



## Should the United States Rethink Sanctions Against Iran?

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### The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy with Iran

History shows that inflexible sanctions rarely yield the desired result. If current sanctions on Iran fail to leverage its behavior or catalyze its people to revolt, then the West should resist the urge to impose more sanctions and lift the ones in place.

Proposing diplomacy with Iran does not make one an apologist for the ayatollahs. That Iran commits objectionable deeds is not in dispute. What is disputed are the benefits of flexibility. Effective sanctions must be carefully calibrated and responsive to cooperation. The U.S. in particular must be willing to dial back sanctions in exchange for Iranian concessions short of renouncing enrichment. This is easier said than done given election-year pressures on Capitol Hill and from the Romney campaign. Indeed, Washington has been reluctant to budge, so whether Iran suffers from sanctions or not has become largely irrelevant.

After years of enduring “sticks”—sanctions, Stuxnet, threats of military strikes, and attacks on its nuclear scientists—and “carrots”—peace overtures, goodwill gestures, and four New Year’s messages from President Obama to the Iranian people—Tehran has sought partial relief from sanctions in exchange for compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Iran has also offered to export its 20 percent uranium and suspend enriching to that level in exchange for the West providing medical isotopes and scrapping sanctions. Those deals collapsed.

Today, the West demands that Iran “stop, shut, and ship”: stop enrichment, shutter Fordow, and ship the 20 percent stockpile—this despite the NPT, to which Iran is a signatory, allowing for peaceful enrichment. Moreover, as the National Iranian American Council’s David Elliot and the Brookings Institution’s Suzanne Maloney observe, Congress passed sanctions that are not conditional on Iranian behavior.

Demanding Iran’s complete capitulation for no relief from sanctions is a maximalist position with zero chance of success. Extrapolating from the case of Libya’s dismantlement of its nuclear program, Duke University Professor Bruce W. Jentleson and doctoral candidate Christopher A. Whytock find that one of the most crucial aspects of coercive diplomacy is that there are clear benefits to cooperation and that those benefits are realized when the coerced state cooperates.<sup>[i]</sup> Similarly, Jonathan B. Schwartz, deputy legal adviser to the Department of State, argued from his personal capacity that reciprocity is critical to any sanctions regime.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Chaim Braun and Christopher F. Chyba, of Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation, argue that the manipulation of economic sanctions and the amelioration of regional security threats are key, as there must be incentives to go along with disincentives.<sup>[iii]</sup> International security experts Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss explain about Iran and North Korea, “Getting them genuinely to forswear nuclear weapons at this stage will require not just the threat of very harmful consequences if they persist but also the prospect of a much brighter future if they reverse course.”<sup>[iv]</sup>

Evidence suggests that effective sanctions on Iran will prove difficult not because of Iran, but because of the intransigent approach of the sanctioning states. Talks are ongoing. Nevertheless, the diminishing returns of economic warfare and international ostracism could lead us down a dangerous path to conflict.

To take a twist on an old saying, if goods do not cross oceans, bombs will. If restricting trade accomplishes little, then failure will galvanize hawks who seek to reckon with Iran militarily. Although Iran has not yet decided to build, test, and deploy nuclear weapons, what it has done is learn the technical and industrial capabilities needed to develop them. Tehran’s knowledge of the nuclear fuel cycle is a major reason why a military strike would prove fruitless; not only would an attack spur Iran to reconstitute its nuclear program but also show to the world that it had a compelling reason for doing so.

The limits of coercive diplomacy are fast approaching. Abandoning rigid sanctions and rethinking the incentives needed for compliance would be the first step and the last chance for a peaceful resolution.

[i] Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock. “Who “Won” Libya?: The Force-Diplomacy Debate and its Implications for Theory and Policy,” *International Security* 30, No. 3 (Winter, 2005): 47-86.

[ii] Jonathan B. Schwartz, “Dealing with a ‘Rogue State’: The Libya Precedent,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 101, No. 3 (July 2007): 553-580.

[iii] Chaim Braun and Christopher F. Chyba, “Proliferation Rings,” *International Security* 29, No. 2 (Fall 2004): 43-45.

[iv] Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss, *The Nuclear Tipping Point*, pp. 332.