



Trump's strategy is turning Europe against Iran

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It's hardly a secret that European leaders dislike Donald Trump. Over the past two years, the U.S. President's divisive personal style, and his confrontational rhetoric on everything from Europe's deficient defense spending to bilateral trade, have severely strained trans-Atlantic relations. And yet, on at least one issue — Iran — European countries are slowly but surely drifting into alignment with the White House, even if they are doing so grudgingly.

On Sunday, the Iranian government announced plans to imminently breach the limits of its 2015 nuclear deal with the West. If it follows through on the threat, the Islamic Republic will begin enriching uranium this week beyond the 3.67 percent threshold outlined by the agreement — laying the groundwork for an eventual "sprint" to nuclear status, should the regime choose to do so. Moreover, according to Iranian officials, unless the U.S. and its allies scale down their pressure on the regime in the next two months, Iran will take further steps to fracture the atomic pact, and is "prepared to enrich uranium to any level and with any amount."

The objective of Iran's threats is clear. As Michael Doran of the Hudson Institute has eloquently outlined, Iran's indications of nuclear breakout — and its increasingly bellicose behavior in the Persian Gulf — are intended to raise the specter of war with the United States, and prod increasingly nervous European nations to pressure the U.S. to back off its campaign of "maximum" economic and political pressure.

But Tehran's maneuvers could actually have the opposite effect. European nations, already nervous over Iran's recent recklessness in the Strait of Hormuz, are becoming more and more alarmed by what they view as an increasingly undependable partner in Tehran.

French President Emmanuel Macron has thus condemned Iran's latest move — although France has for now stopped short of invoking the nuclear deal's dispute resolution mechanism, which could result in the re-imposition of multilateral sanctions on Iran. Germany, too, has said that it is "extremely concerned" with Iran's decision, and has called on Tehran to "immediately stop and reverse all activities" and return to compliance with the 2015 deal. And the European Union has announced that it might need to create a new dispute resolution mechanism in order to nudge Iran back into compliance with the atomic pact.

All of these sentiments reflect a common problem now confronting the countries of Europe. EU nations have long been the most avid proponents of normalization with Iran, and for good reason. Cumulatively, these countries became some of the biggest beneficiaries of reinvigorated trade with the Iranian regime in the wake of the 2015 deal. Between 2015 and 2017, bilateral trade between the EU and Iran expanded dramatically, cresting at over 10 billion Euros annually in both imports and exports. But in the past year, Iran-EU trade has plunged amid mounting sanctions pressure from Washington.

That trendline has left European nations increasingly desperate to preserve their economic partnership with Iran's ayatollahs. That is why, earlier this year, a number of European countries set up a new "transaction channel" called the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, or INSTEX, to facilitate continued business with Iran in the face of mounting American sanctions. That mechanism is now "operational," and European nations are scrambling to lock in trade with the Islamic Republic and thereby preserve their economic equities there.

Such commerce, however, is only sustainable so long as Iran remains within the confines of the nuclear bargain it concluded with the international community four years ago. The more Iran strays from the understandings encapsulated in that agreement, the more difficult it becomes for Europe to continue to conduct "business as usual" with Tehran — and the more justified America's economic pressure on the Islamic Republic appears.

Iran's leaders thus find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. If they remain a party to the 2015 nuclear deal, they do so notwithstanding America's pressure campaign. But if they abandon that agreement, they risk alienating their current trading partners — and turning the countries of Europe into proponents of the Trump administration's Iran strategy.

That is a development that the Iranian regime, now struggling to stay afloat economically in the face of expanding U.S. sanctions, can certainly ill-afford.

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