



As Iran Forges Ahead With Its Nuclear Program the Trump Administration's Criminal Incompetence Does Not Justify War

Doug Bandow

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Hardline Islamists have taken control in Iran, nuclear negotiations with Tehran have stalled, the Saudis and Israelis are restless, and talk of military action against Iran is rising. Such is the price the world is paying for the Trump administration's criminal incompetence.

Remember the halcyon days when Donald Trump proclaimed himself the world's master negotiator but was easily played by foreign interlocutors? He tore up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action limiting Tehran's nuclear activities and insisted that "maximum pressure" would soon bring Iran's mullahs crawling to Washington begging for sanctions relief. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a gloriously imperious speech setting forth surrender terms, a dozen conditions that would have turned Tehran into a vassal state.

Then came Iranian interference with Gulf oil traffic. Continued Iranian support for Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, Syria's Assad government, and Iraq's Shia militias. Missile attacks by the latter groups on U.S. bases and the US embassy in Iraq. Devastating strikes on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities. Rapid nuclear developments despite Israeli assaults on Iranian personnel and facilities. Election of a hardline parliament and president. And rejection of Trump's increasingly pitiful pleas – the diplomatic equivalent of begging – for Tehran to please, pretty please, negotiate.

As his term waned Trump was still predicting that sanctions would force the mullahs to sign surrender documents. Yet Iran's hardliners, angered, emboldened, and empowered, refused to even answer him. Iranian-related threats against America's Baghdad embassy left a humiliated Pompeo [wailing that he might have to close the facility](#), a striking sign of US weakness rather than strength. The administration's performance was pitiful, leaving both America's reputation and security much diminished.

With Tehran's Rouhani government, which had originally negotiated the JCPOA, still in office, the Biden administration had a chance to revive the pact. Since the US had repudiated the deal and spent years attempting to destroy the Iranian economy, Washington had the primary burden of moving back into compliance, especially given Tehran's well justified fears that a change in administrations in 2024 could lead to another US policy reversal. However, apparently fearing criticism from the same GOP hawks who had created the latest crisis, the administration demanded that Tehran move first, which went nowhere.

Then came Iran's June presidential election, ostentatiously and unashamedly rigged by ascendant Islamists in favor of a judge, Ibrahim Raisi, best-known for his role in the murder of thousands of prisoners three-plus decades ago. Some observers suspected that this reflected the Trump administration's intent, to use sanctions to ensure that the worst ended up on top in Tehran, which would help justify the war against Iran desired by Saudi Arabia and Israel. Both naturally were ready to "fight the Iranians to the last American," as [former defense secretary Robert Gates](#) acidly noted.

Although bilateral nuclear negotiations are supposed to resume "very soon," according to the Raisi government, early optimism that the two sides would restore the JCPOA has ebbed. Both recognize important flaws, especially Iran, which never received its expected economic benefits. Receiving most attention in the US was the possibility of Iran creating a "turnkey" nuclear capability, if not actual weapon. Robert Malley, the administration's special envoy for the Iranian nuclear talks, observed that "we have to prepare for a world, which we're doing now in consultation with our partners from this region ... where Iran doesn't have constraints on its nuclear program." The result has been increasing talk of military action by Washington's endless War Party. Secretary of State Antony Blinken would only speak of "other options," but that was widely interpreted as referring to military strikes.

The Imperial City is different from every other nation's capital. Only there do people imagine military action as the first resort. Resist America's manifest destiny anywhere on earth and Washington's usual suspects will elliptically speak of "all options being on the table," if not explicitly threaten a bombing and/or drone campaign. Their response to Iran is no different. To the contrary, American officials have spent decades threatening Tehran with unprovoked aggressive war. Which has only reinforced Iran's case for building nuclear weapons. Even oppressive regimes like Moscow and Beijing do not so constantly threaten other nations.

Of course, it would be better if Iran did not build nuclear weapons. It is a ruthlessly repressive regime, rated not free [by Freedom House](#). In its report earlier this year, [Human Rights Watch reported](#): "Iranian authorities continued to repress their own people. The country's security and intelligence apparatus, in partnership with Iran's judiciary, harshly cracked down on dissent, including through excessive and lethal force against protesters and reported abuse and torture in detention." Under President Ibrahim Raisi the situation is likely to worsen, perhaps significantly.

Moreover, an Iranian bomb would unsettle the region. Although Israel has a more than adequate deterrent, other Middle Eastern nations would feel more exposed. A Sunni "Islamic Bomb" already exists in unstable Pakistan – with the group Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan dedicated to

overthrowing the Islamabad government. Adding a Shiite weapon to another unstable state would multiply the dangerous complexity.

However, only in Washington are the initial presumptions of so many policymakers that, first, this is America's problem, and, second, military action is justified. For many Neoconservatives and conservative nationalists, at least, "bombs away" is the initial response to most any foreign "threat." Never mind the consequences. As former secretary of state [Madeleine Albright](#) [said](#) when asked about US sanctions killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children: "We think the price is worth it." America, and only America, is entitled to decide the world's fate, irrespective of the cost to others.

Yet even a functioning Iranian bomb would not provide a legitimate casus belli for the US

- Tehran does not threaten America. Iran's rulers, though evil, have proved to be pragmatists, committed to personal enrichment, political aggrandizement, and regime survival. A nuclear attack on the US would lead to their destruction. Washington might prefer a world of no risks but making war certain instead is a fool's choice.
- America is the aggressor in the bilateral relationship: promoting the 1953 overthrow of Tehran's democratically elected government; backing repressive Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's rule for a quarter century; supporting Saddam Hussein's brutal war against Iran; aiding Iraq's production of chemical weapons used against Tehran's forces; shooting down an Iranian airliner in 1988; arming Tehran's regional enemies, most importantly the aggressive Saudi dictatorship; assassinating a top Iranian official, Qasem Soleimani, last year; and constantly threatening war. While Washington appears to assume that every threat diminishes Tehran's willingness to build nukes, Iranians more likely treat the constant cavalcade of warnings as another reason to construct a nuclear deterrent. The country that legitimately fears attack today is Iran, not the US
- The consequences of Mideast proliferation would be ugly, but the mere possibility of something bad happening elsewhere in the world does not warrant Washington intervening and starting a war. The Middle East matters less to the US today than at any other time in recent history – America is not dependent on the region's oil and Israel is a nuclear-armed regional superpower. Washington's first duty is to keep *the American people safe*, not thrust them into war for the supposed benefit of others.
- The US should end its status as catspaw to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel. For years those governments have used their outsize political influence in Washington to manipulate US policy to their advantage, opening both treasury and arsenal doors, as well as sending troops forth, at the American people's expense. Going to war against Iran would be worse than everything that came before.
- Iran would not likely remain inert if attacked, making conflict with Tehran even less the "cakewalk" [that was infamously predicted](#) for Iraq. The former has about three times the latter's population. Iran is a real country with a history and civilization. It could respond with asymmetric means against the US and local allies. Although the Gulf monarchies might prefer Tehran defanged, they also would be vulnerable to Iranian attack, as evidenced by [the strike on Riyadh's oil facilities](#) two years ago. The unexpected and unpredictable blowback from such a conflict, especially in other majority Muslim nations, could be substantial. Starting yet another endless war in the Mideast would be

most in the interests of Moscow and Beijing, where champagne corks would pop and uproarious celebrations would continue long into the night.

- An attack would most likely delay rather than end any Iranian nuclear weapons program. U.S. intelligence on Iranian nuclear sites is imperfect, operations are widely dispersed, and underground facilities would be difficult to destroy. Moreover, just as threats of war encourage Tehran to develop nukes, an attack would do the same, only more so. Indeed, the allied war on Libya, after Muammar Khadafy gave up his missile and nuclear programs, and [his gruesome fate](#), sent a clear message to the world's autocrats that trusting Washington to denuclearize is a fool's errand. Suffering a US attack would provide an even more powerful lesson. And this message would go to other potential nuclear weapons states on Uncle Sam's naughty list, most obviously North Korea.
- Only a long-term political solution can settle the region, and that is possible only if the parties don't believe that the US will forever protect them from reality. The Trump administration's welcome failure to go to war for the Saudi royals after Iran's September 2019 attack shook the heretofore pampered and cossetted monarchy. Since then it has been edging out of the Yemen war and talking with Tehran. Some Gulf monarchies also have regularized their relations with Israel and moved toward restoring ties with Syria's Bashar al-Assad. A broad diplomatic modus vivendi would be the most effective way to ease fears in Iran and cause it to forswear nuclear weapons.

President Biden supposedly is pursuing a foreign policy for the middle class. For that slogan to mean anything, there should be no foolish wars on behalf of other governments. Tehran's harder line and reluctance to accept US demands make regional diplomacy even more important. Sectarian conflict benefits none of the nations involved. And many of the governments, including Iraq and Kuwait, have worked overtime to avoid being dragged in by one side or another. Tehran and Riyadh/Abu Dhabi, which in recent years have been even more aggressive than Iran, should forge a modus vivendi to maintain peace and promote development.

The Biden administration should make a priority of restoring the JCPOA while encouraging a new round of negotiations with Iran featuring other countries in the region. Then they, not Washington, should take the lead in creating the elusive peace for which people in the region have long been waiting.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of [Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire](#).