

Pressure Gauges

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Articles & Testimony

As President Bush travelled through the Middle East this past week, his attempts to rally support for continued pressure against Iran encountered some resistance. The recently released National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions, which has been widely interpreted to indicate that Iran's nuclear programme no longer poses a serious threat, has changed the international environment.

The shifting attitudes have been clear at the UN security council, where US-led efforts to enact a third round of sanctions against Iran -- which appeared to be imminent before the release of the NIE -- have been delayed. These negotiations at the UN, which began more than six months ago, continue to stall in the face of Russian and Chinese objections to demands that certain punitive measures be included in the resolution.

Unfortunately, the more benign view of Iran's nuclear programme may be overly optimistic. While Iran may no longer have an active covert nuclear weapons programme, there is still considerable reason to worry about its nuclear-related activities. As Tehran has publicly announced, it continues to move forward on its uranium enrichment activities. The fissile material generated through enrichment could rapidly be turned into a nuclear bomb -- should Iran choose to resume its weaponisation programme.

While some have seized on the NIE to argue that sanctions are no longer necessary, in fact, the opposite conclusion could be drawn from the report. The NIE suggests that Iran might modify its behaviour on its entire nuclear programme in the face of the right mix of carrots and sticks, and that the regime is vulnerable to outside pressure on the nuclear issue.

UN sanctions remain an important part of the overall efforts to ratchet up pressure against Tehran. In light of this, the US, UK, France and Germany must find a way to overcome the obstacles they are currently facing in securing a third round of sanctions.

This may require a slightly different approach than these countries have used to date. While a third resolution would ideally include additional measures targeting Iranian entities and officials, there are also non-punitive measures that would be equally significant. One particularly important step would be the establishment of a team to monitor compliance with the two UN resolutions -- 1737 and 1747 -- that are already in place.

The current arrangements to ensure compliance are extremely limited. Under the resolutions, countries are called upon to report to the UN on the steps they've taken in response to the sanctions. The merits of such an approach can be questioned, as countries are unlikely to be candid about their own failings. Moreover, reporting is only mandatory for one of the two resolutions. For the other, reporting is requested but not required.

China and Russia have strongly opposed US proposals that the UN blacklist specific Iranian financial institutions and elements of its energy sector. It would be more difficult, however, for China and Russia to argue against a monitoring team. Both countries have signed off on the previous resolutions, and objecting to the team would make clear that they are not serious about how effectively the resolutions are being implemented.

The UN has used monitoring teams for many of its other sanctions regimes, including those targeting Sudan,

Somalia, Liberia and al-Qaida and the Taliban. These independent teams -- comprised of consultants hired for their expertise in the particular area at issue -- operate with considerable autonomy. They are generally based in the field, away from the UN bureaucracy in New York, and are only in existence for a limited period of time, with a clearly and narrowly defined mandate.

The UN's Sudan panel has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of such expert teams. The Ethiopia-based team has put together damaging reports with detailed evidence -- including photographic evidence -- of how the Sudanese and others are violating the sanctions. Perhaps most notably, they described how the Sudanese are bombing the civilian population using aircraft painted white to make them appear to be UN or African Union planes. This revelation, which sparked a worldwide outcry, has helped build international pressure against the Sudanese government.

The team monitoring compliance with the sanctions against Iran should be based in Beijing, for several reasons. First, China has become one of Iran's most important trading partners, with its exports to Iran increasing 70% from 2006 to 2007. In many cases, China has been filling the vacuum left by European companies, which have been scaling back their business with Iran. Second, of particular concern, Chinese companies have also provided Iran with sensitive technology. For example, in June 2006 the US treasury department designated four Chinese companies as proliferators of weapons of mass destruction for supplying Iran's military with missile-related and dual-use components. A monitoring team would be well positioned to investigate whether this type of activity, which might violate the resolutions, is continuing.

With China's status as a permanent member of the security council, however, the prospect of the team being located in Beijing is extremely low. A good second choice in that case would be Dubai. Like China, the United Arab Emirates' commercial ties to Iran continue to grow, even as international pressure builds against the regime. In total, Iran imported approximately \$12bn worth of goods from the UAE in 2006. As the business environment in Iran deteriorates, many Iranian businesses have relocated to Dubai, in an effort to circumvent the existing sanctions. By doing so, Iranian companies have been able to improve their ties to European companies, for example, which are now reluctant to do business in Iran itself.

The UAE has taken some important steps recently to more closely regulate its business sector. In August, the UAE passed a law allowing it to restrict exports for national security reasons. Soon after, the Emiratis detained a ship bound for Iran to determine whether chemicals on board violated either the UN resolutions or its recently passed export-control law. While these are signs of progress, in Dubai's free-wheeling business environment, much more still needs to be done. A monitoring team could help identify how Iran is exploiting the UAE to work around the sanctions regime, furthering the UAE's efforts to crack down on illicit Iranian activity.

Persuading Iran to abandon all of its nuclear-related activities remains an uphill struggle, though the NIE gave some hope that this is an achievable goal, concluding that Iran makes its nuclear-related decisions using a cost-benefit approach. While additional punitive measures would be helpful in ratcheting up the pressure against Tehran, better enforcement of the various sanctions regimes already in place could have an equally significant impact. Regardless, continuing to raise the costs for Tehran of its behaviour remains the path most likely to succeed.

Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's [Stein Programme on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11>) and the author of [The West at War: US and European Counterterrorism Efforts Post-September 11](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=237) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=237>). He previously served as a senior advisor in the Treasury Department's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. ❖

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