



A Roadmap for Taking on Tehran

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With Washington resuming indirect talks with Tehran over its nuclear program, opponents of the 2015 nuclear deal in the United States and abroad are raising legitimate fears that Washington will provide the Islamic Republic with sanctions relief while getting little, if anything, in return. And who can blame them?

To be sure, both sides deny they're close to even an interim agreement—and U.S. officials stress that the talks center around not just Iran's nuclear program but also such other points of contention as Iranian proxy attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and three Iranian-Americans imprisoned in Iran.

Nevertheless, each side seems to be inching toward an agreement on the nuclear front. In recent days, Washington issued a sanctions waiver to let Iraq transfer \$2.76 billion to Iran, and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said "there is nothing wrong" with an agreement as long as it keeps his nation's nuclear infrastructure in place.

Either way, the talks are just the latest phase of the decades-long, and to date utterly unsuccessful, U.S. effort to change Tehran's deadly and destructive behavior in the region and beyond.

Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 toppled the U.S.-backed Shah and ushered in the current, radical regime, Washington has tried to engage Tehran (as it did under President Bill Clinton) or pressure Tehran (as exemplified by President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal and his subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign of unilateral sanctions). Some presidents—Obama is the clearest example—have attempted to use both the carrot and the stick.

But if the goal of U.S. policy is a sharp change in Tehran's behavior or—lest we utter the phrase, in light of the chaos after we toppled Iraq's Saddam Hussein—"regime change," our failure is undeniable.

For more than four decades, Tehran's regime has not changed in any significant way. It remains revolutionary, expansionist, regionally-destabilizing, terror-sponsoring, human rights-abusing, anti-Western, and—due to its advancing nuclear and related ballistic missiles programs—a growing threat to the United States, its allies, and its regional interests.

Every president since George W. Bush has pledged not to permit Tehran to develop or acquire nuclear weaponry. But the regime has continued to advance its nuclear program—first by exploiting huge loopholes in the 2015 deal (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and later by preventing international inspectors from fully monitoring activities at its nuclear (or suspected nuclear) sites.

At this point, the International Atomic Energy Agency estimated in its latest quarterly report, Iran can produce enough weapons-grade enriched uranium for one nuclear bomb in 12 days, five in a month, seven in two months, and eight in three months.

Meanwhile, Tehran is undermining U.S. global interests in more fundamental ways.

For one thing, it has been assisting Russian President Vladimir Putin in his efforts to conquer Ukraine, including by providing him with hundreds of drones and the materials to build a drone manufacturing plant that, U.S. officials say, could be "fully operational by early next year." In return, Moscow reportedly is providing Tehran with "sophisticated military technology, financial support, and advice."

For another, Tehran is nourishing closer military, diplomatic, and economic ties not just to Moscow, but to Beijing as well. The three authoritarian powers recently (and not for the first time) held joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman as part of what amounts to a tripartite pact to challenge U.S. power and influence.

Thus, rather than go through another round of either sweet-talking or pressuring Tehran, Washington might want to try a new approach—something more holistic—to rein in the regime at home and abroad.

It should start by strengthening U.S. credibility that it is, in fact, prepared to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. While U.S. officials routinely intone that "all options are on the table," Iran's regime clearly doesn't believe them. Khamenei recently boasted that Iran's adversaries lack the power to stop it from developing nuclear weapons if it chooses to do so.

To change that perception, Washington should give Israel the military hardware it seeks for a possible attack on Iran's nuclear sites, hold increasingly robust military exercises with Israel as a possible dress rehearsal for such a strike, and continue to work with Jerusalem to sabotage Tehran's nuclear technology and know-how.

At the same time, as it gives the regime more to think about in its nuclear pursuits, Washington also should provide full-throated support (rather than the occasional nod) to ongoing protests against Khamenei and his corrupt collaborators.

U.S. support for protests over the regime's human rights abuses is not just morally right. It's also strategically savvy, allowing Washington to strengthen ties with an Iranian population that, at some point, may write a very different chapter for their country's future—and which will remember where we stood when they were under siege.

Such a holistic approach could offer one additional benefit. Just maybe, it could bring together the two sides of Washington's long-running debate over Iranian policy, combining the "carrot" of human rights promotion with the "stick" of action designed to derail Iran's nuclear program. After more than four decades of failure to achieve any discernable change in Iranian behavior, it's certainly worth a try.