



U.S., Allies Too Eager to Resume Nuclear Deal with Iran

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With Tehran making significant progress on the nuclear front, Washington and its European allies seem engaged in an increasingly desperate effort to revive the 2015 global nuclear agreement with Iran, mirroring the earlier eagerness that helped produce the problematic agreement in the first place.

The operative question is whether – in reversing President Donald Trump’s 2018 exit from the deal and returning to the agreement, thereby presumably coaxing Tehran to adhere to its nuclear-related restrictions – Washington will find itself better placed in the long run to limit Iran’s nuclear pursuit, ballistic missile program, terror sponsorship, and regional expansionism.

Signs of Iran’s nuclear progress are mounting. For starters, Tehran announced on June 15 that it has enriched 6.5 kilograms of uranium to 60 percent purity (a short step to the weapons-grade purity of 90 percent) and another 108 kilograms to 20 percent – all far in excess of the agreement’s limit of 3.67 percent purity. Nor has Tehran become more transparent about suspicious activity at its undeclared nuclear sites, which is a problem that precedes the nuclear agreement and that has vexed international inspectors for many years. “The Iranian government has reiterated its will to engage and to cooperate and to provide answers,” Rafael Grossi, the International Atomic Energy Agency director-general, said as his agency’s board met in Vienna. “But they haven’t done that so far.”

Fox News, meanwhile, reported that satellite images since last fall at Iran’s Sanjarian site – where Iran is suspected of manufacturing work on “shock wave generators” (in order to miniaturize a nuclear weapon) – reveal vehicles, excavation work, and trenches that have prompted nuclear watchdogs to urge international inspections. In addition, Germany’s federal intelligence agency concluded in a new 420-page report that “the indications of proliferation-relevant procurement attempts by the Islamic Republic for its nuclear program increased in 2020.”

Western concerns about Iran’s nuclear activities are exacerbated by its progress on other military-related pursuits.

Tehran recently announced that it has added two warships to its arsenal; Iran is flexing its naval muscles by sending two naval vessels for the first time to the Atlantic; Russia is reportedly planning to provide Iran with an advanced satellite system to enable the latter to survey potential military targets; and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq revealed that they now have long-range drones (which Iran designed and the Iranian-backed Houthis use in Yemen) that can reach Israel and other nearby countries.

All of this, however, has not stopped Washington and its European allies from pushing for a revival of the 2015 nuclear deal.

Notwithstanding Rossi’s concerns, the United States and its partners decided not to push a resolution on the issue at the most recent IAEA board meeting, lest it raise tensions with Iran. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early June, Secretary of State Antony Blinken likewise seemed to back away from his earlier pledge not to lift U.S. terrorism-related sanctions on Iran, suggesting they could be “inconsistent” with a revived nuclear agreement. A day after Blinken’s testimony, the Treasury Department in fact lifted sanctions tied to Iran’s energy sector and oil exports to Syria.

Recent U.S. efforts to appease Tehran have extended far beyond nuclear and other military matters. When, this month, an Iranian political prisoner died in prison because he reportedly was denied medical attention, the U.S. special envoy to Iran, Robert Malley, avoided any serious denunciation of Tehran’s increasingly abysmal human rights record and expressed only “sadness.”

With Iran making serious progress on the nuclear and military fronts, U.S. desires to revive the nuclear agreement and re-impose its limits on Iranian nuclear activity may be understandable – even if its inspection system has serious shortcomings and the agreement itself expires in the coming years. But where will that leave the country?

U.S. officials hope to revive the agreement and then engage Iran in broader talks over a longer-term deal that covers its nuclear program, as well as such other issues as its ballistics program and terror sponsorship. Yet, even if Tehran agreed to such a process upfront, it raises an obvious question: why would the regime be inclined to make any further concessions once the agreement has been revived? That agreement would give Iran tens of billions of dollars in additional sanctions relief and allow it to maintain a porous inspection system.

That’s a question that needs to be answered by the Biden administration and those who support negotiations with Tehran.

*Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author of *The Kennedys in the World: How Jack, Bobby, and Ted Remade America's Empire*, new from Potomac Books.*

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