

French Cuffs

Under the leadership of its new president, France has joined the United States at the forefront of the international efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

As a key European Union member, one of the three EU nations leading these international efforts and a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, France is in an excellent position to help generate real economic pressure on Iran— currently the most promising avenue toward forcing Tehran to stop its nuclear weapons program.

EU nations—particularly France, Germany and Italy—are Iran’s biggest foreign investors and trade partners. Should they choose to pull out of Iran, as the United States did in the 1990s, the fragile Iranian economy could go into a tailspin, endangering the very existence of the Iranian regime.

This provides the EU with unmatched economic leverage over Iran. If major EU nations were to condition continued economic engagement with Iran on its cessation of uranium enrichment, Tehran would likely comply.

In sharp contrast to his predecessor Jacques Chirac, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has publicly sided with the United States on Iran and on a slew of other international issues. Even prior to his election as president, Sarkozy stated in Washington that the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran is “terrifying,” and that “all options should be left open” to prevent it from materializing. As president, he called for tough economic sanctions against Iran to avoid the need to choose between “the Iranian bomb or bombing Iran.”

Declaring that “if we allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, we would incur an unacceptable risk to stability in the region and in the world,” Sarkozy said his government was “strongly” urging French companies “to refrain from going to Iran.” He had previously asked French oil and gas companies not to bid for new projects in Iran, and called on French banks to get out of that country.

Sarkozy’s bold approach has significantly enhanced the prospects of meaningful sanctions that could force Iran to stop its nuclear weapons program. Russian and Chinese obstruction has sharply reduced the likelihood of a timely, effective Security Council sanctions resolution. Absent such a resolution and given that to a large extent, U.S. sanctions are already in place, tough EU sanctions would provide the best hope for success. Sarkozy’s efforts to persuade France’s EU partners to join Paris in adopting such sanctions deserve strong U.S. support.