

US military preparations for war on Iran

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Despite claims that its focus is on diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran, the Obama administration is making barely disguised preparations for military strikes to back its threat to use “all options” to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran.

In an interview with CBS on Sunday, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta repeated the warning that any attempt by Iran to develop a nuclear weapon would be a “red line” for the US and also for Israel. Asked how Washington would respond, he declared: “We will take whatever steps are necessary to stop it.”

Iran has again and again denied plans to build a nuclear weapon, but that has not stopped the barrage of unsubstantiated allegations, misinformation and outright lies in the American, Israeli and international media about its nuclear programs.

Speaking at the Davos summit last Friday, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak claimed that time was running out “as the Iranians are deliberately drifting into what we call an immunity zone where no surgical operation could block them.” The Associated Press reported unnamed senior Israeli defence officials saying that a military attack on Iran would have to occur by the middle of this year.

Barak’s reference to “an immunity zone” reflects concerns in the Israeli defence establishment about its ability to destroy Iran’s uranium enrichment facility at Fordo, which is heavily guarded and dug into a mountain.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last Thursday, Panetta revealed that the Pentagon was pressing ahead with modifications to a 30,000-pound bomb, known as the Massive Ordnance Penetrator

(MOP), to ensure that it can demolish the Fordo plant. Panetta explained that while the “bunker-buster” would do “a lot of damage,” it would not necessarily destroy Iran’s underground facilities outright.

The Pentagon secretly submitted a request to Congress this month for funds to enhance the bomb’s capabilities. The *Journal* reported: “The push to boost the power of the MOP is part of stepped-up contingency planning for a possible strike against Iran’s nuclear program, say US officials.”

The article pointed out that “some Pentagon planners believe conventional bombs won’t be effective against Fordo and that a tactical nuclear weapon may be the only military option if the goal is to destroy the facility.” Discussion of the possible use of nuclear weapons against Iran underlines the recklessness of US foreign policy and Obama’s oft-repeated mantra that “all options are on the table.”

Other US military contingency preparations include the conversion of an amphibious transport and docking ship, the *Ponce*, into a floating base for military operations in the Middle East. The “afloat forward staging base” would enable the dispatch of special forces troops, helicopters, speedboats and aircraft with short-takeoff capacity, including drones, without having to negotiate the use of land bases in the region.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby claimed there was nothing unusual in the proposal, describing it as “a longstanding request.” However, the refitting of the *Ponce*, which was due to be decommissioned, has replaced other “staging base” plans, to ensure that it could be deployed to the Middle East by mid-year. The US navy has already doubled the number of aircraft carrier battle groups stationed near the Persian Gulf.

Amid the military build-up, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), at Tehran's invitation, began three days of inspections on Sunday of Iranian nuclear facilities and discussions on its nuclear programs. Inspectors will visit the Fordo uranium enrichment plant, which, despite media allegations about its sinister nature, is under constant IAEA monitoring to check that it does not produce weapons-grade enriched uranium.

IAEA Deputy Director General Herman Nackaerts told reporters that he wanted Iran to "engage us on all concerns," adding that this was a long overdue dialogue. The reference to "all concerns" includes allegations of nuclear weapons research based on doubtful evidence supplied by US, European and Israeli intelligence agencies. Tehran has refused to discuss issues that were based on "fabricated documents."

Foreign Minister Ali Abkar Salehi said on Sunday that Iran was "very optimistic about the [IAEA] mission and the outcome... During the visit, the delegation has questions and the necessary answers will be given." On Monday, he added that the IAEA team could extend its stay if necessary.

It is impossible for Iran to satisfy the IAEA. As was the case prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tehran is being asked to prove a negative: that it has no nuclear weapons program anywhere in its vast territory. Each Iranian answer to IAEA questions only leads to further questions, insinuations and allegations as the US and its allies seek to demonise Tehran and create the public climate for war.

The entire campaign is completely cynical. Any Iranian hint of retaliation is seized on as a new pretext for more aggressive measures, even as the US political establishment openly discusses the launching an illegal, unprovoked war on Iran, and the Obama administration takes steps to make good its threats. Washington's overriding aim is to fashion, in one way or another, a regime in Tehran to further its ambitions for domination in the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

The US and its allies are already waging an economic war against Iran in the form of crippling sanctions, as well as a covert war of sabotage and assassination directed against Iranian nuclear and military programs.

In an interview last week with the *World Socialist Web Site*, Vijay Prashad, professor of international studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, warned: "There are three aspects of a war that has been ongoing against Iran: economic, covert and diplomatic. I fear that Iran is getting boxed in so much that it is now beginning to threaten things like closing the Strait of Hormuz. The moment Iran takes that action, the West is going to use that action as a casus belli and say that Iran has started the war and proceed to bombard six or seven sites where there are identifiable nuclear production facilities... It is a very dangerous situation."

Any attack on Iran by the US and its allies could rapidly escalate into a regional conflict that has the potential to involve all the major powers.



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