



Assessing the Trump Administration's Iran Strategy

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The Trump Administration's Iran strategy is to assert maximum economic, political and military pressure to change Iran's behavior and threaten, if not cause, collapse of the regime. But since it has not undertaken diplomatic engagement on any of its twelve demands on Iran, the Administration has left Iran the option of either capitulation or war. The U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement (the JCPOA) does not advance the achievement of any of the U.S.'s objectives.

OBJECTIVES: We support some of the Administration's objectives but believe they can only be achieved through a strategy that is both multilateral—engaging close allies and other powers—and which combines pressure and diplomacy. We outline here such an alternative approach to achieve six of the key U.S. goals.

- **Preventing Iran from having a nuclear weapon over the long-term.** The JCPOA severely limits Iran's ability to acquire enough fissile material for even one nuclear weapon for the next decade. By returning to compliance with the JCPOA, the U.S. can negotiate improvements through follow-on agreements with Iran and other signatories.
- **Curbing the proliferation and testing of ballistic missiles.** Iran has recently reduced its testing of ballistic missiles but preventing Iran's export of them to others will require a multilateral strategy of coercion and diplomacy and, in the future, regional ballistic missile arms limitations agreements.
- **The release of U.S. citizens imprisoned in Iran.** This will require direct, bilateral and quiet diplomatic contact with Iran.
- **The cessation of Iran's support for Hezbollah, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.** Iran will not discontinue this fundamental part of its national strategy by U.S. ultimatum alone. Success will require careful crafting of pressure and incentives.
- **The cessation of Iran's support for insurgents in Yemen and the removal of Iran's forces from Syria and Iraq.** This too will require sustained, multilateral diplomacy and pressure tailored to resolve each of these unique conflicts. Tehran's involvement in any political settlement will be necessary.
- **Reducing Iran's threats and provocations against U.S. regional partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia.** This change will likely occur only when Iran and other states realize that the costs and risks of continuing conflict are too high and diplomacy could produce positive results. The U.S. should play an active diplomatic and political role in resolving regional conflicts and pressing all regional states toward diplomatic engagement.



SANCTIONS. The Administration's maximum sanctions program will not by itself achieve the U.S.'s desired objectives.

- **Multilateral sanctions helped induce Iran to negotiate the JCPOA because the goal of blocking an Iranian nuclear weapon had broad international backing and sanctions were linked to a realistic promise of a negotiated outcome.** With the Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and without a credible offer of benefit for Iran's economy, the U.S. will not be able to bring together the coalition required to renew multilateral sanctions and get Iran back to the negotiating table.
- **U.S. secondary (extra-territorial) sanctions are effective in weakening Iran's economy, but they also bring the U.S. into confrontation with allies and partners,** thereby weakening their support for other U.S. objectives. They also spur blocking laws to shelter firms against U.S. action, put the U.S. into potential violation of its trade agreements and contribute to the weakening of the U.S. dollar.
- **Unilateral sanctions are more difficult to enforce, foster widespread corruption and encourage efforts to evade U.S. laws.** While these sanctions undermine the economies of the targeted state and cause great hardship for the country's population, historically they have not resulted in major behavioral shifts or the demise of the targeted regime, for example in places like North Korea, Iraq and Cuba.

THREATS. The Administration's emphasis on coercion and threats of military action without diplomatic engagement provides no exit ramp to avoid collision.

- **The mounting threats serve to unite Iran's political factions against external threat, empower its hardliners and undermine the long-term U.S. objectives of seeking a less aggressive Iran without nuclear weapons.** Threats also encourage common cause among the Europeans, Russia and China in opposition to the U.S. If, in response to the U.S. violation of the JCPOA, Iran decides to exceed the nuclear limits established by the agreement, its capacity to produce a nuclear weapon would significantly increase.
- **The Administration's suggested policy of regime change in Iran reflects wishful thinking and a flawed interpretation of intelligence about Iran's vulnerability.** While Iran's economy is under increasing stress and there are many signs of discontent among its population, the regime remains strong, well-armed and united against outside threat. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq remains a striking reminder of our inability to estimate accurately the long-term impact of U.S. actions.
- **The intentional escalation of tensions and promotion of brinksmanship between the U.S. and Iran significantly increases the risk that neither side will be able to prevent a small, unintended clash from spiraling into a large, strategic conflict.** Such a possibility is particularly dangerous now that the U.S. and Iran have limited means of direct communications for early de-escalation.



CONCLUSION: Pulling out of the JCPOA makes achieving U.S. objectives with Iran much more difficult. Applying pressure and unilateral sanctions without viable diplomatic options is highly unlikely to produce the desired outcome and could lead to a more dangerous, destructive and enduring regional conflict with Iran. A more balanced strategy that couples pressure with effective diplomacy, coming not just from the U.S. but from around the world, will be necessary to achieve U.S. objectives while showing an Iran without nuclear weapons a way forward to integration into the region. A decision by the Administration to move toward a more balanced approach, including agreeing to comply with the JCPOA, would be welcomed by the international community and put the U.S. on a better path to achieve its objectives.

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