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Confronting Iran
The Trump Administration's Strategy
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The end of the Cold War forced new thinking among policymakers and analysts about the greatest challenges to U.S. national security. The emergence of al Qaeda, [cybercriminals](#) [1], and other dangerous entities affirmed the threat of nonstate actors. But equally daunting has been the resurgence of outlaw regimes—rogue states that defy international norms, fail to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, and act against the security of the American people, U.S. allies and partners, and the rest of the world.

Chief among these outlaw regimes are North Korea and Iran. Their transgressions against international peace are many, but both nations are most notorious for having spent decades pursuing nuclear weapons programs in violation of international prohibitions. Despite Washington's best efforts at diplomacy, Pyongyang hoodwinked U.S. policymakers with a string of broken arms control agreements going back to the George H. W. Bush administration. North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs continued apace, to the point where after Donald Trump was elected, President Barack Obama told him that this would be his greatest national security challenge. With Iran, likewise, the deal that the Obama administration struck in 2015—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA—failed to end the country's nuclear ambitions. In fact, because Iran knew that the Obama administration would prioritize preserving the deal over everything else, the JCPOA created a sense of impunity on the part of the regime, allowing it to increase its support for malign activity. The deal has also given Tehran piles of money, which the supreme leader has used to sponsor all types of terrorism throughout the Middle East (with few consequences in response) and which have boosted the economic fortunes of a regime that remains bent on exporting its revolution abroad and imposing it at home.

That the threats from North Korea and Iran grew in the post-Iraq war era has further complicated the question of how best to counteract them; Americans are rightly skeptical of the costs of a protracted military commitment in the name of protection from weapons of mass destruction. With the difficulties of Iraq fresh in mind, and with previous agreements to restrain the threats from North Korea and Iran having proved impotent, stopping these recalcitrant regimes from doing harm demands new diplomatic paradigms.

Enter President Trump. For all of the Washington establishment's fretting over his style of international engagement, his diplomacy is anchored in a [deliberate approach](#) [2] that gives the United States an advantage in confronting outlaw regimes.

THE TRUMP DOCTRINE

Both on the campaign trail and in office, President Trump has been clear about the need for bold American leadership to put the United States' security interests first. This commonsense principle reverses the Obama administration's preferred posture of "leading from behind," an

accommodationist strategy that incorrectly signaled diminished American power and influence. Leading from behind made North Korea a greater threat today than ever before. Leading from behind at best only delayed Iran's pursuit of becoming a nuclear power, while allowing the Islamic Republic's malign influence and terror threat to grow.

Today, both North Korea and Iran have been put on notice that the United States will not allow their destabilizing activities to go unchecked. The aggressive multinational pressure campaign that the United States has led against North Korea, combined with the president's clear and unequivocal statements that the United States will defend its vital interests with force if necessary, created the conditions for the talks that culminated in President Trump's summit with Chairman Kim Jong Un in Singapore this past June. It was there that Chairman Kim committed to the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea. North Korea has made similar commitments in the past, but unlike those, this was the first time there was a personal, leader-to-leader commitment on denuclearization. That may or may not signal a major strategic shift on the part of Chairman Kim, and we have much work to do to gauge his intentions and make sure his commitment is implemented. But President Trump's approach has created an opportunity to peacefully resolve an issue of vital national security that has long vexed policymakers. The president, our special representative for North Korea (Stephen Biegun), and I will continue to work with clear eyes to seize this opportunity.

With Iran, similarly, the Trump administration is pursuing a "maximum pressure" campaign designed to choke off revenues [3] that the regime—and particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), part of Iran's military that is directly beholden to the supreme leader—uses to fund violence through Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shiite militias in Iraq, and its own agents covertly plotting around the world.

Yet President Trump does not want another long-term U.S. military engagement in the Middle East—or in any other region, for that matter. He has spoken openly about the dreadful consequences of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 intervention in Libya. Pundits may gin up fear over the idea that this administration will get the United States into a war, but it is clear that Americans have a president who, while not afraid to use military power (just ask the Islamic State, the Taliban, or the Assad regime), is not eager to use it, either. Overwhelming military force will always be a backstop for protecting the American people, but it should not be the first option.

Another important aspect of the president's diplomacy is his willingness to talk to the United States' staunchest adversaries. As he said in July [4], "Diplomacy and engagement is preferable to conflict and hostility." Consider his approach to North Korea: his diplomacy with Chairman Kim diffused tensions that were escalating by the day.

Complementing the president's willingness to engage is his instinctual aversion to bad deals. His understanding of the importance of leverage in any negotiation eliminates the potential for deeply counterproductive agreements like the JCPOA. He is willing to forge agreements with U.S. rivals, but he is also comfortable walking away from negotiations if they don't end up furthering U.S. interests. This is in stark contrast to the Obama administration's approach to the JCPOA [5], in which the deal itself became an objective to be obtained at all costs.

When considering a future North Korea deal that is superior to the JCPOA, we have described our objective [6] as "the final, fully verified denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as agreed to by Chairman Kim Jong Un." "Final" means that there will be no possibility that North Korea will ever restart its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs—something the JCPOA did not provide for with Iran. "Fully verified" means that there will be stronger verification standards than were required under the JCPOA, which, among other weaknesses, did not require inspections at key Iranian military facilities. The exact contours of a North Korea agreement remain to be negotiated, but "final" and "fully verified" are centerpieces on which we will not compromise.

THE IRANIAN THREAT

President Trump's commitment to the American people's security, combined with his aversion to the unnecessary use of military force and his willingness to talk to adversaries, has provided a new framework for confronting outlaw regimes. And today, no regime has more of an outlaw character than that of Iran. That has been the case since 1979, when a relatively small cadre of Islamic revolutionaries seized power. The regime's revolutionary mindset has motivated its actions ever since—in fact, soon after its founding, the IRGC created the Quds Force, its elite special forces unit, and tasked it with exporting the revolution abroad. Ever since, regime officials have subordinated all other domestic and international responsibilities, including their obligations to the Iranian people [7], to fulfilling the revolution.

As a result, over the past four decades, the regime has sown a great deal of destruction and instability, bad behavior that did not end with the JCPOA. The deal did not permanently prevent Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon—indeed, the statement in April by Iran's top nuclear official that the country could restart its nuclear program in days suggests that it may not have delayed that program very much at all. Nor did the deal curtail Iran's violent and destabilizing activity in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria [8], Yemen, and Gaza. Iran still supplies the Houthis with missiles that are fired at Saudi Arabia, supports Hamas' attacks on Israel, and recruits impressionable Afghan, Iraqi, and Pakistani youth to fight and die in Syria. Thanks to Iranian subsidies, the average Lebanese Hezbollah fighter earns two or three times per month what a fireman in Tehran brings home.

In May 2018, President Trump withdrew [9] from the nuclear deal because it was clearly not protecting the national security interests of the United States or our allies and partners, nor was it making Iran behave like a normal country. In July, an Iranian diplomat [10] based in Vienna was arrested for supplying explosives to terrorists seeking to bomb a political rally in France. It is telling that while Iran's leaders try to convince Europe to stay in the nuclear deal, they are covertly plotting terrorist attacks in the heart of the continent. Taken together, Iran's actions have made the country a pariah, much to the despair of its own people.

THE PRESSURE CAMPAIGN

In place of the Iran nuclear deal, President Trump has initiated a multi-pronged pressure campaign. Its first component is economic sanctions. The president recognizes the power of sanctions to squeeze the regime while incurring a low opportunity cost for the United States. Under the Trump administration, the United States has imposed 17 rounds of Iran-related sanctions, targeting 147 Iran-related individuals and entities.

The goal of these aggressive sanctions is to force the Iranian regime to make a choice: whether to cease or persist in the policies that triggered the measures in the first place. Iran's decision to continue its destructive activity has already had grave economic consequences, which have been exacerbated by officials' gross mismanagement in pursuit of their own self-interests. Extensive meddling in the economy by the IRGC, under the guise of privatization, makes doing business in Iran a losing proposition, and foreign investors never know whether they are facilitating commerce or terrorism. Instead of using what wealth the JCPOA has generated to boost the material well-being of the Iranian people, the regime has parasitically consumed it and shelled out billions in subsidies for dictators, terrorists, and rogue militias. Iranians are understandably frustrated. The rial's value has collapsed in the past year. A third of Iranian youth are unemployed. Unpaid wages are leading to rampant strikes. Fuel and water shortages are common.

This malaise is a problem of the regime's own making. Iran's elite resembles a Mafia in its racketeering and corruption. Two years ago, Iranians rightfully erupted in anger when leaked pay stubs showed massive amounts of money inexplicably flowing into the bank accounts of senior

government officials. For years, clerics and officials have wrapped themselves in the cloak of religion while robbing the Iranian people blind. Today, protesters chant to the regime, “You have plundered us in the name of religion.” According to the London-based newspaper Kayhan, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, the head of Iran’s judiciary, who the United States sanctioned this year for human rights abuses, is worth at least \$300 million, thanks to the embezzlement of public funds. Nasser Makarem Shirazi, a grand ayatollah, is also worth many millions of dollars. He became known as “the Sultan of Sugar” for having pressured the Iranian government to lower subsidies to domestic sugar producers while flooding the market with his own, more expensive imported sugar. This type of activity puts ordinary Iranians out of work. Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani, one of the leaders of Friday prayers in Tehran for the last 30 years, had the government transfer several lucrative mines to his personal foundation. He, too, is now worth millions. The corruption goes all the way to the top. Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has his own personal, off-the-books hedge fund called the Setad, which is worth \$95 billion. That untaxed and ill-gotten wealth, often earned by expropriating the assets of political and religious minorities, is used as a slush fund for the IRGC. In other words, Iran’s leading holy man captains the kind of plundering characteristic of Third World strongmen.

The regime’s greed has created a chasm between the people of Iran and their leaders, making it difficult for officials to credibly persuade young Iranians to be the vanguard of the next generation of the revolution. The theocratic ayatollahs can preach “Death to Israel” and “Death to America” day and night, but they cannot mask their rank hypocrisy. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, has degrees from San Francisco State University and the University of Denver, and Ali Akbar Velayati, the supreme leader’s top adviser, studied at Johns Hopkins University. Khamenei himself is chauffeured around in a BMW, even as he calls for the Iranian people to buy goods made in Iran. This phenomenon is similar to what occurred in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, when the spirit of 1917 began to ring hollow on account of the hypocrisy of its champions. The Politburo could no longer with a straight face tell Soviet citizens to embrace communism when Soviet officials were themselves secretly peddling smuggled blue jeans and Beatles records.

Iran’s leaders—especially those at the top of the IRGC, such as Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Quds Force—must be made to feel the painful consequences of their violence and corruption. Given that the regime is controlled by a desire for self-enrichment and a revolutionary ideology from which it will not easily depart, sanctions must be severe if they are to change entrenched habits. That’s why the Trump administration is reimposing U.S. sanctions that were lifted or waived as part of the nuclear deal; the first of these went back into effect on August 7, with the remainder coming back on November 5. We intend to get global imports of Iranian crude oil as close to zero as possible by November 4. As part of our campaign to crush the Iranian regime’s terrorist financing, we have also worked with the United Arab Emirates to disrupt a currency exchange network that was transferring millions of dollars to the Quds Force. The United States is asking every nation that is sick and tired of the Islamic Republic’s destructive behavior to stand up for the Iranian people and join our pressure campaign. Our efforts will be ably led by our new special representative for Iran, Brian Hook.

Economic pressure is one part of the U.S. campaign. Deterrence is another. President Trump believes in clear measures to discourage Iran from restarting its nuclear program or continuing its other malign activities. With Iran and other countries, he has made it clear that he will not tolerate attempts to bully the United States; he will punch back hard if U.S. security is threatened. Chairman Kim has felt this pressure, and he would never have come to the table in Singapore without it. The president’s own public communications themselves function as a deterrence mechanism. The all-caps tweet he directed at Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in July, in which he instructed Iran to stop threatening the United States, was informed by a strategic calculation: the Iranian regime understands and fears the United States’ military might. In September, militias in Iraq launched life-threatening rocket attacks against the U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad and the U.S. consulate in Basra. Iran did not stop these attacks, which were carried out by proxies it has supported with

funding, training, and weapons. The United States will hold the regime in Tehran accountable for any attack that results in injury to our personnel or damage to our facilities. America will respond swiftly and decisively in defense of American lives.

We do not seek war. But we must make painfully clear that escalation is a losing proposition for Iran; the Islamic Republic cannot match the United States' military prowess, and we are not afraid to let Iran's leaders know it.

IRAN EXPOSED

Another critical component of the U.S. pressure campaign against Iran is a commitment to exposing the regime's brutality. Outlaw authoritarian regimes fear nothing more than having the lid blown off their true workings. The Trump administration will continue to reveal the regime's illicit revenue streams, malign activities, crooked self-dealing, and savage oppression. The Iranian people themselves deserve to know the grotesque level of self-interest that fuels the regime's actions. Khamenei and his ilk would not be able to tolerate the domestic and international outrage that would ensue if everything they were up to came to light. Beginning last year, protesters have taken to the street saying, "Leave Syria, think about us!" and "The people are paupers while the mullahs live like gods!" The United States stands with the Iranian people.

U.S. President Ronald Reagan understood the power of exposure when he cast the Soviet Union as "an evil empire." By throwing a spotlight on the regime's abuses, he was pledging solidarity with a people who had long suffered under communism. It is likewise for the sake of the Iranian people that the Trump administration has not been afraid to expose the regime's merciless domestic repression. The regime is so wedded to certain ideological principles—including the export of the Islamic Revolution through proxy warfare and the subversion of fellow Muslim-majority countries, implacable opposition to Israel and the United States, and stringent social controls that restrict the rights of women—that it cannot endure any competing ideas. Hence, it has for decades denied its own people human rights, dignity, and fundamental freedoms. That is why in May, for example, Iranian police arrested Maedeh Hojabri, a teenage gymnast, for posting an Instagram video of herself dancing.

The regime's views on women are particularly retrograde. Since the revolution, women have been required to wear the hijab, and as enforcement, government morality police beat women in the streets and arrest those who refuse to comply. Recent protests against this policy on female dress show that it has failed, and Khamenei surely must know it. Yet in July, an activist was sentenced to 20 years in prison for removing her hijab.

The regime also regularly arrests religious or ethnic minorities, including Bahais, Christians, and Gonabadi dervishes, when they speak out in support of their rights. Untold numbers of Iranians are tortured and die in Evin Prison—a place no kinder than the basement of the Lubyanka, the dreaded headquarters of the KGB. Those imprisoned include several innocent Americans detained on spurious charges, victims of the regime's use of hostage taking as a tool of foreign policy.

Beginning last December, demonstrators took to the streets of Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Arak, and many other cities to peacefully call for a better life. In response, the regime welcomed in the new year in January by arbitrarily arresting up to 5,000 of them. Hundreds reportedly remain behind bars, and more than a dozen are dead at the hands of their own government. The leaders cynically call these deaths suicide.

It is in keeping with the character of the United States that we expose these abuses. As President Reagan said in a speech at Moscow State University in 1988, "Freedom is the recognition that no single person, no single authority or government, has a monopoly on the truth, but that every individual life is infinitely precious, that every one of us put on this world has been put there for a

reason and has something to offer.” In May, the Trump administration enumerated 12 areas in which Iran must make progress if there is to be any change in our relationship, including fully halting its uranium enrichment, providing a full account of the prior military dimensions of its nuclear program, ending its proliferation of ballistic missiles and provocative missile launches, releasing imprisoned U.S. citizens, ending its support for terrorism, and more.

President Trump has made clear that the pressure will only increase if Iran does not live up to the standards the United States and its partners and allies—and the Iranian people themselves—want to see. That is why Washington is also demanding that Tehran make substantial improvements on human rights. As the president has consistently said, he remains open to talks. But as is the case with North Korea, the United States will continue its pressure campaign until Iran demonstrates tangible and sustained shifts in its policies. If Iran makes those shifts, the possibility of a new comprehensive agreement will greatly increase. We think a deal with the regime is possible. In the absence of one, Iran will face increasing costs for all its reckless and violent activity around the world.

President Trump prefers not to conduct this campaign alone; he wants U.S. allies and partners on board. Indeed, other countries already share a common understanding of the threat Iran poses beyond its nuclear aspirations. French President Emmanuel Macron has said, “It is important to remain firm with Iran over its regional activities and its ballistic program”; British Prime Minister Theresa May has said that she is “clear-eyed”^[11] about the threat that Iran poses to the Gulf and the wider Middle East.” This widespread agreement about the Iranian threat leaves no room for countries to remain ambivalent about whether to join the global effort to change Iran’s behavior, an effort that is big and getting bigger.

THE POWER OF MORAL CLARITY

President Trump inherited a world in some ways as dangerous as the one faced by the United States on the eve of World War I, the one right before World War II, or that during the height of the Cold War. But his disruptive boldness, first on North Korea and now on Iran, has shown how much progress can be made by marrying clarity of conviction with an emphasis on nuclear nonproliferation and strong alliances. President Trump’s actions in confronting outlaw regimes stem from the belief that moral confrontation leads to diplomatic conciliation.

This was the blueprint for one of the great foreign policy triumphs of the last century: the American victory in the Cold War. In the first week of his presidency, President Reagan described Soviet leaders, saying, “The only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat.” Foreign policy analysts derided his comments, believing their candor would hinder progress toward peace. But the president had also emphasized a commitment to negotiate with the Soviets, a fact that went largely ignored. President Reagan’s combination of moral clarity and diplomatic acuity laid the groundwork for the 1986 talks in Reykjavik and, later, the downfall of Soviet communism itself.

Those who still bow to the same totemic conviction that candor impedes negotiations must recognize the effect that targeted rhetorical and practical pressure have had—and are having—on outlaw regimes. At the rate that the Iranian economy is declining^[12] and protests^[13] are intensifying, it should be clear to the Iranian leadership that negotiations are the best way forward.

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