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Pentagon and Iran trade threats over renewed oil sanctions

Washington and Tehran have traded threats that the strategic Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly a fifth of the world's petroleum passes, could become the flashpoint for the tensions generated by the Trump administration's attempt to derail the Iran nuclear agreement and reimpose crippling economic sanctions against the country.

The US Central Command, which oversees the Pentagon's far-ranging military interventions from North Africa and the Middle East to Central Asia, issued a statement Thursday asserting that it stood "ready to ensure the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce" through the strait, while insisting that the role of the US military was to "promote security and stability in the region."

In reality, after laying waste to entire societies, from Iraq, to Libya and Syria, US imperialism is preparing for a military confrontation with Iran that could quickly eclipse the bloodbaths in those countries and precipitate a regional and even world war.

The Pentagon's threats followed remarks by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during a visit to Europe aimed at countering escalating US pressure to choke off European trade and investment with Iran.

Speaking at a press conference in Bern alongside his Swiss counterpart Alain Berset, Rouhani said it was "incorrect and unwise" for Washington to believe that "one day all oil producing countries would export their surplus oil and Iran would be the only country that cannot export its oil."

Rouhani's remarks were followed up on Thursday, by a statement from the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which directs Iranian naval operations in the

Persian Gulf. Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari welcomed the Iranian president's "decisive" response to the threats by the Trump administration and expressed confidence in his force's ability "to make the enemies understand what using the Strait of Hormuz by all or none could mean."

Iranian officials had issued a similar threat to block the strategic strait—the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean—in 2012 in response to sanctions imposed under the Obama administration. Tehran has repeatedly made it clear that the cutting off of its oil exports, which account for 60 percent of Iran's foreign earnings and provide the lion's share of the government's revenues, is a red line that would spark retaliation. Military analysts have estimated that Iran could tie up shipping for a month, unleashing a sharp rise in energy prices and potential global economic turmoil.

Rouhani also suggested during his trip to Europe that Iran could curtail its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the international watchdog agency that has repeatedly confirmed that Tehran is in compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal it signed with the US, Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia, accepting the drastic curtailment of its nuclear programs in return for a step-by-step easing of international sanctions.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is to meet with his counterparts from Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia in Vienna today in an attempt to salvage the deal in the aftermath of US President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from and violation of the agreement, together with the re-imposition of punishing US economic sanctions. Iran is demanding that the European powers provide guarantees that the benefits of sanctions relief will continue, in terms of trade and investment, despite the new aggression by the United States.

Under the sanctions legislation imposed under Obama, the punishing measures originally imposed against Iran automatically "snap back" with Trump's repudiation of the nuclear accord. Early next month, sanctions targeting Iran's automotive sector, trade and gold, as well as other key metals, go back into effect. And, on November 4, the sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector and petroleum-related transactions and transactions with the central bank of Iran, as well as ports, shipbuilding, insurance and more, resume with full force.

"Our goal is to increase pressure on the Iranian regime by reducing to zero its revenue on crude oil sales," said the State Department's Director of Policy Planning Brian Hook Monday.

Echoing an earlier ultimatum delivered by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Hook claimed that Washington's strategy "is not about changing the regime, it is about changing the behavior of the leadership in Iran."

The thrust of American policy, however, is to impose such a crippling economic blockade against Iran—essentially an act of war—that the government either collapses or is compelled to submit to US domination of the region. Hook demanded that Iran behave as a "normal country," by which Washington means a vassal state of US imperialism.

The US government has sent contradictory messages over whether it will grant temporary exemptions from retaliatory secondary sanctions against countries that are heavily dependent upon Iranian crude, including China, India and Turkey.

Asked on Tuesday whether China would reduce its imports of Iranian oil as a result of Washington's ultimatums, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman replied that China is opposed to unilateral sanctions. Beijing is both Iran's top trading partner and a major foreign investor, with two-way trade increasing 21 percent last year to US \$37.3 billion.

But China's Minister for Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi told the *South China Morning Post* that Tehran could not rely on China to offset the US sanctions. "Companies will stop working with Iran because they understand they will lose the American market," he said. "China can be a replacement, but very limited."

Washington dispatched its ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley to New Delhi in an attempt to strong-arm the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi into "rethinking its relationship with Iran." India is the second-largest importer of Iranian oil after China. Government sources in India told the media that while New Delhi was "engaging" with the US on the issue, it would have to pursue its own national interests. Previously, the Indian government stated that it did not recognize unilateral sanctions, but only those imposed through the United Nations.

Japan, meanwhile, has reportedly informed the US that it cannot further cut its Iranian oil imports without damaging the country's economy. At the same time, however, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called off a planned trip to Iran—the first by a Japanese prime minister since before the overthrow of the Shah's US-backed dictatorship nearly 40 years ago—in apparent deference to US attempts to isolate Tehran.

While ratcheting up the danger of a wider war in the Middle East, Washington's measures against Iran are simultaneously escalating the drive toward full-scale trade war between US imperialism and its economic rivals.