

Action against Iran? Do it at your peril

WORLD VIEW

The Middle East nations must resist any rash steps against Iran by the US and other world powers

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Buoyed by a string of recent successes US President Barack Obama has shifted into high gear his drive for sanctions to punish Iran for its nuclear defiance. Iran's calculated in-

transigence has compounded matters. The confrontation with the United States also gives Iran's hardliners a means to strengthen their grip over the country. Now the prospect of new UN sanctions against Iran casts a dark shadow over the region. After Obama's announcements that he would seek effective sanctions sooner than later, it would be difficult for him to back down. China has come under pressure to play along, or at least not obstruct this effort.

In New York, the P-5 plus Germany are negotiating a new UN draft which new curbs on Iranian banking, a full arms embargo, tougher measures against Iranian shipping, moves against

members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and firms they control and a ban on new investments in Iran's energy sector.

Sensing the mood, Malaysia's Petrobras has stopped shipments of gasoline to Iran. However, the negotiations are likely to be difficult and protracted.

Obama's recent successes — the healthcare reform package, the New START treaty, and the recent Nuclear Security Summit, plus the barely concealed threat of trade restrictions on China have given fresh momentum to the push for sanctions. This is despite the perilant refusal of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu to attend the Nuclear Security summit in the

wake of US-Israeli differences over the resumption of Israeli settlements activities. Iran's nuclear programme has moved a notch further towards the nuclear weapons threshold.

It has developed a new generation centrifuge and has announced plans to enrich its stockpile of nearly 2 tonnes of low enriched uranium (LEU 3.5 per cent) to 20 per cent. But LEU is sufficient for pressurised light water reactors for power generation. Moving up from 20 per cent enriched uranium to the weapons grade 90 per cent highly enriched Uranium (HEU) can be done relatively quickly.

A few more years down the road, Iran's heavy water Arak reactor could start up, to enable production of weapons grade Plutonium from natural Uranium, though this route is technically more difficult.

One scenario would be for Iran to find some reason to withdraw from the NPT, and go on to produce a sufficient stock of HEU within about 3 months. With over 50 kilograms of HEU, making a nuclear bomb is quite simple. A further exercise in brinkmanship would be to announce enough stocks of HEU for nuclear weapons, but stop short of testing a device.

Another nightmare scenario would be if HEU leaks into the hands of non-state actors, a major concern at the Nuclear Security Summit.

Iran has reacted to threats of air strikes mooted by Israel and US commentators. It has hardened its key nuclear facilities by putting them underground and installing air defence systems, prompting one US think tank to suggest that Israel or the US might use nuclear weapons to damage Iran's nuclear installations underground.

Other possible Iranian reaction such as obstructing the crucial Hormuz straits, with the resulting devastating impact on oil prices has already aroused considerable concern around the world. New aggressive UN sanc-

tions could be just the excuse for Iran to withdraw from the NPT (as had been done not long ago by North Korea), ratcheting up tension further.

Iran's reaction to sanctions is likely to be aggressive and unpredictable. Oil prices would move up immediately on fears of conflict and disruption. Iran's assets such as the Hezbollah and Hamas could be activated pushing Israel over the brink and launching a strike.

Israel is currently believed to possess between 75 and 400 nuclear warheads with the ability to deliver them by intercontinental ballistic missile, aircraft, and submarine.

Moreover, sanctions would be difficult to implement unless there is a high degree of international consensus and political will, which at the present time is lacking.

Both China and Russia are not keen on sanctions. The US would find its task in Afghanistan greatly complicated given that Iran is strategically placed as Afghanistan's neighbour.

The countries in the region would bear the brunt of the impact of all these developments. India is one of those which would be seriously affected, and has therefore been against sanctions and advocated settling the matter within the IAEA, or through diplomatic negotiations. At the recent IBSA and BRIC summits this view was echoed.

Given all these factors, the countries in the region should urge the P-5 and the UN Security Council not to act rashly. They would do well to take into account the concerns of the countries of the region before arriving at a decision. It is for the countries in the region to strongly articulate their concerns before it is too late. Maybe it is time for India and the Gulf states to take this initiative.

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