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As sanctions tighten, Washington threatens Iran with “military might”

The US is dramatically escalating its illegal, economic war against Iran, with the aim of crashing its economy and imposing a pro-US regime in Tehran akin to that of the despot Shah Reza Pahlavi.

Beginning Monday, November 5, the US will embargo Iranian energy exports, which fund well over a third of the country’s state budget.

To choke off the remainder of Iran’s exports and deny it access to machinery, basic consumer goods and other essentials, Washington will also bar Iran’s central bank and other financial institutions from the US dominated-global financial system and target any company that insures trade with Iran.

The unilateral US sanctions against Iran are to be enforced through punitive secondary sanctions. Companies and countries that trade with Iran in defiance of Washington will face exclusion from the US market and massive financial and other penalties.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo describes the Trump administration’s Iran strategy as “maximum pressure” and “disruptive boldness,” adding that “the pressure will only increase.”

Writing in the November–December issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Pompeo claims that “Trump does not want another long-term US military engagement in the Middle East”—i.e. another US instigated war. But his “Confronting Iran” article bristles with war threats, from his boasting that Trump’s threats to incinerate North Korea caused Pyongyang to submit to US demands to his reiteration of the recent statements from Trump, his national

security adviser, the longtime Iran war-hawk John Bolton, and other top officials threatening Iran with military attack.

Employing the favourite stock-phrase of every aggressor, Pompeo declares, “We do not seek war.” He then adds, “But we must make painfully clear that escalation is a losing proposition for Iran. The Islamic Republic cannot match the United States’ military prowess and we are not afraid to let Iran’s leaders know it.”

Pompeo, needless to say, repeats Trump’s cant about Iran being a rogue regime and the world’s leading state-sponsor of terrorism.

Yet it is Washington that has ripped up the 2015 UN-backed Iran civil nuclear accord, although all the other states that negotiated it with Tehran—Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—are in agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and even the US State Department that Iran has fulfilled all its obligations under the accord to the letter.

And it is American imperialism that over the past three decades has waged a series of predatory wars across the greater Middle East, from Afghanistan to Libya, that have razed entire societies, killed millions and displaced many millions more.

It is also Washington that, to use Pompeo’s language, “resembles a mafia,” giving Iran “a choice” between submission or facing America’s “military might”: a choice between accepting US demands that would reduce Iran to a neo-colony—including giving up its ballistic missile program, even as the US threatens it and arms Israel and Saudi Arabia to the teeth; ending all support to its allies such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Syrian regime; and permanent limits on its civilian nuclear program much harsher than those imposed on any other country—or being subjected to an ever-escalating campaign of US economic and military pressure.

A “new instance” of US “oppression”

Speaking Wednesday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Washington’s plans to throttle the Iranian economy constitute a “new instance of oppression by America” and appealed for national unity.

In an oblique reference to a massive depreciation of the Iranian currency, the rial, and a further spike in unemployment due to the pullout of European and other investors spooked by the impending US sanctions, Rouhani conceded that “in the past few months people have faced difficult times and it’s possible that the next few months will be difficult.”

But he insisted Washington “will not be able to reach any of (its) goals with regard to Iran’s oil ... to bring it to zero or reduce it.” To buttress this claim, he emphasized the

opposition of the European imperialist powers to Trump's jettisoning of the nuclear accord and their pledges to develop a Special Vehicle to allow European-based companies and others to circumvent the US sanctions.

In reality, Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime is enveloped in crisis. It had banked on rapprochement with the Western imperialist powers, and a consequent boom in foreign investment, to strengthen its hand against the working class while pushing through neo-liberal reforms aimed at increasing the profitability of Iranian capitalism. However, the European investment surge in 2016–17 fell far short of expectations. This year it outright collapsed, as European businesses scrambled for the exit ramp, for fear of impending US sanctions.

At the beginning of 2018, the Iranian regime was shaken by the eruption of mass anger over years of austerity and social inequality. In the months since, there have been numerous strikes involving teachers, truck drivers and other workers.

Faced with these twin threats, from an increasingly militant working class and a rapacious US imperialism desperate to reverse the erosion of its global power, Tehran has twisted and turned.

Rouhani and Iranian military leaders have asserted—given that the US and its Saudi and other Gulf allies are illegally seeking to prevent Iran from exporting its oil—that Tehran would be in its rights to block the Strait of Hormuz, the principal conduit for Arabian Peninsula oil.

In an interview with CBS News this week, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif dismissed the claim by a member of Iran's parliamentary security committee that there have been secret talks between Tehran and Washington. "But I'm not ruling out the possibility of negotiations," said Zarif. "We've done it in the past. We can do it again."

US imperialism's offensive against Iran and world geopolitics

With the approach of the Nov. 5 launch of the US embargo on Iranian oil exports, various countries have approached the Trump administration for "waivers," that is for US permission to continue importing at least some Iranian oil. Between 2011 and 2015—when the Obama administration was pressuring and threatening Iran, in a campaign Trump, Pompeo and Bolton decry as insufficiently aggressive—the US granted waivers to countries that had traditionally imported Iranian oil, as long as they reduced their overall imports by 20 percent every 180 days.

Yesterday, for the first time, there were indications that the Trump administration was close to granting such waivers, although, if it does, they will reportedly only be short-term and conditional on overall import cuts of 30 percent or more.

Not insignificantly, the two countries said to be close to securing waivers, India and South Korea, are viewed by Washington as key allies in its strategic offensive against China.

For its part, Beijing has reduced its oil imports from Iran in recent months, while rebuffing Washington's calls for it to abide by the US sanctions against Iran.

Some news reports have suggested that Trump may impose sanctions against some Chinese firms active in Iran on Nov. 5, as part of its ongoing campaign of military and economic pressure against the country that administration spokesmen have identified as American imperialism's most important strategic rival.

Yesterday the *New York Times* carried an article headlined "As New Sanctions Loom, US Push Against Iran Faces Steep Obstacles."

The article notes that the Saudi regime, a key ally of Washington in its offensive against Iran, is mired in crisis after its brutal murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and points to the opposition of China, the European powers and most other states around the globe to the Trump administration's trashing of the nuclear accord and unilateral sanctions.

Undoubtedly, the tensions in the Middle East and between the great powers are far more explosive today than at the beginning of the decade, when the Obama administration, backed by Washington's traditional European allies, prevailed on Russia and China to back economic sanctions against Iran, on the grounds that Tehran could be developing nuclear weapons under the cover of a civil nuclear program.

In the interim, Washington has made it clear it is actively preparing for war against nuclear-armed Russia and China, and the trans-Atlantic partnership between the US and Europe has unraveled. Led by Germany and France, Europe is frantically rearming so it can assert its own imperialist interests independently of and, when need be, against Washington. European leaders, it should be noted, have touted the Special Vehicle the EU is now seeking to create to continue trade with Iran as a potential building block for a financial system not subject to US, and US dollar domination.

All this, however, only makes the developing confrontation between Washington and Tehran more volatile and more explosive. Having laid the power and prestige of US imperialism on the line in the aim of humbling and subjugating Tehran, the Trump administration and the American oligarchy will be loathe to see its anti-Iran offensive

undercut or circumvented by its rivals, driving it to still greater recklessness and belligerence.