



TOUGH SANCTIONS ON IRAN?

Summary: As talk of sanctions on Iran grows, the view is emerging that half measures won't work. Sanctions by the U.S. or EU will not be enough. U.N. sanctions are seen as a minimum requirement, preferably with Russia and China on board. China, however, remains a question mark.

Pressure is mounting toward new sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran after Iranian nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that engineers will enrich uranium to 20 percent -- well beyond the level required for fuel rods in power reactors, though well short of the 90 percent needed for nuclear warheads -- and construct ten new enrichment facilities. The ostensible reason for enrichment to 20 percent is to provide fuel rods for a research reactor in Tehran. It will take about a year to reach that level using the centrifuges at the nuclear site at Natanz. Iran's latest move aroused concern for a variety of reasons. Chief among these is that Iran could further enrich nuclear fuel to weapons-grade within six months after reaching 20 percent. Assuming Iranian weapons engineers possess a working bomb design, Tehran is coming within reach of a nuclear arsenal. There is reason to think this is the true purpose for enrichment efforts. That the Islamic Republic needs a nuclear arsenal represents one of few points of consensus between the clerical regime and the liberal opposition. And indeed, the UK Foreign Office dismissed Tehran's official story, declaring that "enriched uranium could not be used for the Tehran Research Reactor as Iran does not have the technology to manufacture it into fuel rods."

Since coming to office last year, the Obama administration has made a concerted effort to ease tensions with Iran, in hopes that calming down bilateral relations would open the way for an amicable settlement of the nuclear standoff. A deal seemed to have been struck last fall under which Tehran would ship low-enriched uranium to Russia and France to be manufac-

tured into rods for research reactors. The deal has evidently collapsed, and hopes appear to be dimming for an end to the impasse. After meeting with French defense minister Herve Morin last month, US secretary of defense Robert Gates held out hope for "a peaceful way to resolve this issue," while also declaring that "The only path that is left to us at this point, it seems to me, is that pressure track, but it will require all of the international community to work together." Added French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner, "This is real blackmail. The only thing that we can do, alas, is apply sanctions given that negotiations are not possible."

Sentiment, then, appears to be coalescing toward combined economic coercion vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. The questions are, what kind of sanctions can the international community agree on, and will what they can agree on bring about the desired change in Iranian behavior? This history of the nuclear dispute offers little solace for nonproliferation advocates. For one thing, an Iranian bomb remains hypothetical, and rallying a community of interest against abstract dangers is notoriously difficult. For another, Tehran has consistently maintained that -- despite the covert nature of elements of its program -- the sole purpose of its nuclear R&D is to generate electricity. And indeed the governing international agreement, the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, affirms nations' right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The treaty offers considerable room for aspiring nuclear weapon states to maneuver, since building nuclear weapons involves many of the same capabilities and substances needed to construct and fuel power reactors.

And then there's the matter of diverging interests among the governments that would levy sanctions. China in particular has shown itself reluctant to apply unbearable pressure on Iran. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has voiced hope that Beijing will go along with (or abstain from voting on) a UN resolution to avoid diplomatic isolation. This seems farfetched. Beijing holds a major stake in developing the Iranian oil and gas sectors. Remaining on good terms with Tehran, consequently, is tied to the vital of Chinese interest of energy security. A draft UN Security Council resolution targeted narrowly at the nuclear program or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps might pass muster with decision-makers in Beijing, breaking the deadlock among the permanent five members of the council, but would such a package prove effective?

Doubtful. If Iran sees nuclear weapons as a vital national interest -- by definition, an interest for which a government is prepared to fight -- sanctions would have to impose enough pain on the regime to compel it to relinquish this interest. Coercive measures enacted by individual governments have produced few results, as the United States' lackluster Iran Sanctions Act demonstrates. The European Union is reportedly mulling sanctions of its own. These might have better prospects than unilateral US measures, since the EU maintains closer economic ties to the Islamic Republic than does the United States. This confers leverage. Even so, it is hard to imagine Brussels holding (or using) enough leverage to elicit a radical change of behavior like abandonment of the Iranian nuclear-weapons effort. Absent full-bore UN sanctions, then, the chances of forcing the Islamic Republic to give up its aspirations appear slight -- as do the prospects for tough sanctions.