

IRAN

ALEX VATANKA

ISSUES

- Iran represents a set of challenges, if not direct threats, to American interests in the Middle East. From its ongoing nuclear and ballistic missile program to its expansionist and ideologically-driven anti-American regional policies to its growing military and intelligence partnerships with Russia and China, Iranian actions can greatly undermine American interests in the broader Middle East.
- The Islamic Republic is at an important juncture. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is nearly 82 years old and the question of succession is already heating up. The outcome of this process can greatly shape the Islamic Republic's political trajectory 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 nuclear deal as it was signed. Alternatively, it has sufficient leverage to convince the Europeans in particular that modifications need to be made, such as the “sunset” years and securing Tehran's acceptance to impose restrictions on its ballistic missile program as a way of alleviating the concerns of U.S. allies in the Middle East.
- 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 de-escalate and agree to make the kind of concessions the U.S. seeks. For this to happen Washington and Tehran both need to work toward a regional détente process that involves the U.S., Iran, and other key stakeholders. The list of U.S.-Iran differences is long and compartmentalization of files is essential, but a step-by-step process can help generate the missing confidence in each other's goodwill.

- The U.S. has to convince Iran to start direct negotiations about its regional actions, especially rolling back its proxy model. But for this to succeed, Washington has to be ready to offer some reciprocity in the face of what Tehran judges to be its security vulnerabilities and national interest. Diplomatic outreach can advance this aim, but so can limited kinetic action that will shape Iran's regional agenda. Rolling back anti-U.S. Iranian efforts will also require alliance building in countries like Iraq and Lebanon and re-engaging Palestinian groups.
- It is in the U.S. interest that the Islamic Republic seizes the succession process to push the country in the direction of reform. Regardless of whether or not the Islamic Republic is able to change course, Washington should, in any diplomatic process, remain dedicated to standing up for the human rights of the Iranian people. The Iranian people remain overwhelmingly in favor of normalization of relations with the U.S. and offer a major opportunity for American diplomacy.

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.