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Coalition-Building Against Iran

Overview and Analysis

As part of its efforts to maximize pressure on Iran, the Trump Administration is urging a wide variety of international actors to adopt Iran policies similar and complementary to those of the United States. The Administration arguably is attempting to isolate Iran politically and diplomatically by fashioning a multilateral “coalition of the willing” consisting of U.S. allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. It is implementing its strategy in international issue-focused meetings, special U.S.-organized and long established multilateral forums such as the United Nations, and bilateral discussions. One particular, although not exclusive, goal is to persuade the other JCPOA parties to follow the Trump Administration’s May 2018 step of abrogating the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), and reimpose economic sanctions.

However, the U.S. effort to fashion a broad coalition to isolate Iran appears to be faltering. Major U.S. partners in Europe, in particular, have expressed resistance to joining the U.S.-led pressure strategy. They argue that the JCPOA—to which Iran and the non-U.S. parties (UK, France, Germany, EU, Russia, and China)—still adhere, continues to serve its nonproliferation objectives. Countries in Asia, which depend partly on Iran’s energy resources, have sought to maintain their relations with the United States while at the same time pressing the United States not to impose sanctions on their transactions with Iran. On the other hand, U.S. partners in the Middle East, which also seek to limit Iran’s strategic influence in the region, back the Administration’s Iran policy.

The February 2019 Warsaw Ministerial

As part of an escalation of its efforts to isolate and pressure Iran, the Administration announced in January 2019 that it and the Polish government would host a ministerial meeting in Warsaw on February 13-14, 2019. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced while visiting Cairo that the meeting would “...focus on Middle East stability and peace and freedom and security here in this region, and that includes an important element of making sure that Iran is not a destabilizing influence.” The European official response to the meeting announcement was tepid in light of the EU’s repeatedly stated commitment to preserving the JCPOA, and Administration officials subsequently refocused the ministerial on a broader discussion of the various regional conflicts and issues in an attempt to encourage wide high-level participation.

Although 62 countries attended the “Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East,” Germany and France sent only mid-ranking diplomats to

the meeting. UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt attended briefly, and only on condition that he could chair a session on the conflict in Yemen. Russia not only declined to attend, but also organized a seemingly rival, simultaneous meeting in Sochi, Russia, with Turkey and Iran (which was not invited to the Warsaw meeting) to discuss the situation in Syria, where Russia and Iran have both supported the regime of President Bashar al-Asad against an armed rebellion that began in 2011. China also did not attend the Warsaw meeting. Arab partners of the United States sent their foreign ministers to the conference, and they met there with Israel’s Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who strongly supports Trump Administration Iran policy. These interactions were notable given that most Arab states have long publicly shunned Israeli leaders.

Rather than solidify a U.S.-EU coalition against Iran, the Warsaw meeting exposed significant differences on that issue among the historic allies. In specific comments quoted below, Vice President Mike Pence called on the EU countries to abrogate the JCPOA outright and accused them of undermining U.S. sanctions by setting up new mechanisms to facilitate trade with Iran.

Excerpts from Speech by Vice President Mike Pence at the Warsaw Ministerial Working Luncheon, Warsaw Poland, February 14, 2019:

“The time has come for our European partners to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and join with us as we bring the economic and diplomatic pressure necessary to give the Iranian people, the region, and the world the peace, security, and freedom they deserve.”

“Just two weeks ago, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom announced the creation of a special financing mechanism designed to oversee a mirror-image transaction that would replace sanctionable international payments between EU businesses and Iran. They call this scheme a “Special Purpose Vehicle.” We call it an effort to break American sanctions against Iran’s murderous revolutionary regime. It’s an ill-advised step that will only strengthen Iran, weaken the EU, and create still more distance between Europe and the United States.”

The JCPOA and Proliferation

The Administration also has tried to build global support for its Iran policy within established international fora. At the March 5, 2019, meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors, the United States sought to directly challenge the main EU rationale for remaining in the JCPOA—the IAEA’s assertion that Iran is fully complying. The U.S. representative to the IAEA, Jackie Wolcott, highlighted Israel’s capture of

Iranian files about Iran's past research into a nuclear weapon in a 2018 intelligence operation.

The IAEA had “closed” the issue of Iran's past nuclear weapons research just prior to the implementation of JCPOA sanctions relief in January 2016. Ambassador Wolcott stated that “Iran's retention of the archive not only underscores the key weakness of the temporary restrictions of the JCPOA, but strikes at the heart of longstanding concerns that Iran continues to keep its nuclear options open.” Yet, the United States has not accused Iran of non-compliance with its JCPOA commitments: Ambassador Wolcott did acknowledge the IAEA's continued access to and inspections of “all sites in locations in Iran that its inspectors need to visit.”

Excerpts from August 6, 2018 Joint Statement by the EU High Representative and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom:

“The JCPOA is working and delivering on its goal, namely to ensure that the Iranian programme remains exclusively peaceful, as confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 11 consecutive reports.”

“We are determined to protect European economic operators engaged in legitimate business with Iran, in accordance with EU law and with U.N. Security Council resolution 2231.”

“Preserving the nuclear deal with Iran is a matter of respecting international agreements and a matter of international security.”

Missiles, Human Rights and Terrorism

The United States also has sought to build support within the U.N. Security Council to reinstate some sanctions on Iran—sanctions that were lifted by Resolution 2231 (July 2015) that endorsed and enshrined the JCPOA in international law. On December 1, 2018, Secretary of State Pompeo called an Iranian test of a medium-range ballistic missile a “violation” of Resolution 2231, which calls on Iran not to develop ballistic missiles designed to carry a nuclear payload. U.S. officials have asked the Security Council to review that and some prior Iranian missile tests for potential Security Council action, and have referenced the launches to disagree with the European assertion of full Iranian compliance with all JCPOA-related commitments. No specific action by either the Council or the EU against Iran's missile program has been taken to date.

However, while not related directly to the JCPOA, signs suggest that the Administration has been able to encourage European solidarity with the United States on some Iran-related issues. In early January 2019, the British, French, German, Danish, Dutch, and Belgian envoys told Iranian Foreign Ministry officials that Europe could no longer tolerate Iran's ballistic missile tests or Iranian assassination plots against anti-regime activists on European soil.

Immediately after the contentious meeting, the EU imposed its first sanctions on Iran since the JCPOA. The EU added two Iranian intelligence operatives (diplomat Assadollah Asadi and Iranian national Hashemi Moghadam) and one entity (the Directorate for Internal Security of the Iranian Ministry for Intelligence and Security) to its list of terrorist-related persons and entities barred from travel to EU countries and subject to the freezing of their EU-based assets. On March 4, 2019, the Netherlands recalled its ambassador from Tehran amid mutual recriminations over Iran's alleged involvement in the murders of two Iranian dissidents on Dutch soil in 2015 and 2017. The EU terrorism-related sanctions appeared intended, at least in part, to signal EU solidarity with the United States on issues in which there is clear evidence of Iranian action outside of international norms.

U.S. officials also have sought to use Iran's human rights record, which is widely assessed as abysmal, to build multilateral support for U.S. strategy on Iran. In February 2019, citing Iran's execution of a gay man, U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell led a multilateral meeting in Berlin to formulate a joint plan to escalate efforts to end the criminalization of homosexuality worldwide. Ending that criminalization enjoys broad support in Europe, and the meeting was widely viewed an attempt to join the United States and Europe in challenging an additional aspect of Iran's objectionable behavior.

Middle East Strategic Alliance

A key component of the Trump Administration strategy has been to unify U.S. partners in the Middle East region against Iran. There are a number of facets to the U.S. regional strategy that are discussed in detail in several CRS Reports for Congress. One significant initiative, announced in late 2018, is the forging of a “Middle East Strategic Alliance” (MESA), which would join the United States with the Gulf Cooperation Council states (GCC: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) and Egypt and Jordan, two other Sunni Muslim-majority partners. Some called the plan an “Arab NATO” that could enable the United States to rely more on regional states to counter Iran.

The effort to establish the MESA has stalled. Although its prospective members generally agree on the need to counter Iran's regional influence, some GCC states advocate regular engagement with Tehran. Prospects for forming an alliance have foundered primarily over a lingering dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia/UAE over Qatar's insistence on pursuing a relatively independent foreign policy, which includes support for regional organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

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