



Time to Look Forward: How Washington Needs a New Iran Strategy

By: Niko Pittore

Niko Pittore is a Masters of International Affairs candidate at the Bush School of Government and Service. His primary research interests include American security policy, particularly toward Iran, Iranian security policy, and the future of NATO.

On August 14, the United Nations Security Council [voted against](#) the United States' resolution to indefinitely extend the arms embargo on Iran. In response, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo triggered a countdown to re-impose sanctions. Great Britain, France, and Germany, who abstained on the arms embargo vote, wrote [letters](#) in opposition. France and Germany specifically said in a joint statement: "Any decisions and actions which would be taken based on this procedure or on its possible outcome would also be devoid of any legal effect."

This highlights the growing frustration of Europe toward President Trump's near-unilateral foreign policy on Iran. With a contentious upcoming United States election in November poised to divide the American electorate on foreign policy, Europe is ready to forge its own path. With the international community almost unanimously opposed to the continuation of the arms embargo and sanctions, Washington needs to find alternative policy options to compensate for the lack of international support for its maximum pressure strategy.

United Nations Security Council President Dian Djani [said](#): "In my view... the president is not in the position to take further action." Niger takes over the presidency in September, and it views Washington's attempt to snapback sanctions as illegal. So, the American demand for snapbacks will remain ignored for the foreseeable future.

Going forward, there are two policy options Washington could utilize. One option, while ideal, is not clearly feasible. Namely, the United States could rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The main issue with this is credibility. Iran has no incentive to trust the United States considering how quickly President Trump reneged on the deal and then began his maximum pressure campaign. Two-thirds of the Iranian parliament's presiding board are either former members or still affiliated with the [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps](#). Moreover, with Iranian presidential elections next year, the indications are the hardline [conservatives](#) are going to win big.

However, [Ayatollah Khamenei](#) has said that if the United States wishes to negotiate, to simply rejoin the deal. In Iran, the Ayatollah has final say on all defense and security policy issues. If a potential Biden Administration can credibly show it is willing to restore diplomacy, there is a serious chance of the JCPOA being restored.

A second option is the United States can join the remaining parties to the JCPOA in establishing a set of rules regarding arms sales in Iran. With an extension of the current arms



embargo now dead, there is a way to have a comprehensive and pragmatic [strategy](#) to limit Iranian arms sales without allowing Iran free range to expand proliferation of arms uncontested inside and outside its borders.

While Russia and China would most likely try to sell Iran low-quality [weapons](#), there is a debate over whether either would be willing to part ways with newer generations of systems. Moscow delivered a [S-300](#) missile system to Tehran which was not covered by the embargo, but still delayed delivery. In addition, Moscow also rejected Tehran's request to send Iran the upgraded S-400 version.

With this in mind, the United States could breathe a little easier about the worry of Russia and China flooding Iran with weapons. A comprehensive and pragmatic strategy could include an arms ban on specific groups, such as the Houthis in Yemen and Hizballah in Lebanon. The UNSC can approve this strategy to give the impression of multilateralism, an approach the Trump Administration has attempted to sidestep at every turn.

From my view, the United States joining the remaining parties in a code of conduct regarding arms sales to Iran could be a precursor to rejoining the JCPOA. If the United States shows the European powers and Iran they are ready to integrate with the international community, the United States would have more credibility when considering the merits of reentering the JCPOA.

Only time will tell where the United States goes. Washington could attempt to rejoin the JCPOA under a Biden administration or work out a set of rules with the European powers regarding arms sales in and out of Iran. But two things are clear: unilateral maximum pressure has failed to produce the results wanted and Europe has had enough. While Iran should continue to be contained, if Washington wants desired results, they should look toward a new strategy.