

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Team Trump determined to drop foreign policy bombs on the way out

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When the Trump administration was good it was at best middling. When the administration was bad — when dropping the nuclear accord with Iran, attempting to force Tehran's surrender through brutal economic sanctions, threatening war with Iran, and allying with the malign Saudi dictatorship — it was truly awful.

Failure only enraged administration officials, causing them to impose even greater hardship on the Iranian people.

Unfortunately, in the administration's waning days officials are doubling down on the administration's worst impulses, which could cause great global harm. For instance, the president's personnel changes at the Pentagon, most notably the firing of Defense Secretary Mark Esper, generated fears that Iran hawks were planning military strikes, perhaps in league with Israel's hardline right-wing Netanyahu government. Apparently, the president recently asked the Pentagon for military options, but was dissuaded from acting.

Nevertheless, the unprincipled Netanyahu, facing domestic political challenges and a trial on corruption charges, will be left far more vulnerable without his patron in Washington. He could see war as a means to lock the Biden administration into a dangerous course even before it takes office.

Maybe in part that's why Trump has continued to increase sanctions on Iran, which by all accounts have failed to bring Iran to heel as the administration boasted they would. But the administration has not been deterred by failure. An unnamed official recently explained: "The goal is to slap as many sanctions as possible on Iran until January 20." Why? Elliott Abrams, whose impotence in dealing with Venezuela was rewarded with the addition of Iran to his portfolio, argued that his campaign to starve Iranians was unexceptional: "We have a maximum pressure sanctions program. If you look at September and October, you will see sanctions being put in place. This will continue in November and December, because it's unrelated to politics."

Of course, the latter claim is just for the record. Trump's anti-Iran campaign primarily serves the interests of Saudi Arabia and Israel, where Abrams headed shortly after the election, rather than American purposes. Indeed, administration hypocrisy is well established, applying sanctions for Iranian human rights abuses while rewarding even more repressive Riyadh with weapons sales.

Moreover, Abrams is a partisan — a loyal Republican retainer convicted for his role in the Iran-Contra scandal. He undoubtedly recognizes that the new sanctions will add little to those already

imposed and certainly will have no effect in the next few weeks. Tehran obviously has no reason to talk to the defeated and humiliated outgoing administration.

Thus, the only purpose for more sanctions is to make it more difficult for the incoming administration to reverse course. The president-elect indicated that he wants to rejoin the JCPOA and repair the damage done by the current administration. With no positive agenda, Trump's officials hope to hamper U.S. diplomacy and undermine regional stability. The additional penalties will further discourage foreign businesses from dealing with Iran and raise political difficulties for Biden in reversing course.

There also is suspicion that Trump might greenlight the Netanyahu government's annexation of Palestinian territory as allowed under the "Deal of the Century" plan, which was written to advance a "greater Israel" at Palestinian expense. Indeed, Pompeo, who reversed the U.S. government position that West Bank settlements were illegal under international law, made an unprecedented visit to a settlement on his trip to Israel last week. He also subordinated Americans' free speech rights to Israeli interests when he declared the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, which has focused on the steady expansion of settlements, to be anti-Semitic. These actions, especially the unofficial endorsement of the settlements, will make it even more difficult for the incoming Biden administration to renew efforts to promote a two-state solution for the Palestinians.

Although annexation was halted by negotiations over recognition by the United Arab Emirates, Netanyahu insisted that he had only suspended rather than ended plans to seize Palestinian lands. He might decide that UAE could not easily reverse course, especially with America's planned F-35 sale in reward for the diplomatic accord. And annexation would strengthen his electoral hand if his uncomfortable coalition government breaks down, as many expect, with another election to follow.

In any case, Netanyahu appears determined to continue Israel's steady de facto annexation by expanding settlements and making a viable Palestinian state impossible. The Israeli group Peace Now reported that the Israel Land Authority has issued tenders for 1200 new homes in East Jerusalem, thereby preceding the incoming administration, which is expected to be more critical of Israeli colonization plans. Among Netanyahu's most fervent supporters are settlers who want to prevent a two-state peace agreement.

Reported ABC News: "The approval of the 1,200 homes is a further setback to dwindling hopes of an internationally backed partition deal that would enable the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The Palestinians, along with critics of Israel's settlement policy, say construction in the Givat Hamatos settlement would seal off the Palestinian city of Bethlehem and the southern West Bank from east Jerusalem, further cutting off access for the Palestinians to that part of the city."

Pompeo's delisting of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a terrorist group in late October, when a Biden victory appeared likely, might also reflect a desire to hamstring the incoming administration. The State Department explained that "for more than a decade, there has been no credible evidence that ETIM continues to exist." Which, if true, meant the designation had no

practical impact. Such clerical fastidiousness at this time is especially curious, given Washington's routine use of the terrorism label against governments for political purposes, not because they actually promote terrorism.

The administration's action enraged Beijing, which claims the organization is still active (and which conveniently elides support for separatism and terrorism). Although China's assault on the entire Uyghur population is a grotesque and monstrous overreaction to terrorist threats, the delisting strengthens Beijing's meme that the U.S. is ignoring terrorist threats against China that Washington would never accept against itself. For no good policy reason Pompeo has put the incoming administration in an embarrassing position.

Trump is president until January 20 and is entitled to exercise all the powers of his office. However, in a time filled with international challenges, it is irresponsible for him to make it more difficult for the incoming administration to confront potentially serious problems. Such irresponsible behavior risks overshadowing the positive policies which he advanced.

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