aggression—a point that is uniformly ignored in the compliant American press.

The move towards oil sanctions takes place in the context of nearly a decade of US military threats against Iran over unsubstantiated claims that it seeks to build nuclear weapons. Moreover, it is all but openly acknowledged that Israel and the US have over the past two years been engaged in acts of sabotage directed at Iran's nuclear program and its military—including the use of computer viruses, explosions at key facilities and the murder of nuclear scientists.

Over the past month, the Obama administration has taken a markedly more aggressive stance. Using an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report published in November as the pretext, the White House has pushed for tougher international sanctions against Iran and emphasized that all options—including military strikes—would be used to prevent Tehran from building nuclear weapons.

The IAEA report was in every way a political document. Produced under pressure from Washington, it contained a key appendix arguing that Iran had carried out research related to nuclear weapons. Most

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of the activities ended almost a decade ago. Some of the "evidence" has been challenged by Iran as having been fabricated by Israeli or US intelligence agencies—an issue passed over by the IAEA.

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta upped the ante last week by declaring in a CBS interview that Iran could have a nuclear weapon within a year or "perhaps a little less"—if there was a hidden uranium enrichment facility somewhere inside Iran. He offered no evidence either that Iran had such a plant or was building a bomb. But that did not stop Panetta from declaring that acquiring a nuclear weapon would be a "red line" for the US, which would "take whatever steps necessary to deal with it."

As if to spell out what Panetta meant, US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey told the media the following day that the Pentagon had drawn up military options that were reaching the point of being "executable if necessary". He warned Iran against underestimating US resolve, saying: "Any miscalculation could mean that we are drawn into conflict and that would be a tragedy for the region and the world."

Behind the scenes there is clearly an intense debate taking place in Washington over a US military attack on Iran. A *Wall Street Journal* editorial yesterday urged the White House to declare that it would consider any restriction on oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz as an act of war warranting a military response. "That response would be robust and immediate, and it would target Iran's military and nuclear assets, perhaps even its regime," the newspaper declared.

A detailed article by security analyst Eli Lake in the *Daily Beast* on Wednesday pointed to intense discussions between the US and Israel in recent weeks over the prerequisites for a military attack. In the context of a well-publicized debate in Israel over military strikes, Lake noted that the White House had been "reassuring the Israelis that the administration had its own 'red lines' that would trigger military action against Iran, and that there is no need for Jerusalem to act unilaterally."

In addition, an essay entitled "Time to Attack Iran" has just been published in *Foreign Affairs*, the premier journal of the American foreign policy establishment, calling for the US to take military action now. In answering critics, it argues that "a carefully managed US attack" could destroy Iran's nuclear facilities without provoking an all-out war that threatened to engulf the region. Significantly, the author of this plan for military aggression is Matthew Kroenig, who was until July a special advisor to the Office of the US Secretary of Defense, responsible for Iran.

While Kroenig and other advocates of war focus on the purported danger of Iranian nuclear weapons, the real purpose of any military action is to advance longstanding US ambitions for regime-change in Tehran as part of broader aims for domination of the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Washington's latest menacing moves take place as the US seeks to exploit the oppositional movements throughout the regions—most recently in Syria—to install regimes more amenable to American interests.

US efforts to ensure regional hegemony are above all aimed at its rivals, chiefly China, which is heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil imports, including from Iran. It is precisely this intersection of any conflict over Iran with wider geopolitical rivalries that heightens the risk of a local war in the Persian Gulf becoming an international catastrophe.

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