

2012 opens with mounting war threat in Persian Gulf

Peter Symonds
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The year begins with the looming threat of a new American war, this time against Iran. In the latest sharp exchange of words, the US yesterday brushed aside an Iranian warning that the American aircraft carrier, USS John C. Stennis should not return to the Persian Gulf as it constitutes a threat to Iran.

The US and the European Union have deliberately raised tensions in the Gulf with further economic sanctions that could cripple the already weakened Iranian economy. On Saturday, President Obama signed into law the National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA) that includes a measure to penalise foreign companies doing business with Iran's central bank, potentially blocking Iranian oil exports. Later this month, the EU will consider an embargo on imports of Iranian oil by its member states.

The impact on the Iranian economy has been immediate. The rial plunged by 11 percent against foreign currencies on Monday, forcing the central bank to intervene. The currency has fallen by about 35 percent since September, compounding the country's high inflation rate. Sales of oil and gas account for 80 percent of Iran's hard currency export earnings.

Tehran has responded to Washington's economic warfare by threatening to block the Strait of Hormuz in the event of restrictions on its oil exports. The US Navy has pointedly warned that it "will not tolerate" any constraint on access to the Gulf. The American and international media have seized on Iranian naval exercises and the test firing of new missiles to demonise Iran, denounce Iranian "aggression" and trumpet the dangers of a "nuclear Iran."

Once again an American administration is using unsubstantiated claims about nuclear weapons to generate public panic and create the political climate for a reckless military adventure. The recent comments of US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who declared that Iran could have a nuclear weapon within a year and warned that the US would "take whatever steps necessary to deal with it," echo the belligerent rhetoric of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney in 2002 as they prepared to invade Iraq.

In a presidential election year, Obama is under pressure from his potential Republican rivals to adopt an even more bellicose posture toward Iran. Last Sunday presidential candidate Rick Santorum declared that he would "degrade" Iran's nuclear facilities through air strikes unless Tehran agreed to dismantle them. The White House is also being pressed by Israel to take action against Iran.

Iran has been central to the Obama administration's calculations in the Middle East over the past year. Having been taken by surprise by the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, the US and its European allies exploited anti-government protests in Libya to intervene militarily with a criminal bombing campaign to oust Gaddafi and install a client regime in Tripoli. Now similar methods are being used against Iran's key regional ally—the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

US efforts to isolate and undermine Assad have received considerable assistance from Turkey, which is exploiting the so-called Arab Spring to further its own ambitions as a regional power. In recent months, the Turkish government, undoubtedly encouraged by

Washington, has retreated from its developing ties with Iran to become a sponsor of the anti-Assad opposition groups.

Having failed to secure a continued US troop presence in Iraq, Washington is also intriguing with Sunni-based parties against the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which is regarded as too closely aligned with Tehran. The US is exploiting the current bitter sectarian wrangling in Baghdad either to pull Maliki into line or to fashion a regime more in line with American interests.

A December 20 paper by Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Anthony Cordesman and others gave voice to a widespread sentiment in Washington that “unless the US does act far more decisively, Iran seems to be the de facto winner of the US invasion of Iraq.” It drew the conclusion: “Much depends on what the US does outside Iraq to deter and contain Iran.”

The Obama administration has already taken steps to consolidate its military presence in Kuwait and other Gulf states, including Bahrain, the headquarters of the US Navy’s 5th Fleet. With Washington’s encouragement, the recent Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh approved the creation of a formal “union” that involves security cooperation against external threats—implicitly Iran.

Last Thursday, the White House highlighted a major \$30 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia, a US ally and Iran’s longstanding rival for regional influence in the Gulf. The following day, the US announced a \$3.5 billion deal to sell sophisticated missile defence systems to the United Arab Emirates. Last November, the Obama administration proposed another arms deal to the UAE that included bunker-buster bombs—the obvious target being Iran’s underground nuclear and military facilities.

US preparations for a war against Iran are not directed at stopping the country’s alleged nuclear weapons program, but at furthering Washington’s hegemony over the strategic, energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The US has not

abandoned the aim that drove the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq: to exercise control over the oil and gas supplies of its European and Asian rivals.

One of the Obama administration’s main objectives in joining the NATO bombing of Libya was to undermine China’s growing influence in the Middle East and Africa. The war on Libya put billions of dollars of Chinese projects in jeopardy. An oil embargo or military conflict with Iran would have far greater economic consequences for China. Iran is the source of 11 percent of China’s oil imports and the destination of large Chinese investments in the construction and energy sectors.

Just last November the US and Australia announced a new agreement to station US troops in the north of that country and otherwise expand American military and intelligence operations in a move patently directed against China.

By recklessly raising the political temperature in the Persian Gulf, the Obama administration has heightened the danger of a slide towards military conflict that threatens to engulf the region and spread internationally. The only force that can prevent such a catastrophe is the international working class. It must be mobilized against imperialist war and its root cause, the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into competing nation states, on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution.

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