



Iran looks for signals of US resolve

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"The Fuhrer beams," Joseph Goebbels said of Hitler after Germany reoccupied the Rhineland in the spring of 1936 and the West did nothing. "England remains passive. France won't act alone. Italy is disappointed and America uninterested."

As it turns out, Robert Kagan explains in "The Ghost at the Feast," his new book about America's global role between 1900 and Pearl Harbor, both Berlin and Tokyo mistook U.S. passivity in the 1930s as permanent weakness.

"[E]very German success in Europe spurred further Japanese aggression in Asia, and every Japanese victory in Asia strengthened Hitler's resolve to press forward in Europe." How, Kagan asks, should German and Japanese leaders have known that "there would come a point at which Americans would completely change their minds and decide that the stakes were worth risking war?"

The 1930s were no historical aberration. Ever since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 created the modern state system of international relations and the concept of territorial sovereignty, global leaders have watched events far from home and plotted accordingly, calibrating the likely response from adversaries.

These days, which leaders around the world are watching what? Of timely note, Iran's leaders certainly are watching for signs of U.S. resolve as they decide how far to push in enriching uranium to near-nuclear weapons grade purity and seek more sophisticated air-defense systems from Russia.

In calibrating whether U.S. leaders have the stomach to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, as they've long threatened, or help Israel do so, Tehran is watching more than Washington's direct response to its nuclear-related activities. It's also looking for signs in the U.S. response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Whether Washington is sending the most forceful signals is open to question.

In a report of recent days, the Institute for Science and International Security wrote that Tehran now can "produce enough weapon-grade enriched uranium" to make a bomb in 12 days and four more within a month — if it chooses to do so. In addition, the International Atomic Energy Agency reported in late January that it found uranium particles that were enriched to 83.7 percent — just shy of weapons grade, which is 90 percent — at Iran's underground enrichment facility in Fordow.

The IAEA also reiterated its concerns that, lacking full access to Iran's nuclear facilities and Tehran's decision of June 2022 to remove surveillance equipment, international inspectors are far less able than they once were to monitor Iran's nuclear activities.

At the same time, Tehran has asked Moscow for the S-400 air-defense system, presumably to help protect its nuclear facilities from a possible air strike by the United States, Israel, or some combination.

Moscow hasn't said it would provide the S-400, but there's good reason to think it will. For one thing, it previously provided Tehran with the less sophisticated S-300 system as part of a growing Russian-Iranian military relationship. For another, Moscow has grown more dependent on Tehran for drones and other hardware as it continues its war with Ukraine, so providing the S-400 would repay the favor.

Iran's advances in nuclear enrichment (and in the ballistic missiles on which it could mount a nuclear warhead) and the potential that it will acquire a more sophisticated air defense system prompt the question of what Washington, Jerusalem, or both are prepared to do about it — and when.

Like at least his three most recent predecessors, President Biden says the United States won't let Iran develop nuclear weapons and that all options remain on the table, including military action. Fine.

Should Tehran take the threat seriously?

More than once over the years, U.S. leaders have opposed Israeli plans to bomb Iran's nuclear sites and denied Jerusalem the weapons to help. In recent days, Washington rejected calls by London, Paris, and Berlin to censure Tehran over its enrichment of near-weapons grade uranium, suggesting U.S. leaders retain hopes of future U.S.-Iranian cooperation and don't want to embarrass Iran's leaders.

The more consequential signal to Tehran about U.S. resolve may be emanating from Kyiv, however.

In his triumphant speech in Poland, Biden declared that Russia's invasion was a test for the world's democracies and their decisions in the coming years would determine freedom's future. But in a private meeting with the "Bucharest Nine" nations of Eastern Europe, who feel most threatened by Vladimir Putin's imperial ambitions, he backed off previous calls to oust Putin and said he wasn't seeking to topple his regime.

While Washington and the West continue to arm Ukraine, Biden continues to slow-walk his approval of President Volodymyr Zelensky's requests for more powerful weaponry. Most recently, he's rejected Zelensky's request for F-16 fighter jets (although, perhaps in a good sign for the future, the U.S. military is now assessing the skills of Ukrainian pilots to fly fighter jets).

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Meanwhile, with Russian and Ukrainian forces bogged down in brutal fighting in and around Bakhmut, Kyiv's need for resupplies of artillery shells and other weaponry is outpacing U.S. production and shipment. In response, some U.S. military officials actually suggest that Kyiv harness its resources by slowing its military efforts.

Would Washington strike Iran's nuclear sites if that's the only way left to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons? Does Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei think so? In light of America's mixed messaging to both Tehran and Kyiv, one has to wonder.

Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author, most recently, of "The Kennedys in the World: How Jack, Bobby, and Ted Remade America's Empire," from Potomac Books.