

US renews military threat against Iran

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The US administration responded to Iran's announcement last weekend that its Fordo uranium enrichment plant was operational with renewed threats of military action. The sharp rise in tensions in the Persian Gulf follows steps by the US and Europe to impose an embargo on Iranian oil exports that would ruin the country's economy.

Speaking on the CBS "Face the Nation" last Sunday, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta acknowledged that Iran was not building a nuclear bomb at present. But he added, Iran was "developing a nuclear capability" and "that's what concerns us."

He warned: "Our red line to Iran is: do not develop a nuclear weapon. That's a red line for us." Panetta is threatening a devastating US military attack on Iranian nuclear and military facilities under the pretext that Tehran is developing nuclear arms.

While insisting that the current US focus was economic and diplomatic pressure, he repeated the mantra that the US was not "taking any option off the table."

General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked on the same program how difficult it would be for the US to "take out their [Iran's] nuclear facilities." He did not address the question directly, but indicated that he was ensuring the "right degree of planning" and positioning of assets "to provide those [military] options in a timely fashion."

Asked about any attempt by Iran to block the strategic Strait of Hormuz, Panetta declared that the US would not tolerate such action. "That's another red line for us, and we will respond to them," he said. Dempsey confirmed that the US "had invested in capabilities to

ensure that if that happens, we can defeat that... We would take action and reopen the Straits."

The US threats are being accompanied by a relentless campaign in the US and international media to demonise Iran as a rogue state bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. The opening of a second enrichment plant at Fordo near the city of Qom is portrayed as another step in that direction. Like the Natanz enrichment plant, the second is buried deep underground and heavily guarded—which is hardly surprising, given repeated US and Israeli threats to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

The Iranian regime has repeatedly insisted that it has no plans to build a nuclear weapon. Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Ali Soltanieh, described the US reaction as "exaggerated and politically motivated."

According to Iran, the Fordo plant will enrich uranium to the 20 percent level required to produce medical isotopes. Soltanieh pointed out that the IAEA has installed cameras in the plant to monitor operations and carries out regular inspections to ensure enriched uranium is not diverted to military purposes.

The Iranian regime has also signalled a harder line, by imposing a death sentence on Amir Mirzaei Hekmati, a US citizen and former Marine convicted of spying. The US has denied that Hekmati was a spy.

These allegations come amid a series of assassinations and a program of sabotage directed against Iran's nuclear and military programs over the past two years, indicating that Israel is waging a covert war inside Iran, with US support.

The European Union is stepping up pressure on Iran, announcing that a meeting of foreign ministers would be held on January 23—a week earlier than previously proposed—to finalise an oil embargo already agreed in principle. Divisions still exist among EU members, some of which like Greece are heavily dependent on Iranian oil and are seeking a lengthy “grace period” to find alternate supplies. Europe accounts for about 20 percent of Iran’s oil exports.

US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner is currently visiting China and Japan, both of which are large importers of Iranian oil, to press them to wind back their purchases from Iran. US President Obama has signed a measure into law that would exclude corporations doing business with Iran’s central bank from the American financial system. Most of Iran’s oil transactions involve the central bank.

Japan, a close American ally, has already taken steps to reduce its oil imports from Iran. Japan’s state-owned exploration company Impex has bowed to US pressure to abandon its joint development of the Azadegan natural gas field. Japan’s Foreign Minister Koichiro Gomba told the media yesterday that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had been approached to supply more oil as Japan wound back its imports from Iran. Japan and South Korea buy about 25 percent of Iran’s oil exports.

China, which is confronting US demands on multiple fronts, has so far resisted US bullying. Last week, President Obama released a key strategic review that made Asia the top priority for the US military and singled out China as the chief threat to American economic and strategic interests in the region.

In Beijing, Geithner will repeat US demands that China revalue its currency. Trade relations are already tense after China imposed tariffs on imported American automobiles in November and began an inquiry into US government subsidies for renewable energy industries. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the Obama administration is setting up a new task force to investigate alleged unfair trade and business practices by China.

The US demand that China fall into line with unilateral American sanctions on Iran is another device designed to undermine Chinese economic and strategic interests. China has developed close economic relations with Iran and purchases large quantities of Iranian oil, in part to avoid being dependent on close American allies such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

China has publicly opposed the imposition of further penalties on Iran via the UN Security Council and has so far refused to back Washington’s sanctions. China’s vice foreign minister, Cui Tiankai, declared on Monday: “Regular economic and trade relations between China and Iran have nothing to do with the nuclear issue.”

Washington’s attempts to strong-arm Beijing underscore the fact that the sharpening US confrontation with Iran is part of a global imperialist strategy that goes far beyond concerns with Tehran’s alleged nuclear weapons program. Rather, US imperialism is seeking to establish its untrammelled hegemony over the key energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia, as a means of undermining its European and Asian rivals.

Geithner’s visit to Beijing contains the implicit threat that the US could punish Chinese corporations for trading with Iran—a move that would dramatically heighten economic tensions between the US and China.



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