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Imperialist powers intensify pressure on Iranian regime in wake of protests



French Foreign Minister Jean Yves Le Drian announced this week that Paris is considering triggering a mechanism in the Iran nuclear accord that would facilitate the imposition of United Nations sanctions on Tehran. The provocative declaration is the latest example of a concerted drive by the imperialist powers to intensify pressure on the bourgeois nationalist Iranian regime following the outbreak of protests against fuel price hikes earlier this month.

“Every two months, there is another dent (in the deal by Iran), to the point where today we ask ourselves, and I’m saying this very clearly, about the implementation of the dispute resolution mechanism that exists in the deal,” stated Le Drian during a parliamentary

hearing. The French foreign minister was referring to steps taken by the Iranian regime to reduce its compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord—steps that have been provoked by Washington’s abandonment of the deal and the European powers’ refusal to abide by trade and investment commitments they made as part of the agreement.

Le Drian also cited unsubstantiated claims that Iran has sponsored attacks on Saudi interests in the region, an apparent reference to the as yet unexplained attacks on a series of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf this past summer and the firing of missiles by Houthi rebels from war-ravaged Yemen at Saudi oil infrastructure.

The reality is that the escalation of tensions with Iran arises from US imperialism’s reckless drive to consolidate its control over the world’s most important energy-producing region. Over the past 30 years, US imperialism has laid waste to entire societies across the Middle East and Central Asia, from Iraq to Syria and Afghanistan, in a desperate effort to offset its global economic decline with military force.

Far from being a peaceful move, the Obama administration’s support for the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 was aimed principally at bullying Tehran into submission while maintaining Washington’s right to launch provocations and outright military attacks at any time. Obama himself admitted that the only alternative to the agreement was war.

Trump’s abandonment of the nuclear deal last year has been combined with the increased deployment of US military personnel and equipment to the region. At the same time, Trump has strengthened Washington’s support for the despotic Saudi regime, the Gulf states and the right-wing Israeli government, with the aim of pushing back Iranian influence in the Middle East and preparing for military conflict.

Le Drian’s latest comments underscore that the European powers are prepared to resort to no less ruthless means to achieve their interests. Although they opposed Trump’s departure from the nuclear agreement and pledged to create a financial mechanism that would permit Iran to trade with Europe, the pledge was quickly shelved.

Iran has responded, as it is entitled to do under the 2015 agreement if the other parties fail to fulfill their obligations, by reducing its compliance with the restrictions on its nuclear activities. Tehran is now operating 60 IR-6 centrifuges, which were prohibited under the deal and can enrich uranium 10 times faster than other centrifuges. President Hassan Rouhani has also indicated that Iranian scientists will soon start injecting uranium gas into 1,000 centrifuges at a secret facility.

Not to be outdone by its French counterpart, US imperialism has seized on the recent protests in Iran to further intensify tensions. On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo seized on the protests to accuse the bourgeois-clerical regime of “human rights” abuses. Pompeo asserted that the US government had received some 20,000 messages documenting the violent suppression of the protests, but avoided commenting on details. He went on to threaten the imposition of further sanctions on Iran for “human rights abuses.”

It is indubitable that the imperialist powers, led by the United States, are endeavouring to foment violent, right-wing opposition to the Iranian regime to advance their own reactionary agenda, which includes the economic crippling of the Iranian regime and preparations for war.

That being said, the opposition of growing numbers of workers and poor to the Iranian government is being driven by mounting social tensions. While chief responsibility for the deepening social and economic crisis in the country of 80 million people lies with the brutal sanctions imposed by the imperialist powers, the crisis also underscores the reactionary character of the bourgeois nationalist regime, which is stepping up its attacks on the working class as it seeks to manoeuvre for a deal with the major powers.

Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli acknowledged this week that around 200,000 people joined the protests, which led to the shutting down of internet service for close to a week. Some 7,000 protesters were detained by the regime. According to Amnesty International, at least 143 protesters were killed by the authorities’ violent crackdown on demonstrations. However, Tehran has challenged this figure, alleging that only a dozen or so people were killed in what they characterized as violent clashes between thugs and security forces.

It is also alleged that over 700 banks and 50 military bases were attacked across the country. Anger at privately owned banks has reportedly increased due to a series of corruption cases in which customers have lost money.

The hiking of fuel prices by 50 percent has had a ripple effect on prices for other commodities. Rice, oil, bread and dairy products have increased by between 5 and 10 percent.

The country’s official news agency reported that costs for transport, messenger services and moving goods have jumped by 50 percent. The rial, Iran’s currency, has tumbled from

32,000 per US dollar when the nuclear agreement was struck to 126,000 per dollar today, making costs for basic necessities even more unaffordable.

When the protests initially broke out, government officials, including President Rouhani, acknowledged that people had a right to be angry at the price hike and to protest. Seeking to quell the opposition, the government began making payments into Iranians' bank accounts, stating that up to three quarters of the population would be eligible for financial support to help offset the increased cost of fuel. However, the regime appears to be retreating on this pledge, with Minister of Labour and Welfare Mohammad Shariatmadari declaring that the government will have to review the bank accounts, assets, and trips abroad of all Iranians to determine eligibility.

While implementing attacks on workers and the poor, the Iranian regime is also responding to the stepped-up pressure by the imperialists by deepening its strategic and military cooperation with Russia and China. Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, commander of the maritime branch of the Iranian army, recently announced that Iran, Russia and China will conduct joint military drills in the Indian Ocean in the near future. Planning meetings between the three countries for the exercise were completed in October.

“A joint war game between several countries, whether on land, at sea or in the air, indicates a remarkable expansion of cooperation,” stated Khanzadi. “[The drills] carry the same message to the world, that these three countries have reached a meaningful strategic point in their relations,” he added.

The admiral went on to declare that the exercise would help secure “collective security” in the region.

There can be no doubt that US imperialism and its allies, through their provocations and bullying, are chiefly responsible for the tense standoff in the Persian Gulf and the mounting threat of war across the region. But the claim made by the Iranian regime that “collective security” can be achieved by establishing a closer military alliance with Beijing and Moscow is reactionary through and through. Such a development merely increases the likelihood that a US-instigated provocation could rapidly escalate into a region-wide conflagration that would quickly draw all of the major powers into a catastrophic war fought with nuclear weapons.