

COVID-19 pandemic spells no truce in US imperialism's global aggression

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The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to virtually every country on the planet, threatening the lives of millions, has done nothing to restrain the predatory and criminal worldwide operations of US imperialism.

Far from declaring a humanitarian truce as the virus threatens the lives of millions, Washington has sought to weaponize the death and disruption spread by the disease to further its regime-change operations. At the same time, US officials are carefully calculating the effects of the catastrophic pandemic on the preparations of the US military for great power conflicts, particularly with China.

In the face of appeals from both the United Nations and nominal allies in Western Europe for a lifting of punitive unilateral US sanctions, Washington has instead doubled down on its attempts to destroy the economies of Iran and Venezuela. The explicit purpose of its sanctions regimes is to inflict a sufficiently high degree of mass suffering as to force the downfall of the two countries' governments. The pandemic is seen by Washington as a means of furthering this objective.

The Trump administration imposed yet another round of sanctions against Iran on Thursday, targeting companies and individuals involved in the construction and shipping industries. Washington alleged there were links between them and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a branch of the Iranian armed forces that controls significant sections of the country's economy.

Among those targeted by the measures announced by the US Treasury Department was Al Khamael Maritime Services, an Iraqi-based shipping company that is accused of facilitating the sale of Iranian oil.

Also sanctioned was Shaykh Adnan al-Hamidawi, a senior leader of Kata'ib Hezbollah, a principal component of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the predominantly Shia militia forces that constitute an official part of the country's military. He was charged with having "planned to intimidate Iraqi politicians who did not support the removal of US forces from Iraq."

Iraq's parliament voted unanimously in January for the

full and immediate withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from Iraq. The vote came in the wake of the January 3 US drone assassination strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassem Suleimani along with Kata'ib Hezbollah leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and several other Iranians and Iraqis at Baghdad's international airport.

Since then, Washington has defied the withdrawal demand, even as it has been compelled to withdraw US troops from smaller bases in Iraq, consolidating its occupation forces at larger, more defensible sites. Iraqi officials stated this week that the Pentagon has already begun bringing in Patriot missile systems, again in defiance of the Iraqi government, which fears that they will be used in preparation for an all-out US war against Iran.

The latest sanctions follow by barely one week a previous set of punitive measures aimed at escalating the so-called maximum pressure campaign Washington has carried out against Iran since the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated the nuclear agreement between the major powers and Tehran in 2018. This was followed a year later by a steady buildup of US military forces in the Persian Gulf.

Iran, with more than 32,000 officially reported cases of coronavirus and nearly 2,400 deaths as of early Friday, is the epicenter of the pandemic in the Middle East. It has been gravely weakened in its attempt to combat the disease by the effects of the US sanctions, which have prevented Tehran from buying essential medicines and medical supplies, leading to many deaths from cancer and other diseases even before the pandemic struck.

In announcing the new sanctions on Thursday, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin repeated the US administration's cynical lie that Washington was providing "exceptions and authorizations for humanitarian aid... to help the people of Iran combat the coronavirus." In reality, by designating Iran's central bank as a sanctioned "terrorist entity," the US sanctions regime has made it impossible for Iran to purchase desperately needed drugs and supplies on the world market.

Only two days before the announcement of the new Iranian sanctions, the United Nations High Commissioner

for Human rights called for all sanctions imposed on countries to be “urgently re-evaluated.”

“In a context of global pandemic, impeding medical efforts in one country heightens the risk for all of us,” said the commissioner, Michelle Bachelet. She added that “humanitarian exemptions to sanctions measures should be given broad and practical effect, with prompt, flexible authorization for essential medical equipment and supplies.”

Washington’s murderous response to this appeal was demonstrated not only by the anti-Iran sanctions announced on Thursday, but also with a further attack on Venezuela announced by the US Justice Department on the same day in the form of a grotesque set of indictments branding every senior official in Caracas as a drug dealer and placing multi-million-dollar bounties on their heads.

Already subject to a US economic embargo tantamount to a state of war, Venezuela has seen its economy collapse even further as oil prices have plummeted.

Speaking to a virtual press conference Thursday, US Attorney General William Barr presented Wild West-style wanted posters offering \$15 million for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and lesser sums for other top Venezuelan officials. He said that the indictment was aimed at “rooting out the extensive corruption within the Venezuelan government,” and compared it directly to the US pursuit of former Panamanian President Manuel Noriega, who was ousted and jailed on US charges of racketeering and drug trafficking following the 1989 invasion of Panama by the US military. He refused to comment on whether Washington was contemplating sending troops into Venezuela.

The pretense that Washington is carrying out a legal intervention to fight “corruption” and defend the Venezuelan people against government officials enriching themselves is patently absurd. On this basis, it would have to indict virtually every government in Latin America, beginning with that of its closest South American ally, Colombia, where there is ample evidence of state sponsorship of drug trafficking.

Barr also said that there had been no consultation on the indictments with Juan Guaidó, the right-wing politician who swore himself in as “interim president” in January of last year and was immediately recognized by Washington. The indictments represent a tacit admission that this operation has failed miserably since Guaidó’s abortive attempt last April to foment a coup against Maduro. The most recent Venezuela poll indicated that just 3 percent of the population recognized Guaidó as president.

Just as the response within the US financial oligarchy and the Trump administration to the spread of the coronavirus is centered on its effects on the markets, so within the US state

apparatus it is focused on how this deadly disease will affect the global position of US imperialism, in particular vis-a-vis its most significant rival, China.

The Trump administration has pursued a viciously anti-Chinese propaganda campaign over the coronavirus, preventing this week’s Group of 7 ministers meeting from issuing a joint statement because of thuggish US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s insistence that it describe the pandemic as the “Wuhan virus.”

The US military, meanwhile, has carried out provocative military exercises directed against China, including a live-fire missile launch in the Philippine Sea on Wednesday and the sailing of a US warship through the sensitive Taiwan Strait on Thursday.

These military operations, from Iraq to the Asia-Pacific region, are continuing even as the US military itself is confronting an ever wider spread of the coronavirus within its own ranks. The US aircraft carrier *Teddy Roosevelt* has been forced to divert to Guam after 25 sailors tested positive. Emergency field hospitals are being set up there in anticipation of a far wider spread of the disease among the ship’s 5,000 crew members. Movement of other troops has been curtailed for fear of spreading the disease.

An article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine warns that the abject failure of the Trump administration to either contain the spread of the coronavirus or mitigate its increasingly devastating effects threatens to undermine Washington’s global position, as Beijing becomes the principal source for foreign assistance to countries confronting the pandemic.

Its authors, Kurt Campbell, former US assistant secretary of state for East Asia, and Rush Doshi, director of the Brookings Institution’s China Strategy Initiative, warn:

“As Washington falters, Beijing is moving quickly and adeptly to take advantage of the opening created by US mistakes, filling the vacuum to position itself as the global leader in pandemic response... Beijing understands that if it is seen as leading, and Washington is seen as unable or unwilling to do so, this perception could fundamentally alter the United States’ position in global politics and the contest for leadership in the twenty-first century.”

US imperialism’s response to this perceived threat is a resort to military force. Even as humanity faces the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic, imperialism is preparing far greater horrors in the form of a new world war.



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