

Iran poses mammoth peril; U.N. yet to show resolve

Jeff Robbins

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It was Adlai Stevenson who observed famously how much diplomacy has in common with the reproductive lives of elephants. In both cases, he noted, there is a great deal of commotion, all of it taking place at a very high level - and then you have to wait two years before anything happens.

Stevenson, who served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was in a position to know. But the spectre of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the U.N. General Assembly last month, subjecting a body whose purpose is to promote peaceful relations among nations to truly blood-curdling threats against the civilized world, reminded many people that what the U.N. does, or does not do, when confronted by those who threaten to wipe out other countries and who are close to having the means to do so is not cause for bemusement - or indifference.

The Iranian regime's harsh repression of its own citizens has, as Human Rights Watch recently pointed out, "reached new lows" under Ahmadinejad.

But it is not just its human rights violations that make the need for the strongest possible set of economic sanctions on Iran so dire.

Its leadership, including its president, has repeatedly threatened not only to eradicate Israel but to destroy the West. Its regime is rapidly closing in on obtaining nuclear weapons, and Ahmadinejad has repeatedly declared that Iran will not cooperate with international investigations into Iran's nuclear weapons program, declaring the issue "closed."

Iran provides lethal support for Hezbollah and Hamas, two terrorist organizations.

Iran's nose-thumbing at the U.N. has been remarkable. Resolutions requiring Iran to suspend uranium enrichment and heavy-water-related projects have been enacted by the U.N. Security Council in 2006, 2007 and 2008, and, in turn, have been disregarded by Iran. In the meantime, Iran disputes the right of the International Atomic Energy

Agency to verify such information on its nuclear program as it actually does provide.

The international community would appear to have three options: military action against Iran, powerful economic sanctions against Iran or clapping for Tinkerbelle and hoping for the best. The first alternative is generally regarded as a dreadful option. So is the third. As Sen. Hillary Clinton commented when asked during the primaries about her vote in support of a U.S. Senate resolution calling for economic sanctions on Iran: "I'm not for doing nothing."

The international community understands that Iran is not an Israeli problem, but an international one. The consequences of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, so near reality, include its ability to blackmail not merely the Middle East, but the whole world.

A nuclear arms race would intensify in the Middle East. The fragile global economy would be rendered even more fragile. Whatever prospect exists of a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be set back by decades, if not nullified altogether.

It would be a grave mistake to regard the issue of Iran as somehow a hyped-up issue which is simply the domain of neoconservatives. And it would be a graver mistake still to regard the need for intensive, powerful economic sanctions on Iran as less than pressing. In less time than it takes for elephants to reproduce, quite simply, it may be too late.

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