



More U.S. talks with Iran are doomed to fail

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The latest U.S. offer of negotiations with Iran prompts the same question with which every administration of recent decades has grappled: Is behavioral change in Tehran possible without regime change?

We Americans want to think so, but the evidence of four decades suggests otherwise. Consequently, President Donald Trump and his team may be headed toward another fruitless U.S. effort to create a better Iran.

With the president concerned that growing tensions between Washington and Tehran were setting the stage for war, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said this week that the administration is ready to talk with "no preconditions."

That came days after the president himself sought to ease tensions by deriding National Security Advisor John Bolton's enthusiasm for regime change. Of the Islamic Republic, Trump told reporters in Tokyo, "It has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership. We're not looking for regime change. I just want to make that clear. We're looking for no nuclear weapons."

The new U.S. offer of talks marked a dramatic change of direction for an administration that, as Pompeo announced a year ago, said it wouldn't talk to Tehran until the regime satisfied a list of sweeping demands that included an end to its ballistic missile tests and its support of militants in Syria and Yemen.

But, when compared to other administrations, the change in direction is far less dramatic than it seems. In fact, in hopes of convincing Tehran to abandon its nuclear dreams and change its ways, Trump is pursuing the tried and true - if ultimately fruitless - approach of his most recent predecessors: to pressure the regime to change, but also to seek an accommodation to convince it to change.

Early on, President George W. Bush sought better U.S.-Iranian relations. After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, his administration worked with Tehran on matters tied to Afghanistan and Iraq. Seeing no behavioral change and concerned about a terrorist-sponsoring state like Iran with nuclear weapons, however, he soon opted for pressure - refusing to rule out military action to destroy Tehran's nuclear program, securing four UN Security Council resolutions that sanctioned Iran over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and imposing additional U.S. sanctions.

Then, with Iran building more nuclear facilities and enriching more uranium that it could use for bombs, President Barack Obama secured more Security Council resolutions and imposed more U.S. sanctions. With Iran's economy reeling, however, he changed direction and launched global talks that produced the 2015 Iran nuclear deal - imposing temporary restrictions on Tehran's nuclear program while providing more than \$100 billion in sanctions relief that he hoped would nourish warmer U.S.-Iranian ties.

What neither Bush nor Obama - nor any of their predecessors since the 1979 Iranian Revolution - did was dissuade Iran, a radical Shia power, from continuing to sponsor terrorism, to destabilize the region's leading Sunni governments, to threaten the United States, to pledge to destroy Israel, and to expand its nuclear and ballistic missile programs that, together, could create a nuclear-armed state.

Will Trump suffer the same fate?

For 40 years, all-too-many U.S. officials have sought to impose Western values and aspirations on Tehran rather than recognize the regime for what it is, which has only clouded Washington's judgments. For us, Iran is what Churchill said of Russia: "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma."

We search for moderates in a regime that remains firmly controlled by hardliners. We see the promise of moderation in Iran's presidents, though none of them pursue the moderate policies that would suggest a new day. We study Iran's parliamentary elections even as ultimate power remains with a dictatorial Supreme Leader.

Not only is Iran no Jeffersonian democracy; it's also no ordinary state that seeks to prosper within its borders. It's aggressive and expansionist, with a revolutionary agenda of imposing its theocratic ideology across the region and beyond. Thus, its nefarious activities reflect its very essence.

From the messy aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War - which, among other things, was driven by Bush's desire to topple Saddam Hussein - regime change has become a dirty phrase in U.S. foreign policymaking circles.

Fine. But if we're no longer comfortable with efforts - overt or covert, military or political - to push a nefarious regime from power, we shouldn't convince ourselves that we can change its behavior.

Four decades after it overthrew the Shah, the regime in Tehran remains what it pledged to be from the start. Rather than launch new efforts to pressure or coax it to moderation, we should accept that reality and plan accordingly.

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