



Ukraine crisis offers Biden cover for JCPOA 2.0

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The only mention of Iran in President Joe Biden's State of the Union address on Tuesday was an unintentional one.

Amid what was admittedly a stirring opening set piece focused on Ukraine, Biden flubbed one line: "Putin may circle Kyiv with tanks, but he will never gain the hearts and souls of the Iranian people." He clearly meant to say "Ukrainian people." The slip-up wasn't a good look, but it also highlighted the fact that the speech contained no deliberate mention of Iran at all.

That omission was, of course, purposeful.

Americans would be furious if they knew how diplomats charged with resuscitating the Iran nuclear deal are quietly selling out America's national security. Diplomacy is a grinding, patient art, and reports on the Biden administration's revived Iran deal negotiations, rife with technical explanations of limits on enriched uranium and sanctions policy, have generally been consigned to the deeper pages of newspaper A sections. But now that Russian President Vladimir Putin's eruption against his country's southwestern neighbor has consumed the media's foreign policy coverage, and rightfully so, given the geopolitical implications, Iran is likely even more of a foreign policy afterthought than usual.

It shouldn't be that way, because the U.S. diplomatic team handling the revived Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiations, led by special envoy for Iran Rob Malley, is doing a dangerous dance. As best we know, American and Iranian negotiators have still not met directly with one another. The key figure in brokering the agreement is in fact Russia's top representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mikhail Ulyanov. In light of Putin's rampage across Ukraine, Americans shouldn't tolerate letting our diplomats engage with the Russians at all, much less trust them to shuttle proposals back and forth between the two sides.

The State Department did issue a ban on U.S.-Russian diplomatic engagement, but it exempted the nuclear talks from it — thereby undercutting the administration's tough talk about putting Russia in the global penalty box. John Kerry's boneheaded comment that he hopes Putin will "help us to stay on track with respect to what we need to do for the climate" had the same effect. More importantly, letting Ulyanov handle nuclear talks is outright dangerous to U.S. interests, and Malley has clearly been rolled in agreeing to Ulyanov as the main interlocutor. Russia and Iran have worked together for years to reinforce their respective positions in the Middle East.

Both regimes have intervened in Syria since 2015 to prop up the murderous Assad regime, and Iran is also a major buyer of Russian weapons. In January, Putin himself received Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, just one of many foreign leaders who have recently made the trip to the far end of the dictator's long table. Does anyone think they didn't discuss how to get one over on the Americans within the nuclear talks, which by Ulyanov's own admission are "practically finished?"

The truth is the Iranian-Russian victory has likely already happened. There is an abundance of evidence to suggest Malley's nuclear diplomacy has adopted a full-on posture of appeasement toward one of the world's most lawless regimes. Clearly something was already amiss a few weeks ago when Richard Nephew, generally regarded as a dissenting voice on Malley's team, jumped ship, as did two others on the team. Career officials working the Iran file are now leaking salacious details of American proposals to my friend Gabriel Noronha, who worked on special envoy for Iran Brian Hook's team at the State Department under former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. If Noronha's reporting is to be believed, among other disturbing details, the U.S. is pushing to rescind nonnuclear sanctions on 112 people in Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office, including people who almost certainly took part in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, and the 1994 bombing on a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Sanctions are also to be lifted on Iranian "charitable foundations" (read: slush funds for the ayatollah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). The Central Bank of Iran, a spigot of money for terrorist activities, will be liberated, too. The fact that these sanctions weren't imposed on the basis of Iran's nuclear activities suggests that Malley has already given away the store on lifting sanctions actually related to Iran's nuclear program. It's no surprise one official told Noronha that the Malley-led talks, which have been "essentially run" by Ulyanov, are a "total disaster." With the public's attention span already transfixed on Ukraine, one can bet that the team in Vienna is pushing to complete a new deal at a time when the headlines will be dominated by the strife in Eastern Europe for weeks to come.

People have lately been reminded that appeasement of rogue regimes doesn't bring security benefits — it only, in the long run, imposes costs on the appeasers. The consequences of reentering the JCPOA for the U.S., Israel, and America's other partners in the Middle East have never been more predictable. If the president and his spin doctors couldn't find a way to sell it at the State of the Union, it's almost certainly not a deal worth having.

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