



How Iran Is Building Leverage Over Biden

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Suddenly, Iran's ayatollahs are on the offensive once again.

In recent days, the Islamic Republic has taken clear steps to ramp up its nuclear program, including expanding its enrichment of uranium to 20%, well beyond levels necessary for simple civilian use, and putting the international community on notice of plans to add 1,000 additional centrifuges to its national atomic effort. At the same time, the regime has revived its pattern of naval provocations, with regime forces seizing a South Korean-flagged oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's military is also preparing for massive military exercises designed to show off its growing arsenal of drones and other advanced weaponry. Though different in nature, these steps all reflect a singular strategic objective on the part of the Iranian regime: to build up bargaining power ahead of likely negotiations with the Biden administration.

Tehran's maneuvers are a very much a product of necessity. Since President Trump's May 2018 decision to pull the United States out of the 2015 nuclear deal known as the JCPOA, his administration's campaign of "maximum" economic and political pressure has dramatically increased American leverage vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. Over the past year-and-a-half, direct U.S. sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities, and the threat of financial action against foreign companies and countries doing business with them, have reverberated throughout the Iranian economy. Among other things, they have helped profoundly chill international investment, dry up most of Iran's oil revenue, and cause a full-scale collapse of Iran's national currency, the *rial*. As a result, the Iranian regime is today in an objectively much weaker political and economic position than it was just a few years ago.

President-elect Joe Biden will inherit this leverage when he takes office later this month. Whether he will use it, however, remains an open question.

At least publicly, key members of his administration (like Secretary of State-designate Anthony Blinken and incoming National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan) have made clear that their plan is to use the JCPOA as the basis for a longer and stronger agreement with Tehran. Presumably, such an expanded framework would include curbs on things that did not end up being covered by the original 2015 – such as Iranian regime's burgeoning ballistic missile arsenal and its extensive sponsorship of radical regional militias. That, in turn, will require the new White House to rely on sanctions and other coercive measures to compel further Iranian concessions.

But such a state of affairs isn't assured, because others in the Biden camp have counseled a different approach, one that involves providing preemptive American concessions and sanctions relief as a show of good faith. If that is the path the United States ends up choosing, it will mean losing all of the leverage that has been built up to date by "maximum pressure."

The Iranian regime, meanwhile, is doing its best to level the playing field. Tehran's increasingly militant regional behavior and recent nuclear maneuvers reflect an attempt by the Islamic Republic to offset existing U.S. leverage – and to create some of its own. In this way, Iran's ayatollahs are wagering that, when the United States and Iran finally do end up resuming negotiations, old process will ultimately end up winning out over new substance.

That is hardly an unreasonable assumption. After all, the incoming Biden administration will include more than a few officials (including Blinken, Sullivan and just-named Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman) who took part in formulating the original 2015 deal, and so remain stakeholders in preserving that arrangement in some fashion. How much more Iran will be forced to give up, when talks do ultimately resume, will depend on how deftly the new White House uses the leverage left to them by the outgoing administration – and how deterred it is by Iran's current bout of brinksmanship.