



How to Lose Friends and Alienate Allies: Trump's New Strategy on Iran

By Guillaume Xavier-Bender

BRUSSELS — There is a thorn in the Rose Garden. When in 2015, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, joined by Germany, reached an agreement with Iran on the future of its nuclear weapon, diplomacy had demonstrated yet again that compromise and trust are the building blocks of peace. Then President Obama, speaking from the White House gardens, underscored that “the issues at stake here are bigger than politics,” and that if Congress killed the deal “it’s the United States that will be blamed for the failure of diplomacy. International unity will collapse, and the path to conflict will widen.”

President Trump brought many reasons forward on October 13 to refuse to certify that Iran is complying with the agreement, despite repeated assurances from the International Atomic Energy Agency — guardian of the deal — and Washington’s partners that it is. The flurry of comments and statements following the announcement of this New Strategy on Iran have shown that if those reasons are hardly justified, they are simply not true. “Inexplicable.” “Irrational.” “Dangerous.” But let’s leave those at that, and the disheartening contemplation of a strategy that is not one.

Indeed, more crucial than the decision itself and its rationale is its ripple effect on international relations and global security. Four streams require immediate and particular attention.

First, Europe. There would have been no deal with Iran without the unwavering efforts of the European Union. That the EU’s top diplomats are already actively engaging with Congress is no surprise. That High Representative Mogherini will travel to Washington herself to convince Americans that everything should be done to save the deal, not just to preserve open relations with Iran, but also in the interest of global security, is a clear message of how determined Europeans remain. The Iran deal is the EU’s single most impactful foreign policy achievement of the past few years; to see it dismantled by Brussels’ closest ally would be a significant blow to transatlantic relations.

Second, France. French President Macron has already confirmed that he will visit Teheran “when the time is right.” The first visit to Iran by a French Head of State since before the Islamic Revolution, the visit would be a milestone for both France and Iran. Beyond the long-standing political and economic ties between the two countries, it would mark Paris’ renewed determination



in the Middle East, in line with President Macron's ambition to restore France as the leading European diplomatic power. Indeed, commitment to the nuclear deal is one thing; directly addressing Iran's role and influence in the region is another. If Macron was waiting for a breakthrough opportunity to assert France's hand in this new grand chessboard, this is it.

Third, Iran. A large part of President Rouhani's political capital lies in the nuclear agreement. His re-election earlier this year was as much due to the deal itself and the rapprochement with the West, to the consequential lifting of sanctions, to the lack of unified substantial opposition from hardliners, and to the continued support of the Supreme Guide. By disavowing Rouhani's success, President Trump is putting the Iranian President in the most difficult of positions — that might be the intent, but yet again, reason fails to explain why. What is there to gain from pressuring Iran once more on its nuclear program when many concerns still exist with regards its ballistic capabilities? What is there to gain from a weakened Rouhani where hardline conservatives are in ambush to regain control of Iran's foreign policy agenda? What is there to gain from referring to an imminent collapse of the regime when the complex and delicate internal machinery for the succession of Ayatollah Khamenei is already under pressure?

Fourth, the rest of the world. The Iran deal does not only bind the United States to Iran, but also to its other signatories. More broadly, it is enshrined in the UN system and multilateralism. By refusing to certify the deal, the American President is confirming his defiance toward global institutions and conventions, regardless of alliances and friendships of convenience. Without much precaution, he is also scrubbing in one wipe years of constructive discussions with Russia and China. While such a decision might provide some short-term political gains for Washington in Tel Aviv or in Riyadh, it will come at huge costs for relations with other allies, especially those across the Atlantic.

Yes, more is still to be done to ensure that Iran does not become a nuclear power, to curb its ballistic missile program, and clarify its role in the region. As such, the question is more whether Iran can be trusted

as a credible power that will in the medium to long term contribute to the prosperity and stability of the region. This will take time and, yes, more talks. It will require finesse and patience. It will require the United States to meet Iran in this field that the poet Rumi so dearly spoke of, "out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing." And you can't do this without friends you can trust: allies.

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