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US escalates threat of force against Iran

The two principal architects of US imperialism's war buildup against Iran are carrying out a series of foreign visits aimed at bullying Europe into falling in line behind Washington's campaign of aggression and whipping up the US-backed anti-Iranian axis comprised of the Persian Gulf Sunni oil sheikdoms, led by Saudi Arabia.

John Bolton, the US national security adviser, was in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, on Wednesday, leveling unsubstantiated allegations against Iran and threatening a "very strong response" by the US and its war machine.

It was Bolton who announced the military buildup against Iran earlier this month, with the dispatch of the naval strike group led by the aircraft carrier USS Eisenhower along with a bombing task force including nuclear-capable B-52s.

Since this initial buildup announced at the beginning of May, Washington has deployed an amphibious battle group carrying warplanes and US Marines, a Patriot missile battery and, at the end of last week, the deployment of another 1,500 troops to reinforce the nearly 50,000 already deployed in a string of bases encircling Iran. US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan said that the latest deployment consists of another 900 troops being sent into Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with 600 assigned to a Patriot missile battery that had scheduled to rotate out of the region but will be kept in place.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, drew up plans for the deployment of as many as 120,000 troops to the region, a similar number as was deployed before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

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Bolton, who prior to his appointment as national security adviser had frequently called for regime change in Tehran and penned an Op-ed for the *New York Times* titled “To Stop Iran’s Bomb, Bomb Iran,” made the improbable claim to reporters in Abu Dhabi that US policy under the Trump administration was not one of regime change.

The US national security adviser blamed Iran for an alleged sabotage attack on four vessels off the shores of the UAE, including two Saudi-owned tankers, together with a drone attack on pumping stations on the Saudi oil company Aramco’s East-West pipeline—claimed by Houthi rebels as a retaliation for the near-genocidal war being waged by Riyadh on Yemen. He also claimed that there had been another attempted attack—previously reported by neither the US nor Saudi Arabia—on the Saudi oil port of Yanbu.

Offering no evidence whatsoever, Bolton declared that the alleged sabotage of the Saudi tankers and the other two vessels was the result of “naval mines almost certainly from Iran.”

The same Bolton in 2002 and 2003 insisted with far greater than “almost certainty” that the government of Saddam Hussein was stockpiling “weapons of mass destruction” when, as undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs in the Bush administration, he was one of the leading advocates for a war of aggression against Iraq.

Iran’s foreign ministry denounced Bolton as a “warmonger” and dismissed his remarks as a “ridiculous accusation.”

Washington’s transparent aim is to present Iran as the aggressor. This is under conditions in which US imperialism is carrying out what it describes as a campaign of “maximum pressure” against the country of 83 million people, mounting an unrelenting military buildup, while imposing sweeping sanctions tantamount to a state of war with the principal aim of reducing Iran’s oil exports to zero and creating social upheaval by crashing the country’s economy.

The US reimposed and escalated sanctions one year ago after unilaterally abrogating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran nuclear deal, reached in 2015 between Iran, the US, the European powers, Russia and China. Under the agreement, Tehran sharply limited its nuclear program while submitting to an intrusive inspections regime in return for the lifting of sanctions and normalization of economic relations.

Recently Tehran announced a 60-day suspension of its commitment to cap its production of enriched uranium and heavy water in an attempt to pressure the European powers to make good on their promises to launch an Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) to circumvent US sanctions by facilitating non-dollar trade with Iran.

While the reported quadrupling of its production rate of uranium to 3.67 percent would still leave Tehran in compliance with the JCPOA, the increase would soon cause it to exceed the cap of 300 kilograms of stockpiled low-enriched uranium. Under the JCPOA, Tehran is supposed to sell off any enriched uranium, which it did to Russia, but now cannot because of the US sanctions.

With unmitigated cynicism, Bolton said of Iran's action, "There's no reason for them to do any of that unless that's part of an effort to reduce the breakout time to produce nuclear weapons." He added, "That's a very serious issue if they continue to do that."

He claimed that Tehran's actions had vindicated Washington's ripping up of the agreement: "This is just more graphic evidence that it hasn't constrained their continuing desire to have nuclear weapons. It certainly hasn't reduced their terrorist activities in the region that we just discussed or their other malign behavior in their use of conventional forces."

Tehran has consistently denied that it has ever sought to develop nuclear weapons.

Bolton's trip to the Middle East came on the eve of a trio of conferences that were convened in Saudi Arabia on Thursday—the Organization of Islamic Countries, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council—all brought to Mecca in a blatant attempt to exploit the Muslim holy city to line up member states behind the predatory interests of the House of Saud which are being pursued in alliance with Washington against Iran.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is conducting a tour of Europe aimed at bullying its governments into subordinating themselves to Washington's war drive against Iran. It includes stops in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, as well a visit to Montreux, Switzerland for the annual meeting of the secretive Bilderberg Group, to share Washington's war plans with a group of billionaires and senior state officials who are sworn to secrecy about what he reveals.

Before Pompeo's arrival, Washington issued a naked threat against any attempt by Europe to bypass the crushing US sanctions against Iran.

The Bloomberg news agency reported in a May 7 letter sent by Sigal Mandelker, the Treasury Department's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, warning that anyone associated with Instex, the European vehicle created to sustain trade with Tehran by avoiding the US dollar and financial institutions, could be subjected to severe penalties and barred from the US financial system.

"I urge you to carefully consider the potential sanctions exposure of Instex," Mandelker wrote in the letter to Instex president Per Fischer. "Engaging in activities that run afoul of US sanctions can result in severe consequences, including a loss of access to the US financial system."

Meanwhile, the US sanctions regime against Iran has focused on a single Chinese super-tanker, the "Pacific Bravo," which took on a load of crude at Iran's Kharg Island and has headed back toward China.

Washington has issued a warning to Hong Kong that if it allows the ship to dock or services it, it could face severe sanctions for violating the US blockade against Iran.

China's Foreign Ministry issued a statement rejecting the threats. "The normal energy dealings between Iran and the international community, including China, that is within the framework of international laws, are reasonable, lawful, and should be respected and protected," it said.

Hong Kong's Commerce and Economic Development Bureau similarly responded that it has been "strictly implementing sanctions decided by the United Nations," which don't impose "any restrictions on the export of petroleum from Iran."

This standoff exposes the real roots of the war drive against Iran. They lie not merely in the maniacal warmongering of Bolton or Pompeo, but in the drive by US imperialism to offset the decline of its economic hegemony by wrapping its fists around the oil pumps of the Middle East, Venezuela and the entire planet in order to dictate terms to its emerging rival, China.

Bound up with the "great power" rivalries that are the focus of the ever-escalating eruption of US militarism, a military confrontation with Iran could trigger a third world war fought with nuclear weapons. Such a global catastrophe can be averted only by means of the independent political mobilization of the working class against war and its source, the global capitalist system.

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