

Washington uses UN session to unveil new sanctions against Iran and Venezuela

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In conjunction with President Donald's third fascistic tirade to an annual opening session of the United Nations General Assembly, Washington has seized upon the occasion to impose punishing new sanctions against both Iran and Venezuela.

US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo unveiled the new sanctions against Iran Wednesday at a conference organized on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session by the ostensibly nongovernmental organization United Against Nuclear Iran, which is headed by right-wing former US officials and funded by two billionaire Republican and Zionist donors, Thomas Kaplan and Sheldon Adelson.

Significantly, Pompeo made it clear that the target of the latest sanctions was not just Iran, but China, which accounts for half of Iran's sharply reduced oil exports, and last year relied upon Iran for 6 percent of its petroleum imports. Also, Beijing and Tehran earlier this month signed \$400 billion worth of deals connected to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of which Iran is a key component.

"We're telling China and all nations, know that we will sanction every violation of sanctionable activity," Pompeo told a cheering audience that included the Israeli ambassador to the US.

Specifically named in the new sanctions were Chinese shipping companies and their executives. These included COSCO Shipping Tanker Co. and COSCO Shipping Tanker, Seaman & Ship Management Co. along with numerous individuals.

The targeting of the Chinese companies is, in the first instance, a ratcheting up of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, begun last year after the Trump administration unilaterally and illegally abrogated the 2015 nuclear accord between the major world powers and Tehran. This campaign is explicitly aimed at reducing the country's oil exports to zero by intimidating other countries with secondary sanctions and starving the Iranian people into submission.

This latest action has also been taken, however, amid the Trump administration's massive intensification of the US

trade war with China in recent months and an increasing drumbeat of war threats against China. This includes Washington's withdrawal from the INF nuclear treaty, with the strategic aim of deploying US medium-range missiles to counter Chinese influence in Asia.

Trump last week described China as a "threat to the world," and in his address to the UN General Assembly boasted of placing "massive tariffs on more than \$500 billion worth of Chinese-made goods."

US aggression against Iran, which has placed the entire Middle East on a hair trigger for a war with incalculable consequences, is bound up with Washington's drive to assert unfettered control over the region's energy reserves—placing itself in position to deny them to its major rivals, China in particular—and to secure hegemony over the Eurasian landmass in which Iran occupies a critically strategic position.

With the targeting of China, the threat of a war against Iran spiraling into a global conflict, posing the threat of nuclear war, becomes all the more explicit.

The Trump administration has seized upon the September 14 attacks on two Saudi oil installations, which temporarily halved the kingdom's production and sent crude prices skyrocketing by 20 percent, to heighten the threat of another US war in the region, dispatching more troops to Saudi Arabia and warships to the Persian Gulf.

Without presenting a shred of evidence of Iran's culpability in the attacks—claimed by Houthis rebels in Yemen as retaliation for Saudi Arabia's near genocidal US-backed war against the impoverished Arab country—the three major European powers, Germany, France and the UK, issued a statement Tuesday indicting Tehran, effectively providing a green light for a US war.

The Trump administration also used the opening session at the UN—a body ostensibly dedicated to the preservation of peace and the protection of the political independence and territorial integrity of every nation—to escalate sanctions that are tantamount to a state of war against Venezuela, imposed with the aim of regime change.

The new sanctions, unveiled by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, target four companies, three based in Panama and one in Cyprus, involved in shipping Venezuelan oil to Cuba. As with the sanctions against Iran, the actions against Venezuela are directed not merely at effecting regime change in Caracas, but at rolling back the influence of China, as well as Russia, in Venezuela and throughout the hemisphere.

Trump used his speech to the General Assembly to vilify Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro as a “Cuban puppet” and to claim that his government was holding “15,000 political prisoners” and deploying “death squads” that were carrying out “thousands of extrajudicial killings.”

In his speech, Trump invoked the crisis in Venezuela—where the private sector today controls two-thirds of the economy and finance capital has reaped unprecedented profits—as a supposed demonstration of the failure of “socialism,” which he vowed would never come to the United States.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, a series of meetings were held aimed at escalating the US imperialist drive for regime change in Venezuela.

In a meeting convened by the Organization of American States (OAS) on Monday, 16 of the 19 states that are party to the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance—the Cold War anticommunist agreement imposed by Washington known as the Rio Pact—approved a resolution invoking the treaty to justify economic and political actions in support of the Washington’s regime-change operation.

The right-wing Latin American governments and US puppet states—Uruguay voted against the resolution and Trinidad and Tobago abstained, while Mexico, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba are not part of the pact—backed the use of the treaty to impose economic sanctions and pursue the “capture” and extradition (presumably to the US) of Venezuelan government officials.

As a mutual defense pact, the Rio Treaty can also be invoked to justify direct US military intervention. The chief of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) recently stated that his forces are “on the balls of our feet” in anticipation of an order to attack.

While some of the Latin American signatories to the Rio Pact resolution initially called for the insertion of language ruling out the use of military force, they bowed to pressure from US officials who insisted that any such provision would be “superfluous.”

On Wednesday, Trump attended a meeting of the so-called Lima Group, comprised of Latin America’s right-wing governments, in which the designated representatives of Juan Guaidó, the self-proclaimed “interim president” of Venezuela backed by Washington, were also present.

Since Guaidó, a previously little known right-wing political operative, swore himself in last January—gaining the immediate recognition of Washington and its allies as the “legitimate” government of Venezuela—his attempts to bring about US-backed regime change have produced a succession of fiascos. The meetings convened on the margins of the UN General Assembly were meant to provide life support to this conspiracy, as well as to pressure the European powers to fall in line behind Washington on Venezuela, just as they have on Iran.

Colombia’s right-wing President Iván Duque has served as the point man in this operation. He used his speech to the UN General Assembly Wednesday to denounce the Venezuelan government in lurid terms.

“The Venezuelan dictatorship is one more link in the chain of transnational terrorism,” he told the assembled delegates. “Its corrupt structures are servants of the drug cartels; its pawns are henchmen of the mafia and fuel violence in Colombia; they shelter murderers and child rapists and ignore these accomplices of the dictatorship.”

Venezuela’s Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza denounced Trump’s meeting with the Lima Group as a “meeting of shame,” akin to a “meeting of the head of a company with his workers looking for a raise by finding strategies to prejudice Venezuela.”

He went on to accuse Duque of “dedicating nearly 80 percent of his speech [at the UN] to Venezuela,” while failing to address “the problems that exist in his own country.”

He called attention to the assassinations of some 500 community leaders, unionists and leftists, the continued operations of right-wing paramilitary bands and the recent breakdown of a peace deal between the government and the FARC guerrillas under the impact of terror and repression.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, the attorney general has initiated an investigation into photographs that have surfaced depicting “Interim president” Guaidó embracing and being driven by leaders of Los Rastrojos. The Colombian drug trafficking and right-wing paramilitary band appears to have played a key role in the abortive CIA-orchestrated provocation staged last February on the Colombia-Venezuela border under the pretext of forcing through truckloads of US-supplied “aid.”



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