

Is an Unholy Alliance against Iran in the Making?

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In a climate of growing threats, recriminations and open provocations toward Iran, the United States is stepping up diplomatic efforts and stratagems with its allies to increase pressure on the Iranian government and, officially, to convince Tehran to give up without delay its nuclear program. While keeping open all options, including the military one, Washington is pressing for an embargo on oil export intended to hit Iran's economy hard and destabilize the regime to its very core. The so-called "diplomatic campaign" against Iran has been in full swing in recent days, with U.S. delegations shuttling to various countries to try and push governments to submit to the dictates of the unilateral sanctions signed by President Obama on December 31, 2011. These new provisions prohibit all transactions with respect to the Iranian Central Bank and block from the U.S. market any financial institutions – public or private – that do business with it. However, Washington allows waivers for buyers from countries that make the commitment to significantly reduce their financial turnovers with Iran. The Iranian Central Bank, the main target of America's punitive actions, runs the payment mechanism for Iranian crude oil sales.

The Obama administration is now focused on Asian allies. On January 19, the State Department's Special Advisor for Non-proliferation and Arms Control, Robert Einhorn and the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes in the Department of Treasury, Daniel Glaser, met in Seoul with South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Jae-Shin and requested that Seoul significantly reduce its oil imports from Iran. As reported in the local newspaper Dong-A Ilbo, the U.S. wants South Korea to cut its oil imports from Iran by half, while Seoul is only willing to curtail its imports by 30 percent at most.

Seoul transfers money to Iran's Central Bank to pay for its Iranian crude oil, which meets approximately 10 percent of its annual energy consumption needs. Despite promises to cooperate with Washington, the South Koreans have been quite cautious in their statements, as they fear that a potential surge in oil prices would seriously undermine their economy and possibly lead to general price inflation, two adverse spillovers President Lee Myung-Bag does not want to deal with now, as he is due to face the South Korean electorate in a few months. The same U.S. delegation is now traveling to Japan, another importer of Iranian oil, to discuss its support for the new U.S. sanctions.

The resistance of other countries to limiting trade with Tehran is far more explicit. India, for example, through its Foreign Minister Ranjan Mathai, told to the White House on January 19 that it would continue to buy Iranian oil and would not seek a waiver from America with regard to the latest new round of sanctions. In essence, New Delhi has decided to ignore all of the measures put forth in Washington. Despite some disagreements over payments in recent months, Iran remains India's second largest supplier of oil after Saudi Arabia. India transfers to the Iranian Central Bank approximately \$1 billion every month to pay for the 370,000 barrels per day it imports from Iran. China and Russia are even firmer in their opposition to taking punitive measures against Iran. China is Tehran's primary commercial partner. The East Asian country, which imports 22 percent of its oil from Iran, has, as expected, rejected upholding U.S. sanctions. Although Beijing has recently reduced its crude oil imports from Iran because of a dispute over the price, it clearly wants to continue its cooperation with the Islamic Republic,

For China, energy security and a pragmatic policy comes first. Beijing intends to maintain cordial relations with both Iran and U.S. allies in the Middle East, as evidenced by the mid January six-day visit to the region by Premier Wen Jiabao, who signed a series of agreements with the Saudi government on oil extraction and nuclear power development.

Moscow, for its part, is even more explicit in condemning the U.S. policy towards Iran, as is reflected in the recent declarations of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. In a statement reported by the Associated Press on January 19, the head of Russian diplomacy warned against making any military intervention in Iran in response to its over its nuclear program, saying that a strike against Iran would trigger a “chain reaction” which would ultimately destabilize the entire planet. Lavrov also criticized the imposition of sanctions, which, he emphasized, penalize the Iranian economy and affect the Iranian nation.

Whereas China and Russia put their national interests first on the Iranian issue, the attitude of the European Union (EU) seems to favor an alliance with the United States, much to the detriment of many member countries. The EU is in effect considering the adoption of a total embargo on Iranian oil. Some countries, such as France, Germany and Great Britain, fully support the measures against Iran, while others, like Italy and Greece, which import large quantities of oil from Tehran at affordable prices, have linked their support to various caveats.

Seyyed Mohammad Ali Khatib, Iran’s representative to OPEC, claimed last week that “Implementing the scenario of banning Iranian oil export to European Union member states is undoubtedly an economic suicide for the countries in this region” (Iran Daily, January 19). Iran exports about 800,000 barrels of oil per day to Europe. An embargo on Iranian oil would cause a further increase in oil prices, worsening the current economic crisis. Nevertheless, Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margall said in Madrid on January 18 that his country would support the sanctions even if they will cause “serious damage” to the two main Spanish importers of Iranian oil. To counter the possibly sharp drop in the amount of Iranian oil available on the international market – now approximately 2.2 million barrels per day (bpd) – Saudi Arabia’s oil minister, Ali Naimi, promised in a CNN interview on January 20 to increase crude oil production of his own country by 2.7 million bpd, bringing it up to 11.8 million bpd. Naimi’s declaration aroused further ire in Tehran, whose Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, immediately called on the Saudis to “reconsider this proposal.” For Salehi, the signals coming from Riyadh are “unfriendly” and could create problems between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In addition to diplomatic and economic warfare, the U.S. and its allies continue to pursue covert operations against Tehran, whose effects were seen last week in the murder of yet another young nuclear scientist, Mustafa Ahmadi Roshan, in the Iranian capital.

This covert targeted-killing was most likely organized by Israel’s Mossad, possibly in collaboration with Jundallah, a Sunni terrorist organization active in Iran. Such actions, which have not been either denied or commented upon by Washington and Tel Aviv, are designed to provoke a reaction from the Iranian side which would justify possible future military action. A pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear installations, in any case, does not appear imminent or strategically expedient.

There have been some signs of caution on the part of Israel in recent days. Not only was a joint U.S.-Israeli military exercise postponed but Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said during a radio interview on January 18 that his government taking any decision to attack Iran is still “very far away” (AFP, January 18).

Such assurances, in any case, contribute very little to soothing the fears of a new armed conflict breaking out in the Middle East, one which would have ruinous consequences. In fact, the U.S. and

Israel seem willing to do whatever it takes to break the axis of resistance in the region, the center of gravity being the Islamic Republic of Iran. Threats, sanctions and covert violent operations will remain the main tools used by the U.S., the EU and Israel, at least until a new regime more receptive to their collective and vested interests emerges in Tehran.

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