

Childish Diplomacy: Donald Trump's New Play Against Iran

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Diplomacy has been seen historically as a practitioner's art, nurtured in schools of learning, tested and tried in the boardrooms of mild mannered summitry. Klemens von Metternich and Otto von Bismarck practiced it with varying degrees of ruthlessness and skill; the man who thought himself a modern incarnation of the Austrian statesman, Henry Kissinger, dedicated a text to the subject which has become the force-fed reading of many a modern student of international affairs. (Kissinger, for his part, was a pygmy shadow of his hero-worshipped subject.)

The Trump administration is supplying another version: diplomacy, not as subtle art but as childish outrage and pressings, brinkmanship teasingly encouraging of war. The result of the latest round of bile-filled spats between Iran and the United States is that diplomacy has ceased to exist, becoming a theatrical show demanding the lowest admission fees.

On Monday, Washington announced that another round (how many will they be?) of sanctions would be imposed. They are of a very specific, personal nature, though their effect is one of insult rather than tangible effect. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, deemed by Trump "ultimately responsible for the hostile conduct of the regime", is the crowning glory of the list, as are his appointments and those in his office. An important aspect of the sanctioning lies in the allegation that the Ayatollah has access to a vast fund that showers largesse upon the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps.

Some eight commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, including the commander of the unit responsible for shooting down the exorbitantly priced RQ-4A Global Hawk last Thursday, have also made the list. This effort was seen as proof that Iran's air defences worked, a dastardly thing in the mind of any Pentagon wonk. Jeremy Binnie of *Jane's Defence Weekly*, throwing petrol on the fire, [suggested on CNN](#) that, "when the Iranians really make investment, it can really count".

The response from Iran's President Hassan Rouhani was one of seething displeasure, marked by a medical diagnosis. The Ayatollah was a man of modest possessions, owning "a Hoseyniyyeh [prayer venue] and a simple house". Then [came the snipe](#).

"You sanction the foreign minister simultaneously with a request for talks. The White House is afflicted by mental disability and does not know what to do."

Trump was [obligingly apocalyptic](#). "Any attack on Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force. In some areas overwhelming means obliteration."

Short of obliteration, US policy is designed to throttle, and, in so doing, create the pretext for war.

The tweets from Trump on Iran read like self-portraits of psychological affirmation, disturbed yet consistent. Broadly speaking, they are also brief notes towards a character of the US imperium, suggesting the psychopath open to both sanctimonious violence and condescending dialogue. "America is a peace-loving nation," Trump assures us. "We do not seek conflict with Iran or any other country. I look forward to the day when sanctions can be finally lifted and Iran can become a peaceful, prosperous and productive nation." He insists that this could happen "tomorrow" or "years from now."

Iran is the Rorschach inkblot, supplying the pattern upon which meaning can be imposed: "Iran [sic] leadership doesn't understand the words 'nice' and 'compassion,' they never have," [goes one](#) remark. "Sadly, the thing they do understand is Strength and Power, and the USA is by far the most powerful Military force in the world, with 1.5 Trillion Dollars invested over the last two years alone". The only thing Strength and Power comprehend in the shallow expanse of Trumpland are, naturally, Strength and Power.

This play of psychological mirroring also finds form in the utterances of US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, who seems to have turned purist on matters of budgeting and transparency. Khamenei, [he argues](#), "has enriched himself at the expense of the Iranian people." His office oversees "a vast network of tyranny and corruption." No neater and concise description of Trump business practice could be possible, but here it is, being applied to a foreign power in terms more appropriate for an ascetic order of monks.

False empathy, doled out in spades, is also necessary: victims must be found, even as they are being victimised by the virtuous. In one sense, Trump sticks to another traditional theme of US foreign policy, [praising](#) the people a policy punishes even as it seeks to distance them from the leadership. Sanctions, blunt and broad, rarely find their mark, and usually fall indiscriminately upon the target populace. "The wonderful Iranian people are suffering, and for no reason at all."

The current round of sanctions, in any case, have been given the heave-ho in terms of effect by such figures as former Treasury sanctions specialist Elizabeth Rosenberg, [who sees](#) their application as being "in the realm of the symbolic." And what dangerous symbolism it is proving to be.

Wiped of history, the context of such sputtering is isolated, ignoring the bountiful US contribution to the creation of the Iranian theocracy. The role of the Central Intelligence Agency in sending Iran's Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh packing in 1953, assisted by their British cousins, leaving the way for a quarter century of byzantine, eccentric and occasionally cruel rule by Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, was deemed an exemplar of destabilisation. Even then, the scribes of the CIA effort were alert enough to note that unintended consequences could arise from such enthusiastic meddling. "Blowback" became intelligence argot, and after September 11, 2001, has become the signature term for the actions of aggrieved nations. The effort to push Iran towards war even as tinfoil claims are made to embrace peace, sink under that realisation.

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