

## It's Not Too Late for Trump to Ignore Bolton and Get Iran Right

*After seven decades of failed Washington policy, he has a chance to up the ante. But will he?*

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Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, has said that his nation will negotiate with America—if the Trump administration will lift sanctions, the hallmark of its “maximum pressure” campaign. To do so would be an admission of defeat, certainly. But so far, President Donald Trump's policy toward Iran has been a spectacular failure, marked by highly erroneous premises, hysterically high expectations, and dramatically counterproductive consequences.

The president apparently believed that threatening war and the “obliteration” of Iran would win concessions when he called for talks. National Security Adviser John Bolton said the president “held the door open to real negotiations.” Indeed, he added, “all that Iran needs to do is walk through that door.” At times, the president appeared to be begging the Iranians to call.

However, though claiming that he wanted negotiations, Trump also made them nearly impossible and risked starting a potentially disastrous war. Currently, a single mistake or misjudgment by an aggressive American or Iranian sailor or airman could inadvertently trigger a conflict. In order to bring back diplomacy, Washington needs to overhaul its policies.

The president's lengthy campaign against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action triggered the present confrontation between the U.S. and Iran. Although Trump likely never understood what the agreement entailed, he denounced it in apocalyptic terms. After he voided the deal, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued 12 demands focused on non-nuclear issues that essentially would have turned Iran into a puppet state.

Unsurprisingly, the Islamic Republic refused to cave or even talk, since the latter seemed tantamount to the former. So the administration declared economic war on Iran and anyone else, including allies, who had any commercial relationship with any Iranians.

As Tehran refused to bend—just as North Korea, Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela rejected Trumpian diktats—the U.S. steadily expanded sanctions, normally considered an act of war. Indeed, Hesamoddin Ashena, an adviser to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, said that “we

consider war and sanctions as two sides of the same coin.” Thus did Iran begin preparing for a conflict.

The Iranian economy is contracting, but so far the revolutionary regime has retained sufficient public support and maintained significant ability to suppress dissent. Indeed, Washington’s attempt to wreck the economy has appeared to push nationalists toward the Islamists in their resentment of U.S. policy. A 2018 poll undertaken by the University of Maryland found growing popular support for restarting nuclear activities after the administration abandoned the JCPOA. Because he was causing much of their distress, the public dismissed President Trump’s whispered sweet nothings about loving the Iranian people.

Unsurprisingly the regime responded with belligerence. By killing the JCPOA, Washington actually empowered the Islamic Republic’s most radical forces, who had also originally opposed the accord. It was almost as if the administration—whose national security adviser had publicly advocated bombing Iran—was seeking a *casus belli*.

As American military threats rose, Tehran made military preparations intended to deter an intervention—but these were perceived as aggressive in Washington. In turn, the U.S. increased its military deployments and threats. The prospect of confrontation grew: tankers were attacked, for which the U.S. blamed Tehran. However, everyone from Saudi Arabia to Israel to the Islamic State had an incentive to stage a false flag attack in hopes of triggering war. The Iranians took responsibility for downing an American drone, though even administration officials privately admitted some doubt as to whether the device was really in international waters when hit.

The Trump administration faced almost universal skepticism at home and abroad over its claims of Iranian culpability for the tanker attacks. An obviously frustrated Pompeo suggested that doubting his assertions was unpatriotic. Yet Americans remembered being lied into war, including during the 2003 build-up to the Iraq invasion. Then there was the 1988 shoot-down of the Iranian jetliner, after which Washington made a series of false statements to cover up its mistake.

Although the president decided not to retaliate for the downed drone, he upped his threats as well as his pleas for negotiation. He evidently lacked a workable strategy, having expected a quick capitulation. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke more than a little truth when he argued that the administration had “become desperate and confused.”

Now Tehran has breached the JCPOA’s nuclear limits. Ironically, administration policy could become the trigger for creating a nuclear-capable Iran. In response, all Washington can think of is more of the same. Bolton threatened: “They’ll either get the point or...we will simply enhance the maximum-pressure campaign further.” He confidently asserted that “the combination of sanctions and other pressure” would “bring Iran to the table.” Alas, he and the president he serves are demonstrating the classic symptom of insanity: doing more of the same while expecting a different result.

Why would the Iranians rescue a failed U.S. policy and negotiate from a position of weakness with someone who doesn’t believe in keeping agreements? Nor is it clear what Trump wants. Pompeo said that “we’re prepared to negotiate with no preconditions,” but that obviously was not true. Otherwise, Washington and Tehran would not be on the brink of war.

The president has repeatedly stated that all he wants is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons—which, of course, is what the JCPOA was intended to do. It has the most detailed inspection regime ever agreed to. Had the president wanted to tighten nuclear restrictions, he could have engaged the Europeans and proposed talks, sweetened by the prospect of additional sanctions relief.

In fact, other demands lurk in the background, unprecedented attempts to limit another nation's sovereignty and direct its foreign policy. Amid his talk of nuclear weapons, the president included a reference to “no further sponsoring terrorism.” On another occasion, he mentioned Tehran halting “fueling of foreign conflict” and “belligerent acts directed against the United States and its allies.” Bolton declared that the president sought “real negotiations to completely and verifiably eliminate Iran's nuclear weapons program, its pursuit of ballistic missile delivery systems, its support for international terrorism and its other malign behavior worldwide.” Which covers just about everything.

Even worse from Tehran's viewpoint, Bolton and Pompeo have unashamedly advocated regime change. When Pompeo was asked whether he really believed that sanctions would force Tehran to comply with his demands, he answered: “what can change is [that] the people can change the government.” Bolton has advocated bombing Iran and been paid to speak by the Mojahedin-e Khalq, or MEK, a cultish former Marxist terrorist group whose past attacks have killed Americans and that now purports to be an alternative regime.

Of course, the U.S. understandably would prefer that the Islamic Republic does what Washington says. Bolton complained that “after the deal, but before recent events, Iran has been on a campaign of aggression.” Yet none of its malign activities much threaten America, and Washington has backed the far more brutal regimes in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. No wonder the authorities in Tehran believe they have a vital interest in preventing Saudi/Emirati/Sunni domination of the Gulf, which is probably more important to them than curtailing U.S. influence in the region.

The president is likely sincere in his desire to talk. But from an Iranian perspective, his offer looks fraudulent.

Said Brian Hook, the administration's special ambassador for Iran, “Our diplomacy does not give Iran the right to respond with military force; Iran needs to meet our diplomacy with diplomacy and not military force.” Yet Washington is attempting to destroy the Iranian economy and state. That is not diplomacy.

The president should offer genuine negotiations, taking his cue from Zarif, who indicated that with the lifting of sanctions, “the room for negotiation is wide open.” The U.S. will have to take the initiative. After all, noted Zarif, by violating the existing accord, “It is the United States that left the bargaining table. And they're always welcome to return.”

The administration should announce that it is reviving the JCPOA and suspending sanctions, concurrent with planning for the wide-ranging talks suggested by Zarif. Moreover, Washington should indicate that there truly are no preconditions, Pompeo's and Bolton's rhetoric notwithstanding. And of course, since the U.S. is requesting tighter nuclear restrictions and changes in Iran's regional activities, America should be prepared to make corresponding concessions, including further sanctions relief, reduced military confrontation with Iranian

allies/proxies, and limits on support for Iran's Sunni antagonists, including weapons sales. The objective is not to fulfill some fantasy of a docile Tehran, but to establish a reasonable regional power balance free of American attempts at micromanagement.

Washington has gotten Iran wrong for nearly seven decades. President Trump has an opportunity to get it right, but that will require an entirely new approach. The administration needs to eschew military intervention, accept the necessity of compromise, and exhibit a genuine commitment to diplomacy. The president surprised almost everyone on North Korea. Could he still do the same with Iran?

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