



If we de-list the IRGC, what will the dictators think?

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Foreign policy does not allow for compartmentalization when you're the world's leading power. What America does in response to any significant global challenge has important implications for other dilemmas and crises.

With authoritarianism rising and freedom shrinking around the world for nearly two decades now, the United States should avoid steps that will embolden autocrats and dishearten democrats. Indeed, Washington should shape its response to disparate global challenges with a key question in mind: What will the dictators think, particularly the world's most powerful strongmen in Beijing and Moscow?

What, for instance, will the dictators think about reports that, to help restore the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran, President Biden is considering taking Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) off the State Department's "foreign terrorist organizations" (FTO) list in exchange for an Iranian commitment to reduce its malign activities in the region.

Washington has long considered Tehran the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism and — recognizing that Iran conducts its terrorist activities largely through the IRGC — the Trump administration put the organization on the FTO list in April of 2019.

The designation was an accurate reflection of the pernicious role that the IRGC continues to play in the region.

"Iran used the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) to provide support to terrorist organizations, provide cover for associated covert operations, and create instability in the region," the State Department wrote in its latest annual country-by-country report on terrorism. "Iran has acknowledged the involvement of the IRGC-QF in the Iraq and Syria conflicts, and the IRGC-QF is Iran's primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorist activity abroad."

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini's theocratic regime established the IRGC to protect the revolution from threats at home and abroad. It reports directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has some 125,000 troops, works with Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, and has conducted major operations in Syria and Iraq in recent years to promote Iranian interests. Just this month, the IRGC unveiled two new missile and drone tunnel bases in Iran's mountains.

To be sure, a delisting would not mean that the United States could no longer sanction the Guards. Under a series of federal authorities, Washington has repeatedly sanctioned it or its paramilitary arm, the Qods Force, since 2007. The administration is reportedly thinking of lifting only the FTO designation.

Nevertheless, doing so would send an unmistakable message not just to Tehran, and not just to America's allies in the region and beyond, but also to our most powerful adversaries in Beijing and Moscow.

In the region, America's allies were shaken by the bumbling U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, which returned the Taliban to power and left hundreds of people who worked with U.S. forces stranded. That seemed to signal a U.S. retreat from the region that would leave our allies vulnerable to Iran's expansionist designs.

Worse, America's regional allies had feared that the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran would not have proved effective in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and, unless its parameters change significantly and unexpectedly, they surely will again fear that a revived deal will not prove any more effective.

As a result, it's relevant to ask: What will the dictator in Tehran think about an administration that's considering delisting the IRGC? Surely, the conclusion Iran's Supreme Leader will draw is that the White House is desperate for a deal, that Iranian negotiators can squeeze for still more concessions, and that the United States has no stomach for military action to prevent his regime from going nuclear.

Then there is Russia.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Biden rallied the West to sanction Russia, send arms to Kyiv, and isolate Russian President Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, he has insisted that he won't send U.S. troops to Ukraine and drew a sharp distinction between how Washington will respond to attacks on NATO vs. non-NATO nations.

So, what will the dictator in Moscow think about an administration that's considering delisting the IRGC? Likely, that the United States will soon tire of the effort to isolate Russia and will eventually pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to give up his fight in order to secure peace.

China is relevant here as well. President Biden has warned Chinese President Xi Jinping of serious repercussions if China provides Russia with economic or military assistance in Ukraine. But Xi offered no commitment in return, Beijing has harshly criticized sanctions for their effects on “common people” and the global economy, and China has drawn closer to Russia in recent months as part of a big-power, anti-U.S. axis.

What will the dictator in Beijing think about an administration in Washington that’s considering delisting the IRGC? Probably, that it has no stomach for a drawn-out conflict, whether in Ukraine or in the South China Sea, where China is building and militarizing new islands, or over Taiwan, which China has threatened to seize by force.

What will the dictators think? It’s the question that Washington must keep asking itself. In the case of the administration’s generous outreach to Iran, the answer will lead only to dangerous conclusions.