



Iran's Nuclear Brinksmanship Is Bound To Backfire

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What could Iran's ayatollahs be thinking? On November 5th, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced that his government was planning to restart sensitive nuclear work prohibited under the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). (The regime has since done so, injecting uranium gas into its centrifuges at its nuclear enrichment facility at Fordow.)

The step marks the most concrete Iranian move to date to pull out of the JCPOA, which President Trump abandoned last year but which the remaining P5+1 nations (France, Great Britain, Russia, China and Germany) are desperate to see continue. It also reflects an Iranian effort to prompt those countries to put pressure on the United States to roll back its "maximum pressure" campaign against the Iranian regime.

But Iran's decision could turn out to be a tremendously costly one for Tehran, for a couple of key reasons.

First, Iran's resumption of proscribed nuclear work threatens to alienate the Islamic Republic's most important international supporters. Up until now, European leaders have been eager to preserve the status quo created by the 2015 agreement, which laid the groundwork for an extensive – and lucrative – normalization of their relations with Tehran. This state of affairs has transformed European nations into advocates for the Islamic Republic who have tried their utmost to dilute the impact of the Trump administration's sanctions so they could continue to do business as usual with the Iranian regime.

But that cooperation is predicated on Iran continuing to abide by the constraints of the JCPOA. While Tehran was doing so, it was possible for these leaders to maintain the fiction that – if only the United States scaled back its Iran policy – it would eventually be possible to nudge the Iranian regime in a more constructive, benign political direction. Now, however, European leaders aren't so sure.

This was clear from French President Emmanuel Macron's reaction to Iran's announcement. "I think that for the first time, Iran has decided in an explicit and blunt manner to leave the JCPOA," Macron told reporters in China, where he was concluding a state visit. The move "marks a profound shift," and a "grave" one, the French president said.

Macron's message is significant, because the French President has been one of the most ardent supporters of normalization with the Islamic Republic, even trying unsuccessfully to arrange a summit between Rouhani and President Trump on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York earlier this Fall. Now, however, Iran's apparent abandonment of the JCPOA will help nudge Macron and European leaders (however reluctantly) closer to Washington's position that the Iranian regime needs to be curtailed and contained.

Second, Iran's new nuclear effort provides added ammunition to President Trump's campaign of economic and political pressure on the Islamic Republic. Here, it's necessary to recognize that that policy, now one year old, isn't necessarily a permanent condition. After all, President Trump himself has indicated that he's prepared to negotiate with Iran, and to do so "without preconditions." Yet any such overtures are, by necessity, constrained by domestic political realities. That is, having campaigned heavily in opposition to the JCPOA, President Trump will be at pains to prove – to both the American electorate and to the U.S. Congress – that any arrangement with Iran concluded by his administration is qualitatively better than the 2015 nuclear deal.

Iran's renewed atomic work makes this exceedingly unlikely. It also appears to confirm what the JCPOA's critics have long contended: that the Iranian regime remains fully committed to building nuclear weapons. And that, in turn, sets the stage for an acceleration of precisely the "maximum pressure" that the Iranian regime is seeking to deter.

It's a fair bet, therefore, that the Iranian regime's latest act of nuclear brinksmanship will backfire, and do so in a way that leaves Tehran even more isolated than it is today.