

America Should Swallow Its Pride on Iran

The U.S. can accomplish more in the Middle East by doing less.

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The United States and Iran remain at an impasse over the nuclear issue two months into President Biden’s administration. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has [stated](#) that the United States will only provide sanctions relief after Iran returns to full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal, while Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif recently [stated](#) that Iran will not budge before the U.S., whose policy rests on the assumption that Iran can be forced to capitulate. This assumption is faulty.

The economic impact of sanctions are diminishing as Iran adapts, echoing Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s call for a “[Resistance Economy](#)” able to withstand sanctions. Iran’s [domestic manufacturing](#) is up. Iran’s currency depreciation has likewise [accelerated](#) the shift towards economic autarky, with domestically manufactured goods replacing costly imports.

As sanctions continue, U.S. leverage will wane as Iran’s economy adapts. Iran’s oil revenues are [down](#), but focus on this ignores that oil revenues now [account](#) for only 15 percent of GDP, meaning Iran is less oil-reliant than [Saudi Arabia](#) or even [Texas](#). Iran has also [turned to China](#) and [Venezuela](#) to buy its oil exports to evade sanctions.

U.S. sanctions have undermined American credibility and are not likely to achieve any sort of popular uproar in Washington’s favor. Iranians have not rallied against their government in response to the economic devastation in the country. Instead, recent [polling](#) in Iran conducted by the University of Maryland reflects a shift towards hardline figures and a rejection of further concessions. Sixty-eight percent of Iranians polled opposed returning to the nuclear deal until after the United States relieves economic sanctions.

Iran is unlikely to capitulate to economic pressure. The U.S. has a lot to lose if it pretends otherwise. If Iran can be forced to capitulate, then why didn’t it do so in 2018, when the impact of sanctions had its greatest effect? Why is Iran still not budging on negotiation now that the Biden administration is offering better terms than President Trump’s?

Continuing sanctions is risky for U.S. troops in the region. Rockets [targeting](#) U.S. troops are commonplace in Iraq, and widely understood as Iran applying pressure to Washington through proxy attacks. President Biden has already fallen into the same tit-for-tat which

characterized the final year of Trump's administration, with the recent U.S. [strike](#) in Syria proving ineffective to stop further attacks. U.S. troops deserve better than having their lives endangered to save face in a negotiation.

The standoff against Iran is altogether unnecessary for U.S. security. Iran is a regional power in a region which [accounts](#) for 4 percent of global GDP. Iran isn't exactly a powerhouse in this region, either. It fields an outdated air force left over from before the 1979 revolution, while Israel fields advanced F-35 fighter jets. Iran's entire military is furthermore [postured](#) to fight against a superior enemy like the United States, not to conquer territory. Even in Shia-majority Iraq, Iran's influence is [contested](#).

Iran can't win with hard power and its soft power is manageable. The U.S.'s threat perception of Iran is disproportionate and has not improved U.S. security. Instead, the U.S.'s confrontation of Iran has enabled Saudi Arabia and the UAE to hide behind an American bulwark rather than engage in diplomacy.

The United States can accomplish more by doing less. Iran's asymmetric strategy is motivated by the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Persian Gulf. If the U.S. withdraws these forces, it not only eliminates a flashpoint for war, it eliminates Iran's incentive for ballistic missiles and proxy forces. Some voices in Washington have [pushed](#) for these maximalist aims without recognizing that withdrawal might encourage these same ends. Even if Iran did persist in its missile program, U.S. forces would not be endangered if they were withdrawn from the region.

The United States has nothing to gain from stalling a return to the deal. Both Iran and the U.S. have stated they will trade sanctions relief for nuclear compliance. The terms are mutually understood. There's no point to delay when the prospects of a deal are diminishing and American leverage has peaked. Washington can decide between its pride and its interests.

So far, the Biden administration has not deviated from the failed strategy of its predecessors. But the U.S. would be better off eliminating sanctions and pursuing a U.S. withdrawal from the region. The Middle East is of minimal importance for U.S. security, and a prolonged deployment of American troops runs the risk of drawing the U.S. into yet another quagmire. The Biden administration should learn from the Trump administration's mistakes. It shouldn't repeat them.

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Michel Chossudovsky

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