

ISSUES

- Iran represents a set of challenges, if not direct threats, to the U.S. From its ongoing nuclear and ballistic missile program to its expansionist and ideologically-driven anti-American regional policies to its growing partnerships with Russia and China, Iranian actions can greatly undermine American interests in the Middle East.
- The Iranian regime is also at an important juncture domestically. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is over 80 years old and the question of succession is already heating up in Tehran. The outcome of this process can greatly shape the political trajectory of the Islamic Republic depending on which faction — be it the so-called moderates or the hardliners — secures the top seat.

US INTERESTS

- As soon as possible, the U.S. has to come up with a strategic vision on how to tackle the various challenges posed by Tehran. On the nuclear issue, Washington has to decide if it wants to return to the 2015 JCPOA as it was signed. Alternatively, Washington has sufficient leverage to convince the Europeans in particular that modifications need to be made to the deal, such as the “sunset” years, and imposing restrictions on Iran’s ballistic missile program.
- At the same time, to prevent a war with Iran, Washington needs to deliberate carefully about how to provide opportunities to Tehran for it to deescalate and agree to make the kind of concessions the U.S. seeks.
- The U.S. has to pressure Iran to start direct negotiations about its regional actions. In particular, there is a need to roll back Iran’s proxy model. Diplomatic outreach to Tehran can advance this aim but so can limited kinetic action that undoubtedly will shape Iran’s regional agenda. Rolling back anti-U.S. Iranian efforts will also require alliance building in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon and re-engaging Palestinian groups (to counter the Iranian narrative/agenda).
- It is in the interest of the U.S. that the Iranian regime seizes the succession process, which is already well under way, to push the country in the direction of change and reform. American policy-makers, however, have to first determine if the Islamic Republic is able to reform and change course or whether ultimately Washington should work to empower the Iranian opposition in the country and in the diaspora that seek to bring down the Islamic Republic.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain close cooperation with European allies on preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state.
- Pursue a dialogue with Iran about the scope and range of its ballistic missile arsenal and regional activities, and be ready with a credible carrot-and-stick strategy.
- Be ready to demonstrate that the U.S. will roll back non-state militant actors with full force if necessary to shape Tehran's cost-benefit calculations.
- The U.S. should look for ways to convince Iran that substituting an ideological foreign policy for the pursuit of tangible Iranian national interests will benefit a restless Iranian population.
- The Iranian people are ultimately pro-American and it should be Washington's priority not to lose Iran to Russia and China for another generation.