



# America needs a new approach to Iran

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Iran announced plans in recent days to build a new research reactor at its Isfahan nuclear site and more nuclear sites around the country, while the International Atomic Energy Agency's top official said that Iran's nuclear program was "galloping along," with more uranium enriched at close to weapons-grade purity.

Meanwhile, senior U.S. officials acknowledged that the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran, which the United States and its European allies have been trying to resurrect, is dead for the foreseeable future because Washington and Tehran remained deadlocked over key particulars.

None of this is surprising. The nuclear deal, from which President Trump withdrew the United States in 2018, was increasingly looking like a geopolitical relic — that is, a priority to which the West clung stubbornly even as developments on the ground made the deal seem outdated, if not irrelevant.

Consider the parallels with the "Middle East peace process," which Western leaders pursued for decades. It was predicated on a broad consensus in foreign policy circles that Israeli-Palestinian peace was the prerequisite for wider Arab-Israeli peace. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to rage, however, Israel inked peace agreements with a growing number of individual Arab states.

Similarly, the nuclear deal — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — was predicated on constraints on Iran's nuclear activities, international inspections to monitor its compliance, and sanctions relief for Tehran. As the West pursued negotiations since March 2021 to revive the deal, however, Tehran dragged out the talks, advanced its nuclear program well beyond the deal's limits, and made it harder for inspectors to do their monitoring.

The question, of course, is what the United States should do now about Iran and its nuclear program?

That is no minor issue, for a new U.S. approach is important not only to address the Iranian challenge but also to send a strong signal of U.S. resolve to (1) a revanchist Russia that has undermined longstanding global norms by seeking to conquer Ukraine and (2) an aggressive China that is threatening Taiwan while challenging the United States more broadly in the Pacific.

A new U.S. strategy for Iran should do at least the following:

*First, restore a credible U.S. threat of force to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.*

Yes, every president since George W. Bush has vowed that Washington will consider military action if all else fails. But, with Washington so intent to revive a nuclear deal that expires in the coming years and that has a weak inspection regime to begin with, do Iran's mullahs believe it?

What might convince them? As Johns Hopkins' Michael Mandelbaum suggests, a combination of U.S. military drills that are clear dress rehearsals for a U.S. attack on Iran's nuclear sites, U.S. delivery to Israel of bunker-busting bombs that can destroy Iran's deep underground sites, and U.S. military responses to growing Iranian provocations against its interests in the region might give Tehran some pause.

*Second, maintain U.S. sanctions on Iran over its nuclear and other activities.*

Just as President Obama offered sanctions relief to convince Tehran to ink the nuclear deal, President Biden offered economic incentives to convince Tehran to rejoin it. In a post-JCPOA world, Biden and his team might be inclined to offer some economic goodies to ease U.S.-Iranian tensions in the short term and seek rapprochement with Tehran over the long term.

That wouldn't be wise. Iran's regime remains congenitally hostile to Washington and, while advancing its nuclear program, is expanding its conventional, asymmetric, cyber, and other capabilities and striking out — itself or through proxies — more aggressively against Israel and Sunni Arab states. Economic goodies won't moderate this regime as it seeks hegemony in the region and more influence in other regions, and it should continue to pay the pay for its malevolent activities.

*Third, build stronger ties to Iran's people.*

The effects of sanctions trickle through an economy so, theoretically, U.S. sanctions could turn Iran's long-suffering people against the United States. The good news is that Iran's people in great numbers have looked to America with admiration and for support as they confront a deeply unpopular regime.

But U.S. public diplomacy with Iran's people, from which its future leaders presumably will come, has long proved problematic. The Voice of America and other U.S.-sponsored media outlets, for instance, need to do better reaching Iranians where they are (on TV, radio, and social media), explaining U.S. policy, and highlighting the differences between U.S. freedom and Iranian authoritarianism.

Globally, the stakes of a new U.S. strategy for Iran could hardly be higher. For years, China, Russia, and Iran have grown closer in an anti-U.S. coalition. Of late, Iran is reportedly giving Russia hundreds of drones for its war effort in Ukraine and supplying it with aircraft parts and equipment. Iran also is trading more with China and working to join the BRICS alliance of China, Russia, India Brazil, and South Africa.

At this critical moment, Washington needs a post-JCPOA strategy that will force all three powers to take notice.