

Biden administration continues “maximum pressure” assault on Iran

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In its first days in office, the Biden administration has made it clear that it intends to continue enforcing the “maximum pressure” campaign of draconian sanctions and military provocations that have brought misery to the people of Iran, while threatening to plunge the Persian Gulf region, and indeed the entire world, into war.

This was driven home with the announcement by the US Central Command (CENTCOM) that it had conducted another fly-over of the Persian Gulf by a lone B-52 Stratofortress. This was the sixth such provocative deployment of the heavy bombers to threaten Iran since November, and the first carried out with Biden as commander-in-chief. While the previous overflights involved two B-52s, this one consisted of the lone bomber accompanied by a squadron of F-15s from Saudi Arabia, Iran’s most virulent enemy in the Arab world.

In addition, Bloomberg reported that the US Justice Department has ordered a tanker allegedly carrying Iranian oil seized and brought to the United States.

In the course of his presidential election campaign, Biden had pledged to rejoin the 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the major powers. The agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the Trump administration unilaterally abrogated in November 2018, traded the lifting of economic sanctions for stringent limitations on Iran’s civilian nuclear program. After breaking the deal, the Trump administration not only reinstated the old sanctions, but imposed a whole series of new ones designed to strangle the Iranian economy and starve the country’s population into submission.

In his first press conference as Biden’s secretary of state, Antony Blinken on Wednesday conditioned a US return to the nuclear accord on Iran first resuming its full compliance with the terms of the agreement, while indicating that Washington would throw a demand for still more concessions from Tehran into the bargain.

“President Biden has been very clear in saying that if Iran comes back into full compliance with its obligations under the JCPOA, the United States would do the same thing,”

Blinken said at the State Department press conference.

“But we are a long ways from that point. Iran is out of compliance on a number of fronts. And it would take some time...for it to come back into compliance in time for us then to assess whether it was meeting its obligations.”

Iranian officials have insisted that it is up to Washington to unconditionally lift the sanctions that it imposed when it tore up the international agreement in violation of a United Nations resolution. Tehran has promised that in return it will quickly reverse steps it took in response to both the unilateral US action and the failure of the western European signatories of the agreement to take any significant actions to offset the illegal US sanctions regime. Tehran’s steps have included the accumulation of greater quantities of enriched uranium and the enrichment of uranium to a higher level than allowed under the agreement, as well as the reactivation of advanced centrifuges that had been shut down under the deal.

Blinken went on to insist that Washington would demand that Tehran renegotiate the 2015 accord, replacing it with a “longer and stronger agreement” that would presumably impose perpetual restrictions upon Iran’s nuclear agreement while addressing what the new secretary of state described as “a number of other issues that are deeply problematic in the relationship with Iran.” This refers to a US bid to force Iran to scrap its conventional missile program and give up its influence in Middle East in the interests of US hegemony over the oil-rich region.

In response to the US demands for concessions from Iran, the country’s foreign minister, Javad Zarif, on Thursday tweeted what he described as a “reality check” for Blinken. It was the US, he pointed out, that had “violated JCPOA” and “blocked food/medicine to Iranians,” punishing Iran “for its adherence to the agreement.” Iran, he insisted, had “abided by the JCPOA” and “only took foreseen remedial measures” in response to US aggression.

“Now, who should take 1st step?” Zarif asked. In earlier tweet, he made clear Tehran’s position: “It was the US that broke the deal—for no reason. It must remedy its wrong; then

Iran will respond.”

Meanwhile, an Iranian government spokesman appealed directly to the Biden administration to lift sanctions that have restricted the country’s ability to import vaccines needed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Iran harder than any other country in the region, with 1.4 million reported cases and nearly 60,000 reported deaths.

“Since [Biden’s] administration claims not to be anti-science like the previous one...one expects it to free the transfer of Iran’s own foreign exchange resources to fight the coronavirus and for health and food, and lift banking sanctions quickly,” government spokesman Ali Rabiei told state television.

With its appeal for “unity” with the Republican Party, the Biden administration has little stomach for a swift and sharp reversal of the “maximum pressure” campaign imposed by Trump. Leading right-wing congressional Democrats, including Senator Robert Menendez, the incoming chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, have also opposed any letup of US aggression against Iran.

Biden has also pledged to “engage” with Israel before taking any steps to change the current “maximum pressure” regime against Iran, while Blinken has repeatedly stated that the new administration views Israel’s security as “sacrosanct.”

Tel Aviv has not only opposed any US return to the JCPOA but has threatened to militarily attack Iran and its nuclear facilities in response. This was expressed most directly by the new chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, who gave a bellicose speech on Tuesday, declaring a return to the Iran nuclear deal an “intolerable threat” to Israel. He said that “anything that is similar to the current deal is a bad thing, and we cannot allow it,” adding that he had ordered the IDF to prepare new “operative plans” for attacking Iran.

Significantly, the first high-level US official to visit Israel since Biden’s inauguration is Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of the CENTCOM, which oversees the US military buildup against Iran as well as the Pentagon’s operations throughout the Middle East. He arrived on Thursday for talks with Kochavi and the IDF general staff.

The visit comes after the Pentagon quietly shifted Israel from the jurisdiction of the European Command to CENTCOM, enabling closer military collaboration in military operations against Iran. Israel had been excluded from CENTCOM to facilitate winning the support from right-wing Arab oil monarchies and dictatorships for US wars of aggression in the Middle East. While previously these regimes had formally opposed military ties with Israel because of its oppression of the Palestinian people, they have since abandoned this pretense, with several of them

signing US-sponsored “normalization” agreements with Tel Aviv in the interests of forging an anti-Iranian axis.

Conversely, the first high-level Israeli visit to Washington since the change in administrations will be that of Yossi Cohen, the chief of Israel’s spy agency Mossad, who will meet with Biden on the Iran question.

The inflammatory rhetoric of the Israeli government toward Iran is driven in part by an election in March—the fourth in barely two years—in which Netanyahu, who is facing trial on multiple corruption charges, is appealing to his right-wing base. This makes the threat of war no less real, however, under conditions in which Tel Aviv has carried out continuous airstrikes against Iranian-linked targets and organized the Mossad assassination of Iran’s top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, in November.

Nor will the threat of an eruption of US militarism in the Middle East lessen under a Biden administration. Blinken and others who have returned to positions of power in Washington were the architects of the US-orchestrated wars for regime change in both Libya and Syria.

Moreover, they view Iran through the prism of the US conflict with China and the strategic imperative of securing US domination of the Middle East, which provides much of China’s energy imports.

The ratcheting up of Trump’s reckless and dangerous anti-China policy is being pursued by the veterans of Obama’s “pivot to Asia.” The warmongering character of the new administration’s attitude toward Beijing was clearly expressed by Biden’s nominee for US ambassador to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who told a Senate panel Wednesday that China is a “a strategic adversary,” whose actions “threaten our security, they threaten our values and they threaten our way of life.”



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