The Danger of Pressing Iran

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On Thursday, the White House released an expanded list of companies and individual persons subject to sanctions for assisting Iran's nuclear program. The rationale for such an approach, just weeks after a supposedly groundbreaking agreement to ensure Iran no longer enriches weapons-grade uranium, is ostensibly to demonstrate our resolve, while also placating security hawks at home as well as concerned international partners (i.e. Israel and Saudi Arabia) who have criticized the agreement as naïve and Iran's position as disingenuous.

While we must show resolve, policymakers would be wise to consider the second and third-order effects of such actions. Keeping in mind the current power struggles inside Iran, we should not overplay our hand at the expense of what might otherwise be a dramatic breakthrough on security in the Middle East.

Critics of the agreement key on their belief that President Rouhani is only a puppet controlled by the same puppet master, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenie, who controlled the policies of our favorite Iranian nemesis, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. According to their argument, the new president may present a smiling face, but the policy -- to bring Iran to a breakout capability or worse -- has not changed. They see Rouhani as a pawn to buy Iran time to covertly develop nuclear weapons. While Khameni's secretive inner circle makes it difficult to be certain, signs indicate the critics are wrong. An alternative reading of facts presents some room for optimism, and recognition of an opportunity to change the face of the region in positive ways. The U.S. and its partners must quickly seize this opportunity.

From the facts, we may assume Khamenie would not have allowed Mr. Rouhani's election unless he wanted to try a new approach. Khamenie knows the current sanctions have had a deleterious effect on the Iranian economy. While even more sanctions could further harm the Iranian economy, inflation, unemployment and cuts in subsidies have already significantly undermined Iran's ability to function as a state. Further, we may conclude the tentative nuclear agreement required the Supreme Leader's assent. Taken together, these facts point to a likelihood the Ayatollah prefers a face-saving agreement -- one in which Iran maintains its international legal rights to peaceful nuclear technology -- to the current sanctions regime.

While this may be the case, the push back by hardliners who we might otherwise expect to tow the party line suggests the Ayatollah's security advisors do not fully understand his intentions, but from a pure power perspective, Khamenie's approach makes sense. By allowing President Rouhani to take the lead without overt or vocal support (and a charade of public chastisement), Khamenie preserves an option to crush any failure or perceived misstep, while reaping the benefit of positive developments.

Thus, without full authority, President Rouhani and the Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, must shoulder the unenviable tasks of negotiating an agreement and increasing peaceful relations with neighbors, and with critics from the Iranian security establishment working to derail their efforts. While we should not fool ourselves that the Rouhani administration includes doves and true liberal reformers, it does appear they have a genuine self-interest in working to resolve tough international issues.

U.S. policy officials should be sensitive to President Rouhani's need to demonstrate quick wins before the Ayatollah's security advisors have time to quash his efforts. Their narrative promotes distrust of the West, and particularly of the U.S. New sanctions, tough talk, or even perceived insults and affronts, could be enough to convince the Supreme Leader that negotiations are foolish and should be scuttled.

I am not here to argue for a soft approach to Iran. I have argued in past commentary that military action may be required, and that Iran's most dangerous capability -- its intelligence and special operations Qods Force and Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) apparatus -- will become even more so under a nuclear Iran. Iran has played the role of spoiler and combatant in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Afghanistan. Its intelligence agencies have a lot of American blood on their hands. Rouhani may not succeed, but any opportunity to turn the course of Iran is worth a shot. While anti-U.S. sentiment remains strong in Iran, and we cannot realistically expect much rapprochement in the near term, a successful Rouhani regime may help resolve difficult problems in the region. Slapping on more sanctions and increasing bellicose rhetoric only plays into the hands of Iranian hardliners who want to see this effort fail.

Renewed sanctions and military options are always on the table. For now, let us attempt peace.