

Trump vetoes war powers resolution on Iran

By Bill Van Auken
8 May 2020

The United States Senate Thursday fell well short of the two-thirds majority needed to override President Donald Trump's veto of a war powers resolution that purported to limit his authority to wage aggressive war against Iran.

Forty-nine senators voted against the veto and 44 to sustain it. Seven Republicans joined Democrats in voting to override the president's actions. This was similar to the lineup in the February Senate vote to pass the resolution, when eight Republicans joined Democrats in supporting it.

While the legislation was passed by the Senate in February and the House in March, it took nearly two months to get to the White House because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The legislation was introduced in the wake of the criminal January 3 drone missile assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran's most senior leaders, shortly after he arrived at Baghdad international airport on a diplomatic mission to meet with then Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. A top leader of Iraq's Shia militia movement, part of the country's armed forces, was also killed in the attack, along with several other Iranians and Iraqis.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell defended Trump's veto in remarks delivered on the Senate floor Thursday, calling the war powers resolution "misguided" and defending the assassination of the Iranian leader, "We must maintain the measure of deterrence we restored with the decisive strike on Suleimani."

Democratic Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, one of the principal sponsors of the legislation, used his own remarks to insist that the measure was "not part of a strategy to hurt President Trump." He added, "I've advocated these same positions as have other members of this body under presidents who were both Democratic and Republican."

For his part, Trump issued two statements, one a formal presidential veto message and the other a crudely political statement issued from the Pentagon in which he described the bill as a "very insulting resolution, introduced by Democrats as part of a strategy to win an election on November 3 by dividing the Republican Party." He accused the eight Republicans who voted in favor of the measure of having "played right into their hands."

He continued by insisting that the resolution was unnecessary, declaring that the US "not engaged in the use of force against Iran." He indicated that the assassination of Suleimani in Iraq followed by Iranian missile strikes on US bases in Iraq, in which no American personnel were killed, had ended the matter. As for the assassination, he claimed it "was fully authorized by law, including by the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 and Article II of the Constitution."

He criticized the war powers resolution for implying that the US president's right to launch a war without congressional approval was limited to the defense of the United States and its military against "imminent attack."

"That is incorrect," he wrote. "We live in a hostile world of evolving threats, and the Constitution recognizes that the President must be able to anticipate our adversaries' next moves and take swift and decisive action in response."

In other words, he claimed that the US Constitution recognized the right of an American president to wage preventive, i.e., aggressive war, a war crime under international law. What precise language in the US Constitution authorizes such criminal actions, Trump did not say.

In the separate formal statement addressed to the Senate, Trump said that the resolution was "unnecessary and dangerous," adding that its apparent

aim was to prevent an escalation of conflict with Iran. “Yet no such escalation has occurred over the past 4 months, contrary to the often dire and confident predictions of many,” the statement said.

Trump’s assertion of the essentially unrestricted right of the president to wage war when and how he pleases, regardless of constitutional limitations or popular sentiment, is hardly an innovation. His predecessor, Democrat Barack Obama, asserted the same right in relation to the US-NATO war for regime change in Libya in 2011.

The latest resolution on Iran, which is founded upon the War Powers Resolution passed by Congress in 1973 after the US withdrawal from Vietnam and over the veto of then-President Richard Nixon, was largely toothless in terms of restraining presidential power.

It called for the US president to end armed conflict with Iran absent a declaration of war or authorization for the use of military force approved by Congress. It included a provision, however, ensuring the president the power to carry out military action in the face of an “imminent attack” without such approval.

Given that the initial defense of the US assassination of Suleimani was based on the phony claim that it was designed to forestall just such an “imminent attack,” the resolution provided a deliberately designed escape clause to assure that unlimited power to launch military aggression would remain in the hands of the White House.

The Trump administration later backed off of the claim that the murder of Suleimani was aimed at preempting any imminent attack on US forces, acknowledging that the killing had been designed to curb Iran’s “malign activity” in the Middle East, i.e., its interference in Washington’s imposition of undisputed hegemony in the region. Suleimani was killed as he was attempting to negotiate an easing of tensions between Iran and the Saudi monarchy, thereby threatening the anti-Iranian axis built up around the Saudis and other Gulf oil sheikdoms along with Israel.

Just two days before Trump’s veto of the Iran war powers resolution, an overwhelming bipartisan majority of 387 members of the House of Representatives issued a letter to the US State Department calling for the use of “robust diplomacy” to force an extension of an arms embargo against Iran that is supposed to expire in October as part of the 2015

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal concluded between Tehran and the major powers.

The lifting of sanctions against Iran was offered under the agreement in exchange for Tehran drastically curtailing its nuclear program. The Trump administration abrogated the agreement in May 2018 imposing a series of increasingly punishing unilateral sanctions under a “maximum pressure” campaign that is tantamount to a state of war.

While Washington’s thuggish secretary of state, Michael Pompeo, has threatened to invoke the “snapback” of previously existing UN sanctions in order to maintain the embargo, Washington has no standing to do so having broken the nuclear deal. It may pressure its erstwhile European allies to pursue a continued embargo, but it is virtually certain that China and Russia, both signatories to the agreement, would veto such a maneuver.

The bipartisan congressional group calling for increased US pressure against Iran is led by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel of New York. Its action underscores the support of both the Democratic and Republican parties for the campaign of US aggression against Iran.

Washington has steadily tightened US economic sanctions against Iran under conditions in which the country has faced one of the highest mortality rates in the world from the coronavirus pandemic, with over 103,000 confirmed cases as of Thursday and nearly 6,500 deaths. The sanctions regime has prevented Tehran from importing essential medicine and medical supplies needed to fight the pandemic and provide adequate health care, leading to thousands of unnecessary and preventable deaths.

The deadly pandemic is seen by Washington as another useful weapon of war in its protracted campaign to force the Iranian people into submission and effect regime change in the oil-rich and geostrategically important country.

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