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Pompeo asks U.N. to bar Iran from ballistic missile testing

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ramped up the campaign against Iran another notch Wednesday by urging the United Nations Security Council to prohibit the Islamic republic from conducting ballistic missile tests.

In a speech to the Security Council, Pompeo trained his criticism on Iran's ballistic missile activity, saying it had increased since the nuclear deal took force in 2016.

"Our goodwill gestures have been futile correctives to the Iranian regime's reckless missile activity and all other destructive behaviors," he said.

Pompeo specifically said the United States will work to impose prohibitions on Iran's ballistic missile tests that were in effect before the nuclear deal; which were largely ignored by Tehran.

"Iran has been on a testing spree and a proliferation spree, and this must come to an end," he told reporters after the meeting adjourned.

Pompeo's high profile appearance at the Security Council underscored the laser focus the administration has placed on painting Iran as the epitome of evil in the world. Almost every day in recent months, officials from the State Department and the Treasury Department have issued statements, imposed sanctions or designated Iranian individuals and entities for their bad behavior.

But while envoys from other nations expressed concern about Iran's behavior in the region, the Security Council session also demonstrated the isolation of the United States after its withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and the decision to reimpose sanctions. Diplomats from eight European Union countries reiterated their commitment to the agreement their regret over the U.S. withdrawal and their determination to establish a financial vehicle that can be used to circumvent U.S. sanctions and trade with Iran.

Pompeo acknowledged the differences with European allies over the nuclear deal, which he characterized as a failure or worse.

"We have different views of the JCPOA," he told reporters, using the acronym for the deal's official name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. "They view it as the linchpin. I view it as a disaster, and I think President Trump does as well."

The threat posed by Iran is often cited by U.S. officials as the top reason to maintain friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, which is Iran's biggest regional rival, despite U.S. intelligence

conclusions at the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, ordered the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Iran backs the militant Lebanese group, Hezbollah, which has been a threat to Israel. Its support for the Syrian government has helped President Bashar al-Assad cling to power despite a civil war. And Tehran is believed to have sent missiles, training and money to Houthi rebels fighting in Yemen.

But many Middle East experts say the administration overstates the threat Iran poses to the United States.

“My view is, Yemen is about Yemen,” said Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. “Their view is, Yemen is about Iran. Everything’s about Iran. It’s a real problem with their foreign policy.”

Dina Esfandiary, a fellow in the Felter Center at Harvard University, said many officials in the Trump administration believe the theocracy in Iran is on the verge of collapse.

“It makes sense for them to focus all their foreign policy efforts to squeeze and isolate Iran as much as possible,” she said.

The Khashoggi murder has made it more difficult for the administration to portray Riyadh as a natural ally in the fight against Tehran.

“It muddies administration efforts to turn the Iran campaign into a morality play that pits the forces of darkness (Iran) against those of goodness (Saudi),” said Aaron David Miller, a former State Department official now with the Wilson Center. “The fact is there are no heroes here. The choice for the U.S. is between bad allies and very bad adversaries.”

The immediate cause for the Security Council session was a Dec. 1 test of a ballistic missile that Pompeo said was capable of carrying nuclear warheads to parts of Europe. Iran has confirmed that it conducted the “important test.”

Pompeo mistakenly claimed that such a test already was banned in violation of the U.N. resolution that endorsed the Iran nuclear deal. In fact, the resolution “calls on” Iran not to undertake ballistic missile tests, weaker language that was criticized by opponents of the deal.

“Notwithstanding the changed language, the world’s concerns remain,” Pompeo said.

Pompeo sat staring at Iranian Deputy Ambassador to the United Nations Eshagh Al-Habibas as he castigated Washington for reimposing sanctions.

“The council should consider the U.S.’s illegal act, and hold it accountable,” he said. “Any leniency will only embolden the United States to continue its unlawful practices and irresponsible policies.”