



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 78 - 26 September 2019

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THE CENTRAL MISTAKE OF TRUMP'S IRAN POLICY

By
Fareed Zakaria

“The enemy gets a vote.” U.S. military leaders are fond of using that line. Gen. Jim Mattis used it so often that it is sometimes attributed to him. In fact, it is a nugget of wisdom dating back to Sun Tzu, the Chinese military strategist, who counseled that one must “know the enemy.” It describes the central mistake of President Trump’s Iran policy.

In confidential 2018 cables that were leaked this summer, Britain’s then-ambassador to Washington, Kim Darroch, wrote something that was obvious to most observers: Trump pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal largely because “it was Obama’s deal” and had given little thought toward a “‘day-after’ strategy.” Darroch also noted that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tried to put some distance between himself and Trump on this issue, privately referring to the move as “the president’s decision.” But while the decision might have been made for domestic political reasons, it has unleashed serious geopolitical consequences.

The Trump administration’s strategy, such as it is, appears to have been to double down on pressure on Iran, force other nations to abide by the United States’ unilateral sanctions and bet that this would cause Iran to capitulate.

Tehran’s initial reaction was restrained. It simply sought to bypass the United States. It continued to adhere to the deal and made efforts to trade with other countries. This failed. Because of the dollar’s centrality to the international financial system, the sanctions worked. Iran’s economy suffered a big blow, and its oil exports have plummeted. European countries, furious about the abuse of the dollar’s role, tried to create an alternative payments mechanism, but so far, it has not succeeded.

Iran's next effort has been to demonstrate that there is a cost to this kind of maximum pressure. It has harassed ships in the Persian Gulf, reminding everyone that 20 percent of the world's oil supply goes through that narrow body of water. It shot down a U.S. drone, signaling to the Pentagon that it has the capacity to impede the United States' intelligence and reconnaissance in the region. And now, Tehran – possibly using proxies and allies in the region – seems to be behind a precision attack on Saudi Arabia's main oil processing facilities, a strike effective enough that it initially shut down half of the kingdom's oil production. The message is clear: Hostilities with Iran would spill over throughout the Middle East and disrupt the global oil supply.

The enemy voted, and its behavior was surely the opposite of what the Trump administration expected. Maximum pressure on Iran did not moderate its behavior or make it come crawling back to the table. Instead it provoked Tehran to retaliate. The status quo of sanctions is hard enough on Iran that it must feel it has less to lose by acting provocatively, even dangerously.

There is also the reality of domestic politics within the Islamic republic. The Iran deal was unpopular with hard-liners in the United States, but it was also unpopular with hard-liners in Tehran. Some wanted to impeach the lead negotiator, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, just for shaking hands with President Barack Obama. Those who opposed the deal argued that Tehran was making major concessions – shipping away 98 percent of its enriched uranium, pouring concrete into its plutonium reactor – in return for promises that the United States would lift sanctions and allow Iran back into the global economy. They predicted that Washington would renege on its commitments. Once Trump pulled out of the deal, they claimed vindication.

One line that Mattis has in fact coined is about allies: "Nations with allies thrive, and nations without allies wither." It is striking that the United States embarked on a new, risky strategy toward Iran with the support of few allies. Trump treats European allies poorly to begin with – it appears to be the main reason Mattis resigned as defense secretary. They too have a vote and, far from helping, some are actively seeking to thwart the United States' policies toward Iran. Even the United Arab Emirates, perhaps Saudi Arabia's staunchest ally, has placed some distance between itself and Riyadh in recent months, getting out of what it believes is a failed intervention in Yemen.

In "The Art of War," Sun Tzu writes that victory is possible only with a leader who knows when to pick his battles and is prepared. Defeat is all but guaranteed with a leader who is reckless, mercurial and prideful. Timely analysis from ancient times.

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This article was published in *The Washington Post* dated 19 September 2019.

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