

Sarkozy's bold shift

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French President Nicholas Sarkozy announced Sunday that Paris "will have no more contact with Syria... until we have proof of Syrian willingness to let Lebanon appoint a president by consensus." This severing of diplomatic relations is being termed by some as a "failure" of French policy. Yet the real failure is in the more common Western belief in a business-as-usual approach toward rogue regimes.

It is not as if France did not try the more conventional path. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner has been shuttling back and forth to Damascus, and Sarkozy also appointed one of his top advisers to press Syria on the Lebanon issue. Sarkozy also spoke with Syrian President Bashar Assad as late as December 16. Yet the standoff since pro-Syrian Lebanese President Emile Lahoud stepped down on November 23 has continued.

Perhaps the problem was that the West insists on playing by the rules, while rogue states insist on breaking them. It should not be terribly surprising when regimes that support terrorism and engage in assassinations as an integral part of their foreign policy are not swayed by polite behind-the-scenes requests to behave differently.

This does not mean, of course, that the West should behave like the rogues. No one would suggest that democracies respond in kind to aggression from rogue states. The mystery is, however, why democracies do not use the ample diplomatic and economic tools that are legally at their disposal to defend themselves.

The potentially most potent of these is the UN Security Council which, according to Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, can impose sanctions that are binding on every member state in order to address "any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression."

Article 41 of that Chapter 7 states that such sanctions "may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations." And if that doesn't work, Article 42 states that the Security Council "may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations."

During the Cold War, these provisions became a dead letter since the Soviet Union was itself an aggressor regime and would use its veto to protect itself and its allies from UN action. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the US and other democracies squandered an opportunity to revive the original purpose of the UN Charter by seeking sanctions against all regimes that supported terrorism.

In practice, Chapter 7 of the UN Charter has only been invoked in very extreme cases, such as when Iraq obliterated Kuwait, after 9/11, in the case of Iran developing nuclear weapons, and to impose an arms embargo on Hizbullah - which Iran and Syria have been rampantly violating. It is telling that Iran and Syria were supporting terrorism for years before the Security Council paid any attention to them. Despite the resolutions passed after 9/11 - aside from the sanctions on Libya for allegedly blowing up civilian airliners - the UN has not imposed sanctions to stop states from supporting terrorist aggression.

There is no reason that democracies should continue to accept in silence the emasculation of the UN Security Council by Russia and China. But even in the current context, there is much that the US and Europe can do to defend themselves and restore international security.

The two weak sanctions resolutions passed against Iran and Resolution 1701, passed at the end of the 2006 Lebanon War, provide plenty of justification for the US and Europe to together impose draconian economic and diplomatic sanctions against Iran and Syria. For starters, no one is forcing Europe to continue to provide export credits to subsidize trade with Iran, or to maintain diplomatic relations and air links.

Teheran and Damascus are counting on the West to continue to trade with them and treat them as international "players," rather than pariahs to be cut off from the entire world. So long as such Western tolerance for these regimes continues, no one should be surprised that the rogues see their support for terrorism as producing more benefits than costs. We can only hope that, as the new year begins, Sarkozy's bold step marks a lasting change in this pattern and becomes a harbinger of a shift toward a more effective Western policy.

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