

Maximum Pressure: America's Strategy to Counter Iran

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00:07: Anya, I thought I'd pop up and just join you and Nick. Nick is, I think, I think Nick's one of the best correspondents in the United States. He holds down a foreign affairs job at News Hour. Nick, tell us how you've tried to report this Iran issue.

00:22: Well, thanks, Nick, I paid you to say that, obviously, and I appreciate that, and I appreciate you guys having me back this year again. And what's been interesting, just very briefly while we wait for Brian...

00:36: I'm in.

00:37: Okay, here we go. No one wants to hear me talk about journalism...

[laughter]

00:40: Welcome. I'm just going to take it quickly from on Anya and Nick. So as Anya kind of laid out, we've got a couple of tent poles for the setting the scene for this conversation, we're two years and three months after the JCPOA withdrawal, we're a few months before the end of the conventional arms embargo, we're two months from President Trump urging Iran to quote making the big deal, saying they would get better terms if they negotiated before the US election. We're just a few days after the Supreme Leader rejected that offer saying no negotiations because it would help President Trump's reelection. And of course, numerous regional issues, not the least of which the Beirut explosion and what that says about Lebanese government. So, Brian, just give us a very quick answer to the fundamental question, has the maximum strategy, has the maximum pressure strategy worked?

01:36: Well, first of all, let me thank Nick Burns and Anya and also you, Nick, for having me on. Pleasure to be here virtually. We are two-and-a-half years into the strategy of post leaving the Iran deal, but our Iran strategy was approved by principles back in May of 2017, and we have been executing against that strategy now for the entire administration. The President ordered a reassessment, a policy review when we came into office, and what we concluded is that if you want to make progress against this regime, you need to have a combination of economic pressure, diplomatic isolation and the credible threat of military force to defend our interests.

02:22: So that is where... That's our theory of the case, you might say. And what we've done on the pressure side has been historically significant. On December 31st, President Rouhani admitted that our sanctions have cost the regime \$200 billion, our oil sanctions alone, we have collapsed Iran's oil sector, and that's where the IRGC gets most of its money. So if you want to get serious about drying up the revenue for the Rev Guards and for the Quds force, you have to be serious about the oil, and for as long as we were in the Iran deal, we couldn't touch Iran's energy sector.

03:00: But we have gone after Iran's energy sector, its mineral sector, petrochem, a number of areas. And Rouhani is right, we have deprived this regime of a lot of money, and it is the epicenter

for terror finance, money laundering, but then they also have been organizing training and equipping these proxies, and in 2014, one of the Iranian officials bragged that they owned three capitals. Today we see Iran losing its grip in a lot of these places, where only a few years ago they were bragging. The New York Times and the Washington Post have run a number of stories over the last couple of years documenting how Iran's proxies are weaker, and that is the consequence of our maximum pressure.

03:45: We have dried up the revenue that the regime would otherwise spend. Consider this statistic. Since 2012, the regime spent over \$10 billion in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon. And there was a Shia fighter in Syria who said, the golden days are gone and they're never coming back. Iran just doesn't have the money that it used to. These are the sort of headlines that we ought to be wanting to see, Iran's proxies weaker, the regime having to choose between guns in Damascus or butter in Tehran. We put them... They have to make very hard decisions now.

04:20: So yes, we'd like to get to a new deal, but don't lose sight of the fact of what we've been able to accomplish by really putting this regime on its back foot, restoring military deterrents and maintaining it. So we're very pleased with our strategy, the door continues to be wide open for diplomacy, the Supreme Leader has chosen resistance over diplomacy, that's his decision. Secretary Pompeo warned him two-and-a-half years ago, you can either come to the table or you can manage economic collapse.

04:51: So I'm going to go about 15 minutes here, and we're going to go through the conventional weapons ban, we're going to go through COVID, we're going to go through some explosions in Iran and some regional tensions. Just a reminder, when I open this up, hopefully at about 12:20 or a couple minutes afterward, please raise your hand and I will be able to call on you and you can ask Brian your questions.

05:14: So Brian, there are critics obviously of the strategy, and I want to posit two big criticisms to you in terms of the overall approach. Since the administration has left, JCPOA, Iran has increased its stockpiles of nuclear fuel, resumed its enrichment of uranium. Does that not mean that Iran is actually closer to building a nuclear weapon than it was a few years ago?

05:40: One thing I'd point out is that the various nuclear commitments, Nick, that you've described, Iran would be free to do once the deal expires, and so we pulled forward the expiration date of the Iran nuclear deal, so that we wouldn't have to deal with an Iran that was much richer, its proxies are richer, and it retained most of its nuclear infrastructure.

06:00: Well, you didn't pull forward the expiration day, you left, and the sunsets were a few years from now, right, rather than today?

06:08: Well, the sunsets start in about two months. This deal is going to continue expiring. The missile restrictions expire in 2023, and it's going to keep expiring until there's no deal left. And so what we would like to do is get a permanent deal, certainly we can talk about this, but no enrichment. I think, Nick, your question illustrates the problem. For as long as Iran is allowed to enrich, we're going to be having this discussion, how close is Iran to a nuclear break out, how close

are they to weaponizing a bomb.

06:41: We need to restore the UN Security Council's standard of no enrichment. And when I was in the Council from '06 to '08, when Nick Burns was Under Secretary, I remember this in the Bush administration, we were able to negotiate a prohibition on no enrichment that's binding international law, and China and Russia voted for it. That is the standard that we have to restore. And if you look at Secretary Pompeo's list of 12 demands, there at the top is no enrichment. And it's going to get us out of this debate of how close Iran is.

07:14: Iran does use nuclear blackmail in order to win concessions, and so we're out of the deal, they are regularly threatening the Europeans with, they've now broken their nuclear commitments no fewer than five times. We would like to... We've now put in place, I think, the leverage necessary in terms of pressure and isolation and all of that, in order to get the kind of deal that will be necessary. It's going to take a lot of leverage to get a comprehensive deal, but we've got to get no enrichment restored. And we, to be more specific to your question, Nick, we monitor that very closely. The timeline is always classified, the President has made very clear Iran will never get a nuclear weapon for as long as he is President. I think the Iranians know he's not bluffing.

08:02: One other big criticism that I want you to respond to, the Supreme Leader last week said the one accomplishment of the maximum pressure campaign was to discredit the Europeans. Your critics argue the administration has lost the unity that existed leading up to JCPOA with Europeans, with Russia and with China, GCC is fractured and Iran has been pushed into China's arms.

08:27: Well, unity is, of course, always preferred, but it shouldn't be unity for the sake of unity. We have... Here's how I look at it. I spend a lot of time with the E3 but I was also in Estonia last week as part of a trip to Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. Estonia's on the UN Security Council. So I regularly discuss this with our European allies. We have the same threat assessment. The E3 do not want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, they would like Iran to be at peace with its neighbors, they would like to see an end to the ballistic missile testing, they don't like the hostage-taking. We have had a tactical disagreement about how to achieve those ends. The Europeans have stayed in the deal, we left the deal after being in it for some period of time to see if it could be fixed.

09:17: But being out of the deal, and this is the argument that the President and the Secretary makes to the members that are still in it, we need to get a new and better deal. And Prime Minister Johnson has said publicly that this deal has many, many deficiencies and he has said maybe we should try to get to a Trump deal. I know that the original plan in the prior administration was to start with the nuclear piece and then build out to the others. They didn't get to the other pieces. That's unfortunate, but when you look at Iran's threats to international peace and security, the nuclear is one piece, and we need to get on with the others.

09:54: Working with allies, of course, may, as you say, develop next year, if there is a larger negotiation, but there is a more immediate negotiation that's happening right now, it's the end of the conventional weapons ban, October 18th. The administration has argued that even though it's outside of JCPOA, you have the legal right to snap back sanctions. Will you soon table a resolution extending that conventional weapons ban in the Security Council?

10:23: Yes, Nick, we are going to be tabling a resolution very soon. And this has been very patient diplomacy, very methodical. In December of 2018, Secretary Pompeo in remarks to the UN Security Council said that the arms embargo is going to be expiring and we need to start addressing that in an early way. So since 2018, we have been talking about this. I have briefed the UN Security Council virtually a few weeks ago when we circulated our text back in June, I made a number of trips up to New York before COVID.

10:58: This resolution that we've been working on, it's been pretty much been something we've been drafting since October. So this has been no rush to tabling the resolution. I in the last month have been to 11 countries, I've gotten through the entire Gulf, into Israel. If you listen to the countries in the region that are on the front lines of Iranian aggression, they're all speaking with one voice, that the Council has to extend the arms embargo. It has been in place for 13 years, it has served the cause of peace very well. That doesn't mean we've solved the problem of weapons smuggling by Iran, we have interdicted weapons going to Yemen.

11:41: Look, the UN Secretary General gave a report to the Council a few weeks ago confirming that the missiles that landed in Saudi Arabia at Abqaiq, at the world's largest oil processing facility, were of Iranian origin. The Iranians are making the case themselves for extending the arms embargo with all of this kinetic activity. So I have not heard a single country make the argument on national security grounds that we should let the arms embargo expire. And I get that people are going to have disagreements over procedures, but we need to... I'm happy to talk about why we have the legally available option to do snap back if we're unsuccessful. But it is very important that we extend this 13-year arms embargo. It was a mistake to ever allow in year five of the Iran deal to let the arms embargo expire on the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism.

12:32: You may have unanimity in the Gulf, the countries that you've just mentioned, and despite your diplomatic efforts around the world, you do not, though, have unanimity among the permanent members of the Security Council. So is the Trump administration willing to snap back sanctions if it does not have the support of the other permanent members of the Security Council?

12:52: Well, I think that's still an open question, we haven't had the vote yet, some people have signaled their intentions one way, but I don't give up on diplomacy until I see the hands go up in New York. And in the case of the support for this, you have the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Bahrainis, Yemen and Israel, all in complete agreement that the arms embargo needs to be extended. And when the Arabs and the Israelis come together on something, I really think it's important for the international community to pay attention, and we have to listen to what the region is saying. The region does not want... Look, no one thinks that what is missing from the Middle East are more Iranian weapons. They're very...

[overlapping conversation]

13:37: Would you support a European effort if it's a six-month extension?

13:41: I don't negotiate with myself. So we have tabled a resolution that we think accomplishes what needs to be accomplished. The Council by charter is invested with the maintenance of

international peace and security. This is diplomacy 101. This is a test for the Council, in some ways. There's no national security argument to let it expire. And so we have the legally available option if we need to, we want to do it the easy way, the easy way is to do a roll over of the arms embargo. It's not difficult. There's all the reasons in the world to do it, but we will do this one way or the other.

14:17: We've got 300 attendees, and only one question, raise your hand and you've got Brian here with questions. Brian, let's try and just tick through a few other topics. Since June 25th, when there was an explosion in the military complex, there have been dozens of explosions inside Iran, some of them, I'm sure, bad management, bad infrastructure, but one of them, of course, occurred inside Natanz. Do you know the source of the explosions?

14:46: I don't have any observations to make on the series of incidents that you've described in Iran.

14:51: Hypothetically, Israel believes Iran won't respond to attacks because they're waiting for Biden and so they're trying to degrade the nuclear program. Or hypothetically, Israel is trying to goad Iran into some kind of response, which would help you with the conventional weapons ban, of course, and perhaps constrict Biden's policy. Either of those scenarios plausible?

15:12: I think those are two good questions for the Iranians and the Israelis. I will not speak on their behalf.

15:18: Let's go to COVID quickly. I want to take you back to 2004, after an earthquake in Iran killed 30,000 people, the Bush administration sent 200 personnel, 150,000 pounds of aid. I believe the President even offered to send a family member, including, and Senator Elizabeth Dole. What did the Trump administration offer to Iran after the COVID outbreak?

15:41: As soon as it was clear that they were facing a health crisis, I personally conveyed a diplomatic notice and a dip note to the Iranians through the Swiss, and I said, "Please let us know the gaps in your system and we can help fill them."

15:57: Did you have any specific offers in that note?

16:00: Well, I'll give you the full picture of it. So one, I just wanted to reach out to them and say, we've had a policy for three-and-a-half years of standing with the Iranian people. That includes when there's a crisis. And you're right, citing what happened in the Bush administration. It goes back farther than that, though, whenever... Look, the United States is the world's largest donor of humanitarian assistance, and that is something which is an evergreen across administrations. And so I reached out very quickly, the White House did as well. After I conveyed the offer, it was rejected within hours. If not hours, it was within the next day. The White House was also, through the NSC, also rejected. I've done it a few times, and unfortunately, this is a regime, another example of the regime not being able to get to yes, and making sort of a commonsense, normal decision. Secretary Pompeo frames this as we'd like Iran to behave like a normal country and the question that Kissinger asks, "Is Iran a country or is it a cause?"

17:02: And when Iran, when its leaders behave like a cause, it is for, it is to the enormous detriment

of the Iranian people. President Trump said in 2017, at his first UN General Assembly address, the longest-suffering victims of the Iranian regime are the Iranian people. So that's why we've stood with them, we've done it again. The regime doesn't allow it in. We did support some... We were able to get... I set up with Sigal Mandelker of Treasury, of the Swiss humanitarian channel, it's now processed a few transactions, getting cancer drugs and organ treatment therapies, so we're going to continue doing that. That's worked. They rejected our offer on COVID, but that's really a problem for the regime. We do the right thing.

17:48: There's more to ask you on that, but I'm running out of time, so let's just do two quick ones on the region. Obviously, one of the main US and international complaints about Iran is its regional activities. Let me just highlight a few. Recently in Iraq Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, of course, who is US-supported, came to power with the help of some Iranian support in Afghanistan, Iran is supporting the talks that Zal's team is leading. We're seeing some ambiguous, but some positive moves from Iran out of Yemen. Do you believe Iran has pulled back in the region since Qasem Soleimani was killed?

18:24: We have seen a change in their tempo with their proxies. I think the President, he did the strikes on Kata'ib Hezbollah, he's done a few strikes in Iraq and Syria. After an American was killed on December 27th in an attack organized by Qasem Soleimani, the President then struck some Kata'ib Hezbollah sites. You've had Israel striking Iran in Syria. And so you've seen the tactical displacement of troops and Iranian forces in Syria, that's all to the better. We're very pleased with how Kadhimi has organized his government, he cracked down on Kata'ib Hezbollah fairly early. We have seen a collapse among the Iraqi people for tolerance of Iranian interference.

19:17: And Iran knows that it's now playing a very weak hand in Iraq. And Kadhimi is an expression of that. There were huge, in October, massive protests in Lebanon, you had massive protests in Iran in November, and you also had a huge protest in Iraq. What we see are people rejecting this Iranian model of revolution, violence, sectarian violence, lack of opportunity, the usual lack of transparency, the corruption that has really held people back. When I'm in the Gulf, and I've traveled all through there many, many times, you go to cities like Manama and Abu Dhabi and Doha and Dubai, you look at Vision 2030 for the Saudis, these are governments that are investing in their own people. And you look across the Gulf and you get this profound sense that the Iranian people have lost decades of progress. So we like the Gulf model, investing in the future, investing in their people, the Iranian people want that. We see the Iranian model being increasingly rejected in the region, so I see a lot of positive trend lines there.

20:27: And in 30 seconds, has Saudi Arabia constructed a facility for extracting uranium yellow cake with the help of Chinese technology?

20:35: Don't have any comment on that. Just don't have any comment on it.

20:41: That's why I figured we could do that in a few seconds. Okay, so...

20:44: That's a five-second answer.

20:46: Let's turn it over to questions. I see five right now, I saw Barbara Slavin first. Barbara Slavin, please unmute yourself and start your video if you want, and... Go ahead.

21:03: Start video. Hello, how are you? Nice to see you both.

21:08: Hello, Barbara, you too.

21:08: Nice to see you both. The question I have is to dispute that Iran is losing influence in the region. What I see is something different. Kadhimi has made attempts, but it seems as though the militias are very, very strong in Iraq, the Houthis are doing extremely well in Yemen, Assad is in Damascus, and I don't detect any lack of influence on the part of Hezbollah. So I just wonder how you come to your conclusion that Iran is losing influence in the region?

21:41: Well, I just answered that. I think you and I just look at the region very differently, you sort of have a glass half empty view of it, I just disagree with your assessment on what's happening in Iraq. We have seen a pretty marked shift since the killing of Qasem Soleimani. He was the indispensable man, he had a cult of personality, he spoke Arabic fluently, he had a genius for organizing. And so, Barbara, I just suggest that you talk to people in the region, they see it much differently. There's been a big change since Qasem Soleimani was taken off the battlefield, he very famously said that the battlefield is mankind's lost paradise.

22:22: He was responsible for the deaths of 603 Americans in Iraq, that's 17% of the total deaths, and that obviously means thousands that are injured, some permanently. You just... You can't... To accept your analysis, Barbara, you'd have to ignore all of the protests in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran rejecting the Iranian model. You have to look at some of the polls and the other things in Iraq. Things are not going well for the Iranians in Iraq. So we're very hopeful. Some of this is, I think, fatigue with 41 years. Iran is facing an economic crisis, its worst in 41 years, they're facing a crisis of legitimacy and credibility with their own people. The regime today clings to power on the basis of brute force, and these are not things that we were talking about three-and-a-half years ago when we came into office.

23:17: Jane Harman, Representative Harman, you have the floor, could you unmute and start your video, if you'd like.

23:28: Did I do it?

23:29: Yeah, hello, Jane, hi.

23:31: We gotcha.

23:31: Hi, Brian.

23:32: How you doing?

23:33: I'm doing fine, and I applaud your service, you know this.

23:37: Thank you, Jane.

23:37: I think the administration's very lucky to have you, and the Wilson Center is lucky to have you as a friend. So I have a two-part question, and I asked the first part of this yesterday at another panel, and that is, how do you assess the capacity now of our intelligence community? I think a lot of senior folks have left for various reasons, and I worry that we have lost the experience to not only collect the truth, but speak truth to power in the IC, and that's crucially important as we assess Iran. And my second question, I heard you... You didn't answer the Saudi question, I understood that, but is, how do you handicap the chances of an arms race in the greater Middle East, not just in Saudi, if the Iranians really start to move ahead on nuclear weapons?

24:29: And Brian, sorry to interrupt, you have less than two minutes to answer.

24:33: Wow. Alright, let me see if I can get through this. I remember working with Jane Harman when she was on the Intelligence Committee, which she served with distinction, I remember that period, testified before the Committee once back then. Look, we... On the intelligence side, I think that we're well postured with a lot of good people, Gina, we have a new DNI Director, General Nakasone at NSA. There's... I think there are a lot of efforts under way, I know that Iran is a priority, there's no such thing as omniscience in intelligence, but I do think that, on the subject of Iran, it is given a great deal of priority, that's been my judgment from being in this role for a couple of years, and I think that will continue.

25:20: On the arms race, this is what worries me about letting the arms embargo expire, all the countries in the region are going to look and see the Iranians purchasing fighter jets... This is what they're going to be allowed to do on October 18th. Fighter jets, attack helicopters, submarines, large caliber artillery systems, missiles that range up to 300 kilometers and tanks, and I don't know how this is a good idea for the region. This arms embargo needs to be extended, and I think it's really important for the international community to make the case to the five permanent members of the Council and to the 10 elected members that this needs to continue.

26:02: Brian, with all due respect, she was talking about a nuclear arms race, rather than conventional, just very quickly.

26:08: I'm sorry. Okay, so let me give you 30 seconds on that. One of the challenges that we've had, in the Bush administration, we were able to negotiate the 123 Agreement, the gold standard with UAE, and UAE is celebrating now its 10th year of civilian nuclear power without enrichment. That's what we need to be supporting, and the Emiratis deserve a great deal of credit for doing the right thing on the nuclear side. Over half of the countries in the world that have civilian nuclear power do not enrich. The Iran nuclear deal, by allowing Iran to retain its enrichment capabilities, signaled to the other countries in the region that when you show up and you have a conversation, you say, "Hey, I'd like to talk about the 123 Agreement," and the answer that comes back is, "You know what? I think we'll take the deal you gave Iran," this is why we have to restore the standard of no enrichment.

27:03: Brian Hook, we thank you, there's a lot more to discuss. Sorry I didn't get to all of your questions, there's a couple more, but Anya, back to you.

27:10: Thank you very much, Nick, and thank you, Brian, for taking time out. I think this might be your one day of holiday, and thank you for your service in this really...

27:19: You're welcome.

27:19: Difficult time. I'm just going to throw you one last question with the 30 seconds that we have left. I think you're absolutely right, that the Saudi monarchies and Israel are very united behind our tough on Iran policy, but we've been down this road before, and it feels like, especially the Arab monarchies in the Middle East, always quite happy to hold America's coat while we are tough on Iran. What are you doing about that? Do we think we're listening too much to that viewpoint and what are they doing to be helpful?

27:55: Well, I think the Saudi embassy just yesterday put out a couple of videos explaining the rationale for extending the arms embargo. I would have you take a look at the speech the President gave in Riyadh. His first trip overseas as President, we had the Arab Summit, you had 57 Arab Muslim nations come together. The President said that we really need to improve the competencies and the capabilities of our partners in the region, so that they can be better postured to deal with regional threats. So we're obviously, after Iran started increasing its kinetic attacks, the President enhanced our troop posture by 15,000. We helped Saudi with their air defenses, so we've also helped organize other countries to improve Saudi air defenses, because they were very much focused on the south threat from the Houthis, but then they started getting attacked from the north directly, from the Iranian regime.

28:54: So I think we have done a good balance of trying to increase burden-sharing in the region, I know that's been the President's goal. We have seen these countries step up, they are doing more, we're going to continue to ask them to do more. We're happy to play a leadership role as the President has, but when I went to the region, I did press conferences with foreign ministers at each stop, including Adel Al-Jubeir, and they're very clear, they're speaking with great clarity, and they're helping. They are helping to organize the diplomatic effort, especially with the P5, to get the arms embargo extended.

29:39: Great. Thank you very much, Brian. We could talk about this all day, lots of issues in the world that we haven't yet covered. Thank you again.

29:47: Thank you, Anya, very nice. Thanks for having me on this program.

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