

US a Step Closer to Iran Blockade

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The United States government has imposed new sanctions on Iran, this time targeting its shipping industry, by blacklisting the main shipping line and 18 subsidiaries, accusing the maritime carrier of being engaged in contraband nuclear material, a charge vehemently denied by Iran.

While the economic impact of the measures against Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) will be minimal in light of the near absence of any connection between the shipping company and US businesses, this latest US initiative against Iran sends a strong signal about the US's intention to escalate pressure on Iran, even unilaterally if need be. And, perhaps, it is a prelude for more serious and dangerous actions in the near future, above all a naval blockade of Iran to choke off its access to, among other things, imported fuel.

The outgoing George W Bush administration is slowly but surely taking strident actions that will effectively tie the hands of the next US president, particularly if that happens to be Democratic candidate Senator Barack Obama, who in the past has expressed an interest in direct dialogue with Tehran.

Should the new sanctions prove as catalysts for more aggressive US actions against Iran in international waters or the Persian Gulf, as called for by some members of US Congress seeking the interdiction of Iranian cargo ships, then by the time Bush's successor takes over at the Oval Office next January, the climate in US-Iran hostility may have degenerated to such depths that it would take a monumental effort to undo what appears to be Bush's last hurrah.

On the other hand, on the eve of US presidential elections in November, more tensions between the US and Iran are tantamount to greater prioritization of national security issues by the average American voter, something that benefits Obama's Republican rival, "bomb, bomb Iran" John McCain.

Indeed, the coupling of crisis in Georgia and the Iran crisis represents a major bonus for McCain and his "get tough" approach toward the US's external foes.

According to American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who has done several reports on US covert actions against Iran, Bush has on more than one occasion vowed not to leave the White House with Iran's nuclear program still intact.

With the new tensions with Russia over Georgia lessening the prospects for fresh "multilateral" Iran diplomacy at the United Nations this autumn, the White House has now begun a new chapter in coercive, unilateral action against Iran that may well be part of a comprehensive "package approach". This could include the interdiction of Iranian ships on

the high seas and even incremental steps toward imposing a regime of “smart blockade” aimed at denying Iran access to badly needed imported fuel.

The purpose of the latter would be to in effect target the Iranian population by applying tangible pain that could dissipate the popular support for the government’s nuclear policy, that is, its insistence that it has the right under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to enrich uranium. Doubtless, this is playing with fire and things could get nasty and rather quickly, spiralling out of control in the event of a stern Iranian reaction.

As far as Washington and Tel Aviv are concerned, their efforts to create a wedge between Iran and Syria is paying off, thanks in part to the tireless efforts of France, and Israeli politicians have made no secret of their hope that their negotiations with Damascus will create a timely dividend in the form of breathing cold air into the hitherto hot furnace of the Iran-Syria alliance.

In Iran murmurings of “weak and reactive diplomacy” can already be heard, thus putting the President Mahmud Ahmadinejad administration on the defensive.

Consequently, Washington hawks increasingly smell a late opportunity to defang Iran. They will surely have made their own threat analysis and estimates of risks. Should their calculations prove incorrect, it could prove disastrous with incalculable, monstrous new headaches for the US government for years to come.

For Iran’s part, a spokesperson for IRISL has denounced the US’s measure as “illegal” and based on “false accusations”, promising to complain to international tribunals. IRISL is, in fact, a stock-owned private company and not government owned, and the US’s action may be in violation of the terms and ambit of UN sanctions imposed by the Security Council on Iran over its nuclear program. For instance, these sanctions exempt the Bushehr power plant in Iran, thus allowing the shipment of nuclear material for the Russian-made plant nearing completion.

This means that the US might seek to seize Russian nuclear goods bound for Iran, thus raising the ire of Moscow and using this as a payback for Russia’s offensive in pro-West Georgia. Alternatively, the US could use the threat of such action as leverage with regard to both Tehran and Moscow. Russia, from Washington’s point of view, needs to be brought into line on Iran.

Again, any such action by the US is bound to have both intended and unintended consequences, and it would be foolhardy for Washington hawks to pretend to know the full scope of the ramifications, which could be dramatic in terms of heating up a new cold war and outright militarizing the Iran nuclear crisis.

Tehran does not appear to welcome any new escalation with the US. A deputy foreign minister, Mehdi Safari, announced Iran’s preparedness to engage in good-faith negotiations with the “Iran Six” nations (the UN Security Council’s permanent five – the US, Britain, France, Russia and China – plus Germany).

Ahmadinejad is due in New York in less than two weeks to attend the annual UN General Assembly gathering, and by all indications the US and Israel are deliberately picking up serious momentum in their anti-Ahmadinejad campaign, thus warranting a letter by Iran’s ambassador to the UN, Mohammad Khazaei, complaining of blatant threats against Iran’s

president by Israeli politicians – they even said they would kidnap him.

In conclusion, as tough new decisions on Iran are being plotted in Washington and Tel Aviv, the fate of peace and stability in the volatile oil region of the Persian Gulf seems once again on the verge of being compromised in the drive towards open confrontation with Iran.

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