

Could Sanctions Stop Iran

Could Sanctions Stop Iran?

By Carne Ross

Published in the Washington Post, 30 March 2006

Now that the U.N. Security Council has agreed on a statement demanding that Iran restrict its nuclear program, the United States and its allies are doubtless considering tougher measures, including sanctions, to force Iran's compliance. The experience of sanctions imposed on Iraq (and on other countries), which I helped engineer and maintain as a British diplomat at the Security Council, offers some lessons.

First, no sanctions regime is effective unless its objective is widely shared, especially by the neighbors of the targeted state. On Iraq, even though the United States and Britain managed, through strenuous diplomatic effort, to gain Security Council approval of sanctions, there was considerable evasion of the sanctions by Iraq's neighbors and others, for whom their economic welfare was more important than the goal of disarming Iraq. Even if China and Russia do not block any sanctions resolution on Iran, no resolution will be effective unless they and other states choose to enforce the sanctions.

Second, oil sanctions are a double-edged sword. In the latter years of the 12-year sanctions regime on Iraq, Saddam Hussein often threatened to stop Iraq's oil exports in order to deter the United States and Britain from imposing measures in the Security Council to thwart his sanctions-busting techniques. Then as now, the gap between global oil demand and supply was so small that even the threat of stopping Iraq's exports caused damaging spikes in global oil prices. Any attempt to block or limit Iran's oil exports would surely have similar effects.

Third, even the most aggressive sanctions regimes, such as comprehensive economic sanctions, tend not to achieve their desired effects. While they were in effect, sanctions on Iraq prevented it from rearming -- despite the claims of the U.S. and British governments before the 2003 invasion. But the sanctions did not force Iraq to comply fully with the United Nations' weapons inspectors. It finally took the threat of invasion for Iraq to cooperate with the inspectors in the months before the war.

Instead, comprehensive sanctions caused considerable human suffering in Iraq and, thanks to the control over food rationing that the oil-for-food program placed in the regime's hands, they arguably helped reinforce Hussein's rule. This mistake must not be repeated.

Fourth, any sanctions regime requires a long-term, patient and detailed effort to succeed. Sanctions on Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia were effective partly because the United States and the European Union devoted considerable resources to targeting Milosevic's illegal financial holdings. Although there was lots of rhetoric, and American ships

patrolled the Persian Gulf, sanctions enforcement on Iraq was sporadic, as the United States and its allies allowed Iraq's neighbors, particularly Jordan and Turkey, to import oil illegally. It's hard to believe that support for sanctions against Iran, even if they were imposed, would endure for very long.

Sanctions on Libya, imposed in 1992 after the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, were more effective in part because they were more limited. The U.N. ban on arms sales and air travel to Libya was seen as measured and commensurate pressure on Moammar Gaddafi to comply with the Security Council's demand that two Libyan agents accused of planning the bombing be handed over for trial. Even then, it took many years before Libya complied. Here there is a lesson that sanctions, when supported politically and patiently applied, can eventually work. Perhaps here there is scope for something that could work with Iran: a package of travel bans and financial measures targeting Iranian leaders. Targeted sanctions are, after the Iraq experience, now the fashion.

But there is one big reason why any U.S. effort to obtain sanctions against Iran is unlikely to be effective. All U.N. sanctions in the past have been imposed on governments that have done something seriously wrong -- such as invading other countries (Iraq) or brazenly hosting terrorist organizations (the Taliban). The claim that Iran might be developing a nuclear bomb hardly meets this standard, particularly because Pakistan and India got away with it (and with U.S. sympathy) and because U.S. intelligence assertions on weapons of mass destruction are, thanks to the Iraq experience, thoroughly disbelieved. Unless Iran is silly enough to do something such as testing a bomb (which is not very likely), there will probably not be sufficient international support for punitive measures.

All of these reasons suggest that sanctions, as a policy option, are far from straightforward. Without troublemaking from Iran (which perhaps the United States is hoping for), they are unlikely to be agreed to under the current circumstances, and even if they are, they will succeed only if they are very carefully designed, targeted and supported by long-term and diligent diplomacy to shore up support.

The writer is a former diplomat who served in Britain's delegation to the United Nations from 1998 to 2002. He is now director of Independent Diplomat, a nonprofit diplomatic advisory group.