US Secretary of State Pompeo presents war ultimatum to Iran

Bill Van Auken
22 May 2018

On Monday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo presented what was billed as Washington's "Plan B" following the Trump administration's scrapping of the nuclear agreement reached in 2015 between Iran and the so-called P5+1—the US, UK, France, Germany, China and Russia.

The thuggish and bellicose address, titled "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," was delivered to the right-wing Heritage Foundation in Washington. It amounted to a war ultimatum to Tehran, demanding the complete capitulation of the Iranian government in the face of what Pompeo vowed would be "the strongest sanctions in history," as well as military pressure on all fronts in the Middle East.

The speech was the first delivered by Pompeo since leaving his post as CIA director. That position was filled by Gina Haspel, the former director of a CIA torture site who was sworn in Monday by Trump after her nomination was ratified with key support from Democratic senators. Together with the elevation of John Bolton—a fanatical right-winger who has repeatedly called for the bombing of Iran—to the post of national security advisor, Trump has assembled what amounts to an anti-Iranian war cabinet.

The secretary of state's address constituted a laundry list of lies and false accusations against Iran, beginning with praise for "Israel's recent remarkable intelligence operation." This referred to the absurd theatrical performance by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented on the eve of Trump's May 8 decision to abrogate the nuclear agreement. Netanyahu failed to present any evidence that Iran had violated the terms of the nuclear accord.

Pompeo placed the entire blame for the crisis in the Middle East on Iran. In reality, the region has been ravaged by a succession of US wars for regime-change—from Iraq to Libya and Syria. He placed responsibility for the war that has brought Yemen to the brink of starvation on Tehran, even as the US supplies the bombs and military support that enables its key regional ally Saudi Arabia to decimate the country.

He added a list of charges that are grounded in fantasy and fabrication, claiming that Tehran is providing sanctuary for leaders of Al Qaeda—a movement based on fanatical anti-Shia elements—and attempted to pin the blame for the catastrophic situation in Afghanistan, where the US military has waged a 17-year war, on alleged Iranian support for the Taliban, something for which no evidence whatsoever has been presented.

Making a phony and cynical appeal to the Iranian people, he accused Iran's government of "corruption" and diverting "hundreds of millions of dollars to military operations." This is from a government in Washington that is beset by innumerable corruption scandals, and which diverts roughly a trillion dollars annually into military spending.

Pompeo then delivered a list of 12 demands on what Iran "must do." These entail shutting down the country's nuclear program and halting its development of missiles. They include the withdrawal of all military forces from Syria, the ending of support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the ceding of any influence in Iraq. Vowing to "crush" Iran's "operatives" all over the world, the US secretary of state declared, "Iran will never again have carte blanche to dominate the Middle East."

The demands amount to an ultimatum requiring Iran to cease any role as a regional power and submit to Washington's unfettered neocolonial domination.

The Iranian government issued an immediate rejection of Pompeo's demands. "The world today does not accept that the United States decides for the world. Countries have their independence," President Hassan Rohani said in a statement broadcast by Iranian media. "Who are you to decide for Iran and the world?" he added.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi told a press conference in Tehran, "No one can force Iran to do anything and Iran will remain in Syria as long as there are terrorist groups in there and as long as the Syrian government wants." He added, "Those who have entered Syria without the Syrian government's permission should leave the country," referring to the more than 2,000 US

© World Socialist Web Site

troops that have been sent to occupy the country's east and its oilfields.

Pompeo also left no doubt that Washington intends to pursue its policy of aggression against Iran at the expense of its nominal allies in Western Europe through the imposition of extra-territorial or "secondary" sanctions. These will penalize any company in Europe or anywhere else in the world that seeks to do business in Iran.

"We understand that our reimposition of sanctions and the coming pressure campaign on the Iranian regime will pose financial and economic difficulties for a number of our friends," he said. "Indeed, it imposes economic challenges to America as well. These are markets our businesses would love to sell into as well."

This is nonsense. US trade with Iran in 2017 amounted to just $170 million. Trade between the European Union and Iran, on the other hand, amounted to some $25 billion, with a host of major European corporations having struck trade and investment deals in the wake of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

While the UK, France and Germany all opposed Trump's decision to abrogate the nuclear agreement and have vowed to support the accord without the US, Iran has demanded that the European Union take concrete steps to assure that the substance of the deal—freeing Iran's economy from the effects of crippling sanctions in return for strict limits on the country's nuclear program—is maintained.

"With the withdrawal of America ... the European political support for the accord is not sufficient," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told the EU's energy commissioner Miguel Arias Canete on Sunday.

"The announcement of the possible withdrawal by major European companies from their cooperation with Iran is not consistent with the European Union's commitment to implementing" the agreement, Zarif was quoted as saying.

The EU and the major European powers are anxious to prevent Washington's policies from depriving them of the ability to exploit the potentially lucrative Iranian market. At the same time, European governments, while themselves deeply involved in imperialist operations in the Middle East and engaged in pressuring Iran, fear that the precipitous drive toward war with Iran would have devastating effects, including the driving up of energy costs, the destabilization of the entire region and the resurgence of the flow of refugees.

The French energy giant Total has already announced that it will withdraw from a $5 billion deal to develop the South Pars gas field in the Persian Gulf unless it is granted a sanctions waiver by US authorities. The Danish shipping giant Maersk Tankers said Thursday it would cease its activities in Iran, while German insurer Allianz and the Siemens corporation, which has sold gas turbines to Iran, have also announced that they are closing down their operations there. Airbus, which has already provided jets to Iran under a multibillion-dollar contract, has indicated it is considering compliance with US sanctions.

Meanwhile, China's state-owned oil company CNPC announced that it is prepared to take over the contract for the Iranian gas field if Total withdraws. China is Iran's top trade partner. The Russian government has signaled that it is prepared to incorporate Iran into a free trade zone.

While the unilateral US action has brought relations between Europe and America to their lowest point in the post-World War II era, with calls from European officials for an independent policy and a defense of "economic sovereignty," the EU and its member states have yet to agree on any concrete policy for defying Washington.

Proposals coming out of Brussels reportedly include the continuation of Iranian oil imports by making direct euro-denominated payments to Iran's central bank, bypassing the US financial system; paying damages to companies affected by US sanctions; and the retooling of a 1996 "blocking statute" drafted in response to US sanctions against Iran, Libya and Cuba, which makes it illegal for European firms to comply with extra-territorial sanctions. At the time, the Clinton administration provided relief for European corporations doing business in those countries, rendering the statute moot.

There is no indication that the Trump administration intends to provide any such exemptions. This means that, whatever the divisions among the European powers, trade war and political tensions will continue to intensify as the threat of a major new war in the Middle East looms.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site