

What would Joe Biden do?

Vis-a-vis Moscow and Tehran, Trump should do the opposite

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President Biden tried to downplay wars. For example, on Jan. 19, 2022, he suggested — hopefully, it seemed to me — that Russia’s coming invasion of Ukraine would be only a “minor incursion.” No such luck. Just over a month later, Russian ruler Vladimir Putin sent his tanks rolling toward Kyiv on a mission to drag Ukraine back under the Kremlin jackboot.

Similarly, Mr. Biden offered Iran’s rulers sanctions relief and diplomatic engagement even as they enriched uranium, stockpiling enough by 2025 for multiple nuclear weapons.

The theocrats were not interested in rapprochement. For 47 years, they have stated their goals with crystalline clarity: “Death to America!” and “Death to Israel!”

They meant the latter literally: the extermination of the Jewish state and its citizens from the river to the sea. The threat to America may imply a more modest objective: collaborating with Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang to relegate the United States to the margins of global power, alongside formerly great nations such as Britain, France and Spain.

Has President Trump now recognized these realities?

Last week, he backed Ukraine’s deep strikes into Russia, authorized an emergency Patriot missile package, gave Kyiv the right to co-produce the interceptors, and agreed to a bipartisan bill that adds tougher sanctions on Moscow.

Over recent days, he ordered U.S. forces to strike more than 300 Iranian targets in response to continuing attacks on commercial ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz, issued new sanctions on Iran’s financial sector, revoked the sanctions waiver letting Iran sell oil under the ceasefire, and began reinstating a blockade on Iran.



No one can say that Mr. Trump did not give diplomacy a chance. He offered Iran's rulers multiple off-ramps, including a memorandum of understanding that, in my view, conceded way too much.

Still, Iran's rulers were not appeased, as they made apparent during the funeral last week for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who for 36 years was the country's clerical dictator. In January, Khamenei ordered his troops to crush protesters "by any means necessary," resulting in the slaughter of tens of thousands for the "crime" of seeking relief from oppression and immiseration.

Mourners carried banners reading: "We Will Kill Trump." Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, issued a statement Saturday saying that revenge for his father's assassination "is the demand of our nation, and it will most certainly be carried out."

Israel reportedly shared intelligence with the U.S. indicating a plot to assassinate Mr. Trump.

Analysis of satellite imagery released last week shows Tehran continuing construction at two nuclear facilities in egregious violations of the memorandum of understanding.

Mr. Trump does not need my advice, but I need to offer it: He should double down on this un-Bidenesque approach, raising the price Moscow and Tehran must pay for their bellicosity and terrorism.

Both regimes are down, but neither is out, which is exactly the right time to hit them harder. Miss Manners would not approve, but she is not a geopolitical strategist.

Russian casualties in Ukraine are shockingly high, with negligible territorial gains to show for it. Russia's economy suffers from high inflation, acute labor shortages and fuel scarcity.

As for Iran, 12 days of Israeli airstrikes last year — capped by American B-2 bunker busters hitting subterranean nuclear sites — followed by 38 days of what the Pentagon called major combat operations this year, did not achieve everything Mr. Trump had hoped.

Regardless, Iran's rulers are now years, no longer weeks or months, from developing nukes. Most, maybe all, of their enriched uranium lies beneath tons of rubble. Their centrifuges are not spinning. Their missile and drone arsenal is nowhere near as large as it would have been by now had the U.S. and Israel held their fire.

Iran's rulers have lost their hold on Syria. Their proxies in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon have been decimated. They are losing power in Iraq. In Yemen, the Houthis have been curiously quiet.

Iran's economy, feeble before 2025, is barely breathing. Mr. Trump could shut it down completely, but I surmise he would rather not, because he knows most Iranians are not America's enemies.

Despite all this, if Iran's rulers continue to believe Mr. Trump is constrained by "pain at the pump" and midterm elections, they will tough it out.

If, on the other hand, they are convinced that every drone attack on a container ship will result in the loss of assets they value, both military and personal, they may recalculate.

On Friday, Mr. Trump posted on Truth Social that the "Islamic Republic of Iran has asked us to continue 'talks.' We have agreed to do so, but the United States has stated to them, in no uncertain terms, that the cease fire is OVER."

A spokesman for Iran's rulers responded that talks would not resume unless Washington fulfilled its responsibilities under the memorandum of understanding, as interpreted by Tehran.

Mr. Trump should remember that there is no need to choose between diplomacy and force. "Negotiations without arms are like music without instruments," as Frederick the Great may have said.

Coercive negotiations may not bring regime change or even regime collapse. Yet crippling the regime — severely limiting its ability to project power — will make it much less of a threat to America, American interests and American allies.

Similarly, although increasing pressure on Mr. Putin will not make him peace-loving, it may lead him to accept a ceasefire.

It is lovely to think — as I believe Mr. Biden did and many in the foreign policy establishment still do — that wars end when both sides compromise in the interest of "conflict resolution."

In the modern world, however, most wars do not end; they merely abate. Achieving even that becomes possible only if our enemies conclude that their goals are unreachable and that more pain would be unbearable.

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