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Henry Brandon: The risk of catastrophe

The world is on a dangerously slippery slope. Once again it is facing a madman unwilling to accept the basic principle of civility on which the peaceful coexistence of nations rests. Once again he has the kind of stubbornness and irrationality that could, in the end, lead to catastrophe.

President Carter showed admirable patience with the theatrics of the Iranian government until it proved unable — on the orders of Ayatollah Khomeini — even to take custody of the hostages. He then had no alternative but to invoke sanctions.

At the same time, if we accept the analysis of the situation that Adm. Stanfield Turner, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, gave to the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week, we come to realize what an exasperating and perilous situation the president is facing.

Explaining why it is so difficult to come to any conclusion about the prospects for the release of the hostages, the admiral replied to a question:

"I would find it very difficult to give you any reason to assume that Khomeini will accede to pressure. This man has a history of resisting pressures and of refusing to compromise. Our patience has not succeeded. Clearly it seems to me we have to try other means. But I cannot predict the workings of the internal dynamics of power in Iran."

A senior administration official in close contact with the situation, when asked how he assessed President Bani-Sadr's position in the wake of this rebuff, said that one must assume that his prestige has suffered serious damage and, therefore, his stand has been weakened. By the logic of these events the power of the militants was reinforced.

American policymakers frankly admit that they are well aware of the limited value of political and economic sanctions even if the allies help to make them more effective. The hope against hope is, as one of them put it, that they will help to "make it sink in" that Iran is isolating itself politically from the rest of the world and that its economic life is bound to become increasingly precarious.

The trouble is that while it will "sink in" with the Bani-Sadr government, it probably will not with Khomeini, who lives in his self-imposed, splendid isolation; or with the militant students who hide behind the American embassy walls, concerned only with holding on to the hostages.

Since the earlier expectation that American patience would strengthen President Bani-Sadr has failed, President Carter now is hoping to reinforce his influence by the imposition of sanctions. Under rational circumstances this calculation may have some vitality.

But it could also weaken him further and play into the hands of those forces which are secretly backed by the Soviet Union. Economic sanctions could hasten change, but they cannot control its direction. The risks must not be underestimated.

The desire among the allies to help is strong, and, I hope, they will recognize that this crisis is not just an American problem. So far they have badly underrated the emotional explosiveness of the issue in this country and overrated the extent to which it is part of the American "power struggle," the primaries (though it is

obvious that White House aides are increasingly haunted by the fear that an unresolved hostage issue could cost President Carter the election).

Pressures from Islamic countries, many of whom have already indicated their sympathy, would also help, but they are unwilling to exert themselves, they say, because they resent the Camp David accords.

There is much loose talk about military sanctions even though early on in this crisis, when military judgment was not influenced by political necessities, the military experts said privately that there are no real military options they could recommend.

President Carter is thus facing a dire, exasperating situation with no obvious solutions in sight. He must continue to put pressure on Iran, despite the inherent political risks, because he cannot allow American interests to be challenged with impunity. But he must not allow himself to be pushed into a Sarajevo-like minor crisis that could develop into a cataclysmic one.

President Carter deserves sympathy, understanding and patience, not the whiplash of American public opinion.