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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

3 September 2018

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04.09.2018

Washington and Tehran trade threats over the Strait of Hormuz

Less than a month after brutal US sanctions snapped back into force against Iran, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed yet again, in a report released Friday, that Tehran is in full compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord. The agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was unilaterally abrogated in May by US President Donald Trump, who made entirely bogus claims that Iran had violated the deal.

The latest IAEA findings further expose the provocative character of the Trump administration's policy, which threatens not only to plunge the entire region into military conflict, but also has dramatically sharpened tensions between Washington and its ostensible European allies. Trump vowed following his announcement that any company doing business with Iran, including those based in Europe, would be barred from trading with the United States.

The fact that US imperialism is the most destabilizing factor in the present situation has been underlined over the past week following aggressive comments by US National Security Adviser John Bolton. On August 22, he declared that Washington intends to push Iranian oil exports down to "zero," and do so just as soon as its sanctions on Iran's energy sector are re-imposed November 8.

Bolton's ominous threat was made as reports emerged that the US may be preparing a major military strike on the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, which, as a close ally of

Tehran and Moscow, is viewed by Washington as a major obstacle to the consolidation of its unchallenged control over the energy-rich and strategically pivotal Middle East.

In response to Bolton's threat, a top general in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) threatened to block oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, if Washington follows through on Bolton's declaration. In recent months, Iranian officials have repeatedly said that if the US and its local clients, such as Saudi Arabia, seek to illegally strangle Iran's economy—imposing, in what is tantamount to an act of war, an oil-export embargo—then it will be within its rights to stop the Saudis and others from exporting oil as well.

The Pentagon has invariably replied to such Iranian warnings with war threats. In what amounted to an implicit threat of direct military action, Major Josh Jacques of US Central Command was quick to respond to the IRGC general's warning, declaring "Together," with its allies, Washington stands "ready to ensure the freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce wherever international law allows."

"Freedom of navigation" has served as Washington's justification for a massive military build-up in the Asia-Pacific against China, including the deployment of nuclear-capable aircraft and vessels to the region in a series of highly provocative exercises.

Should US imperialism follow through with the threat to invoke "freedom of navigation" to launch a military assault on Tehran, Washington would provoke a region-wide conflict with catastrophic consequences.

As well as being a direct participant in the Syrian conflict, Iran has also aligned with Turkey and Russia to exclude the United States from ongoing peace talks. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met last week for a previously unannounced meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has increasingly been at odds with Washington due to its support for the Kurdish YPG in Syria and its backing of a failed coup against Erdogan in July 2016.

Officially, the meeting was billed as preparation for a summit to be attended by Rouhani, Erdogan and Russian president Vladimir Putin in Iran on September 7 to discuss the way forward in Syria. However, the two leaders undoubtedly discussed their plans to maintain Iranian-Turkish energy ties, which are critical to both countries' economies, when US sanctions on Iranian energy exports take hold.

Amid these rapidly rising tensions, Tehran announced plans on Saturday to boost its missile capacity and purchase modern fighter jets and submarines. Ayatollah Khamenei,

Iran's Supreme Leader, said he believed a war would not break out, but added that the army needs to be "vigilant ... and raise their personnel and equipment capacities."

Khamenei's remarks came just days after he told a cabinet meeting, also attended by Rouhani, that Iran could leave the nuclear accord. "The nuclear deal is a means, not the goal, and if we come to this conclusion that it does not serve our national interests, we can abandon it," he declared. His message was reiterated in a tweet Friday, following the publication of the IAEA report, from Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif.

These threats reflect the deepening crisis confronting the bourgeois-clerical regime in Tehran, under conditions in which Washington is seeking to crash the Iranian economy and is intensifying military pressure. At the same time, unrest is growing in Iran over rampant social inequality, and the bourgeoisie's drive to make the working class and oppressed masses bear the burden of the confrontation with imperialism.

Khamenei's threat is also bound up with Tehran's growing realization that its hopes that the European powers would and could shield them from Washington's offensive are proving in vain.

Although the EU has revived legislation it claims will protect European companies from US sanctions if they continue to do business with Iran, hundreds of corporations, including Germany's Daimler and France's Total, have voted with their feet by declaring their intentions to halt operations in the Islamic Republic.

This has led to a deepening of the rift between the former trans-Atlantic allies. Driven by the intensifying crisis of global capitalism, expressed above all in the breakdown of the post-war economic and political institutions, European politicians, led by Germany, are demanding more independence from and even confrontation with Washington. Two weeks ago, in a comment in the German daily *Handelsblatt*, German Foreign Minister Heiko Mas called for the creation of an independent European payments system as an alternative to the US-controlled SWIFT system and the drawing of "red lines" by the European powers in their relations with Washington.

No less than Washington, the European imperialist powers are determined to exert their economic, political and military domination over Iran, the Middle East and other parts of the globe. However, their sharp differences with Washington over policy to Iran are based on frustration that the US sanctions are cutting across billions in European investment, and fears that a war with Tehran would cause oil prices to spike and destabilize the entire Middle East region on Europe's doorstep.

This was underlined in the response by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian to the latest IAEA confirmation that Iran is complying with the JCPOA's terms. While defending the JCPOA, Le Drian echoed Trump by demanding that Tehran accept negotiations not only on its future nuclear policy, but also on its ballistic missile program, as well as its roles in regional conflicts in Syria and Yemen. "Iran needs to avoid the temptation to be the [regional] hegemon," added Le Drian.

The danger that a catastrophic military conflict could erupt between the US and Iran, which would rapidly draw in the European imperialist powers and other regional players like China and Russia, is compounded by deep divisions within the Iranian regime. These disagreements are being exacerbated both by US imperialist aggression and internal social conflicts, which were expressed most clearly in widespread working class protests against worsening living conditions earlier this year.

In an unprecedented move, the Iranian parliament censured Rouhani following responses he gave to a parliamentary sitting last week on the economic situation and economic policy. Earlier in August, parliamentary deputies voted to remove Rouhani's economy and labour ministers. This reflects sharpening conflicts within the regime between so-called hardliners, whose support for the Iran nuclear deal was at best tepid from the start, and the Rouhani-led "moderate" wing of the ruling elite, which hoped that the JCPOA would serve as the initial stage of a broader rapprochement with the imperialist powers. Trump's decision to trash the nuclear accord has further weakened the moderate wing, which had already been under increased pressure due to the JCPOA's failure to bring about any real improvement to economic growth and the living standards of the vast majority of the Iranian population.

The Iranian president's attempts during his parliamentary appearance to portray the US as solely responsible for the country's economic woes and tar all anti-government protesters as dupes of Washington are thoroughly dishonest. All factions of the Iranian regime, whatever their differences over foreign policy, agree that the working class must be made to pay for the country's economic crisis and have pursued neo-liberal pro-market reform and austerity measures for years.