US flies B-1 bomber over Persian Gulf: “All options on the table” against Iran

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The Pentagon announced Sunday that the US Air Force conducted another flyover of the Persian Gulf by a B-1B strategic bomber. The resumption of these threatening operations, which were steadily ratcheted up in the waning days of the Trump administration, came amid warnings of “military options” by the Biden administration over Iran’s nuclear program.

In a statement on Twitter, the US Air Force’s Central Command, responsible for American military operations in the Middle East, said that the flight of the B-1B Lancer Bomber over the strategic Strait of Hormuz Saturday sent “a clear message of reassurance” to Washington’s allies in the region.

The bomber was accompanied by fighter jets dispatched by regimes of the US-led anti-Iran axis, including Israel, the reactionary monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and the Egyptian military dictatorship of Gen. Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi. This air squadron also flew over the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and its strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The menacing military maneuver came amid expectations that talks on the moribund Iran nuclear deal will resume in Vienna at the end of this month between Tehran and the six major powers that are also signatories to the agreement: the US, China, Russia, the UK, France and Germany.

Signed in 2015, the so-called JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), which traded tight restrictions on Tehran’s nuclear program for the lifting of economic sanctions, was unilaterally blown up by the Trump administration, which imposed a “maximum pressure” sanctions regime that targeted both Iran and any country or company that dared to trade with it. It did so as Iran continued to abide by the terms of the agreement, even though Washington never provided significant sanctions relief.

The Biden administration has maintained the draconian sanctions in place, while the Western European powers have mounted no challenge to what amounts to a financial and trade blockade tantamount to a state of war against Iran. The sanctions have deprived Iranians of imported food and medicine, condemning many to hunger and an early death. In response, Iran has stopped observing some of the restrictions imposed upon its nuclear program under the agreement, including on its level of uranium enrichment and the size of its stockpile.

US President Joe Biden met on the sidelines of the G20 meeting in Rome Saturday with heads of the NATO member states that are signatories to the Iran deal: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

The four powers issued a joint statement designed to put pressure on Tehran. It accused Iran of having “accelerated the pace of provocative nuclear steps.” It declared their “determination to ensure that Iran can never develop or acquire a nuclear weapon,” while demanding that Tehran “return to a good faith effort” to advance negotiations on reviving the agreement. It added, menacingly, “That is the only sure way to avoid a dangerous escalation, which is not in any country’s interest.”

The statement presented Iran’s breaching of the limits set by the JCPOA, not the US abrogation of the entire agreement and the imposition of its “maximum pressure” sanctions regime, as the trigger for the “dangerous escalation” threatened by the Western powers.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry responded to the joint statement by insisting that the country has no plans for building nuclear weapons and that its nuclear program

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remains dedicated entirely to civilian purposes.

There have been six rounds of talks in Vienna between Iran and the major powers that have produced no progress. The sessions have been suspended since June, when the new government of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took office.

The Iranian government sees little to negotiate. It has stated its willingness to return to full compliance with the restrictions imposed under the JCPOA once the US ends its boycott of the agreement and lifts sanctions.

"We have already had enough of empty words," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said at a press conference Monday. "We have been waiting for an action that has been delayed for months."

For its part, the Biden administration has raised the need to "fix" the JCPOA and has proposed new measures that would impose restrictions on Iran's missile program and force Tehran to cede its influence in the Middle East to Washington's drive for hegemony over the oil-rich region.

In an interview on CBS News Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, a chief proponent of these new demands on Tehran, responded to a question of whether the US plans "include military" options, declaring, "As we always say, every option is on the table."

Washington, he added, was also preparing "other necessary options if Iran is not prepared to engage quickly in good faith" negotiations. Blinken questioned whether the US could "actually recapture all of the benefits of the agreement," given that Iran has supposedly been "learning enough, doing enough" to enhance its capabilities to produce a nuclear weapon.

Blinken's remarks were widely reported by the media in Israel. Israel Defense Force Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi stated at the beginning of this year that he had instructed the country's military to draw up fresh plans for attacking Iran. Last week, the Israeli government announced a $1.5 billion program to make preparations for a war against Iran and secure new weapons, including bunker-busting bombs needed to destroy Iranian underground nuclear facilities. The *Times of Israel* noted that the US B-1B bomber that flew over the Persian Gulf on Saturday is capable of carrying bunker-busting bombs.

Underlying the aggressive US posture toward Iran is its intersection with the increasingly open preparations by Washington for a military confrontation with China.

Beijing and Tehran signed an agreement earlier this year that provides for $400 billion in Chinese investment in Iran under the Belt and Road initiative in exchange for the guarantee of discounted oil exports to China for the next 25 years. It is estimated that Iranian oil exports to China could reach 600,000 barrels a day next year, effectively breaching the US blockade.

Even as Washington has attempted to carry out a strategic shift from the decades of war in the Middle East to its "great power" conflict with China, this conflict threatens to ignite a new and far more devastating war in the region, while turning every continent into a potential battlefield.

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