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# Iran Sanctions Are Failing. What's Next?

*We will soon be left with a stark alternative: Either Iran gets a nuclear weapon and we manage the risk, or someone acts to eliminate the threat.*

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By DANIELLE PLETKA

Has the U.S. abandoned plans to target the Iranian regime's access to banking and credit and to isolate Iranian air and shipping transport? While recent reports to that effect have been strenuously denied by the administration, it has become clear that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's promise of "crippling sanctions" and President Barack Obama's "aggressive" penalties are little more than talk. The administration simply cannot persuade a critical mass of nations to join with it.

At this juncture, there are blunt questions that need to be asked. Can sanctions even work? Can we live with a nuclear Iran? Is military action inevitable? But first, some foreign policy forensics are in order.

Candidate Obama told us engagement would be his byword, and to give him credit, he proffered a generous, open hand to Tehran. If his hand remained outstretched a little too long, he was secure in the knowledge that the world rarely criticizes an American president who is willing to make sacrifices for peace (especially if those sacrifices are measured in terms of American national security). But Mr. Obama was more than committed to dialogue with Iran: He was unwilling to take no for an answer.

How else to explain Mr. Obama's lack of interest in the Iranian people's democratic protests against the regime. Or his seeming indifference to Tehran's failure to meet repeated international deadlines to respond to an offer endorsed by all five permanent U.N. Security Council members (and Germany) to allow Iran to enrich uranium in Russia, receiving back enriched fuel rods that do not lend themselves to weapons production. One might have hoped the administration was using that time to build international consensus for a plan B. But apparently that's not the case.

After months of begging, China will agree only to discuss the possibility of a fourth U.N. Security Council resolution punishing Tehran's noncompliance with its nonproliferation commitments. But along with Russia, it has already ruled out any measures to target the regime or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Even nonpermanent U.N. Security Council members Japan, Brazil and Turkey have reportedly rebuffed the administration requests to support tougher sanctions.

Meanwhile, Tehran continues to work toward a nuclear weapon, with the International Atomic Energy Agency now looking for two new nuclear sites in the Islamic Republic. Any talk of a tidal wave of ad hoc sanctions among various like-minded Western nations has fallen by the

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wayside. True, companies like Royal Dutch Shell, major oil trader Vitol and others have decided to take a pass on new deals with Iran. Others are less cautious.

In the past few weeks, among other reported business with Iran, Turkey announced it was mulling a \$5.5 billion investment in Iran's natural-gas sector. Iran and Pakistan signed a deal paving the way for the construction of a major pipeline. And a unit of China National Petroleum inked a \$143 million contract with Iran's state-run North Drilling Company to deliver equipment for NDC's Persian Gulf oil fields.

Sanctions increasingly appear to be a fading hope. Thus we are left with a stark alternative: Either Iran gets a nuclear weapon and we manage the risk, or someone acts to eliminate the threat.

Unofficial Washington has long been discussing options for containment of a nuclear Iran. Setting aside the viability of containment (I have my doubts), surely these challenges must be apparent to some on the Obama team. But you'd never know it from administration officials, who continue to privately profess faith in the (weak) sanctions route. Badgered by those in the region most directly menaced by a nuclear Iran, administration officials have reportedly refused to engage in discussion of possible next steps.

The implications of this ostrich-like behavior are grave. Some Gulf states (including, some say, Qatar, which hosts American forces and equipment) have begun to openly propitiate the Tehran regime, anticipating its regional dominance once it is armed with nuclear weapons. Others, not reassured by Clinton drop-bys and ineffectual back-patting, have begun to explore their own nuclear option. Repeated rumors that Saudi Arabia is negotiating to buy an off-the-shelf Pakistani nuclear weapon should not be ignored.

What of Israel? The mess of U.S.-Israel relations has ironically only bolstered the fears of Arab governments that the current U.S. administration is a feckless ally. If the U.S. won't stand by Israel, by whom will it stand? Conversely, our adversaries view both the distancing from Israel and the debacle of Iran policy as evidence of American retreat. All the ingredients of a regional powder keg are in place.

Finally, there is the military option. Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu left Washington last week befuddled by Mr. Obama's intentions on Iran. Should Israel decide to attack Iran, the shock waves will not leave the U.S. unscathed. Of course, Mr. Obama could decide that we must take action. But no one, Iran included, believes he will take action.

And so, as the failure of Mr. Obama's Iran policy becomes manifest to all but the president, we drift toward war. The only questions remaining, one Washington politico tells me, are who starts it, and how it ends.

*Ms. Pletka is vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.*

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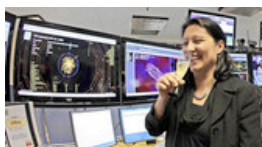
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