Democrats back Trump administration’s new sanctions against Iran

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Top Democrats have thrown their support behind new sanctions announced by US President Donald Trump against Iran, part of an aggressive foreign policy shift of the incoming administration.

The sanctions were formally announced on Friday by the US Treasury Department, nominally in response to Iran’s launching of a missile last weekend and its alleged support for Houthi forces targeted by the US-backed Saudi bombardment of Yemen. The sanctions target 13 individuals and 12 companies that have ties to Iran, including one Chinese national.

Friday’s actions are more significant for what they indicate about the direction of the Trump administration’s policy toward Iran than for their immediate impact. They came two days after an extraordinary press briefing in which National Security Adviser Michael Flynn declared that Iran was being put “on notice,” and that the US would retaliate in some way, including possible military action.

The announcement of the new sanctions was followed by a statement from Flynn on Friday, declaring that the “international community has been too tolerant of Iran’s bad behavior” and that “the days of turning a blind eye to Iran’s hostile and belligerent actions toward the United States and the world community are over.”

The US president responded with a Tweet on Friday: “Iran is playing with fire—They don’t appreciate how ‘kind’ President Obama was to them. Not me!” The administration is reportedly carrying out a “strategic review” of Iran policy, and one top administration official said that the sanctions were just “initial steps.”

At a briefing on Friday, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked whether “military options” against Iran were “still on the table” and whether “there are more actions coming.” Spicer replied, “I would never rule anything off the table. I think the president has made it clear throughout his time that that’s what’s going to happen.”

While there are divisions within the American ruling class over whether to continue with the 2015 nuclear agreement backed by the Obama administration, there is broad support from both Democrats and Republicans for a harsher line against Iran, which is seen as a principal regional threat to US imperialist interests in the Middle East.

In advance of Friday’s formal announcement, a bipartisan group of 22 senators, including Tim Kaine, Democratic Party presidential candidate Hillary Clinton’s running mate, sent a letter to Trump backing the new sanctions. Eight of the signatories, including Kaine, had supported the nuclear deal with Iran, which Trump has pledged to scrap.

The letter states that the senators are “concerned by reports of a ballistic missile test,” which would violate “both the letter and the spirit of its obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 2231 not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using such ballistic missile technology.”

UN Resolution 2231 endorsed the nuclear deal agreed by Iran and the US, along with other major imperialist powers. Iran has said that the missile tested was not nuclear-capable and is not covered by the resolution, and that the test was instead a response to the militarization of other countries in the region.

“Full enforcement of existing sanctions and the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missiles program are necessary,” the letter states.

The letter was spearheaded by Republican Bob Corker and Democrat Ben Cardin, the chairman and
ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, respectively. Among the Democrats endorsing the letter was Chris Coons from Delaware. Coons said in an interview with the Weekly Standard earlier in the week that Iran’s actions are “a grave threat to our vital ally Israel, and to our troops in the region, and if they continue along the path of developing better and better ballistic missiles, it’s ultimately a threat to Europe and the rest of the world.”

The involvement of Kaine in endorsing the sanctions underscores the central focus of the criticisms of Trump from Democrats and the campaign of Hillary Clinton—US foreign policy. While Democrats have raised concerns that the Trump administration will be “too soft” on Russia, there is agreement on taking more aggressive measures against Iran, either within or outside the framework of the nuclear agreement.

The response of Democrats and the Democratic Party-aligned media to the extraordinary statements from Flynn—an open threat of war against Iran—has been either muted or broadly supportive.

In an editorial published on Friday, the New York Times called Flynn’s statements “dangerously provocative,” but added that the Trump administration was right to highlight “Iran’s troubling behavior … as well as Iran’s expanding influence in Iraq.” The newspaper added, “Israel and America’s Sunni Arab allies are also alarmed about Iran’s aggressive moves and consider the country their chief adversary.”

The Times said nothing about the fact that Israel has interpreted the election of Trump to be a green light to aggressively militarize and expand illegal settlements in Palestinian territory. It also did not note that Saudi Arabia, armed and funded by the United States, is waging a bloody war in Yemen that has killed more than 10,000 people.

The real concerns of both Democrats and Republicans were outlined in a report by Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which has close ties to the US military and intelligence apparatus. “Iran remains the major threat to US strategic interests in the Gulf and the Middle East,” Cordesman wrote last month. He added that General James Mattis, Trump’s new secretary of defense, “has been all too correct in singling out Iran as such a threat.”

Iran’s development of non-nuclear missiles, Cordesman warned, could allow it to target “critical petroleum, desalination, power, and military facilities in the Gulf, and even Israel and Egypt.” Cordesman also expressed concern that Iran was building up its political influence in Iraq.

The initial actions of the Trump administration make clear that the US is preparing a major escalation of military aggression in Central Asia and the Middle East. Fifteen years of the “war on terror” under Bush and Obama—including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the bombing of Libya, the US-backed civil war in Syria, and the Saudi bombardment of Yemen—have killed over one million people.

American imperialism, however, has failed to secure its aim of establishing unrivaled domination over the oil-rich region. Now, under Trump, a new and even bloodier chapter is opening.