

TRUMP AND IRAN: REGIME CHANGE

The Prussian strategic theorist Carl von Clausewitz once observed that

“The aggressor is always peace-loving . . . he would prefer to take over our country unopposed.”

This is what President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo actually mean when they say they aren't seeking war with Iran. Because while they probably do not want a war, everything they are doing seems to be courting it. The January 3 U.S. execution of Qassem Soleimani, a senior security official of a country with which the United States is not formally at war, at the civilian national airport of Iraq, without the permission of that U.S. ally, demonstrates exactly that. Most countries would consider the assassination an act of war.

The administration seeks regime change in Iran. Prior to assuming office, Pompeo argued that regime change in Iran should be U.S. policy. Though the United States denies this, it has enhanced its twelve demands with calls for a series of domestic political reforms that amount to just that. Pompeo laid them out in the twelve demands listed in a speech at the Heritage Foundation in May, 2018. Iran **must give up**, not merely constrain, its nuclear research and development program; civilian and military elements of the program are assumed to be so tightly intermingled that only abolition will do. Iran **must submit** to intrusive inspections to ensure this for perpetuity. Iran must also give up its sovereign rights to any independent foreign or security policy: It **must abandon** its missile development and production program, because a missile could deliver a nuclear or chemical warhead. It **must give up** its alliances in the region, with states such as Syria and Iraq, and with non-state, armed clients such as the Houthis in Yemen, and Hizbollah in Lebanon. In effect, Iran is being required to be a *non-state* state like Palestine precisely **to also eliminate** Iran as a threat to Israel. The Iranian regime thus has reason to suspect that, after giving up its missiles, allies, and proxies, it would be perceived as so weak that the United States **could demand** regime change and could then easily enforce that demand militarily.

Iran also has a strategy. It has attempted to protect itself against U.S. economic sanctions. In its eyes, the sanctions are particularly malevolent, because Iran had agreed, after long negotiations with the Obama administration and the European Union, to constrain its nuclear ambitions in return for enhanced economic exchange with its negotiating partners. The Trump administration defected from this agreement. Other guarantors did not hold up their end, even though Iran initially adhered to the terms. The European Union, in particular, has done essentially nothing to fulfill its part of the bargain, because the United States has threatened punishing secondary sanctions on foreign banks and companies if they do so. Russia and China, the other co-guarantors, have been somewhat more willing to help Iran, but the help is furtive and insufficient to ameliorate the U.S. sanctions effort.

The United States is demanding that Iran concede its sovereignty and its ability to defend that sovereignty. Through a series of relatively limited but still dangerous military actions and incremental retreat from the terms the original nuclear agreement, Iran has signaled that it will not concede to the U.S. demands without a fight. And, it has indicated to Europe, Russia, and China that they must support the economic relations promised in the agreement or run the risks



associated with possible escalation to a U.S.–Iran war in the Gulf.

Iran has used discriminate, if increasingly provocative, violence to send their message. In June 2019 Iranian saboteurs fixed small demolition charges to four tankers to send the message that if they were not allowed to export oil, then they could see to it that others might suffer the same fate. A few months later, they attacked the Saudi sulphur and gas oil separation facility at Abqaiq with a mix of “entry-level” cruise missiles and drones, doing sufficient damage to affect production for several days. Similarly, Iran shot down an unmanned U.S. reconnaissance aircraft which, judging from publicly available maps, was close enough to Iranian air space for Iran to assess that it was inside and fair game. Notably, none of these attacks killed anyone, probably by design.

After General Soleimani's killing, Iran's allied Shia militias in Iraq began firing rockets at bases used by the U.S. military. This was surely more provocative, and one explosion killed a U.S. civilian contractor, apparently by chance, as most shelling had been directed at relatively inactive parts of these bases. The Trump administration retaliated on bases belonging to the militia, though the strike, killing twenty-five, though there are doubts that the militias were responsible. . In response to the U.S. strike, protestors mobbed the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Few if any brought their weapons, and after setting some fires and breaking some windows, they withdrew the next day at the urging of the Iraqi police.

After the attack on the embassy the cycle of “tit for tat” exchanges might have petered out for a while, both sides having made their points. But only for a while, because the U.S. effort to strangle Iran continues. In escalating the conflict with the assassination of General Soleimani, U.S. officials were quite clear: **nothing will dissuade** the United States from its campaign of economic strangulation, and if Iran wants to change the game to actual war, then that's fine too. Iran's retaliatory strike could well be read: “message received and not believed.” Iran's President Rouhani has since reiterated that there will be no negotiations while President Trump's maximum pressure campaign continues.

If President Trump is reelected, the present Iran policy will continue. Indeed the U.S. will quite likely find new ways to squeeze Iran. And U.S. security allies—Europe and Japan—will be no help to Iran economically. To protect their access to the U.S. markets and the U.S. security umbrella, they will not cross President Trump. The Europeans have made an effort to restart a diplomatic track, but the plain truth is that, for the Europeans, **appeasing** President Trump is now called

diplomacy. Russia and China will have more complicated calculations to make about helping Iran survive the sanctions. Neither wants Trump's enmity, so it's not clear what they would have to gain by providing Iran with open assistance. If sanctions lead to a U.S.–Iran war, the concomitant rise in oil prices would **benefit Russia, but harm China**. A U.S.–Iran war would, however, tie up U.S. forces and attention for some time, which would be **good for China's** ambitions in the Pacific. All in all, it **seems unlikely** that Iran will soon find economic allies to offset the U.S. economic offensive.

Iran is outclassed by the U.S. military. These assets are no match for the U.S. military, but they might force the United States to defend all its **militarily incompetent Gulf client states** from Iranian attacks. Their embarrassing dependence will be on public display. Oil markets will be roiled, and stock markets will follow suit. And the war would likely also produce **unintended consequences**, because that is what wars do. Military and intelligence effort against ISIS and other *jihadi* organizations will fade, and they will recover their vigor. Middle East wars tend to produce **refugees in large numbers**, so Turkey and Europe will again find themselves under serious pressure. Many U.S. allies will probably clamor for a ceasefire an hour after the shooting starts, and the chorus will grow louder with each passing day.

The United States could try to **end such a war quickly** and cheaply by bombing Iran's diverse capabilities out of existence, though this would probably take more time than many expect and probably would not fully succeed. The U.S. air campaigns against Serbia and Libya **took much longer** than anyone expected; both adversaries managed to continue military operations while under aerial pressure. Both were much weaker than Iran.

If Iran is **unwilling to capitulate**, as is likely, then the United States would have **five** options: **negotiate** an end to the war that includes compromises on U.S. objectives; **stop bombing and hope** that the Iranians also stop fighting; **settle in** for a long, grinding blockade and attrition war; **escalate the bombing** to civilian targets, a war crime that the president has already hinted at in one of his tweets; or **invade Iran** with ground forces. None of these options look good.

War would be costly, and probably unwinnable in the traditional sense **without an invasion** of Iran. Though equipped with old weaponry, Iran's regular armed forces are large. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IGRC) are competent and motivated practitioners of all types of special operations. Iran's “proxies” all over the Middle East are its long-range strategic strike assets. Iran's missiles are their air force, demonstrably capable of attacks on economic and military targets throughout the region, though their supply of these weapons is limited. Their small-boat navy and arsenal of sea mines can harass oil exports from the gulf.

Strategists need to consider where the U.S.–Iran conflict is likely going and how it would plausibly end. Those who wish to avoid this road must not accept at face value the Trump administration's statements that the “U.S. does not want war.” The administration's strategy has a very good chance of **producing a war**. Indeed, it seems to be **courting it**.

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