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Iran: Time for Sanctions of the Willing

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to the United Nations this week shines a spotlight on Iran as a growing menace to international security—from its burgeoning nuclear program to its sponsorship of international terrorism to its support of the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the failure of diplomacy to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, major powers should work outside of the U.N. framework to impose tough economic sanctions on Tehran.

The Iranian Threat. While all options should be kept on the table, including military action, it appears that the preferred path—peaceful diplomacy—is making no headway in addressing the threat Iran poses to peace and stability. Tehran continues to thumb its nose at the concerns of the international community.

Making matters worse, China and Russia—both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—are disinclined to take a harder line with the intransigent Iranians. Economic interests might explain their reluctance to check Iran's ambitions in the Middle East and beyond. China will invest \$25 billion in the Iranian oil and gas sector over the next 25 years; Russia sees Iran as both a major arms sales client and a potential member of its proposed natural gas cartel.

Growing Support for Sanctions. An idea long advocated by The Heritage Foundation is gaining traction with some major powers, especially in Europe: coming together outside the U.N. framework to impose tough economic sanctions on Iran.

France, the United Kingdom, and some other European nations—in concert with the United States—have recently expressed a willingness to impose punitive economic sanctions on the Iranian regime in response to its protracted unwillingness to compromise on the nuclear issue.

Just last week, French President Nicolas Sarkozy accused Iran of seeking nuclear weapons and advocated “stronger sanctions.” He said, “[Iranian nuclear capability] is unacceptable and I tell the French people it is unacceptable.”

Unfortunately, Germany, one of Iran's biggest trading partners, is reluctant to cut financial and commercial ties with Iran, even as its efforts have come to naught as a leader of the European Union's nuclear negotiating team, along with France and the U.K.

Why Sanctions Could Work. While there is no guarantee of success, restrictions on trade and foreign investment by major economic powers could give Tehran pause concerning its pursuit of nuclear weapons and its support for terrorism and the Afghan and Iraqi insurgencies.

In fact, Iran had the most advanced economy in the Middle East at the time of the 1979 Iranian

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revolution. Since then, Iran's economy—in spite of oil and gas revenues—has been sorely mismanaged, resulting in both double-digit inflation and unemployment.

The sputtering Iranian economy has increased social pressure on the regime. Sixty percent of Iranians are under the age of 30. With this group yearning for economic opportunity, foreign trade and investment matter greatly to the Tehran regime.

Furthermore, Iran has complained vociferously and threatened endlessly over the issue of economic sanctions, leading one to believe—at least superficially—that their imposition would undermine the regime's interests.

At this point, Iran may fear economic sanctions more than it fears military action. Tehran believes that military action is a long shot while the United States and NATO are engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Conclusion. Some major European and Asian nations continue to balk at taking tougher action. After several years of shuttle diplomacy by the EU and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the time has come to circumvent U.N. Security Council roadblocks. Nations such as Germany and Japan must be convinced to put long-term global security ahead of short-term economic gains.

If Iran is cut off by its major trade and investment partners, Tehran may just change course—because there is nothing the regime fears more than a counterrevolution by Iran's dissatisfied, economically disadvantaged youth.

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