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# Demanding All and Getting Nothing: Secretary Pompeo's Speech on Iran

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## **Demanding All and Getting Nothing: Secretary Pompeo's Speech on Iran**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

There is a difference between confrontation and diplomacy. Secretary Pompeo's explanation of the new Trump strategy in dealing with Iran contains many accurate indictments of the Iranian regime, but it does far more than call for the usual changes to the JCPOA. It effectively rejects the approach used in the JCPOA of focusing on Iran's nuclear programs and it demands that Iran halt all of the activities the U.S. finds threatening and do so before the U.S. offers any concession on sanctions or other incentives.

This may be an initial negotiating position. The Trump Administration may be willing to reconsider a step-by-step approach if Iran offers enough. It may be willing to make some concessions over sanction in dealing with other countries if they will take a more hardline approach in dealing with Iran.

This scarcely, however, fits the tone or the words of Secretary Pompeo's speech. The speech implies that Iran must negotiate an entirely new agreement, and one that meets a far wider range of demands before the U.S. will offer Iran relief from U.S. sanctions. The speech also explicitly includes making efforts to exclude Iran from key aspects of the world's financial systems.

The Secretary – like the President in his original speech rejecting the JCPOA and the Treasury's statements explaining how sanctions would be applied – offers no concessions to other nations in complying with the terms of U.S. sanctions. The only relief from sanctions – if it can be called that – is to allow some transactions to be phased down within the 180-day deadline under the terms of the original sanctions already permitted.

Much of the speech is familiar from previous speeches by the President and other senior Administration officials. The Secretary lists all of Iran's policies and actions that the Administration feels threaten U.S. interests and those of our allies. These indictments are accurate in most respects, but they go far beyond Iran's nuclear weapons activities. They include virtually all of Iran's missiles, all its security activities and uses of force and weapons transfers in the Gulf and outside of it. The indictment also includes all of Iran's other security activities in the rest of the Middle East and South Asia – including its activities in Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza, Iraq and Yemen and potentially Afghanistan.

The real core of the speech, however, consisted of specific demands that also went far beyond Iran's nuclear program, and each of which presents a major political and secretary challenge to the regime. The text of the speech refers to 12 such demands,



but the wording and numbers is somewhat imprecise. What is clear is that Iran would have to abandon virtually every critical aspect of its security posture to meet them:

*The first demand is that, "Iran must declare to the IAEA a full account of the priori military dimensions of its nuclear program and verifiably abandon such work in perpetuity."* This demand requires the regime to admit that it has lied about nuclear activity in the past and prove when and to what degree it has halted every aspect of its nuclear activity. Nations rarely formally admit that they have lied, particularly when a figure like the Supreme Leader is involved.

*The second demand is that, "Iran must stop enrichment and never resume plutonium processing including the heavy water reactor."* This effectively requires Iran to give up all of its investment in centrifuges and in heavy water that can be used for future power reactors. This goes far beyond its nuclear weapons program and requires Iran to sacrifice a major investment that does have legitimate civil applications without any compensation.

*The third demand is that, "Iran must also provide the IAEA with unqualified access to all sites throughout the entire country."* This seemingly requires Iran to provide immediate access to the IAEA to all military facilities indefinitely into the future. It may or may not be critical to Iran which is certain to have secrets other than the aspects of its nuclear facilities.

*The fourth demand is that, "Iran must end its proliferation of ballistic missiles and halt further launching or development of nuclear-capable missile systems."* The problem with this demand is that any ballistic missile large enough to carry a meaningful conventional payload can also carry a nuclear weapon, and Iran has not been able to really modernize its air force since the U.S. and Britain cut off arms sales in 1980. Giving up its missiles would mean giving up its only conventional deterrent to the far superior equipment in the U.S. and GCC air forces

*The fifth demand is that, "Iran must release all U.S. citizens, as well as citizens of our partners and allies, each of them detained on spurious charges."* This demand presents fewer problems than many of the others but seems to require Iran to accept the fact that none of its detentions of foreign citizens have had a legitimate cause. This is may be true in the case of U.S. citizens, but raises more serious issues if it involves nearly every foreign prisoner in Iran.

*The sixth demand is that, "Iran must end support to Middle East terrorist groups, including Lebanese Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad."* No one can condone terrorism, but the Secretary then seems to make each major group he names an individual additional demand. As such, the resulting list of "terrorists" includes most of Iran's allies in the Middle East. They include the Hezbollah, possibly Hamas, all of the pro-Iranian Shite militias in Iraq, the Houthi in Yemen,

all ties to Al Qaida, all ties to the Taliban, all forces under Iranian command in Syria, and an undefined mix of "terrorists" elsewhere in the world.

*The seventh demand is that, "Iran must respect the sovereignty of the Iraqi Government and permit the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of Shia militias."* This demand may well be critical to create an effective, independent Iraq. It may easily become a key issue in the coalition-building that must follow the recent Iraqi election and it is a demand that key Shiite figures like Sadr and Sistani might well support. The key problem lies in having the U.S. make the demand rather than Iraqis, and openly turning Iraq's already serious problems in creating a national government into a U.S. vs. Iran power struggle.

*The eighth demand is that, "Iran must also end its military support for the Houthi militia and work towards a peaceful political settlement in Yemen."* Once again, the cause is legitimate, but it virtually forces Iran to openly concede to Saudi Arabia and the UAE with no ability to conceal the fact it is conceding and no quid pro quo

*The ninth demand is that, "Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety of Syria."* Syria was Iran's only Arab ally in the Iran-Iraq War, and this demand effectively requires Iran to withdraw from a war it has largely won. Again, it demands a great deal with no clear incentive and requires an Iran which fought Iraqi invaders for eight years in the bloodiest war in the Middle East's recent history with no clear incentive to do so.

*The tenth demand is that, "Iran, too, must end support for the Taliban and other terrorists in Afghanistan and the region, and cease harboring senior al-Qaida leaders"* This might well be a negotiable demand if Iran had some guarantee that the Afghan government could win the war or that there would be an acceptable peace settlement. At present, however, Iran uses such ties both as levers against the U.S. and as protection against an Afghan government defeat. Once again, the U.S. is asking Iran to give up something now for nothing now and vague promises for the future.

*The eleventh demand is that, "Iran, too, must end the IRG Qods Force's support for terrorists and militant partners around the world."* Like its ballistic missiles, Iran's ability to conduct asymmetric warfare and support non-state actors is a critical offset to its weakness in conventional forces. That Iran would give up what it sees as a key aspect of its security and key counter to the U.S. and Iraqi forces without some broader set of new security guarantees seems very doubtful.

*The twelfth demand is that, "Iran must end its threatening behavior against its neighbors – many of whom are U.S. allies. This certainly includes its threats to destroy Israel, and its firing of missiles into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It also includes threats to international shipping and destructive – and*

*destructive cyberattacks.*” Iran's threats against Israel are a key part of both its political ideology and a key tool in claiming that it acts in support of Islam and the Palestinians rather than simply in its own interests. Its challenge to Saudi Arabia and the UAE is part of a broad and continuing arms race in the Gulf that has gone on in different forms since 1980, and where Saudi Arabia and the UAE have a decisive lead in force modernization and airpower. Along with the previous demands, this comes close to demanding unilateral disarmament.

A case can be made for taking a broad hardline position. There is no question that the U.S. and many of its allies would be far more secure if all of these demands were met. The practical problem, however, is that they potentially require Iran to give up virtually every bit of its strategic and military leverage without any improvement in its security. They also require Iran's leadership to define virtually all of its outside allies as terrorists, reverse its position on Israel, and admit in great detail that it has lied to the world about its nuclear weapons programs.

Meeting all of twelve of these demands would effectively isolate Iran and would deprive it of all the proxies and allies it uses to help compensate for its aging and low-quality conventional military forces. They may not be quite as excessive as the Austrian demands on Serbia that led to World War I, but they are virtually unnegotiable as a package, and even some of the individual demands come close to declaring the equivalent of political and economic warfare.

And, like the fact sheets that followed the President's earlier speech rejecting the JCPOA, the speech at least implies that Iran must meet these demands under conditions where it must make "tangible, demonstrated, and sustained shifts" in its policies to meet all these demands before it get a lifting of sanctions and "support in the modernization and integration of the Iranian economy into the international economic system."

Moreover, the Secretary calls for the support of Congress, and hints a treaty level of Congressional support. He also calls upon *all* of America's allies to support the U.S. in what comes close to being an all-or-nothing approach to Iran. This effectively rejects an approach with any links to the E3 (Britain France and Germany), the EU, Russia, China, and the UN of the kind involved in the original JCPOA negotiations.

Iran does face a serious economic crisis, and popular demonstrations as well as concern over its security spending outside Iran. It still seems highly unlikely, however, that either Iran or many of America's allies will support this all-or-nothing approach even when it is presented in far more articulate and well-defined form than the Secretary's speech. Unless the U.S. acts very quickly to at least suggest more negotiable option, it may well end in have demanding all and getting nothing.

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