

MILITARY BUILDUP: US doubles aircraft carriers near the Persian Gulf

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The Obama administration has reinforced the threat of American military strikes against Iran by doubling the number of US aircraft carrier groups in the region. The provocative decision heightens the danger of war in the Persian Gulf as the US moves aggressively to impose a de facto embargo on Iranian oil exports.

The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, backed by a cruiser and a destroyer, arrived in the Arabian Sea this week to join the USS John Stennis. A third aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln, is also heading for the area after a port visit in Thailand on Tuesday.

US military spokesmen downplayed the naval deployments as “routine,” noting that the USS John Stennis was due to return to the US. Nevertheless, the Pentagon has quietly decided to maintain two aircraft carriers in the region rather than one, and, while the changeover is taking place, could have three, greatly enhancing its ability to conduct an air and naval war against Iran.

The *New York Times* reported on Thursday that the Obama administration had taken the unusual step of directly warning Iran via a secret diplomatic channel that any attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz would be considered a “red line”—implying massive military retaliation. Tehran has threatened to shut the waterway, which carries about one fifth of the world’s daily traded oil, if the US and its allies block Iranian oil exports.

The Obama administration’s menacing moves against Tehran are being accompanied by an escalating campaign in the American and international media designed to vilify the Iranian regime and create the climate for war. A steady stream of editorials and commentary gives legitimacy to unproven claims that Iran is developing nuclear arms, while portraying the regime as aggressive, provocative and a threat to regional peace.

In reality, the description more acutely applies to the Obama administration, which, at the very least, has given its blessing to a covert war of assassination and sabotage being waged inside Iran. The latest victim was the Iranian nuclear scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, who was killed by a bomb blast on Wednesday in an operation that bears all the hallmarks of the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad.

Thousands of mourners took part yesterday in a public funeral in Tehran for Roshan, angrily denouncing the killing. Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused the US and Israel of orchestrating the “cowardly assassination” and pledged to punish those responsible.

Washington's pro-forma denials of any involvement are in marked contrast to the widespread discussion in US official and media circles, which accepts these acts of terrorism as legitimate and debates the efficacy of the covert war. Over the past two years, three other Iranian nuclear scientists have been killed, a series of unexplained bombings have taken place at military sites, and a computer virus has been used to inflict damage at Iran's nuclear facilities.

Whether or not Iran's nuclear program has been retarded, these criminal activities have the character of deliberate provocations aimed at producing retaliation by Tehran, which will, in turn, be seized on to further inflame tensions in the Persian Gulf or provide a casus belli for war.

The Obama administration's punitive economic measures against Iran are likewise acts of calculated aggression. On December 31, President Obama signed a measure into law that imposes penalties on foreign corporations that do business with Iran's central bank. The US sanction, which does not even have the fig leaf of UN approval, means that Washington can punish companies for carrying out normal and entirely legal business activities.

Over the past fortnight, US officials have used the threat to bully foreign governments, businesses and banks into complying with Washington's demands. US Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner visited Japan and China this week to press for a reduction in oil imports from Iran. A senior Obama administration official told the *New York Times* on Thursday, "We do mean to close down the Central Bank of Iran."

The US legislation is already having an impact. According to the *Financial Times*, European refineries have begun to wind back their purchases of Iranian oil on the spot market, while at this stage continuing to buy under their long-term contracts. The European Union is due to decide later this month on a full embargo on Iranian imports. Faced with the prospect of being excluded from the American financial system, European banks are also restricting their involvement in financing trade with Iran.

To drive home the threat, the US announced sanctions on Thursday against three oil corporations: China's state-run Zhuhai Zhenrong Corporation, Singapore's Kuo Oil Pte Ltd, and FAL Oil Company Ltd, an independent trader based in the United Arab Emirates. The companies will be excluded from receiving US export licences, US Export Import Bank financing or loans over \$10 million from US financial institutions.

There is no doubt that the main target was Zhuhai Zhenrong, a major Chinese corporation, which not only buys Iranian oil but sells refined petroleum products to the country. Lacking refining capacity of its own, Iran is dependent on imports for 30 to 40 percent of its gasoline.

While Zhuhai Zhenrong is unlikely to be seriously affected by US sanctions, other major Chinese oil corporations—China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC), China Petroleum and Chemical Corp (Sinopec) and China National Offshore Oil Corp (CNOOC)—have billions of dollars invested in the US energy sector and are thus highly vulnerable.

China has refused to back further UN sanctions against Iran and has rebuffed US calls for it to reduce Iranian oil imports. The sanctions against Zhuhai Zhenrong are aimed at pressuring Beijing to fall into line. Analyst Derek Scissors from the US-based Heritage Foundation told Reuters: "We don't want to be taking action against Sinopec, CNPC and CNOOC. They are huge, and politically powerful. But Zhenrong is close enough to them, and

won't really do that much harm beyond sending the signal."

The targeting of China highlights the underlying purpose of the Obama administration's aggressive drive against Iran: to secure US economic and political dominance in the Middle East and thus control over the vital energy supplies of its European and Asian rivals. Its reckless intervention in the Persian Gulf risks a dangerous new war that could embroil the region and the major powers.

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