

## **Sanctions will not curb Iran's nuclear ambitions**

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With Wednesday's passage of new United Nations Security Council sanctions against Iran, the Obama administration achieved an important milestone in its efforts to put pressure on Tehran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. What is less clear, however, is whether this achievement makes the prospect of a nuclear Iran more or less likely.

The product of six months of frenzied diplomacy and Washington's painstaking cultivation of Moscow and Beijing, the resolution offers a modest intensification of three previous Security Council measures to persuade Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment programme enacted under the Bush administration's watch. This latest round of sanctions adds curbs on conventional arms sales and an array of hortatory language intended to facilitate the adoption of more severe penalties by the European Union and other American allies.

Still, its principal virtue appears to be its mere passage, temporarily put in doubt last month by an 11th-hour Iranian diplomatic gambit involving Turkey and Brazil. In fending off the aspiring powers' proposal to remove some of Iran's low-enriched uranium – an offer Hillary Clinton, US secretary of state, deemed a mere ploy – Washington managed to maintain the backing of major world powers for new pressure and make good on its warnings to Tehran and other would-be proliferators that, as President Barack Obama moralised on Wednesday, “actions have consequences”.

But before Washington indulges in a victory lap, it would be wise to contemplate the consequences of the sanctions. First, it seems widely accepted, even if rarely acknowledged by the administration, that the latest UN measures are unlikely to alter Iran's fundamental nuclear calculations. While they will add to the mounting costs and inconveniences of Iran's provocative foreign policy, they will not be “crippling”, as Mrs Clinton once promised, because they do not directly strike at the Islamic Republic's lifeblood – its oil revenues, which total in the tens of billions. Rather, these sanctions, like the 31 years of American unilateral measures before, are likely to prove reasonably tolerable for Tehran. As a result, it will now focus its energies on averting, circumventing, insulating and even exploiting them, endeavours that the regime has elevated to an art form.

The shift from prevention to adaptation and mitigation explains why the threat of sanctions is typically far more influential than their implementation. In this respect, the new penalties are better suited to a long-term strategy of containing and eroding Tehran's capacity for troublemaking, rather than their ostensible purpose of quickly coercing Tehran into adopting more responsible foreign policies.

The other likely consequence is the reinforcement of the most paranoid segments of Iran's leadership and the revival of its intensely factionalised debate over foreign policy. Searching for a means of enhancing his battered domestic standing, it is President Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad – yes, he of the reprehensible rhetoric and rigged re-election – who has proven the foremost champion of direct engagement with Washington. But his rambling letters to world leaders and persistent championing of the low-enriched uranium deal have generated little traction with a Washington disillusioned with the idea of engaging Iran. Unfortunately, Iran's repressive and competitive internal political environment will deter other Iranian leaders from pushing for greater accommodation with the international community, and Iran's ultimate decision-maker, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, will see sanctions as validating his preference for defiance.

Whatever tactical advantage the UN vote provides may be offset by the longer-term problem of drawing Iran into a durable understanding on respecting its non-proliferation obligations. In

dismissing the Brazilian-Turkish-Iranian deal, the US and its allies are counting on economic pressure forcing more meaningful Iranian compromises. Yet purely coercive diplomacy cannot produce sustainable agreements or resolve the inconsistency between Iran's security perceptions and those of the international community. Only an approach involving direct dialogue and strategic patience can produce lasting success.

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