Iran and America—The Impasse Continues

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Articles & Testimony

The answer does not lie in doubling down on pressure or 'returning' to diplomacy, but rather in wielding those policy tools in concert under the guidance of a realistic strategy.

As U.S. President Donald Trump nears the end of his first term in office, both critics and proponents of his "maximum pressure" strategy toward Iran feel vindicated. The latter point to the fact that Washington has, contrary to the expectations of most, proven able to bring unprecedented economic pressure to bear on Tehran without precipitating an Iranian nuclear breakout, spike in oil prices, or other crisis.

Yet the former are quick to observe that this pressure has not produced the outcome the Trump Administration professes to desire—a new, more comprehensive U.S.-Iran agreement. On the contrary, it has led to an expansion of Iran's nuclear activities and seemingly contributed to greater U.S.-Iran conflict in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East.

American policy toward Iran thus suffers today from a double impasse—between the U.S. and Iran on one hand, and between the Trump Administration and its critics, both domestic and foreign. Progress will require addressing both of these impasses, which are inextricably linked. And while all parties—the Trump Administration, its domestic opposition, U.S. allies, and the Iranian regime—may hope that the key to unlocking progress lies in the American presidential elections in November 2020, such hopes are likely to prove to be in vain.

The success of American policy toward Iran will be found neither in doubling down on pressure nor in "returning" to diplomacy, but in wielding those policy tools in concert and in the service of a realistic strategy, as well as winning support from a sufficient domestic and international coalition to sustain that strategy.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Accounts of the current stalemate in U.S.-Iran relations often begin with Trump's decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear agreement—or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—in May 2018. To better understand it, however, requires placing this decision in the context of American policy toward Iran over the past several decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. concerns about Iran focused on its support for terrorism and actions in the Middle East punctuated by episodes such as the 1988 clash between the American and Iranian navies, the 1994 bombing of the Israeli embassy and cultural center in Argentina, and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia.

While concerns about Iran's nuclear pursuits were not absent during that period, they came to the fore only with the revelation in 2002 that Tehran had been clandestinely constructing a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and heavy water reactor at Arak, both of which could be explained only as elements of a covert nuclear weapons program.

During the George W. Bush Administration, the view of U.S. officials was that Iran's nuclear program could not be addressed in isolation from its overall national security strategy. Tehran's nuclear pursuits and other troublesome activities, such as its support for non-state proxy and terrorist groups, were part and parcel of a single approach to foreign policy. In this view, a solution to the nuclear crisis could only come in the context of a broader strategic shift by Iran, whether resulting from a change in leadership in Tehran or simply a decision on the part of that leadership.

This outlook was informed by the experience of American officials with regards to rapprochement with Libya, where Muammar Gadhafi gave up not just his nuclear weapons program but also renounced his support for terrorism and made other policy changes in exchange for a lifting of Western sanctions. Beginning in 2005, the Bush Administration—disabused of regime-change aspirations by the morass of Iraq—embarked on a dual-track policy of pressure and diplomacy designed to raise the costs to Tehran of its existing security strategy while illuminating a path to a different relationship with the West.

President Barack Obama, dissatisfied with progress in resolving U.S.-Iran differences under his predecessor, wrought significant changes to American policy. At first, this was largely confined to expanding U.S. outreach to the Iranian leadership. This was motivated by a desire to demonstrate a clear break from the approach taken by Bush, whose reluctance to engage, the Obama team believed, had supplanted Iran's actions as a matter of international consternation. Also, the then-new administration hoped that showing a willingness to engage would have the effect of increasing the pressure on Iran by shifting the focus onto it to respond.

When this outreach proved fruitless, however, a more significant but less apparent policy change was introduced: Obama abandoned the idea that an Iranian "strategic shift" would necessarily have to precede a nuclear deal, and instead decided to pursue a nuclear-first deal in advance of any such shift. The nuclear agreement reached between the United States and Iran—along with other partners in the so-called "P5+1"—thus did not require Iran to address the American or UN Security Council's non-nuclear concerns, or even aim to dismantle Iran's theretofore illicit nuclear program.

While this was done initially in fear of a possible Israeli military attack on Iran, U.S. officials came to believe that such a deal could serve to cool tensions between the United States and Iran and pave the way for a broader rapprochement.

This was a major, if unspoken, policy shift. While the Obama Administration projected self-assurance, however, it failed to assemble the coalition necessary to ensure the new policy's success. The U.S. shifted in 2012 from a multilateral to a bilateral negotiating format, leaving not just Middle Eastern allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel on the outside, but also allies such as France, which previously had been intimately involved in the process.

The reservations that were increasingly publicly expressed by these partners reinforced unease in the U.S. Congress, where mistrust of Iran was acute, ultimately leading to the JCPOA failing to garner majority support in the U.S. Senate. This did not prove an obstacle to the agreement entering into force, as a legislative compromise between the

U.S. Congress and the White House meant that two-thirds of the Senate would have to oppose the deal to block it, but it sowed the seeds for the agreement's demise.

Given this background, it was unsurprising that virtually every Republican candidate for the presidency in 2016 denounced the JCPOA and suggested that he or she would withdraw from it if elected. Republicans' objections were both substantive, focusing in particular on the deal's temporary nature and exclusion of non-nuclear issues, as well as political, given the partisan basis on which the agreement had ultimately been adopted.

U.S. POLICY UNDER TRUMP

When Donald Trump—who had in the course of his campaign held a rally outside the White House in opposition to the JCPOA—ascended to the Oval Office, the surprise was not that he ultimately withdrew from the agreement, but that he did not do so immediately upon taking office. However, in his rush to undo what he regarded as the error of his predecessor, Trump in effect repeated it.

Just as President Obama had failed to build the necessary domestic support to sustain his shift in policy toward Iran, President Trump's action was almost entirely unilateral. Even Republican and Democratic lawmakers who expressed serious reservations about the JCPOA in 2015 hesitated to support withdrawal from the agreement absent a clear strategy to replace it. Most American allies in the Middle East were also cool to the idea, and those outside the region took an even stronger position, opposing the American withdrawal outright and making clear that they intended to continue abiding by the deal.

As a result, America's withdrawal from the JCPOA was likely a mixed bag from the perspective of the Iranian regime. In negotiating the agreement, Tehran had managed to have its cake and eat it too—that is, to receive nearly comprehensive relief from sanctions, while at the same time retaining the key elements of a nuclear weapons program and even having its theretofore illicit nuclear efforts legitimized by the UN Security Council, which had spent years insisting that Iran renounce those very activities.

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 may have threatened sanctions relief—though the extent to which American secondary sanctions would be honored by third countries was not yet clear at that point—but ironically reinforced the legitimization of Iran's nuclear program. The conviction with which other countries pledged fealty to the JCPOA made clear that they saw the deal not as a political agreement between the United States and Iran—which in effect it was, despite the UN Security Council's blessing—but rather a matter of international law, quite unlike other arms control agreements.

Yet this achievement also came with a cost, as it required Iran to continue complying with the JCPOA despite the American exit. As a result, the United States was able to achieve the best of both worlds: even as Washington re-imposed sanctions on Iran and squeezed its economy, Iran continued complying with the JCPOA's nuclear restrictions. As months passed, it became clear that third countries were complying with American sanctions, in large part because the decision to do so lay not in the hands of governments but in those of private businesses, which were unwilling to risk their access to the American market to maintain their business with Iran.

This effect was amplified by the existence of what amounted to bottlenecks in the flow of international trade; for example, a business might be willing to trade with Iran but could not find a bank willing to facilitate the transaction, or a state might be willing to buy Iranian oil but be unable to find ships to transport it or an insurer to insure them.

That Iran continued to adhere to the JCPOA despite this disappointment underscores the importance Iranian leaders attach to the strategic, as opposed to economic, benefits of the agreement.

This rough equilibrium—the United States enforcing sanctions, Iran and the other members of the P5+1 continuing to carry out the agreement—was upended in May 2019 when America decided to cease granting waivers that had the

effect of permitting other states to continue importing limited amounts of Iranian oil. The withdrawal of these waivers, under which Iran had continued to export one million barrels of oil per day, posed an enormous threat to the Iranian government, which was forced to reduce the share of oil revenues in its annual budget from 29 percent in 2019 to just 9 percent in 2020.

In reaction, Iran embarked on a shift in policy that appeared designed to threaten and, in some cases, actually impose costs on the United States and its allies, with the aim of compelling the former to change course and prompting the latter to more actively campaign for Washington to do so.

Iran's effort to compel a change in American policy has thus far consisted of two tracks. First, Iran has embarked on a campaign, both directly and via proxies, to escalate tensions with the United States and its allies in the region. While it is difficult to know precisely which Iranian activities to attribute to this effort, and which simply represent business as usual for Iran, that they include high-profile attacks such as the September 14, 2019, drone and cruise-missile strike against Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq oil processing facility.

The second track of escalation that Iran has pursued is nuclear; beginning in May 2019, Iran incrementally reduced its compliance with the JCPOA's restrictions on its nuclear activities, making clear with each step that another would follow in a prescribed amount of time if the European Union did not enact concrete measures to provide economic relief to Iran.

These steps included surpassing caps on Iran's stockpile of heavy water and low-enriched uranium, exceeding limits on the degree to which uranium was enriched, accelerating research and development into advanced gas centrifuge technology, resuming the enrichment of uranium at its underground bunker of Fordow, and, finally, declaring that it would no longer be bound by the JCPOA's limits on enrichment-related activities, period.

Initially, the Iranian leadership likely felt that this approach was paying dividends. The United States declined to respond to Iran's regional provocations—even the downing of a U.S. military drone on June 20, 2019. What's more, in the wake of the Aramco attack, Trump suggested that the United States had no interest in defending its Gulf allies or regional energy infrastructure against such aggression. This constituted a clear departure from the Carter Doctrine, which held that the United States would use military force if needed to defend its interests in the Gulf.

Together with reported diplomatic outreach by Arab Gulf states in the wake of the attack, Iran may have believed that its efforts were prompting a measure of decoupling between Washington and its regional allies and hastening America's disengagement from the region—a more profound strategic impact than Tehran likely imagined possible.

Likewise, Iran's nuclear escalation sparked a flurry of diplomacy that had previously been absent. French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson sought to persuade Trump to ease sanctions in exchange for the direct engagement with Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, for which he had publicly expressed a desire.

The chief obstacle to those initiatives turned out not to be American obstinacy but Iranian hesitation; Rouhani likely calculated either that such engagement would prove ruinous for him domestically, or that it was a card that could only be played once and whose value must therefore be maximized.

Yet Iran paid no price for violating the JCPOA. The E3 nations of France, Germany, and the UK ultimately triggered the agreement's dispute resolution mechanism following Iran's fifth and final nuclear step, but this process promises to be both lengthy and quite likely inconclusive, rather than a prelude to punitive action.

Nevertheless, Iran ultimately overplayed its hand on both the regional and nuclear fronts. While the United States was unmoved by Iran's attacks on oil tankers, pipelines, and even the brazen attack on the Aramco facility, an attack by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that killed an American contractor on December 27, 2019, finally moved the Trump

Administration to action. And when it came, that action surely exceeded Iran's expectations—the targeted killing of General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and arguably Iran's most important military leader and second-most powerful figure overall.

And on the nuclear front, the French- and British-led diplomacy fizzled rather than producing offers more favorable to Iran, in part because growing protests in Iran in late 2019 made it politically less palatable for Trump to engage with his Iranian counterparts and encouraged American policymakers to believe that the Iranian regime was shakier than previously thought.

LOOKING AHEAD

Neither the killing of Soleimani nor the end of 2019's brief burst of nuclear diplomacy marked the end of Iranian efforts to deter the United States, however. Since Soleimani's death, Iranian-backed groups attacked U.S. forces in Iraq nearly twenty times from January through March 2020, prompting little apparent response from the United States. Nor did Iran's regional activities appear to change meaningfully elsewhere, suggesting both that Iran remained determined to pursue those policies and that the IRGC-QF was capable of doing so in Soleimani's absence.

On the nuclear front, reports from IAEA inspectors indicate that Iran has continued to increase its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, reducing the time that would be required to produce the fissile material for a nuclear weapon (Iran's so-called "breakout time.") The reduction of that breakout time to a matter of weeks in 2015 formed a cornerstone of the Obama Administration's argument for the necessity of the JCPOA; the metric had diminished to the point, Obama asserted, that the United States was faced with a choice between a diplomatic agreement or war. As of March 2020, the Institute for Science and International Security judged Iran's breakout time at 3.5 months, down from 12 months in January 2016.

In fact, Iran and the United States both still appear committed to the same overall strategies they were pursuing in early 2019 despite the year's tumult. Iran's objective appears to be preserving the JCPOA, which as noted above allowed it to enjoy economic benefits while preserving the option of pursuing nuclear weapons in the future. Trump continues to pursue a strategy of "maximum pressure" aimed at continually increasing the cost to Iran of refusing to renegotiate the 2015 accord. Little change in the approach of either state is likely prior to the American presidential elections in November 2020, which both see as a key inflection point in their strategies.

For its part, Iran likely understands that a new U.S. administration headed by a Democrat would be inclined to return to the JCPOA without requiring additional concessions from Tehran, or at least to negotiate a new accord in which all sides offer new concessions. This weakens any incentive for Iran's leaders to accept the Trump Administration's offer of negotiations, which surely would be held on less advantageous terms. The Trump Administration, on the other hand, understands that Iran is likely waiting for the result of the elections before deciding whether to return to the negotiating table, and is content to wait, all the while ratcheting up the pressure.

Yet both the United States and Iran may find that November 2020 is not the turning point for which they were hoping. The Trump Administration's policy of "maximum pressure" has caused unprecedented economic pain for the Iranian regime, but has not yet resulted in any outcome that advances American interests, however defined. It has not resulted in a new U.S.-Iran negotiation, ended or meaningfully obstructed Iranian regional activities, or provoked political instability in Iran.

Nor, by themselves, will sanctions likely accomplish these aims. Iran's regional activities by and large are designed to be inexpensive and not highly susceptible to disruption by sanctions, the prevalence of which over the past four decades in fact helped to shape the strategy that Iran pursues today. While this is not true across the board—supporting the Assad regime in Syria or the vast array of social, political, and military activities in which Hezbollah engages in Lebanon is not cheap—there is little sign that Iran's military and terrorist activities are rendered less

troublesome by budget woes. Indeed, Iran has demonstrated a willingness to prioritize these activities, reportedly increasing security budgets amid both sanctions and the coronavirus epidemic.

Likewise, Iran has experienced significant political instability, but there is little to indicate that sanctions either are its cause or have interfered with the regime's willingness or ability to respond to it. As for negotiations, the Iranian regime—like those ruling North Korea, Venezuela, and elsewhere—has demonstrated a willingness to absorb enormous economic pain rather than capitulate to American demands. This is likely motivated by a fear of showing weakness as well as a low estimation of American patience and tolerance for risk.

DOUBLE IMPASSE

The temptation for the Trump Administration is to simply bide its time, hope that it is granted a second term, and allow the effect of sanctions to compound. There are, however, several reasons why this approach may prove insufficient.

First, if Trump wins a second term, Iran may indeed decide that it has little choice but to return to the negotiating table in hopes of stabilizing an economy wracked not only by sanctions but by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. However, Iran is likely to make this return by way of stoking a crisis, so that it enters any talks not on terms set by the United States but with leverage of its own. It would most likely do this via nuclear escalation—returning, for example, to the status quo ante 2013, when its nuclear activities were expanding without constraint, and its breakout time was measured in weeks, not months. By doing so, Iran would hope to induce panic, turning time in its favor and prompting third countries to implore the United States to compromise.

Second, even absent such actions by Iran, time may not be on the administration's side. Even if Trump wins a second term, the Iranian regime may prove more able to absorb economic pain than might seem possible to Western policymakers, if it prioritizes regime survival above economic prosperity and is able to fend off domestic challenges. The regime may also delay making concessions in the belief that the sanctions regime will degrade over time, either because of the development by Tehran and other JCPOA parties of workarounds, or because of changes in economic fundamentals such as the price of oil.

Third, there is a disconnect between America's heavy focus on Iran and its oft-stated desire to disengage from the Middle East, which encourages the Iranian regime to hold out in the belief that doing so will result in other strategic gains. Clearest among these would be American unwillingness to sustain the level of military commitment in the Middle East, particularly Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf, in order to deter or respond to Iranian aggression. Frequent provocations by Iran, even at a relatively low level, leave the United States, in the short-term, with two choices—maintain a significant military presence in the region, or draw it down despite Iran's hostility. The former is at odds with a military strategy that seeks to de-emphasize Middle East conflicts in favor of a greater military commitment to Asia and Europe; the latter is politically unpalatable as it carries the whiff of acquiescence to Iranian aggression.

Even if the United States does not withdraw in the face of Iranian-sponsored attacks, recent events have demonstrated that actions by the United States to limit its response—for example, by responding against Iraqi parties or declining to come to the aid of allies—can net political victories for Iran.

On the other hand, were President Trump to fail to win a second term, Iran may not find the United States more accommodating. While a presidential administration headed by a Democrat would likely abandon the "maximum pressure" policy and be more inclined to return to the JCPOA or negotiate a similar agreement, it might nevertheless be tempted to make use of the leverage the previous administration passed along, and would in any case be faced with the same conundrum as the Obama Administration: the need to bring along a sufficient domestic coalition to sustain the deal.

Republicans in Congress, and perhaps even some Democrats, would seek to stymie any effort to restore sanctions

relief for Iran, or to undo other actions taken by the Trump Administration such as designating the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization. Even if Republicans could not muster sufficient support for such efforts, foreign businesses might hesitate to resume trade with Iran without a clear signal of support from the U.S. Congress—such as the ratification of any agreement as a formal treaty—for fear of facing penalties in the future. Iran itself may insist on such a step, cognizant that sanctions relief depends as much on executive action as reassuring markets regarding the regulatory safety of doing business with Iran.

America's policy toward Iran thus faces a double impasse—blocked at one turn by Iran's unexpected capacity to defy economic pressure and avoid resuming negotiations on the terms desired by Washington, and at another by deep divides between the United States and its allies as well as within the United States itself. Success will require circumventing both obstacles.

NEXT STEPS

For all the differences between them on the matter of American policy toward Iran, Presidents Obama and Trump are alike in important ways. Both desired a major diplomatic deal with Iran, and both saw achieving one as furthering a broader aim of decreasing American involvement in the Middle East. This has led to something of a paradox—even as successive U.S. administrations have sought to rebalance the country's priorities away from the Middle East and toward "great-power competition" with the likes of China and Russia, the American focus on its foremost Middle Eastern adversary, Iran, has arguably increased.

The George W. Bush Administration, generally viewed as responsible for getting the United States overly entangled in the region, ironically had a more modest focus on Iran, and a less well-developed sanctions regime, than either Obama or Trump.

It is tempting to write off this contradiction as a mere oddity arising from American politics—the country's voting public, conventional wisdom holds, is unenthusiastic about U.S. engagement in the Middle East, but deeply concerned about Iran, and so American political leaders act accordingly.

Yet this is misguided, for two reasons. First, as Obama and Trump both recognized, Iran acts as a spoiler in any plan for a dignified American drawdown from the region; we may hope that our forces will be replaced by local allies or third-country partners ready to shoulder the burden, but Tehran sees an American exit as a recipe for extending its own influence to the detriment of U.S. allies and interests.

Second, and conversely, a perpetual U.S. focus on Iran—one which is unlikely to abate even if Trump is denied a second term—inevitably draws American resources and attention away from matters of greater import, such as great-power competition. Squaring this circle—that is, countering the threats to American interests posed by Iran without allowing the issue to derail our broader national security strategy—should be the focus of Washington's approach toward Tehran.

A successful American strategy should first and foremost remain mindful of U.S. objectives with respect to Iran. The most important of these is to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, which would pose a direct threat to the United States and destabilize the Middle East.

Others are derivative of a broader American agenda in the region that has been poorly defined for years, but might be characterized as promoting the resilience and capability of partners so that key U.S. interests are secured even as the American commitment of resources to the region diminishes. For example, U.S. officials would like Arab Gulf security forces to be able to defend the region's energy infrastructure against Iranian threats as well as the establishment of workable multilateral regional mechanisms to address conflicts such as those in Syria and Yemen—goals which remain far off.

Iran generally seeks to disrupt such plans, and thus must be held at bay for them to succeed. Thus, U.S. forces are not in Iraq to deter Iran for its own sake, but to help Iraq develop the capacity to secure itself, which requires pushback against Iranian efforts to capture the Iraqi state. This may seem obvious, but is easily forgotten in the heat of battle.

The beginning of sound strategy with respect to Iran is to recognize that no diplomatic deal addressing all of these concerns is likely possible. Asking Iran to forsake not just its nuclear and missile programs but its support for proxies and other regional activities is to ask it to abandon wholesale its national security strategy and revolutionary ideology, and it is difficult to imagine that there are any incentives that would persuade the current leadership in Tehran to do so.

This does not mean it is mistaken to pursue a diplomatic deal, but it does mean that U.S. strategy should leaven its hopes for a deal with the expectation that at best any deal will only partially address America's concerns, and at worst no deal will be achieved.

A reasonable strategy might therefore seek to worsen Iran's perceived alternatives to negotiations in order to increase its relative incentive to return to the table, while preparing to advance U.S. interests even if no meaningful negotiations occur.

Accomplishing this does not require abandoning existing efforts to impose economic pressure on Iran, but rather supplementing them in three ways.

First, the United States should seek ways to minimize friction with allies over the American sanctions regime. This would be useful both from the perspective of Iran policy, as it would deny Tehran opportunities to expose and widen gaps within Washington between Republicans and Democrats, and between Washington and partners in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere, as well as for broader U.S. strategy, in which Iran is a lower-priority policy matter than others such as Russia and China, on which the U.S. would like allied cooperation.

Doing this requires American policymakers to recognize that not all pressure is created equal. Denying Iran substantial oil revenues, for example, is a highly consequential form of pressure that may be worth friction with allies to the extent it is helping to advance U.S. objectives. Seeking to prevent the EU from operationalizing its INSTEX mechanism for conducting non-sanctioned humanitarian trade, however, has been a major transatlantic irritant that has failed to meaningfully increase pressure on Iran. Denying sanctions waivers for nuclear work to continue at Iran's Arak and Bushehr nuclear facilities would be counter-productive and a lose-lose step, easing constraints on Iran while upsetting U.S. allies.

Better management of the tradeoffs involved in the American economic pressure campaign holds the potential for easing the strains it causes within Washington and with allies, and thus makes U.S. policy more sustainable over the long term.

Second, the United States should issue a diplomatic proposal that explicitly indicates how it hopes to move from maximum pressure to negotiations. At the moment this is a significant gap in American policy, which has led to policy entrepreneurship from others, chiefly France and the UK. Rather than wait for further such proposals, which carry no guarantee of advancing American interests but which Trump may nevertheless be tempted to accept—either out of impulse or in response to a crisis—the United States should take the initiative in shaping diplomacy. It can do so by providing allies with a roadmap for negotiations—what it would hope to discuss, and what good-faith measures it would be willing to enact during talks in exchange for reciprocal measures by Iran.

Less important, at least at first, than gaining Iranian agreement to any such proposal would be its credibility in the eyes of America's allies, particularly in the P5+1. Were the United States to make what these partners see as a serious diplomatic proposal, it would significantly change the tenor of international debate on this issue. Were Iran

to reject the proposal, it would create an opening for the United States to ask that they join Washington in ratcheting up pressure on Tehran, which has already irritated the E3 with its violations of the JCPOA.

Furthermore, if the Trump Administration were able to generate serious discussion about an American proposal, it could also dampen domestic opposition to its Iran policy and even shape the options available to a successor administration, which would likely be more inclined to reverse unilateral actions by Trump than to abandon an ongoing multilateral discussion or negotiation.

Finally, the United States should demonstrate a sustainable commitment to the Middle East that regards Iran in proper priority relative to other national security challenges and is sustainable over time. Such a policy should include a commitment to counter and deter Iranian aggression, but in a place, time, and manner of Washington's own choosing.

The United States should reserve the right, for example, to respond elsewhere to the actions of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, both to minimize the cost of the American response to U.S.-Iraqi relations, and to make clear to Tehran that it will not be permitted to dictate the venue in which U.S.-Iran hostilities play out. Making clear that America is willing to respond in other theaters—even against Iran proper—for actions elsewhere would add a major element of uncertainty to Iranian planning. It must also be clear that the United States is willing to do so repeatedly if necessary, which will mean taking action that is sufficiently measured to avoid a domestic backlash in America and can be accomplished with an economical regional presence.

Any American commitment to the region, however, should not be primarily about responding to Iran's actions, but about building partnerships that reduce Iran's room for maneuver. Iran's regional influence has increased in recent decades less because of Tehran's own designs or resources, and more due to the weakness of neighboring states. Strengthening those states, and in particular enhancing their security services to protect their own citizens from the sorts of threats posed by Iran, will do more to block and deter Iranian aggression than any other actions the United States can take.

Simply respecting the sovereignty of our partners and making clear that we view advancing our own regional interests as compatible with the promotion of theirs will provide a powerful contrast with Tehran's manner of operating. That such a policy requires a long-term commitment should by now be well-understood by American policymakers, and dictates that the level of that commitment be one that can be sustained politically and militarily over time, and that American ambitions be realistic rather than all-or-nothing propositions; there will be no eradication, for example, of Tehran's influence in Iraq and Syria, but this does not mean that either country is destined for Iranian domination.

American presidents have long spoken in terms of solving American problems with Iran, imagining a future where the United States and Iran are not adversaries, but friends. The temptation to speak in these terms is clear—the Iranian people are regarded as far more sympathetic than the regime ruling them, and the United States and Iran had a pre-revolutionary history of partnership.

Yet efforts to deliver such solutions have consistently fallen short, in part because the Iranian regime's opposition to the United States is ideologically deeply ingrained, and because the growing American desire to scale back its involvement in the region encourages Tehran to hold firm in its ambitions.

A better approach may be to manage American problems with Iran, preventing worst-case outcomes while designing a broader Middle East policy consistent with a shift in focus to great-power competition and aiming to prevent Iran from interfering with its execution. Such a policy will necessarily be multilateral, comprehensive, and sustainable, and holds the greatest chance both to worsen Iranian alternatives to compromise and break down barriers within Washington's own domestic and international coalition.

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