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Trump Plays Cat and Mouse with Iran

MIKE WHITNEY
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Why is the Trump administration threatening Iran?

On February 1, National Security Adviser Michael Flynn announced that the administration was “putting Iran on notice” after it tested a ballistic missile which the US sees as a violation of Iran’s treaty obligations. Flynn’s frigid tone made it clear that the administration is considering the use of military force. But why?

Under current UN resolutions (Resolution 2231), Iran is forbidden “to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.” Read that over again. Iran is not forbidden from testing ‘all ballistic missiles’ just missiles that are ‘capable of delivering nuclear weapons.’ The resolution could not be clearer. There’s no gray area here, none at all. Flynn is just fudging the resolution’s meaning, so he can rattle a saber. But, why? And why are other members of the administration, including the president himself, making equally belligerent remarks? In a tweet last week, Trump said, “I won’t be as ‘kind’ to Iran as Obama” which was followed by a speech by US Defense Secretary James Mattis who called Iran “the single biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world.”

What's going on? Why the full court press against Iran? And how are these threats consistent with Trump's campaign promise to avoid pointless confrontations abroad? Here's an excerpt from a speech Trump delivered in Cincinnati on December 1:

"We will pursue a new foreign policy that finally learns from the mistakes of the past... We will stop looking to topple regimes and overthrow governments.... Our goal is stability not chaos ...In our dealings with other countries, we will seek shared interests wherever possible and pursue a new era of peace, understanding, and good will."

Where is the "peace, understanding, and good will" towards Iran? There doesn't seem to be any. This is the same incendiary rhetoric we're heard from every US administration dating back to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. But, why?

Isn't the problem the same as it was with Iraq, Libya, Syria and every other country the US has either toppled or tried to topple in the last 65 years?

Of course it is. Washington abhors any country that conducts its own independent foreign policy or resists US attempts to install its own puppet government. With Iran, the problems run even deeper since Iran sits on a vast ocean of oil and natural gas to which the western oil giants feel they are entitled. They think the oil is theirs and they expect Washington to help them expropriate it.

Washington wants to return Iran to the glory days of the Shah, an era in which the USG had a trusted ally in Tehran who would follow its directives, crush the domestic opposition, and preserve the privatization-model of oil production. It's worth noting that the Shah was installed in a CIA coup that triggered a nearly 40-year reign of terror for which the US is entirely responsible. Here's a short excerpt from The Harvard Crimson that will help readers to understand the horror Washington unleashed on the Iranian people to achieve its foreign policy objectives:

"The Shah systematically dismantled the judicial system of Iran and the country's guarantees of personal and social liberties. Nearly every source of creative, artistic and intellectual endeavor in our culture was suppressed.

The SAVAK conducted most of the torture, under the friendly guidance of the CIA which set up SAVAK in 1957 and taught them how to interrogate suspects. Amnesty International reports methods of torture that included "whipping and beating, electric shocks, extraction of teeth and nails, boiling water pumped into the rectum, heavy weights hung on the testicles, tying the prisoner to a metal table heated to a white heat, inserting a broken bottle into the anus, and rape."...

The Shah greatly expanded the military and turned it against his own people. With newfound oil wealth the Shah bought \$2C million of U.S. arms. The U.S. military trained Iranian officers. Despite claims that a strong army was needed to prevent external aggression, its real purpose became clear when the army murdered more than 50,000 Iranians fighting the Shah." The number of students tortured, lost or murdered is unknown." ("**Life Under the Shah**", The Harvard Crimson)

This is America's legacy in Iran: "Whipping, beating, electric shocks, extraction of teeth, boiling water pumped into the rectum, and rape." This is how the exceptional nation exported democracy to Iran.

The US has never tried to make amends for the suffering or death it inflicted on the Iranian people, nor have its crimes ever been prosecuted at an international tribunal, nor has there ever been any talk of monetary reparations. Instead, the US has done everything in its power to further isolate and punish Iran for resisting Washington's savage intrusion into their affairs. For many years, Washington has justified its cruelty by claiming that Tehran was developing nuclear weapons that would endanger the region and the world. As it happens, there's no evidence that Iran ever had nuclear weapons program, it's all a hoax concocted by the political class and their allies in the media. Here's a quote that sums up the "Iran nukes" fable in one short paragraph:

"It is essential to recognize that Iran does not currently have a nuclear weapons program, nor does it possess a nuclear weapon. On February 26, James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, ended his country's nuclear weapons program in 2003 and "as far as we know, he's not made the decision to go for a nuclear weapon." This repeats the "high-confidence" judgement of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) that was first made in November 2007."

There it is in one, short clip: No nukes, no nuclear weapons program, no diversion of nuclear fuel, and no sinister nuclear project aimed at blowing up Israel and establishing a region-wide Islamic Republic. It's all 100 percent bunkum conjured up by the same group of journalists who produced the mobile weapons labs, the yellowcake uranium, the aluminum tubes, curveball and the myriad other lies that preceded the invasion of Iraq.

But if Iran is not building nukes and is actually complying with the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (aka- The Iran Nuclear Agreement) then why all the fiery rhetoric and saber rattling? Is Trump seriously considering an attack on a country that poses no recognizable threat to the United States or its allies in the region?

Many people seem to think so, but I am not at all convinced.

Keep in mind, that a war with Iran would not be a cakewalk, it will be a bloody and protracted affair that would require significant military resources and tens of thousands of American troops on the ground. US warplanes would not be able to selectively bomb designated targets without provoking asymmetrical retaliatory attacks on US military bases, oil platforms and strategic allies in the region.

Iranian special forces would be deployed to locations beyond their borders where they would wreak havoc while plunging the Middle East into a broader regional war. The transport of oil through the Straits of Hormuz would be blocked indefinitely which would send gas prices skyrocketing while global equities went off a cliff.

More important, Washington would have no allies in the conflict excluding a few of the corrupt Gulf monarchies whose military value is negligible at best. The traditional European

allies would abandon the US in order to maintain their ever-dwindling political base which is fed up with American adventurism. The war in Iraq, followed by the Wall Street-generated global financial crash, followed by the flood of refugees fleeing US conflicts in Syria, Libya and beyond, have made it impossible for EU leaders to support another bloody US-led fiasco in the Middle East. Washington would have to go it alone which would, in turn, strengthen the position of rising rightwing politicians in the EU that want to sever relations with the US and develop an more Euro-centric foreign policy.

The end of the Atlantic Alliance would mark the end of imperial America and the collapse of the current global order. If Washington were to lose its ability to persuade or coerce the vassal states to follow its edicts, it would be cut off from its greatest source of geopolitical power. An attack on Iran would precipitate a speedy unraveling of the global system the US has painstakingly stitched together over a seventy year period. US dominance would progressively erode while foreign governments would ditch the dollar leaving Washington to face a future of pariah-like isolation and grinding poverty.

In my opinion, an attack on Iran would trigger a series of events that would greatly accelerate US economic decline while exacerbating tensions between allies that would lead to the inevitable breakup of the Atlantic Alliance and the end of the dollar's dominant role as the world's reserve currency. Is Trump really willing to risk all that in order to punish Iran or is something else going on below the radar?

In order to understand what Trump is doing, we need to clarify a few details regarding the Iranian nuclear deal or JCPOA. In very broad terms, the Iranian leadership accepted the strictest nuclear inspections regime in history (overseen by the IAEA) in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. (which, by the way, were imposed without any hard evidence that Iran was developing nuclear weapons) Donald Trump believes that this is the worst deal in history when, in fact, Iran was being unfairly punished for crimes it never committed.

The question is: Why would Trump oppose an agreement that clearly eliminates any chance for Iran to cheat and secretly build a nuclear weapon?

The obvious answer is that the hawks in his administration want to (eventually) topple Iran's government which requires that they weaken the regime as much as possible through economic sanctions. This is how Washington typically conducts its regime change operations; economic strangulation usually precedes the coup d' etat followed by the installing of a US puppet. Wash, rinse, and repeat.

But here's the rub: The administration cannot unilaterally terminate the JCPOA because it's a multi-lateral agreement endorsed by the UN Security Council. As one analyst said, If Trump rejects the deal "the international sanctions regime that incentivized Iran to negotiate would unravel.... Russia and China, for instance, won't continue sanctions on Iran because the GOP says they should. If this were to happen, Iran would receive sanctions relief without having any constraints on its nuclear program." Besides, If Trump walks away from the JCPOA, then "the next round of negotiations will be the US sitting at a table for one."

So even though Trump doesn't like the deal, he's stuck with it, because if he bails out, the allies are not going to support him. Here's a little more background that helps to explain things:

“Some opponents of the deal advocate for threatening the international community: You can either do business with Iran or business with the United States. But this threat lacks credibility. As Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew explained in a *New York Times* Op-ed, 40% of American exports go to the European Union, China, Japan, India, and Korea. By threatening to exclude these countries from our banking system, the U.S. would be placing a significant portion of its own economy at risk. Moreover, the major importers of Iranian oil (China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey) also account for one-fifth of U.S. exported goods and own 47% of foreign-held American treasuries. Even threatening to terminate this economic connectivity could have negative ramifications for both the US economy and the economies of our allies.

Our negotiating partners will not maintain sanctions that hurt their economies simply because the U.S. Congress insists they do so. Threatening our allies with economic warfare is a ludicrous approach, especially when compared to the practical and widely supported alternative of implementing the agreement....”(“**Iran Nuclear Deal: Debunking the Myths**“, The Center for Arms Control and Non Proliferation)

What does it all mean?

It means that coercion and arm-twisting aren't going to work this time. The agreement is written in a way that make it nearly impossible for the administration to achieve its objectives, which is to return to a bygone era when the US could inflict excruciating economic punishment on Iran without anyone uttering a word of protest. Those days are gone.

But if that's the case, then why have Trump and his lieutenants stepped up the hectoring, the demonization and the saber rattling? What's that all about?

But if that's the case, then why have Trump and his lieutenants stepped up the hectoring, the demonization and the saber rattling? What's that all about?

That's where it gets interesting. The Trump team has settled on a strategy of cat and mouse, which means they're trying to beat Iran by tricking them into making a mistake that will give the US the advantage. In other words, Trump does not want a shooting war with Iran, he simply wants Iran's leaders to overreact to Washington's bullying by abandoning JCPOA. That's the goal. The fact that the administration can't unilaterally reject the nukes deal, doesn't mean that Iran can't be duped into doing it for them. And, if Iran takes the bait and withdraws from the agreement, then Trump will have the allies on his side for another painful round of economic sanctions. That's what Trump wants.

So the best thing Iran can do is nothing. They need to continue to stay the course, shrug off the provocations, and keep up their end of the deal. That's it; just hang tight and stay cool.

Unfortunately, that's easier said than done.