

# WEAK TEA

The U.N. sanctions against Iran have been watered down to almost nothing.

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After a year's worth of diplomacy, the moment of truth for the next round of Iran sanctions is upon us. The White House has indicated that a vote in the United Nations Security Council on a fourth round of sanctions on the Islamic Republic is expected this week. At various points in the previous months, President Barack Obama's administration has promised that these sanctions will be "crippling," "smart," and "targeted." In reality, however, the best adjective to describe the new sanctions is "ineffective."

In May, the Obama administration announced an agreement on the language of a draft resolution between the veto-wielding members of the Security Council. The administration patted itself on the back for getting China and Russia to go along with another round of sanctions. However, the White House paid a huge price for their agreement: It agreed to water down the obligations in the resolution, making its most important restrictions voluntary. As a result, the resolution is not strong enough to change Iran's strategic calculation any more than the three resolutions that preceded it.

Even with these concessions, it is no certainty that the resolution will be

adopted. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rushed to announce the agreement before her negotiators had finished work on the annexes listing the names of the individuals and entities to be sanctioned. The quick announcement marked an attempt to manage the fallout from the nuclear-fuel swap negotiated by Turkey and Brazil, whereby Iran agreed to park 1,200 kilograms of its uranium stockpile in Turkey, while receiving in return a supply of enriched uranium ostensibly for use in its medical research reactor. China and Russia have reacted sympathetically to the terms of the deal, signaling their weak resolve to enforce the new U.N. sanctions even if they vote for them.

The new draft resolution displays in the clearest possible terms the contrast between the administration's boundless faith in international institutions and reality. The White House considers it a major accomplishment that the resolution simply names the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), Iran's principal maritime shipping company. The resolution also includes entities acting on behalf of the IRGC and IRISL, as well as entities that are owned or controlled

by them. However, the draft resolution falls short of actually mandating international action against these entities.

The new sanctions will require countries to block IRGC or IRISL assets only if these entities are proven to be engaged in activities that are “proliferation sensitive.” In other words, if a country does not catch them red-handed while shipping centrifuges to Iran, it does not have to act.

The same qualification applies to the financial-services sanctions, which include a prohibition on opening new banks, branches of Iranian banks, and correspondent relationships. The sanctions apply only if there are grounds to believe a specific financial transaction relates to proliferation-sensitive activities. The Central Bank of Iran is mentioned only in passing, and the resolution only “encourages” countries to exercise vigilance over its transactions.

The resolution does offer some encouraging developments, but they are unlikely to have sufficient impact to change Iranian behavior. The sanctions will give countries the authority to interdict ships they believe are carrying prohibited nuclear items to Iran. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874, imposed after North Korea’s 2009 nuclear-weapons test, gave countries the authority to stop North Korean vessels, and some countries—including India, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates—have actually used

it. However, this has obviously not stopped Kim Jong Il’s nuclear program, which proceeds apace.

One of the resolution’s few mandatory provisions requires countries to prohibit Tehran from acquiring an interest in commercial activity involving uranium mining, as well as production or use of nuclear materials and technology. Iran has been seeking to acquire uranium from Venezuela and Bolivia, a prospect this resolution might affect. Prohibiting investment in a mine, however, will not stop Iran from buying the ore extracted from it.

The new resolution is also rife with loopholes when it comes to new arms restrictions. For example, it does not prohibit Russia from selling S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran because those weapons are not covered by the resolution’s technical definition of a missile listed on the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms. Administration officials have said they have reached a separate understanding with the Russians, but there are no sanctions ready to go if they supply the S-300s anyway.

The voluntary nature of many of these sanctions guarantees that states will implement them in widely varying ways. The United States will likely use the resolution to expand its array of unilateral sanctions and enforce sanctions on Iranian financial transactions and shipping even more vigorously. EU member states will also strengthen their measures, but will not

independently impose sanctions on new targets. Although they will be more aggressive in interdicting shipments, we are not likely to see Britain or France prohibiting the Iranian business of European oil companies such as Total and Shell. Russia and China, on the other hand, will probably parse the resolution’s language to its barest essentials, doing the minimum necessary to meet its requirements. This will allow Russian energy giant Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corp. to continue their Iran projects as usual.

Although the paltry effect of the new U.N. sanctions might not have much of an impact on Iran, it could spur the U.S. Congress to implement unilateral sanctions on Iran’s petroleum exports, which the Security Council’s resolution does not address. Congressional sanctions probably will not change Iran’s strategic calculation either, but supporters can plausibly argue that they could choke off the money that pays for Iran’s nuclear program. The U.S. Government Accountability Office estimates that oil sales comprise as much as 76 percent of the regime’s revenues.

Of course, the resolution that will likely be passed this week is better than nothing. There should be no illusion, however, that it will stop Iran’s drive toward nuclear weapons. U.N. sanctions will need to be a lot tougher to have an impact on the Islamic Republic, if it is not already too late for them to have any impact at all.