



Tehran sets the table in Vienna

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What precisely does the Biden administration want to accomplish in its diplomacy with Iran? With new talks over Iran's nuclear program now underway in Vienna, it's a question worth asking.

To hear the White House tell it, the current talks are the only way to put Iran's increasingly mature nuclear program back in a box, despite new evidence that — despite its denials — the Islamic Republic is, in fact, pursuing an offensive nuclear capability. From this standpoint, America's 2018 abandonment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (as the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers is known) represented an egregious strategic error, and the "maximum pressure" policy that followed was an abject failure.

It's a narrative the Iranian side has been only too happy to nurture. Iranian officials have railed against the "inhuman" measures levied against them by "the aggressor" United States and have called for an end to U.S. sanctions as a precursor to any deal.

Here, it's useful to remember just how much the administration's Iran policy has eroded since the start of the year. When it took office in January, the Biden administration's abandonment of "maximum pressure" in favor of diplomatic outreach was intended to bring Tehran back into the 2015 nuclear deal as a prelude to a "longer and stronger" agreement.

Instead, Iran delayed and obfuscated, agreeing only to successive rounds of "proximity talks" overseen by Europe. Little progress was made in those conversations, but even that meager dialogue ground to a halt while Iran installed a new government led by the regime's hand-picked candidate, Ebrahim Raisi.

During that time, Tehran deftly managed to move the goal posts in the global conversation over its foreign policy, even as its regional maneuvers (from stepped-up nuclear activity to regional hostility and intimidation) helped it build up valuable leverage. The gambit worked. In recent months, in hopes of jump-starting negotiations with Tehran and getting it to behave better, Biden administration officials significantly relaxed existing sanctions, contemplated the rollback of non-nuclear ones, and even considered offering significant inducements to the Islamic Republic.

Iranian officials, however, want more. "The main objective of the upcoming talks should be the full and effective implementation of the JCPOA and the pursuit of the goal of normalization of trade relations and economic cooperation with Iran," Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian recently told reporters. But, Iran's foreign policy czar made clear, none of that would be possible "without verifiable and effective lifting of all sanctions" imposed on Iran by the U.S. In other words, the conditions for Tehran's compliance are nothing short of a full-scale abandonment of American economic pressure, even though much of it (such as sanctions levied as a result of egregious domestic human rights abuses and persistent support of global terrorism) has nothing to do with Iran's nuclear program.

And that's just the beginning. Among Iran's mounting demands is the insistence that they "never ... impose sanctions on Iran again," the country's chief negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani, is cited by the *New York Times* as saying. If these demands aren't met, regime officials have threatened to further accelerate their country's nuclear effort.

Against this backdrop, the current talks in Vienna are unlikely to produce anything resembling the "grand bargain" that Team Biden initially sought to secure. If a deal with Iran is in fact struck, it will be because the U.S. capitulated to Iranian demands and accepted a shorter, weaker deal over the regime's nuclear program. A deal that does little to delay Iran's path to the bomb and ignores other aspects of its rogue behavior.

An agreement like that would represent a clear diplomatic victory for Iran's ayatollahs and a strategic defeat for the U.S. and its allies.