

The Trump Administration's Compellence Strategy and Iran's "Melian" Dilemma

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THE UNILATERAL WITHDRAWAL OF THE United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—also referred to as the Iran nuclear agreement—and Washington's re-imposition of nuclear-related sanctions as part of a new "compellence" strategy against the Islamic Republic of Iran have set the stage for a clash between the two nations. Such a conflict would imperil both regional and global peace and security. Given the asymmetry of economic and military power between the Western superpower and the "regional fulcrum," Iran, the latter is confronted with a dire situation not unlike the Melians in the Peloponnesian War, recalling Thucydides' famous declaration that "the strong do what they can, and the weak endure what they must."¹

Since President Trump's announcement of the U.S. exit from the Iran deal on May 8, 2018, a series of economic strains have been leveled against Iran, including a mass exodus of foreign energy and non-energy firms from Iran, cancellation of major foreign contracts, termination of Iran-related transactions by foreign banks and financial institutions, cancellation of direct flights to Iran by Western airlines, and a creeping cut-back in imports of Iranian oil by several nations due to fear of U.S. sanctions.² All of this has been spurred by President Trump's explicit warning that those who continue to trade with Iran will be banned from trading with the United States.³

At the same time, the Trump administration has escalated its rhetoric against Iran's clerical rulers and has demanded a "change in the behavior" of the Islamic Republic.⁴ Various top administration officials, including the national

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security advisor, John Bolton, and the White House counsel, Rudy Giuliani, have appeared at the events of the Iranian opposition group known as the Mojahedin-e Khalgh Organization (MEK), calling for a "free Iran."⁵

In response, Iran has resorted to a litany of both soft and hard power responses, including filing complaints with the United Nations—which endorsed the JCPOA through UN Security Council Resolution 2231 in July 2015—threatening to resume full-scale nuclear work, appealing to the International Court of Justice, invoking the JCPOA's internal mechanism to elicit the support of other signatories to the deal, and conducting naval maneuvers in the strategically important Strait of Hormuz (underscoring Tehran's threat to block the strait if the U.S. trade embargo infringes upon its right to export oil).⁶ A growing number of international voices, including Idris Jazairi, the UN Special Rapporteur, have denounced the United States' unilateral sanctions against Iran as "illegitimate," "unjust," and tantamount to "economic war."⁷

As a result, the previous thaw in U.S.-Iranian relations under the Obama administration has been replaced with a dangerous downward spiral not unlike the pre-2003 Iraq invasion milieu.⁸ The United States has leveled a 12-point list of demands against Iran. These include enjoining a complete halt to Iran's uranium enrichment and heavy-water activities, which is in clear breach of the terms of the JCPOA and has been deemed entirely unacceptable by Tehran.⁹

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age of incentives to Iran to remain within the JCPOA despite the United States' withdrawal.¹⁰ Moreover, European governments have adopted a "blocking regulation" aimed at protecting their companies that do business in Iran from U.S. secondary sanctions.¹¹

Thus, instead of constructing a new international coalition against Iran after withdrawing from the JCPOA, as explicitly predicted by Ambassador Bolton in his 2017 blueprint for the Trump administration, the administration has achieved the exact opposite.¹² Save Israel and Saudi Arabia, the United States stands alone against the deal. Even U.S.-friendly India, which has a nuclear-sharing agreement with the United States, officially stated that it does not recognize the

Tehran insists that the United States has renege on its obligations to a legally binding international agreement; this view is shared by European governments, who have offered a pack-

United States' unilateral sanctions on Iran and recognizes only UN sanctions, illuminating the stark challenges the Trump administration faces in pursuing its "maximum pressure" strategy vis-a-vis Tehran.¹³ In effect, the nets of the U.S. sanctions regime are cast wide and denote an "extended compellence strategy," by virtue of the fact that instead of exhorting voluntary compliance with its coercive measures against Iran, the United States has embarked on arm-twisting and threats of punitive measures against other nations to garner their cooperation.¹⁴ The scope of this extended compellence and its effectiveness will become clearer after November 2018 when the 180-day "wind down" period for the U.S. oil embargo on Iran begins, in light of China's intention to continue its Iranian oil imports. China is Iran's leading oil importer and Chinese energy companies have stepped in to fill the void of Western energy companies leaving Iran.¹⁵

EXPLAINING THE U.S. SHIFT FROM CONTAINMENT TO COMPELLENCE

In retrospect, the diplomatic breakthrough of negotiating the JCPOA helped ease U.S.-Iranian tensions for a limited time but failed to provide a solid foundation for a long-lasting detente.¹⁶ Purposefully limited to the nuclear issue, the multilateral negotiations succeeded because of the transparency of benchmarks for a quid-pro-quo, whereby Iran agreed to restrict its nuclear program and to allow unprecedented inspections in exchange for the removal of financial, energy, and trade sanctions imposed by the UN, the United States, and the European Union with respect to its controversial nuclear activities.¹⁷ In the absence of a comprehensive negotiation to tackle the totality of outstanding nuclear and non-nuclear issues, the latter (non-nuclear) issues were left festering and ultimately infected the nuclear breakthrough, causing a setback.¹⁸

The JCPOA had a paradoxical impact: it enabled Iran to economically bounce back from the clutches of international sanctions, which in turn raised fears of Iranian "hegemony" in the region and added to tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia (particularly as Iran moved closer to Russia, which intervened militarily in the Syrian conflict as of September 2015, a mere two months after the JCPOA was inked, and was soon billed as a clear "winner" in the Syrian conflict).¹⁹ These, together with U.S.-Saudi allegations of Iran's complicity in the Houthi rebels' missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, Israel's alarm about Iran's forces in its vicinity inside Syria, as well as NATO-ally Turkey's growing realignment with Russia and Iran, reflected negative developments from the viewpoint of the United States.²⁰ In the midst of these developments, the administration undertook an inter-agency review of Iran policy. That review culminated in

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a radical shift from the United States' previous containment strategy to a "get tough" confrontational approach focusing on Iran's vulnerabilities.²¹

But, as a testament to the limits of the administration's strategy, this change has fueled nationalistic resistance inside Iran instead of generating sympathy for the U.S. government. An increasing number of Iranians blame President Trump for their growing hardship, as confirmed by a recent CNN report from inside Iran.²² As Ambassador Wendy Sherman, chief U.S. negotiator with Iran, aptly stated, a leading problem with the Trumpian approach to Iran is that it does not understand Iran's "culture of resistance."²³ After all, Iran has been under the guns of U.S. sanctions since the early 1980s. The brief interlude of a partial lifting of "primary sanctions" from January 2016 through August 2018 represented an exception to a pattern of coercive policy familiar to the Iranian people and government. In all likelihood, Iran—with the help of China and Russia as well as other nations such as Turkey, Iraq, and the Caspian Sea and Central Asian states—will survive the new onslaught of U.S. sanctions and other measures in the Trump administration's arsenal, (e.g., covert action, inciting Iran's ethnic minorities, destabilizing Tehran's regime through proxies such as the MEK). In the intermediate and long-term, a U.S. failure to achieve its maximalist objectives on compellence may result in a policy U-turn and the re-adoption of the JCPOA.

IRAN'S "MELIAN" DILEMMA AND BRINKSMANSHIP IN STRAIT OF HORMUZ

The essence of Iran's dilemma is similar to that of the weak Melos facing Athenian imperialism in the fifth century B.C.E. Iran has been presented with stark choices: either submit to the United States' demands, no matter their reasonableness or legality through the prism of international law, or face economic oblivion. The United States' compellence strategy has made war with Iran a substantial possibility, because of structural weaknesses in the international system which render the system incapable of offsetting the debilitating consequences of operations of (disciplinary)

power. The potential paths to a U.S.-Iranian conflict are varied and increasingly plausible: among others, a reckless and trigger-happy

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president seeking to look presidential in the face of mounting domestic problems, accidental warfare in the Persian Gulf, a Gulf of Tonkin-like incident involving the U.S. and Iranian navies, acts of terrorism attributed to Iran (rightly

or wrongly), Iran's deliberate brinksmanship by seeking to block the Strait of Hormuz and also attacking other shipping lanes in the region, Iran's resumption of full-scale nuclear work and exit from both the JCPOA and even the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) triggering a U.S. (and Israeli) military response, and so on. However, one thing is for sure. In the eyes of the Iranian leaders, the United States' pursuit of economic warfare amounts to war by non-military means and, most likely, a prelude to military confrontation with Iran. Iran will not resign itself to be a passive observer of the United States systematically "busting up" its economy, as President Trump boasts.²⁴ A number of Iranian foreign policy officials interviewed by us for our forthcoming book have also openly wondered if an increasingly beleaguered President Trump dealing with mounting domestic political problems would resort to a war with Iran to salvage his presidency. This aside, in all likelihood, Iran will seek to increase the costs of the United States' bellicosity and to leverage its advantages via asymmetrical warfare, such as the vulnerability of U.S. forces stationed in Iran's vicinity to Iran's proxies—in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.²⁵ For the moment, however, Iran's preference is to pursue the diplomatic and legal track, build international support for the preservation of JCPOA, and count on the pressure of the United States' European allies to ultimately force a U-turn in Washington on the JCPOA. The purpose of Iran's brinksmanship in the Persian Gulf is less to provoke direct combat with the United States and its allies and more to broaden the specter of conflict as a "potential countermeasure."²⁶

STEPPING BACK FROM ARMAGEDDON AND THE NEED FOR DIPLOMACY

Today's volatile Middle East is still reeling from the calamitous conflicts of the past several years. It is senseless to ignite another inter-state war, which would likely dwarf the disastrous results of the Iraq War. Instead of treading the ruinous path of conflict with Iran through a compellence strategy without broad international support, the U.S. government ought to seriously consider the alternative of diplomatic engagement with Iran, drawing on the lessons learned from its current policy toward North Korea. This more benign alternative has been foisted on the horizon by President Trump's offer of dialogue with Iran "without any precondition."²⁷ But, the question arises of how serious the U.S. offer of dialogue is, in light of Bolton's own admission that, after exiting the Iran Deal, the United States should offer to negotiate with Iran to simply give the impression that it is interested in a genuine diplomatic resolution of disputes with Iran.²⁸ Understandably, Iran has rejected President Trump's offer as a public

The Trump Administration's Compellence Strategy and Iran's "Melian" Dilemma relations front and Iran's Supreme Leader has rebuffed the offer as "useless."²⁹ Still, given the gravity of the situation and the extremely high stakes, the final word on this matter has not yet been spoken and chances are that with sufficient positive signals from Washington, Tehran could be persuaded to come to the table. As we have argued in our recent opinion piece in the New York Times, we believe a Trump-Rouhani summit at the UN's sideline is feasible and realistic, and can and should count on the role of UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, to act as intermediary, for the sake of global peace and security.³⁰

Whether or not the United States and Iran can move in the direction of peaceful diplomacy remains to be seen, and the efforts (or lack thereof) of the international community to prevent the outbreak of a U.S.-Iran war might tell us how much we have really progressed beyond the world of the Peloponnesian War, where the brute realism of sheer force dictated the rules of engagement among nations.

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