

# Incremental Sanctions Make a Nuclear Iran More Likely

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Articles & Testimony

In its most recent report, the IAEA acknowledged what many observers have asserted for years -- that Iran is developing a nuclear weapon. Whether this is the result of new evidence, or merely the willingness of the agency's new director-general to heed the existing evidence, is beside the point. The findings will provide new impetus for a sanctions push that has been extensively foreshadowed over the last several months by leaders in the United States and Europe.

For the next tranche of sanctions to be successful, thought must be given not only to which measures are chosen, but how they are chosen. The instinct of policymakers in Europe and Washington is often to act incrementally; stronger sanctions are proposed, only to be diluted in U.N. negotiations aimed at unanimity. The measures that are ultimately adopted are usually just one step beyond the previous set.

This incremental approach is counterproductive. The sanctions' predictability and long lead time allows Tehran to prepare for them in advance. For example, Iran is currently expanding its oil refining capacity and reducing consumption subsidies in anticipation of the sort of gasoline sanctions moving through Congress, and could be a net gasoline exporter by 2013. Incrementalism inures the Iranian regime to sanctions altogether, stripping of credibility any threats of tougher action in the future. The result is to rob sanctions of their deterrent effect and make extreme outcomes -- a nuclear-armed Iran, or war with Iran -- more rather than less likely.

The traditional approach also places too high a value on international consensus. While multilateral support is necessary to efforts to deter Iran, unanimity is not. Unanimity does not make weak sanctions more effective. Also, the unanimity achieved is often symbolic -- lowest-common denominator measures are supplemented by a "coalition of the willing" who shoulder greater sacrifice while others enthusiastically embrace whatever is not explicitly forbidden. For example, China National Petroleum Corporation (having taken the place of France's Total SA) will begin the drilling phase of a major gas project in Iran in March, at the same moment the rest of the P5+1 begin their deliberations on sanctions. In this next round of sanctions deliberations, the price required of Beijing for its seat at the head diplomatic table must be that it accept its fair share of the responsibility for and cost of deterring Iran.

To avoid the trap of incrementalism and advance efforts to halt Iran's nuclear weapons progress, the U.S. and Europe must think backwards. That is, consider what circumstances must be brought about to induce a change of course by the Iranian regime, along with the time available to bring about such circumstances. A cursory analysis of past Iranian shifts suggests that the threshold at which the regime will recalculate remains far off -- Ayatollah Khomeini's 1988 decision to accede to a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq war, for example, came only after several Iranian naval ships were destroyed in battle with the U.S. Navy.

Thinking backwards leads to the conclusion that the regime's resilience, and the urgency underscored by the IAEA report, should lead the West to eschew any gradual buildup of pressure for bolder, less predictable, and faster-acting measures. By implication, our international persuasion efforts should be focused less on means -- such as sanctions -- and more on ends. If an ally agrees that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons, that its success in this regard would be

devastating for global security, and that sufficient pressure must be brought to bear on the Iranian regime to force its recalculation, then reasoning backward will lead naturally support for far-reaching sanctions or similar measures. If on the other hand there is no such concurrence on objectives, then agreement on "crippling" sanctions is unlikely ever to materialize.

It is possible that a bolder approach to sanctions will signal to a skeptical Iranian regime that we are willing to endure much to derail its nuclear ambitions, and induce its leader to preemptively change his strategy. More ominously, a failure by the regime to do so may lead the international community to realize that no sanctions will be sufficient to divert Iran from its path.

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