

Trump to light fuse under Iran nuclear deal, as part of more aggressive anti-Iran strategy

By Jordan Shilton
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US President Donald Trump is expected to announce Thursday a new more aggressive policy against Iran. This is said to include refusing to certify that Tehran is in compliance with the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, although all its signatories—including the US—concede that Iran is fulfilling all its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Trump's refusal to certify Iranian compliance would not by itself constitute US abrogation of the nuclear accord. But it would light a fuse under the agreement, which was only reached after the US, assisted by its European allies, imposed punishing sanctions on Iran and the Obama administration repeatedly threatened Tehran with war.

Russia, China, the major European powers and large sections of the US political and military-security establishment are vehemently opposed to Trump's apparent plan to use the threat that the US Congress could "snap back" sanctions that froze Iran out of the world banking system to pressure Tehran into renegotiating the nuclear deal.

They fear Trump's actions will cause the Iran accord to rapidly unravel, setting Iran and the US on the fast-track toward a war which could engulf the entire Middle East.

Trump has repeatedly denounced the Iran deal in scathing terms, declaring, in the same UN General Assembly speech in which he threatened to annihilate North Korea, that it was an "embarrassment" to the United States.

If press reports are to be believed, Trump wanted to use the October 15 Congressional deadline for presidential certification of Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal, to blow it up. But US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson prevailed on him to serve notice of its impending execution instead, for fear that US abrogation of the JCPOA would lead to an open breach with Washington's European NATO allies.

Regardless of the intentions of Trump and his advisers, the prospects for renegotiating the deal are dim to say the least. Iran has rejected point blank its reopening and the European powers have indicated they are opposed, noting that such action would only make it more difficult to convince North Korea it could ever place trust in a deal negotiated with Washington.

It is much more likely that the tougher terms pushed for by

the US, including the elimination of so-called sunset clauses in the current deal that lift some of the restrictions on Iran's civil nuclear program after ten years and the inclusion of provisions limiting Tehran's missile program, will kill the JCPOA.

At the gathering at the White House last Thursday where Trump ominously spoke of the "calm before the storm" while surrounded by top military generals, he also said that it was necessary to put an end to "Iranian aggression."

The reality is that the only aggressor in the current situation is Washington. As eight reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency over the past two years confirm, Tehran is in full compliance with the JCPOA.

Over the past quarter-century, US imperialism has laid waste to wide swathes of the Middle East and Central Asia, from the Gulf War and the war in Afghanistan to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the 2011 "regime change" war in Libya, and now the war in Syria and Iraq. These operations, which were aimed in part at strategically isolating and encircling Iran, have only deepened the crisis of US imperialism.

They have failed to consolidate Washington's hegemony over the world's most important oil-exporting region. Indeed, Washington's system of client states in the region is breaking down, with a Saudi-led coalition of Gulf States imposing an embargo on Qatar, home to the largest US military base in the region, and Turkey making overtures to both Russia and Iran.

This crisis is only encouraging the Trump administration to adopt ever more reckless measures, including seeking to carve out an US-sponsored "rebel" enclave in eastern Syria so as to prevent the establishment of a "land bridge" linking Iran with southern Lebanon, and moving to scuttle the Iran nuclear deal, while knowing full well that it will place Washington and Tehran on a collision course.

The fact that Iran has abided by the deal's provisions means that Trump will have to declare that the agreement is no longer in the US "national interest" to justify his refusal to certify compliance. Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster have reportedly developed a plan whereby Trump will declare Tehran in breach of the agreement "in spirit" on the basis of its ballistic missile program and support for groups and states hostile to US interests, including Hezbollah, Hamas, the Assad regime, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

This approach has reportedly been endorsed by substantial sections of the Republican Party, which opposed the signing of the nuclear deal, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has repeatedly demanded Iran be subjected to much more onerous conditions, including an outright ban on any civil nuclear program or, failing that, that the agreement be scrapped altogether.

The US media is also citing anonymous sources as saying that on Thursday Trump will also announce that he has designated Teheran's powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps (RCG) as a "terrorist organization," placing it on a par with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. The RGC has played a major role in Iran's intervention to prop up the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, supported Iraqi government forces in their fight against Islamic State, and also controls substantial sectors of Iran's economy.

Such a move by Trump would not only dramatically escalate tensions between the United States and Iran throughout the Middle East. It would also make it much more difficult for foreign companies to do business with the Islamic Republic, since transactions involving the RGC would be prohibited.

Trump's bellicose threats against Iran are enflaming an already highly-combustible situation in the region. As the deadline for the US president to certify Iranian compliance approaches, a series of counter-threats have been issued from Tehran, and Reuters is reporting that Trump's provocations have served to bring together the rival wings of the Islamic Republic's ruling elite— those led by President Rouhani who have been pushing for rapprochement with the western imperialist powers and their so-called hardline opponents.

Iranian media has reported that "all options are on the table" if Trump blacklists the RGC. "It seems the Trump administration understands only swear words, and needs some shocks to understand the new meaning of power in the world," Iranian armed forces' spokesman and RGC member Masoud Jazayeri declared Tuesday.

The European powers, above all Germany, oppose cancelling the Iran deal from the standpoint of defending their own imperialist interests. Berlin and Paris have taken advantage of the JCPOA to increase their economic ties with Iran, including through a multi-billion dollar energy deal concluded earlier this year by France's Total. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as part of Berlin's attempt to assert its own ambitions independently of Washington, has repeatedly cited the Iran deal as a model for resolving the crisis on the Korean Peninsula, a position reiterated this past weekend by outgoing Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel.

Beyond these immediate economic interests, the European imperialist powers see their own geostrategic and security concerns in Europe and the Middle East threatened if the US scuttles the nuclear deal, potentially triggering a major war.

Even if a war did not ultimately involve other powers from outside the region, such as Russia, it would raze a region

already ravaged by war, triggering a renewed influx of refugees to the European continent, while roiling the world economy. Oil prices, for one would, shoot up, a development that would hit Europe, which relies on supplies from the region, much more than the US.

The divisions existing within the US ruling elite are similarly of a tactical character. Those forces, including former Obama administration officials and some within the Trump administration, who oppose a move by Washington to repudiate the JCPOA are no less determined to see Iran brought to heel, but they want any confrontation to take place under the most favourable conditions for US imperialism. By stepping up pressure on Iran over its support for the Syrian government, militant forces in Lebanon and Yemen, and its missile program while remaining part of the nuclear deal, these forces calculate that Washington can "contain" Iran, so as to concentrate on confronting US imperialism's most important strategic competitors in Eurasia.

This view was summed up by Wendy Sherman, the Obama administration's lead negotiator on the Iran deal in 2015. Writing in an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, she observed, "If President Trump undermines the nuclear deal, the repercussions for American foreign policy will be disastrous: It will drive a wedge between the United States and Europe, weakening the critical trans-Atlantic relationship and increasing the influence of Iran, Russia and China." She continued, "Unjustified unilateral American action will give the Iranians the moral high ground, allowing them to rightly say that it was the United States, not them, who killed the deal. At the same time, if Iran stays in the agreement with the other countries who are party to it, the United States will lose any standing to bring concerns to the Joint Commission, the forum the agreement set up to oversee progress."

In other words, Sherman and her co-thinkers want Washington to prevent the European powers from gaining the upper hand in dealing with Iran at the expense of the United States, while at the same time avoiding US foreign policy being diverted away from its broader agenda of aggressively confronting its chief economic and geostrategic rivals: China and Russia.

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