

On Iran: Don't Snap Back, Step Up



United Nations Security Council
UN Photo/Manuel Elias

The Trump administration was handed a resounding defeat in the United Nations Security Council at the end of last week when it offered a new resolution to indefinitely extend the UN arms embargo on Iran. To get support from others on the Council the U.S. delegation toned down the anti-Iran rhetoric from the text of earlier drafts and applied diplomatic pressure to garner votes, but only one country, the Dominican Republic, acquiesced. The UK, France, and Germany, America's closest allies on the Council, abstained. Russia joined China in voting against the resolution and President Vladimir Putin put out a [statement](#) before the vote in the Council, that proposed an online summit with China, France, Russia, Britain, the United States, Germany, and Iran to find a way to prevent further "confrontation or a spike in tensions" at the United Nations over Iran, adding that the alternative is a "further escalation of tension and an increased risk of conflict."

Not only is the outcome of this vote embarrassing for the United States, it was the first salvo in a dangerous game of brinkmanship that is likely to be the biggest test of the Security Council's resolve in the 75-year history of the United Nations.

It will further isolate America and sabotage a multilateral agreement that was achieving its aim of preventing Iran from developing and deploying nuclear weapons.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [responded](#) to the vote by dramatically claiming the “Council’s failure to act decisively in defense of international peace and security is inexcusable.” But he knew the Russians and the Chinese would block approval. Weeks beforehand it was clear that the intention of the resolution was to give the Trump administration an excuse to make their next, much riskier move. On 30 July Pompeo [told](#) the Senate Foreign Relations Committee exactly what that move would be if the UN resolution failed, saying “we’re going to take the action necessary to ensure that this arms embargo does not expire...we have the capacity to execute snapback and we're going to use it in a way that protects and defends America.” Pompeo was referring to a provision in a previous Security Council [resolution](#), known as the “snapback process,” that enables any one of the Council’s five permanent members that are party to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to re-impose sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the agreement. The Trump administration has vowed to kill the Iran deal and snapback would essentially do that, but there may be a procedural loophole because the U.S. [withdrew](#) from the JCPOA in May 2018, rendering it no longer a “participant” and thus unable to initiate snapback. The Trump administration and some of its most ardent defenders argue that the U.S., as an original participant, does have authority. Either way, there is likely to be a heated high stakes debate in the Security Council pitting America’s allies against the United States about the use of the veto in future resolutions.

The U.S. used to apply a different strategy where it focused on partnering with allies to dissuade isolated rogues. Now the U.S. is isolated, and the Trump administration is widely viewed as reckless by partners that trusted America’s judgment on foreign policy.

The lack of trust did not start with the Trump administration. This latest shellacking in the Council over the Iran deal evokes the trouncing that the George W. Bush administration received at the Security Council in the February 2003 lead up to the Iraq war, where it garnered so few votes that it withdrew its resolution. The chaos from that rebuke of U.S. unilateralism that ensued still lingers. Since

the Trump administration has been tone deaf to the international community on its rupture of the JCPOA, what it must not fail to hear in this rebuke at the Council, reinforced by Vladimir Putin's call for a meeting on conflict escalation by the U.S., is global rejection the prospect of U.S. unilateral military measures. Pompeo's words about the failure of the proposed resolution as inexcusable and the Security Council failing in its mission to defend international peace and security seem—purposely or co-incidentally—to echo then U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell shortly before the Iraq War when he admonished the Council for not taking action on Saddam Hussein's failure to be fully transparent about what proved to be a non-existent stockpile of WMDs. The war that followed was a disaster and the mistrust for the United States is reemerging with President Trump and his Iran policy. The defeat in the Council last Friday illustrates how this administration has failed in any vision or practice of seeing where and how—building from the past—that sanctions policy and practice is linked with counter-proliferation and international cooperation. If you undermine the UN Security Council through withdrawal from existing, globally supported arms control norms and obligations, and also conduct unilateral, dysfunctional sanctions policy, no serious progress on arms control—from arms trade to curbing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—is possible.

The U.S. policy of taking the Iran case to the UN Security Council was initiated under the Bush administration and was sustained and intensified by the Obama administration. Bipartisan political support existed for UN Security Council action on Iran and was sustained through both administrations. This was an important factor in assuring the continuity of U.S. policy and maintaining the unity and effectiveness of UN action.

The backing of the UN Security Council reflected a high degree of international unity in support of exerting diplomatic pressure on Iran. It was especially important that Russia and China joined the consensus. This was the first time the two states supported the U.S. and other countries in applying nonproliferation sanctions on Tehran. This increased Iran's isolation in the international community. Another powerful blow was the active support of the European Union and the cooperation of Germany and other EU member states in applying financial and commercial sanctions on Iran. The imprimatur of the UN Security Council provided the legal and political authority necessary for European states to

join the U.S. in imposing sanctions. The European states not only implemented the sanctions adopted by the Security Council but added their own more forceful measures against Iran. The cumulative weight of UN, European Union, and U.S. sanctions exerted significant persuasive pressure.

The willingness of the UN Security Council to take measures against Iran reflected the high international salience of nonproliferation issues. By contrast, relatively few countries have been willing to support U.S. policy on Iran in relation to the human rights issues. Nuclear proliferation is a threat to all nations, including Russia and China, and provides a basis for gaining high levels of international cooperation.

These and other security concerns were brushed aside with the decision to disregard this textbook case of good practice in effective diplomacy. The JCPOA was the result of a strategic package of sanctions and incentives that yielded unprecedented, independently verified results that made the Middle East region and the international community safer. That safety is now again in jeopardy with the U.S. mounting efforts to increase pressure on Iran actually undermining the remaining safeguards that are in place as a result of the JCPOA.

Even trying to evoke the snapback procedure will not only have dire consequences by scuttling an agreement that had been working until the Trump administration started to weaken it, it also risks further isolating America from the friends and allies that have worked so tirelessly for over seventy years to protect each other and preserve the international rules-based system. It is not time to snap back, it is time to snap out of it and return to the role of a responsible trustworthy partner and a world leader.

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