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US-Iran Relations: Bolton's "Maximum Pressure" Policy Is The Illegitimate Child Of Diplomacy

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The September 14 strikes against Saudi Arabia's Khurais oilfield and Abqaiq processing facility, which the U.S. government quickly pinned on Iran, as well as President Trump's decision to substantially increase sanctions against Iran in response, are sobering reminders that the firing of former National Security Advisor John Bolton has done little to move the dynamics of U.S.-Iran relations away from an escalating pathway to war. Lest we forget, Trump's "maximum pressure" policy has been the brainchild of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, not Bolton. The endgame Bolton championed involved a major military attack against Iran, in which he believed that the United States and its regional allies would eliminate Iran's current regime. Bolton embraced the "maximum pressure" policy because he foresaw in it a highly efficient and quick track to advance his own end—attacking Iran. And, had it not been for Trump's last-minute volte-face in June, most probably Bolton would have realized his goal.

Compellence Strategy

As long as the incendiary dynamics of "maximum pressure"—a policy with a long and contentious pedigree—continue to define Trump's approach to Iran, a retaliatory response by either party could rapidly spiral out of control. The logic underlying "maximum pressure" goes back to Thomas Schelling's "compellence" strategy. Schelling, who received the 2005 Noble Prize in Economics, articulated the strategy in his influential book, *Arms and Influence* (1966).

The essence of compellence strategy is bargaining through violence. Derived from game theory, compellence is a strategy of brinksmanship involving active use of coercion to get an enemy to change or abandon its behavior. To be effective, compellence must be implemented by means of a carefully calibrated schedule of punishments with built-in escalation designed to force the enemy to change course. Each time the enemy fails to comply, the punishments must become more severe, ultimately advancing to the use of lethal force.

The strategy is implemented by informing the "enemy" through various signals that they could have peace if they meet a list of demands (in Iran's case, Pompeo's infamous list of 12 demands). The signal must be given with sufficient clarity to indicate punishment will be imposed if the enemy fails to comply. Punishments range from economic strangulation (in Iran's case, "crippling sanctions" and a blockade on Iranian oil exports) to some form of violence through the use of military force. At each point, the enemy's failure to comply will lead to ratcheting up the punishments. Successfully implementing the strategy requires the enforcer state to maintain its *credibility*: so long as the enemy persists in noncompliance,

the promised escalating punishments must be carried out, lest that credibility be lost.

In theory, compellence strategy seems persuasive, especially in situations where the enforcer's military power is significantly superior, and achieving its objectives through negotiations seems doubtful. But in real-world applications, compellence strategy suffers from serious weaknesses. First, it assumes a far greater degree of control and discipline on the part of the decision-makers orchestrating the strategy than exists in any administration, let alone in the Trump administration. But the strategy's lethal weakness lies in its core assumptions about the enemy. The foe is seen as having an aggressive, supremely rational and highly calculating leadership exclusively preoccupied with a cost-benefit assessment of its foreign policy goals. If the costs are unbearably high and the outlook for realizing the benefits poor, the rational leadership would cut its losses, abandon the goals, and hope for a better day.

Clearly, compellence is a strategy of brinksmanship. Once committed to compellence strategy, to maintain credibility, the decision-makers should never question the validity of their assumptions. The strategy must be followed through to the very end, until the foe gives up.

Flawed Assumptions

It is hard to imagine a country, let alone Iran, whose leadership's behavior mirrors the stereotypical imagery presumed by compellence strategy. Compellence strategy leaves no room for diplomacy. Diplomacy demands a nuanced view of the enemy and a measure of empathy that enables one to understand how the enemy views the situation and its interests, and what motives drive its foreign policy behavior. Compellence strategy abandons all complexities and replaces them with a simplistic rational actor prevalent in economic and game theories. By training, economists tend to overlook such critical political phenomena as nationalism and how it shapes the behavior of adversary in interstate conflicts.

Contrary to the expectations of the advocates of the maximum pressure policy, crippling sanctions enforced by a *de facto* blockade have served to inflate the emotional potency of the Iranian nationalism, fueling nationalist outrage. This has raised the cost-tolerance of the regime. No Iranian regime under siege by a powerful external enemy would be willing or able to cave in without mounting serious resistance. A regime that believes its very survival is at stake would be willing to take far greater risks and tolerate a much higher level of cost for the sake of its survival. All these behavioral patterns gainsay the validity of the assumptions made by the compellence strategy.

Finally, had Iran been "aggressively" motivated, as the defenders of the maximum pressure policy claim, by now it well might had given up on opportunities it supposedly was chasing because they had become too costly. But this is not what is happening. Each time the U.S. ratchets up the pressure, Iran digs in deeper and reciprocates by cautiously opting for a riskier response. In other words, compellence strategy has forced Iran into a very dangerous *tit-for-tat* game with the U.S.

This can quickly spiral out of control with unimaginably disastrous consequences for all. The point is an obvious one: Giving up on opportunities will not be fatal for anyone; failing to defend oneself can be. With the possible exception of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, more

than any other time in the past 40 years the Iranian leadership feels threatened by the U.S. Iran's response to U.S. pressure fully conforms with this heightened sense of threat. Meanwhile, against the expectations of the supporters of the maximum pressure policy, factional divisions among the Islamic Republic's ruling elites, which have persisted since the early days of the revolution, have not intensified. In fact, the opposite seems to be occurring. The elites seem to have recognized that, when the chips are down, they will perish or survive together. Each round of escalation appears to push more of them to close ranks behind the leader.

The U.S. first employed compellence strategy in Vietnam under President Johnson during the mid-1960s. The results proved nothing short of disastrous. Compellence was once again employed by the Carter administration in 1979 to pressure Iran to release its U.S. hostages. Carter abandoned the strategy after the rescue mission to free the hostages ended in failure. North Korea is another example wherein the U.S. has, on and off, relied on compellence without achieving its desired goal. And now, under the tutelage of the Secretary of State Pompeo, compellence is being used against Iran for a second time. In almost all cases where the U.S. has consciously relied on compellence strategy to achieve its policy aims, not only has it failed, but it often caused devastating consequences. It is astonishing to see the U.S. employ the strategy again after so many failures.

In sum, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy is an illegitimate child of diplomacy because it doesn't allow for real diplomatic engagement. Under compellence strategy, capitulation is the only acceptable option for the enemy. Either Iran gives in to U.S. demands or it must be forced to do so—even by violent means.

Feature image: Mike Pompeo speaking at the United Against Nuclear Iran summit (U.S. State Department via Flickr)

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