

Why Iran Is Standing Firm

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No one really believed that the latest round of international negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program would produce a breakthrough. So it was no surprise that it did not, despite the concessions that were made at the meeting in Kazakhstan by the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, plus Germany). Washington's belief that a harsh sanctions regime could coax Iran into a deal has proved to be unrealistic.

Despite being isolated and ostracized, Iran has managed to gain some strategic breathing room with the help of countries like China, Russia, India, Syria and Venezuela, allowing it to resist Western pressure. More important, even though the severe sanctions regime led by the U.S. is bound to be imperfect, it only hardens further Iran's resistance.

To be sure, Iran's alliances are vulnerable to erosion, and in the case of two staunch allies, Syria and Venezuela, to outright collapse. Even so, Russia and China continue to take a much more lenient approach to Iran and its pursuit to gain the capability to produce nuclear weapons. While the Western powers have embraced ever-harsher sanctions, Russia and China view Iran as a tool in their global competition with the U.S.

China's Iranian interests boil down to economics. Bilateral trade stands at about \$40 billion a year. China is not only Iran's largest customer for crude oil, but also a colossal investor — somewhere between \$40 billion and \$100 billion — in Iran's energy and transportation sectors. True, China cannot entirely overlook U.S. pressure and the staunch opposition of its top oil supplier, Saudi Arabia, to Iran's nuclear program. But, while China has supported the mandatory sanctions set by the United Nations Security Council, it has rejected the West's unilateral measures.

With bilateral trade worth only about \$5 billion annually, Russia's economic interests in Iran are fairly modest. But it fears Iran's ability to cause trouble, particularly by stirring up unrest among Russia's Muslim citizens. Moreover, the U.S. has refused to pay the Kremlin's high price — curtailment of congressional human rights legislation and abandonment of plans for ballistic missile defense in Europe — for Russian support on Iran.

The problem with the U.S. drive to have key stakeholders join its anti-Iran crusade is that some of them live in neighborhoods where Iran is an important factor — India, for example. India is certainly alarmed at the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons, not to mention the possible effects of Iran's Islamist fundamentalism on Kashmiri Muslims. But India's \$14 billion in annual bilateral trade, and its dependence on Iranian oil are key strategic considerations.

Moreover, India needs Iran as an alternative trade and energy conduit to Central Asia, bypassing rival Pakistan, and also as a hedge against an uncertain future in Afghanistan after the U.S. withdraws in 2014. As a result, India's policy mirrors China's: It has aligned itself with mandatory international sanctions but has abjured voluntary Western financial restrictions.

The equivocal nature of Iran's alliances, however, can be a mixed blessing. Yes, a harsh sanctions regime might still gain additional supporters, but an Iran with its back against the wall would probably be even more obstinate in its nuclear drive. After all, Iraq was an easy target in the first Gulf War precisely because it had abandoned its nuclear program. It had no weapons of mass destruction to use as a deterrence threat. Similarly, Libya's Moammar Gadhafi exposed himself to a NATO onslaught by relinquishing his weapons of mass destruction.

By contrast, North Korea shows that defiance, rather than accommodation, is a strategy that works. That is why Syria, with North Korean assistance, tried to develop a nuclear program, which were presumably destroyed by Israel's officially unacknowledged "Operation Orchard" in 2007. Iran will not consider abandoning its nuclear insurance policy unless a broad agenda is agreed upon that addresses Iran's concerns as a regional power and secures the immunity of its Islamist regime from U.S. actions.

Albert Einstein's definition of insanity as "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" could be applied to the United States' Iran policy. The diplomacy of sanctions, ostracism and brinkmanship has failed resoundingly. As Iran's uranium enrichment and other weapons development activities continue unabated, the U.S. needs to make a break with the old rules of engagement.

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