

The US to turn up heat on Iran

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The US administration is already signalling aggressive new moves against Iran, following the expiry of President Obama's December 31 deadline for a negotiated deal over Tehran's nuclear programs. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared on Monday that "the door to dialogue" was still open, but warned that the US would not "stand by" while Iran took "steps towards the possible production of nuclear weapons".

Preparations for the imposition of further tough sanctions on Iran are well underway. Representatives of the so-called P5+1—the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany—are due to meet within the next fortnight to discuss punitive measures against Iran in the UN Security Council. While China this week publicly ruled out more sanctions, the US and its allies are ready to proceed—with or without UN approval.

The immediate steps were laid out in a *New York Times* article last Sunday. Unnamed White House officials noted that domestic unrest inside Iran and technical difficulties with its uranium enrichment could make Iranian leaders "particularly vulnerable to strong and immediate new sanctions". In a bid to exploit political tensions inside Iran, the Obama administration wanted to target the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which had been involved in suppressing anti-government protests.

An article in the *Washington Post* on December 30 noted that the administration had been taking "a dramatically harsher tone on Iran" even before unveiling new sanctions. The measures would probably be imposed in three ways—at the UN Security Council, in conjunction with allies and unilaterally by the US—more or less simultaneously. The first move in the UN was likely to be delayed until February, when France, which backs punitive measures against Iran, replaces China as chairman of the Security Council.

The most menacing signs of a looming confrontation are to be found in the mounting media campaign to

vilify *New York Times* published article on Wednesday purporting to reveal that Iran had "hidden an increasingly large part of its atomic complex in networks of tunnels and bunkers across the country". The story, republished and reported around the world, conjured up "a maze of tunnels" that "further obscured" Iran's "notoriously opaque nuclear effort". This "cloak of invisibility" was itself "something of a stealth weapon" for Tehran.

Despite its length, the article was remarkably short on facts. It pointed again to the underground uranium enrichment plant near the city of Qom that was "revealed" by Obama at the G-20 summit in September. Iran had already declared the Qom plant to the International Atomic Energy Agency. The IAEA subsequently visited the site and found that it was still under construction with no equipment installed. That did not prevent the *Times* from commenting breathlessly on the large number of tunnels in Iran, the presence of foreign companies selling tunnelling equipment and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "abiding interest in tunnels" due to his professional career as a transportation engineer—none of which is surprising given the country's mountainous character.

The article placed considerable weight on recent claims by an Iranian exile opposition group—the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)—that Iran had "a group of factories" buried in mountains east of Tehran that specialise in "manufacturing nuclear warheads". It noted that the NCRI had exposed the existence of Iran's underground enrichment plant at Natanz in 2002 and claimed that the "discovery" of the Qom plant verified its other allegations. The article dismissed comments by former IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei that most of the NCRI's claims had proved to be "bogus".

Promoting the NCRI's propaganda as good coin recalls the way in which the Bush administration and media used "intelligence" provided by Iraqi exiles on

so-called weapons of mass destruction to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The NCRI is connected to the People's Mujahedin or MEK, a petty bourgeois nationalist formation that has carried out terrorist attacks inside Iran. Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter pointed out in his book *Target Iran* that the NCRI's exposure of Natanz was not based on its own sources but was fed to it by Israeli intelligence, which no doubt continues to provide information—and disinformation.

The *New York Times* article is just the latest in a string of stories that have the hallmarks of articles planted by intelligence bodies. Last month the British-based *Times* published dubious leaked Iranian documents, supposedly showing the regime had been researching a trigger device for a nuclear weapon. Last week, the Associated Press cited an intelligence report from an unnamed country claiming that Iran had a secret deal with Kazakhstan to purchase 1,372 tonnes of purified uranium ore or “yellow cake”. Iran, which has repeatedly denied having a nuclear weapons program, has dismissed these claims as fabrications. The obvious purpose of this steady drip of scare stories is to manufacture a climate of public uncertainty and fear to justify punitive measures against Iran.

The most sinister aspect of the *New York Times* article was its open discussion of the feasibility of attacking Iran's “maze of tunnels”. After noting that Israel did not have the conventional weapons needed to destroy underground facilities, the newspaper added that “the Obama administration has been careful to leave the military option on the table, and the Pentagon is racing to develop a deadly tunnel weapon”. Initial testing of the Massive Ordnance Penetrator took place in 2007, the program was accelerated last year and the huge 13.6 tonne bomb is due to be ready for use later this year.

While the Obama administration may have no immediate plans for a military attack, there is a remorseless logic to its actions. If hefty sanctions against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard fail to bring Tehran to heel, the US Congress is debating legislation to empower the Obama administration to enforce a crippling embargo on refined petroleum exports to Iran. All the time, the “military option” is kept in play, further inflaming tensions and heightening the danger of a slide into another US-led neo-colonial war.

Obama's preparations for confrontation with Iran dovetail with the escalating US-led war in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the extension of the “war on terrorism” to Yemen. Washington's threats against Iran have no more to do with its alleged nuclear weapons programs than Obama's AfPak war is about eliminating Al Qaeda. The overriding US aim is to establish its economic and strategic dominance in the energy-rich areas of Central Asia and the Middle East—regions in which Iran has historically been a vital linchpin. Like Bush, Obama is recklessly pursuing a strategy aimed at shoring up America's waning power at the expense of its rivals, despite the obvious danger that a conflict with Iran would not only convulse the Middle East but threaten to draw in other major powers.

Peter Symonds

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