



Trump's Iran strategy: Maximum pressure, minimum impact

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President Trump is at it again, taking to Twitter to announce that he had directed Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin to ratchet up sanctions on Iran in the wake of the missile strike against Saudi oil facilities. But while the world can be glad that Trump hasn't yet decided to start a war with Iran, Trump's latest sanctions are another chapter in a "maximum pressure" campaign that has resulted in no benefits for the United States.

The strategic hole at the center of Trump's Iran strategy – and a running theme throughout his conduct of foreign policy – is his instinct to want to look tough and impose harsh measures without any real theory of how that will produce the desired results.

In fact, it was Trump's desire to out-tough Obama that kicked off the chain of events that brought things to where they are today. Having criticized Obama for making the "worst deal ever" and promising to pull out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA), Trump then did so over vociferous opposition from American allies, as well as Russia and China. Even many of his own national security aides and U.S. intelligence officials urged him to stick with the deal. The president ignored these recommendations and imposed new sanctions, while at the same time expounding a drastically more extreme set of demands on Iran.

Predictably, that went nowhere. Instead, Iran has slowly begun to shed its obligations under the JCPOA, while noting that it is doing so only because the original deal is no longer valid thanks to the U.S. withdrawal from it. Worried about the possibility of American intervention, Iran has also taken more provocative steps – seizing ships in the Strait of Hormuz and possibly the strike on Saudi oil facilities – to signal that the costs of such a move would be high.

Trump's response to this has been to try dialing up the pressure once again. To be clear, the problem with Trump's sanctions campaign isn't that it won't generate pressure. No one doubts that U.S. policy has imposed considerable pain on the Iranian people. And analysts have predicted that additional sanctions will almost certainly increase this suffering.

But even robust multilateral sanctions rarely achieve their aims. And in this case, Trump's unilateralist approach and maximalist objectives are a recipe for failure. Not only does most of Europe and the rest of the world want to re-embrace the original nuclear deal, but the Iranians will never give in to U.S. demands. To do so would amount to utter capitulation, the complete surrender of Iranian sovereignty, and the de facto end of the Iranian government.

In the end, Trump's maximum pressure campaign will make it more likely that Iran resumes its nuclear program at full speed, and, in turn, increases the chances that Iran and the United States will end up in a war that the American public wants no part of. A recent poll from Business Insider found that just 13 percent of Americans would support U.S. military action in response to the strike on Saudi oil facilities. Similarly, a Gallup poll from August found that just 18 percent of Americans think it's time to take military action against Iran.

It would be bad enough if Iran were the only example of Trump's "maximum pressure, minimum impact" foreign policy. Unfortunately, he took a similar approach to the crisis in Venezuela, combining increased sanctions and threats of military action that have produced nothing. He is also in the middle of a fruitless attempt to bully China into a trade deal by imposing an escalating series of tariffs.

Some analysts have argued that Trump's reluctance to launch a military strike against Iran is proof of his prudence and restraint. But the reality is that Trump has always been more about showmanship than strategy. It's easy to call for more meaningless sanctions in order to pose as the hard-nosed president. Starting a war with Iran in retaliation for an attack on Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would be ugly, costly and harder to square with Trump's "American First" campaign rhetoric.

The bottom line is that Trump's tough guy approach to foreign policy is making the United States, and the world, less safe. The right Iran policy would involve reentering the JCPOA, removing sanctions and scaling back America's efforts to control the Middle East through military might.

John Glaser, Christopher Preble, and A. Trevor Thrall are the authors of "Fuel to the Fire: How Trump Made America's Broken Foreign Policy Even Worse (and How We Can Recover)." (Cato Institute, 2019).