



How Washington Can Flip the Script on Iran

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As talks resume over reviving the 2015 global nuclear agreement with Iran, the United States needs to alter the dynamics of its relationship with Tehran if it hopes to secure a deal that will serve American interests.

At the moment, Tehran is dictating the timing and terms of the talks while continuing to make progress on its nuclear program. Iran is perhaps no more than a month away from developing a nuclear bomb if it chooses to do so.

President Joe Biden and his team have acceded to Tehran's demand that the United States not sit at the table during this week's talks in Vienna, leaving America's interests in the hands of European allies. Tehran also is insisting that the United States lift all sanctions before it will consider returning to the 2015 deal. U.S. officials have responded with vague threats of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities that Tehran surely doesn't take seriously.

Rather than prostrate itself to the dictates of an outlaw regime in hopes of convincing it to change direction, Washington needs to set the terms of discussion with Tehran.

Doing so will not only increase the chances that the United States secures a strong deal. It also will reassure America's regional allies that Washington will not leave them to face a nuclear Iran alone. In addition, it will send a strong signal to its adversaries in Beijing, Moscow and elsewhere that the United States will defend itself and its allies in the face of threats to peace.

Concretely, the Biden team should take the following five steps to change the nature of U.S.-Iranian relations and raise the chances of securing a strong nuclear deal.

First, insist on participating in face-to-face talks. Iranian officials currently refuse to meet directly with U.S. officials. Instead, Iran is sitting down with other members of the so-called P5+1—Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China—that negotiated the 2015 deal while U.S. officials wait outside and later learn what they missed.

That makes no sense. The United States is not just the world's leading power; it was the country that spearheaded the 2015 deal in the first place. Without a seat at the table, Washington cannot fully defend its interests in the nuclear talks, and the United States looks far more like a supplicant than a global leader.

Second, set a deadline for a deal. Rather than merely prod Tehran to negotiate seriously and warn that time is running out, Washington should set a firm date by which the parties must reach an agreement. Absent an agreement by that date, U.S. officials should say, the United States will play no role in future talks.

Such a U.S. stance would make clear to Iranian leaders that they have limited time to secure a deal that lifts sanctions. And, if the deadline passes without a deal, Washington would be free to take whatever steps it chooses without worrying about their effect on future negotiations with Tehran.

Third, set a deadline for Iran to allow unimpeded international inspections. In two reports in November, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tehran isn't letting its inspectors reinstall cameras to monitor a key nuclear facility, and is subjecting inspectors to "excessively invasive physical searches."

The 2015 deal suffers from a weak inspection regime, and Iran has taken full advantage of it. Over the last six years, Tehran has limited inspections at its nuclear facilities, withheld surveillance footage and refused to answer questions about its past nuclear-related activities. Even the strongest deal on paper will prove largely meaningless without inspections that can certify Iranian compliance.

Fourth, act in response to missed deadlines. As the talks resume, Iran is further pursuing its nuclear program. The dangers to peace are mounting. Washington must make clear that Tehran will pay a price, beyond the current sanctions, if it continues to drag out the talks with unrealistic demands.

The United States could take steps to sabotage Iran's nuclear program, as Israel has, and make clear that it will support future Israeli sabotage efforts—rather than, as the Biden team is now doing, complaining that Israeli action makes a deal with Iran harder to achieve. At the same time, Washington can join with regional allies in joint military exercises that showcase U.S. resolve. Aggressive steps of this kind would make threats of military action more credible.

Fifth, highlight other Iranian behavior. The threat of a nuclear Iran is inextricably tied to the nature of its regime. Tehran sponsors terrorist groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, works to destabilize Sunni Arab governments and abuses human rights at home. In recent days, a spokesman for Iran's military repeated Iranian calls for "the annihilation of Israel," and Iranian forces used tear gas and pellet guns against hundreds of people in the city of Isfahan who were protesting water shortages.

To nourish public support for the steps suggested above, Washington needs to showcase and condemn such Iranian behavior—just as U.S. administrations did with Soviet behavior during the Cold War and with that of other adversaries in later years.

All told, the United States must decide whether it's serious about stopping Iran from developing nuclear weaponry—and about convincing Tehran that it is.