

The March to War or The Diplomatic Option: Obama Administration Presses for Talks with Iran

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With the negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program set to resume in Geneva next week, the Obama administration is pleading with the US Congress and key US Middle Eastern allies not to sabotage the talks and thereby scuttle US efforts to extract concessions from Iran. The alternative to “exploring” the diplomatic option, they have bluntly warned, is a quick march to war.

On Thursday, President Obama reiterated that the US is keeping “all options on the table,” including the option of waging war on Iran. But “military options,” he said, “always have unintended consequences.”

“No matter how good our military is, military options are always messy, are always difficult, always have unintended consequences—and in this situation are never complete in terms of making us certain that they [the Iranians] don’t then go out and pursue even more vigorously nuclear weapons in the future,” he said.

Were the US to impose further sanctions on Iran as Israel’s government and many Republican and Democratic leaders are demanding, US Secretary of State John Kerry told members of the Senate Banking Committee Wednesday, it would likely cause the nuclear talks to collapse.

peaking of existing US-European Union sanctions, which have halved Iran’s oil exports and shut down much of its foreign trade, Kerry told reporters: “We put these sanctions in place in order to be able to put us in the strongest position possible to be able to negotiate. We now are negotiating.”

“The risk,” Kerry continued, “is that if Congress were to unilaterally move to raise sanctions, it could break faith in those negotiations, and actually stop them and break them apart.

“What we are asking everyone to do, is calm down, look hard at what can be achieved and what the realities are. If this doesn’t work ... I will be up here on the Hill asking for increased sanctions, and we always reserve the military option. So we lose absolutely nothing.”

The Obama administration’s remarks are politically disingenuous. Iran’s government has repeatedly vowed that it has no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons, and US intelligence agencies have conceded that it does not have an active nuclear weapons program.

Above all, the US President concealed from the people of the United States and the world

the scope of the “military options” that his administration and the Pentagon plan to employ, in the event that Washington fails to force Iran to make sweeping concessions through the current policy of punitive sanctions, bullying and threats.

The Pentagon opposes plans for a US “surgical strike” on Iranian nuclear facilities as too risky. It fears an Iranian counter-strike, either directly—by shutting the Straits of Hormuz, through which 40 percent of the world’s oil exports pass—or indirectly, by encouraging its allies such as the Shiite militia Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic group Hamas to attack Israel.

The war Washington has been planning for is a “shock and awe” campaign that from the get-go will seek to deny Iran’s retaliatory capacity by destroying much of its military, industrial, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure. Moreover, the Pentagon’s plans are based on the recognition that such a war could rapidly escalate into a regional conflict, embroiling much of the Middle East and potentially even drawing Russia and China.

Obama defended Washington’s conduct at last week’s meeting between Iranian diplomats and representatives of the P-6 (the US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) in Geneva. That meeting, which was extended from two to four days and ultimately was joined by all the P-6 foreign ministers, reportedly came close to brokering an “interim agreement” under which Iran would halt much of its nuclear program in return for a modest, “reversible” easing of a small portion of the US-EU sanctions.

Obama insisted that the concessions offered Tehran were minimal, providing “very modest relief at the margins of the sanctions.” The principal sanctions, those that freeze Iran out of the world banking system and choke off the oil exports that fund most of the state budget, would remain in full force. “We would leave in place,” vowed Obama, “the core sanctions that are most effective and have most impact on the Iranian economy.”

Details of what was on the table in Geneva have not been officially divulged. But it has been widely reported that sanctions effecting Iran’s trade in gold, auto parts and petro-chemicals would be relaxed, and that Tehran would be granted access to some of the tens of billions of dollars of its own money now frozen in the world banking system.

Prior to last week’s negotiating round, US officials spoke of putting in place a financial spigot where Iran would be given access to these funds in dribs and drabs, thereby allowing the US and its allies to push for more concessions with each Iranian withdrawal.

The *Jerusalem Post*, a vehement opponent of any relaxation of the sanctions until Iran’s nuclear program had been dismantled lock-stock-and-barrel, has reported that in the initial phase Iran was to be transferred just \$3 billion—money owed it by various Asia countries, including China and India, for oil shipments that have already been received.

Each side has blamed the other for the ultimate failure to reach agreement last week, while making clear that they believe the proposal left on the table at Geneva constitutes a strong basis for a 6-month interim agreement.

By all reports the French, working in consultation with Israel, insisted on eleventh-hour changes to the original, US-drafted P-6 proposal, on the grounds that it did not do enough to “roll back” Iran’s nuclear program. Iran for its part, reportedly took exception to the US’s steadfast refusal to acknowledge Iran’s right to a full-cycle civil nuclear program as part of

any permanent agreement.

The US first began trumpeting the nuclear issue in 2003, immediately after invading Iraq and rejecting an Iranian proposal for a “grand bargain,” in which Tehran would have recognized Israel and cut off military support to Hezbollah and Hamas in exchange for a US guarantee to cease its efforts to overthrow the Islamic Republic. For the US the confrontation with Iran has always been about much more than its nuclear program.

Washington is determined to force Iran into accepting US predominance in the Middle East and gaining unbridled access to its vast oil and natural gas resources.

Iran’s bourgeois-clerical regime for its part has repeatedly offered to act as a “stabilizing force” in Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere. According to press reports, such discussions were being held on the sidelines of last week’s Geneva talks. An article in “Al-Monitor” cites an official source in Tehran who told *Al-Monitor*, “Iran knows what it wants, and that’s what we are after.”

The source explained that a deal on the nuclear front will resolve other issues in the region. “The Syrian crisis wasn’t at the heart of the negotiations, but it was discussed thoroughly during side talks. Moreover, there was an American request that we discuss possible options whenever the nuclear deal is sealed, and that’s why some regional powers asked the French to put their spanners into the talks, and here we are.”

Israel and Saudi Arabia are, for their part, aghast at the prospect of a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, undercutting their role as the US’s chief proxies in the region.

Israel has gone to extraordinary lengths to try to disrupt the talks between the US and Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke out against last week’s potential Geneva agreement in the strongest terms. He denounced it as the deal of the century for Iran, adding that Israel held out the right not to abide by it—an implicit threat of unilateral Israeli military action against Iran.

The Israeli government is openly urging the US Senate to defy Obama and press forward with further sanctions. Senate Israeli cabinet minister Bennett was in Washington this week to lobby against the Obama administration’s Iranian policy.

The Netanyahu government’s stance has caused growing divisions with the Israeli establishment with a host of senior figures, including Israeli President Shimon Peres.

On Friday, Peres called on Israelis to show respect for Washington. “We must not underestimate the importance of this friendship. There can be disagreements, but they must be conducted with a view to the true depth of the situation,” he said. “If we have disagreements we should voice them, but we should remember that the Americans also know a thing or two. We are not the only ones.”

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