

The Threat of War Is the Only Way to Achieve Peace with Iran

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Oct 27, 2021

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Tehran no longer takes Washington seriously, so the Biden administration needs to put the prospect of military escalation back on the table if it hopes to make progress on the nuclear issue.

The Biden administration's approach to Iran has been predicated on putting the Islamic Republic's nuclear program back in a box by restoring the 2015 nuclear deal and the limits it imposes on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure until 2030. Once achieved, the administration believes, it will have time to negotiate a "longer and stronger" deal—one that would extend the sunset provisions that end the limitations on the size and quality of the program and one that would address the issues of Iran's ballistic missiles and aggressive behavior in the region. Like a military plan that seems to work until it encounters the enemy, the plan required the Iranians to go along—and they have shown they will not be a partner to the White House's plans.

Instead, they have made their nuclear program far more threatening and in the process have raised questions about whether there is a diplomatic answer to it. Not only have the Iranians denied the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to monitoring data of their enrichment activities, but they have been taking steps that have no justifiable civilian purpose: the enrichment of uranium to the 60 percent level and the production of uranium metal.

They declared these actions were a response to acts of sabotage, reportedly Israeli, against their facilities and plants at Natanz and Karaj, which operate and produce centrifuges that enrich uranium. But that was merely a pretext to take actions that have no relationship whatsoever to the peaceful use of nuclear power.

Although they reject the Iranian justification of actions that move Iran toward a nuclear weapon, Biden administration officials told the Israelis, as I learned recently in Israel, that there was “good pressure on Iran and bad pressure”—citing the example of sabotage at Natanz and Karaj as bad pressure because the Iranians seized on it to enrich to near weapons-grade and produce uranium metal whose primary purpose is to create the core of a nuclear bomb.

While it’s certainly true that Iran used these actions to cross dangerous thresholds, this argument misses an essential point. The Iranians understood the significance of these actions and weren’t afraid; they clearly expected little or no reaction, diplomatic or otherwise, from the United States or the other members of the P5+1, including China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom. And they were right—there was no consequence.

The loss of Iranian fear about what they can get away with on their nuclear ambitions is dangerous. It may produce a miscalculation on Iran’s part about whether the United States might ever respond militarily and for sure makes a diplomatic outcome less likely.

Are the Iranians pressing ahead now with near weapons-grade enrichment, uranium metal, and cascades of advanced centrifuges to pressure Washington into improving the terms of the nuclear deal, where they get more sanctions relief than they are entitled in exchange for fewer constraints on their nuclear infrastructure? Or are they doing so because they want to achieve a Japan-like threshold capability that would enable them to move very quickly to a nuclear weapon if they chose to do so? Or both, since these are not mutually exclusive options?

Regardless, unless the Iranians understand that the pathway they are on is dangerous for them, the probability of the use of force will go up. Certainly, the Israelis, believing the Iranian nuclear threat is existential, are more inclined to move beyond sabotage and militarily attack Iran’s whole nuclear infrastructure, particularly at a time when they see Iran approaching the tipping point for reaching a Japan-like threshold weapons capability—a capability that would give Iran the ability to present the world with a nuclear fait accompli at a time of its choosing.

If the United States wants to reduce the risk of a conflict and give diplomacy a chance to succeed, the Biden administration is going to have to restore Iran’s fear of a U.S. reaction and apply pressure far more effectively. (That, of course, would also affect the Israelis and reduce their perceived need to act independently.)

So how can the Biden administration alter the Iranian calculus, especially at a time when the Iranians have finally **[announced \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iran-nuclear-deal-jcpoa-biden-iaea/2021/10/27/0ecf7420-3740-11ec-9662-399cfa75efee_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iran-nuclear-deal-jcpoa-biden-iaea/2021/10/27/0ecf7420-3740-11ec-9662-399cfa75efee_story.html)** they will return to talks in Vienna? It will need to integrate and orchestrate a number of political, diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military moves. Politically and diplomatically, it needs to focus on isolating the Iranians. In withdrawing from the nuclear deal without a plan to replace it, the Trump administration mistakenly isolated the United States, not Iran.

Iranian leaders don’t see themselves as being like North Korea—isolation matters. But to isolate Iran politically requires American seriousness about diplomacy and working with others, even as it makes clear the consequences if diplomacy fails to prevent the Iranians from becoming a threshold nuclear weapons state. Threats and declaratory policy are part of this mix. For example, China, the world’s biggest importer of oil, needs a stable Middle East, not one disrupted by war, and an Iran on its current nuclear pathway toward a threshold weapons status risks precisely that.

(In 2009, during my time in the Obama administration, I was sent to Beijing, where I made the argument that neither country wanted to see a major conflict in the Middle East, yet Iran’s nuclear program, if not contained, would produce that. To avoid that, China needed to be part of the effort to isolate Iran politically and economically—and it subsequently was.)

To be sure, neither the Russians nor the Europeans want to see Iran acquire or develop nuclear weapons, and they

also understand the risks of a wider conflict in the Middle East if Tehran continues on its current path. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in particular, understands that if Israel feels compelled to strike Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shiite militias in Syria will hit Israel with tens of thousands of rockets and drones. Given the Russian presence in Syria, the last thing Putin wants is to be caught in the middle of such a conflict.

What binds the P5+1 together is both the desire to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons and the belief in using diplomacy to achieve that goal. In this sense, it is important to show Washington's commitment to diplomacy but also what will threaten its continued use and Iran in the process. Striking that balance requires a declaratory policy that signals to Iran the danger it faces without alienating others. It is not enough to speak of considering other options, a line that has become routinized. Rather, the Biden administration, while emphasizing its commitment to diplomacy, should say that if Iran makes a diplomatic outcome impossible, it risks its entire nuclear infrastructure.

Before altering the U.S. declaratory posture, the Biden administration needs to share its plans with the other members of the P5+1. In addition, President Joe Biden should couple a tougher declaratory policy with humanitarian overtures to Iran, inviting Europeans and others to join the United States in offering COVID-19 vaccines and help in addressing Iran's acute water problems—which are set to become worse because of climate change and mismanagement. Should Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, say no, as is likely, he will contribute to the country's isolation on the outside and greater frustration on the inside.

Economically, the United States should not be lifting sanctions, but Biden could offer again to grant waivers for purchases of Iranian oil to select countries or access to some of Iran's frozen assets in return for stopping enrichment above 3.67 percent (and shipping out of the country the amount stockpiled above that level), halting production of uranium metal, and ending the obstruction of IAEA monitoring.

Militarily, the United States should be using U.S. Central Command to run joint exercises with Israel and Arab states, including integrating defenses against ballistic and cruise missile attacks, using electronic means and cyberweapons to shut down missile launches, and simulating retaliation to small boat attacks. I know from experience that Iran pays close attention to U.S. exercises. (Unilaterally, the U.S. Air Force should also demonstrate its military reach on a regular, not symbolic, basis by having routine B-52H flights to the region.)

Beyond this, Biden needs to disabuse Iran of the notion that Washington will not act militarily and will stop Israel from doing so. Providing the Israelis with the mountain-busting Massive Ordnance Penetrator, a 30,000-pound bomb that penetrates deep underground before the fuse ignites, is one option. Israel would need to be leased B-2 bombers to be able to use it, but the message that Washington is ready to provide it to the Israelis would be unmistakable to the Iranians: The United States is giving the Israelis the means to attack the Fordow enrichment site, built within a mountain, and is ready to support their use of it if that's the only way to blunt the Iranian nuclear program.

If Washington wants to make the use of force against the Iranian nuclear program less likely, it is essential to restore deterrence. For that, Iran's leaders must believe either the United States or Israel will act militarily to destroy their massive investment in the nuclear program if they stay on the current path and reject a negotiated outcome. Not for the first time, the credible threat of force is necessary to obviate its use.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/27/threat-war-iran-nuclear-biden-israel-only-way-achieve-peace/>). ❖

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