

Time for the Biden Administration to Get Tough on Iran

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Biden Administration needs a realistic, proactive approach to defeat Iran's nuclear, regional, and terrorist challenges and to hold the regime accountable.

If Iran becomes a nuclear-armed power, it will threaten the U.S., its allies, and partners, further support terrorism, and drive nuclear proliferation in the region.

The U.S. must focus on stopping, not appeasing, Tehran. This means ramping up sanctions, expanding the Abraham Accords, and strengthening regional security.

The deadlocked negotiations on Iran's nuclear program resumed in Qatar on June 28, after European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell visited Tehran to coax Iran back to the negotiating table. Resuming the nuclear talks makes sense only if the United States and its allies step up pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. Otherwise, Tehran is sure to continue its delaying tactics while pretending to take the negotiations seriously, advancing its nuclear program, and orchestrating proxy attacks on U.S. military forces and allies in the Middle East.

If the Biden Administration fails to adequately ratchet up pressure on Tehran, then Iran's radical regime will become a nuclear-armed menace that will pose much greater threats to the U.S., its allies, and partners and stability in the Middle East than it already does.

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The Biden Administration's single-minded efforts to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, have been stalemated by Iran's hard-line Islamist regime, which continues to push for additional, unwarranted concessions. Despite the Administration's eagerness to renew the deeply flawed nuclear deal, the Vienna nuclear talks have been suspended since March because Iran has insisted on receiving two additional concessions that were not part of the original deal: the lifting of U.S. terrorism-related sanctions on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and a guarantee that the U.S. will not withdraw from any nuclear deal again.

Meanwhile, Iran has seemingly reduced its "breakout time" to a few weeks if not less, enriching enough uranium to build at least one nuclear weapon—and eventually more.¹ Iran also continues to attack U.S. allies and U.S. military forces in the Middle East with rockets, armed drones, and its terrorist proxies. It is long past time for the Biden Administration to drop its soft-minded, soft-power diplomacy on Iran's deeply troubling nuclear program and adopt a realistic and proactive strategy. This new strategy should penalize and undermine Iran's outlaw regime and pressure it to end its hostile anti-U.S. policies; at the very least, Iran must pay a much higher price for them.

Time for Plan B

The Biden Administration's complacent "diplomacy first" approach to Iran has amounted to little more than "diplomacy only." The Administration's reliance on open-ended diplomacy using "carrots" but few "sticks" gave Iran cover to rapidly advance its nuclear and missile programs and orchestrate multiple attacks on U.S. forces and its allies via its proxies.

The Administration committed diplomatic malpractice by abandoning the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions strategy, turning a blind eye to Iran's surging illicit oil exports to China, and downplaying the possibility and utility of using military force if Iran continues down its path to nuclear weapons. These self-imposed constraints enabled Iran to expand its oil exports and foreign currency holdings while minimizing the perceived risks to Tehran of potential military action. These miscalculations greatly reduced pressure on Iran to compromise at the negotiating table on its nuclear program.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, an ultra-hard-line protégé of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was inaugurated last August and is more willing than many past Iranian leaders to sacrifice national economic interests to advance the regime's Islamist totalitarian and regional agenda.

The Raisi regime has blocked any resolution of the nuclear issue unless the Biden Administration first lifts its designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization and removes the economic sanctions on it.²

The IRGC controls key parts of Iran's nuclear program, ballistic and cruise missile forces, and armed drone arsenal, and orchestrates Iran's shadow war against the U.S. and its allies, including Israel, often using proxy attacks by terrorist and other militant groups.³ In addition to threatening Iran's external enemies, the IRGC is a pillar of internal repression on which the Raisi regime increasingly depends to control Iran's disaffected citizens,⁴ and also controls up to one-third of Iran's economy,⁵ two more reasons that the regime is adamant about lifting U.S. sanctions on it.

The Biden Administration initially sought to trade the lifting of sanctions for a public statement that Iran would not attack U.S. interests, but Tehran balked at making even such a weak and non-binding statement. Buoyed by high oil prices, which have eased the pain of sanctions, the Raisi regime is in no hurry to reach a deal while it fills government coffers.

The regime also believes that its growing stockpile of enriched uranium, which puts it ever closer to fielding a nuclear weapon, gives it significant negotiating leverage and allows it to make a litany of demands of the U.S. at the table.⁶

Even if renewed negotiations yield another nuclear agreement, which looks increasingly unlikely, it will not be the "longer and stronger" agreement that the Administration promised,⁷ but a "shorter and weaker" one that will not address the JCPOA shortcomings, such as its "sunset provisions" and failure to capture Iran's ballistic missile program—the largest in the Middle East.⁸

It is long past time for the Biden Administration to get tough on Iran to protect and advance U.S. interests. The Administration must bolster its diplomatic demands by fully using all the tools of national power, including punitive economic sanctions and military force, if necessary, to prevent Iran from deploying a nuclear weapon.

To address Iran's intensifying nuclear and regional challenges, the U.S. should:

- **Ramp up U.S. sanctions on Iran.** The Biden Administration relaxed its enforcement of sanctions in a misguided effort to lure Tehran back into the nuclear deal. It failed to stem the smuggling of illicit Iranian oil exports to China, Iran's biggest customer.⁹ Washington should crack down on and penalize oil-smuggling entities and Chinese firms buying the illicit oil. To enable the vigorous enforcement of sanctions,

the White House should order the intelligence community to prioritize the gathering of intelligence on how Iran circumvents economic sanctions. It should also order the Departments of State and the Treasury to update their lists of Iran's front companies and foreign enablers of sanctions busting more frequently, and to share the lists with appropriate foreign governments to enhance enforcement.

- **Work with European allies to “snap back” U.N. sanctions on Iran.** The United Kingdom, France, and Germany also are part of the 2015 nuclear agreement and can trigger the automatic reimposition of multilateral U.N. sanctions on Iran under the JCPOA. The sanctions snapback would further isolate Iran politically, make it pay a higher economic price for its nuclear defiance, help to stifle Iran's conventional military build-up, and discourage other countries from helping Iran to evade sanctions. One of the weaknesses of the Iran deal is that the snapback option expires in 2025, removing a major source of leverage over Tehran.
- **Develop, with allies, a favorable military force posture in the Persian Gulf region to balance Iran.** The Pentagon, its allies, and partners should develop the capability in the region to dissuade, deter, and deny (if necessary) Iranian acts of aggression. With U.S. military forces already stretched thin to meet global military commitments, regional allies and partners must do more to balance Iranian forces. In the current geopolitical environment, burden-sharing among U.S. partners is critical. The Biden Administration also must be prepared—in concert with allies and partners—to take military action against Iran's nuclear program to prevent the development and deployment of a nuclear weapon capability.
- **Strengthen the security of regional allies.** Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been frequently targeted by Iran and its proxy network. Through international arms sales, the U.S. should help them to bolster their defenses against Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles, rockets, and armed drones, with the goal of eventually building an integrated air defense system that also enhances the security of U.S. forces in the region. In addition to selling more air and missile defense systems to Arab partners, Washington should also encourage Israel to consider selling some of its own air and missile defense systems to Arab countries that have normalized relations

with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Doing so would strengthen a burgeoning relationship that would protect and advance U.S. interests as well as enhance the security of U.S. troops located in the region. Washington should also strengthen Israeli deterrence of Iran by accelerating the sales of aerial refueling tankers, precision-guided munitions, and bunker-buster bombs capable of destroying Iran's fortified underground nuclear facilities and missile bases.

- **Expand the Abraham Accords.** The Trump Administration brokered the Abraham Accords that normalized bilateral relations between Israel and Bahrain and between Israel and the UAE in 2020. Morocco and Sudan later signed similar agreements to normalize relations with Israel. The Biden Administration should strongly support the expansion of the accords to include Saudi Arabia and other Arab states threatened by Iran. Establishing this diplomatic framework would clear the way for expanded Arab–Israeli security cooperation in a regional partnership to defeat Iranian threats.

Iran Must Be Stopped, Not Appeased

After complacently allowing U.S. sanctions on Iran to be undermined and tolerating a drumbeat of Iranian proxy attacks for almost 18 months, the Biden Administration needs a realistic and proactive approach to defeat Iran's nuclear, regional, and terrorist challenges.

The United States must hold Iran accountable for its accelerating nuclear program and multiple proxy attacks against U.S. forces and interests.¹⁰ It must compel Iran's regime to pay a much higher price for those actions, or Tehran will continue to act with impunity. And, the U.S. must develop policies that will prevent Iran from becoming the world's tenth nuclear-armed state.¹¹

The failure to do so will result in a nuclear-armed radical regime that will threaten the U.S., its allies, and partners in the Middle East and beyond, support international terrorism, drive nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, and destabilize the region through crisis and conflict, deeply undermining American interests.

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Endnote

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10. James Phillips, "Biden Must Stand Up to Iran's Proxy Extortion Strategy," Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/biden-must-stand-irans-proxy-extortion-strategy>.
11. The nine states that currently possess nuclear weapons are the U.S., Russia, China, U.K., France, India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea.