

# WebMemo



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## Iran Economic Sanctions at the U.N. Security Council: The Incredible Shrinking Resolution

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President Obama and French President Nicolas Sarkozy earlier this week urged reluctant members of the United Nations Security Council to quickly pass sanctions against Iran. But that is highly unlikely, as Obama himself acknowledged: “Do we have unanimity in the international community? Not yet. And that’s something we have to work on.”

In the absence of decisive action from the U.N., the Obama Administration should work with allies to impose strong sanctions outside the U.N. framework, where effective action is hampered by the veto power of China and Russia.

**Diplomatic Foot-Dragging.** Predictably, the U.S. push for another round of sanctions at the Security Council, which previously passed three weak sanctions resolutions, has stalled in the face of Chinese and Russian diplomatic foot-dragging. The Obama Administration had claimed that its engagement policy would help ease the passage of sanctions at the United Nations if Iran spurned its efforts to resolve the nuclear standoff through diplomacy. But despite Iran’s continued defiance, Beijing has cynically warned that sanctions “could complicate the situation” and derail diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to come into compliance with its nuclear safeguard commitments.

Both Moscow and Beijing remain adamantly opposed to the stiff economic sanctions that would be necessary to get Tehran’s attention. Both unsurprisingly continue to advance their own national interests by cultivating closer economic relations with Iran and do not want to see U.N. sanctions hamper their own economic and foreign policy interests.

Neither country seems to care much about Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s truculent defiance and flouting of U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for a halt in Iran’s uranium enrichment efforts. Both ignored the revelation last September of yet another Iranian illegal covert uranium enrichment facility and the fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency declared for the first time in February that it has evidence that Iran has worked on a nuclear warhead for its ballistic missiles.

**Hitting the Snooze Button.** The Obama Administration’s misguided effort to hit the “reset” button with Iran has not been any more successful than its fruitless effort to hit the “reset” button with Russia. And in Iran’s case, the reset turned out to be a snooze button that actually undermined the perceived urgency of imposing sanctions and gave Tehran more time to advance its nuclear program.

The Obama Administration, which entered office talking about imposing “crippling sanctions” on Iran, now has considerably toned down its rhetoric. Last week, in a speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual conference, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promised to impose “sanctions that bite.” But any sanctions that emerge from the U.N. Security

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Council are likely to be relatively toothless, thanks to China and Russia.

Several days after Clinton's speech, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the United States has already backed away from pushing a number of tough measures at the U.N. in an effort to win support from Beijing and Moscow. Among provisions removed from the draft resolution were sanctions to deny Iran access to international banking services, access to capital markets, permission for Iran's national airlines and air cargo carriers to use the airspace of U.N. members, and permission for Iran's shipping firms to operate in waters controlled by U.N. members.<sup>1</sup> The current resolution retains sanctions against Iran's Revolutionary Guards and their corporate empire as well as a ban on states offering credit or subsidized trade with Iran. But this is a far cry from the "crippling sanctions" initially promised by the Obama Administration.

Some have argued that such watered-down sanctions have symbolic importance in isolating Iran. But such symbolic wrist slaps are unlikely to impress Iran's thuggish regime. And the glacial pace of negotiations at the U.N. Security Council means that any actions taken are likely to be too little, too late. Iran has made steady progress on its nuclear program and will amass enough low enriched uranium by late July to arm a nuclear weapon if it is enriched to higher levels.<sup>2</sup>

**Going Around the U.N.** The only chance of halting Iran's nuclear weapons program short of war is to quickly impose the strongest possible sanctions on Iran. This requires going outside the U.N. Security Council, where Russia and China can use their veto power to delay and dilute sanctions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has suggested that if the U.N. Security Council was unable to agree on sanctions, then Germany and other countries might impose their own sanctions. Sarkozy at the White House this week indicated that he would work with

Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown to consolidate European backing for sanctions above and beyond what is likely to be permitted by Moscow and Beijing at the U.N. Security Council.

The Obama Administration should also reconsider its opposition to congressional legislation that would impose much stronger U.S. sanctions on Iran. Despite the Administration's objections, both houses of Congress have passed Iran sanctions legislation with impressive bipartisan support. In December the House voted 412–12 to pass the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, which would penalize foreign companies that help Iran to import gasoline and other refined petroleum products by denying them access to U.S. markets. The Senate passed its own Iran sanctions legislation in January, which would impose similar penalties on companies that export gasoline and other refined petroleum products to Iran, add sanctions on leading officials of the ruling regime, and tighten export controls.

The two bills now await action by a conference committee to reconcile the differences. But the White House has sought to delay final passage because it argues that such unilateral sanctions could complicate its diplomatic efforts at the U.N. This is a weak excuse for inaction, given the anemic sanctions that are likely to be passed by the Security Council.

**No Time for Half-Steps.** Half-hearted half-steps on sanctions are unlikely to budge Tehran's theocratic dictatorship. After neglecting sanctions for more than a year, the Obama Administration should quickly take strong action to have any chance of slowing Iran's steady push to acquire nuclear weapons.

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1. David Crawford, Richard Boudreaux, Joe Lauria, and Jay Solomon, "U.S. Softens Sanctions Plan Against Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2010.
2. See James Phillips, "Iran's Nuclear Program: What Is Known and Unknown," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2393, March 26, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/03/Iran-s-Nuclear-Program-What-Is-Known-and-Unknown>.