**Loopholes Let Iran Off the Hook**

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LONDON — Geopolitical psychoanalysis can be a lazy and futile staple of international affairs. But the judgment of Robert M. Gates, the U.S. defense secretary, that Russia’s relationship with Iran is “schizophrenic” is hard to fault these days.

Mr. Gates was talking to a congressional panel in June, just after Russia and China had signed on to new U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran. A “schizophrenic Russian approach,” he explained, grew out of the conflict between Russia’s commercial desires and its recognition of Iran as the greatest danger to Russian national security — a threat assessment that Mr. Gates said was made to him directly by Vladimir V. Putin three years ago.

The defense secretary seems to have seen something coming.

Last Thursday, regardless of American resets and separate new sanctions decided by the European Union and the U.S. Congress, here was the Moscow Chamber of Commerce telling Bloomberg News that state-controlled Russian oil companies, including Gazprom and Rosneft, were in talks with the Iranians about delivering them gasoline this month or next. This followed up on a joint Russian-Iranian announcement that they are “developing and widening their joint work” in the petroleum sector.

For a symbol, that’s an unmistakable one. The oil business — both selling it overseas and importing gasoline from abroad (because Iran’s refining capacity provides only 40 percent of its fuel needs) — is at the heart of the subsistence of the regime of the mullahs. Crimp it hard, or strangle it, and, so goes the theory, Iran’s rush to nuclear weapons might be slowed.

But stopped? There seem to be too many loopholes, and too much seriously inconsistent behavior concerning Iran, in addition to Russia’s, to get the job done.

Leon E. Panetta, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has said the new sanctions will have some impact, possibly weakening the regime and creating some serious economic problems. He put this in the context of what he described as an Iran already having enough enriched uranium for two nuclear weapons and the capability of building them in two years; Israel’s estimate of their deployment time is 12 months.

So when Mr. Panetta asked himself aloud in a television interview a couple of weeks ago whether the sanctions would deter Iran’s “ambitions with regard to nuclear capacity,” his answer came back with full clarity: “Probably not.”

Mr. Panetta did not elaborate on his reasoning, but the schizzy aspects — Mr. Gates made a glancing reference to Europe, alongside Russia, in his description of Iran’s effect as both threat and lure — look like a real factor.

For example: While the new American sanctions legislation signed by President Barack Obama last month makes it possible for him to punish foreign firms with U.S. connections for exporting refined petroleum products to Iran, the new E.U. directive does nothing of the kind.

The European Union’s avoidance of such a measure is a candidate for analysis on any geopolitical couch. France, a tough and persistent voice on Iran, pushed hard to make a ban on refined petroleum exports part of the Security Council’s measures, only to let the proposal evaporate when the Obama administration said it would do nothing to harm “the Iranian people.” The French response back then was essentially that the administration’s rationale was hooey, but that the tough stuff would be re-incorporated into the allies’ eventual separate sanctions.

Now, Europe can argue that five European companies that provided Iran with the bulk of its gasoline are out of that business. According to testimony given in Washington to a House committee last week by Mark Dubowitz, executive director of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the main replacement suppliers are Chinese and Turkish companies.

You don’t have to be particularly Machiavellian to suppose the European Union has no desire to start fining or putting the muscle on these firms (or their European affiliates), which belong to big and retributive trading partners. I also have been told that similar reluctance, this time involving German hesitation to clamp down on a bank in Hamburg facilitating suspect European deals with Iran, resulted in a recent phone call, to no immediate avail, from Mr. Obama to Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Of course, the Obama administration is capable of undercutting its own stated resolve. Three days after the deal was done with Russia and China on the Security Council resolution, it lifted earlier sanctions on three Russian military suppliers to Iran, including the official state arms exporter. Besides, under the new rules for unilateral American restrictions, the president still retains the possibility of waiving sanctions against Iran’s helping hands from so-called cooperating countries.

Would you be an optimist about sanctions in these circumstances?

Mr. Dubowitz, while emphasizing in a conversation that he did not want to sound Pollyannaish, said he expected that a new recommendation of fines against 10 miscreant companies would reach Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton by mid-August, and that if billions of dollars in penalties were imposed, they could have “a tidal wave effect.”

Then what? Mark Fitzpatrick, a former State Department nonproliferation expert who now tracks the Iran issue at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, sees the sanctions as getting tougher, and finds it interesting, and possibly effective, when people like Michael V. Hayden, a former C.I.A. director, say an attack on Iran “may not be the worst of all possible outcomes.”

Yet if the sanctions are hard enough to push Iran into negotiations, then a powerful argument states the only acceptable outcome in such talks for the United States’ and its allies’ credibility is the elimination of Iran’s nuclear weapons capability — which they have defined as unacceptable, again and again and again.

Should negotiations start, Mr. Fitzpatrick says “the best we’ll get is limiting the potential of the Iranians getting a bomb and increasing the potential for discovery” of possible Iranian cheating.

He believes Iran seeks an operative bomb regardless. David Kay, who led U.N. weapons inspectors’ efforts after the Gulf War, has written that Iran’s claims of abandoning its weapons capabilities could never be conclusively verified.

Plainly, talks with Iran could in the end produce nonsolutions wrapped in the slick paper of reasonable compromise. To accompany that prospect, a dictionary in my house offers a definition of schizophrenia as a disability involving serious “loss of contact with reality.”