

THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY AND UNITED STATES WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAN'S NUCLEAR DEAL: 2017-2021

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Abstract

The United States withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal better known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 was one of the biggest and most controversial foreign policy decisions made by the Donald Trump Presidency. Since America withdrew from the JCPOA, tensions between the United States and Iran have risen steadily and reached a boiling point in recent months, sparking fears of war. It is within this context that this paper examines the implications of America withdrawal from the nuclear deal for global peace and security in the 21st century. The study adopted a qualitative research method which is descriptive and explanatory. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews while secondary data were obtained from books and other sources. The study leveraged the liberalist theory to explain America withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the Iranian response. Findings revealed that United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal has worsened relations between Washington and Tehran given the escalated tension between the two countries especially following the killing of a top Iranian General by the United States in January 2020. The paper, therefore, recommends renewed round of talks among parties to the JCPOA to address the contentious issues in the deal.

Keywords: Nuclear Deal, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Foreign Policy, International Atomic Energy Agency, United Nations Security Council, Rogue State.

Introduction

The United States has had relations with Iran ever since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, American Christian missionaries have been in Iran even longer than that. But the United States significant engagement with Iran dates back to World War II. The relationship was generally cordial before then but was first punctured by the involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the coup d'état of 1953 which overthrew a popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddegh, and later by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which brought in the Ayatollah theocratic leadership. These events led to the demise of cordial

relations between the two countries so much more that Iran labelled the United States as the “Great Satan” and the Bush administration labelling Iran a member of an “Axis of Evil” (Bush, 2002).

As Saul Bakhsh noted, the United States-Iranian relationship was similar to the United States-Saudi Arabia relationship in which the United States related with one ruling family. In Iran, the United States established relations with Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi who ascended the throne in 1941 and ruled for almost four decades. From the American side, the interest in Iran was due in large part to the country’s strategic location between the Arabian Gulf and the Soviet Union. Iran was also important because of its oil wealth. The United States considered Iran during the Cold War as a potential ally against the Soviet Union. As Bakhsh argued, as Iran grew wealthier from oil revenues, it increasingly became a market for USA goods, arms, industrial equipment, technology and investments. During the oil boom years of the early 1970s, Iran hired the services of American technicians, advisers, specialists to handle critical sectors of the country’s economy (Bakhsh, 2009).

In 1953, acting under the orders of President Eisenhower the CIA organized a military coup that overthrew Iran’s democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh. The coup was described as “a crucial turning point both in Iran’s modern history and in US-Iran relations” Bakhsh (2009:25). As at the time of writing of this paper, there is no formal diplomatic relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America. Iranian citizens have been banned from entering the United States due to the implementation of President Donald Trump’s executive order titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” In addition, the United States issued additional sanctions against Iran, “the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism” on February 3, 2017 Grobe (2017).

As Iran advances its nuclear programme and trains proxy forces throughout the Middle East, the potential for conflict continues to increase. Iran has pursued a nuclear programme since 1957, with varying degrees of success. By the late 1980s during the brutal war with Iraq, Iran decided to develop nuclear weapons to ensure its security. Consequently, Iran pursued nuclear agreements with China and Russia throughout the 1990s to support its ongoing research into the development of nuclear weapons. Under growing scrutiny and international pressure between 2003-2004 Iran agreed to terminate its nuclear weapons programme insisting only that it maintains its nuclear centrifuges for nuclear energy. However, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) discovered and exposed that Iran had plans to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Later in 2003, a coalition of countries known as the P5+1 (The United States, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom) began a series of negotiations in an effort to contain Iran’s nuclear programme and prevent the development of nuclear weapons. To encourage Iran to cease uranium enrichment and come to the negotiating table, the United Nations Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iran in 2006. The sanctions resulted in twenty percent domestic unemployment and a severe contraction of Iran’s gross domestic product, which in part enabled Hassan Rouhani to win Iran’s presidential election in 2013 because he campaigned on promises to lift sanctions and restore the economy.

Over the next two years, the United States convened several rounds of bilateral talks and led the P5+1 in negotiation with Iran, which resulted in official agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Once the key parties had signed the agreement, the United Nations Security Council approved resolution 2231, which paved the way for sanctions relief. The JCPOA requires Iran to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98% for fifteen years, cut the number of operating centrifuges by two-thirds for ten years, and provide International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors access to enrichment facilities within twenty-four days if the IAEA suspects violations. Moreover, if the IAEA confirms violations, the JCPOA allows for the immediate reinstatement of sanctions. After the JCPOA entered into force on January 16, 2016, Iran received sanctions relief that totaled nearly \$100 billion (Takeyh, 2019).

Though Iran's nuclear ambitions were restricted by JCPOA, Iran has continued to develop ballistic missiles which according to the United States violates United Nations resolution 2231. In response, the United States continues to impose sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program because it considers Iran to be a foremost state sponsor of terrorism spending more than one billion dollars on terrorist financing annually. Because the JCPOA only addressed Iran's nuclear programme and not its revisionism or ballistic missile programs, the Trump administration asserted that the agreement was a stopgap. Thus, in May 2018, President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA, pledging to seek a more comprehensive deal. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo subsequently issued twelve requirements for a new agreement, which Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei responded to by proposing seven conditions for remaining in the JCPOA. Since May 2018, America has re-imposed and raised new sanctions against Iran and demanded that European countries withdraw from the JCPOA as part of new containment Strategy. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom refused to do so, and have since attempted to devise a backchannel for trade with Iran; America responded by threatening European allies and European companies with consequences should they continue to do, business with Iran. Iran's oil exports have since decreased by more than half. United States sanctions have sparked the worst economic crisis Iran has faced in forty years and emboldened Iranian hardliners (Gordon, 2020, p.40).

Since the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018, tensions have risen between the United States and Iran. While America pursues a strategy of maximum pressure to bring Iran to the negotiating table, Iran has begun to contravene the JCPOA's restrictions on its nuclear programme. In April 2019, the United States designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a terrorist organisation which happens to be the first time the United States classified part of another government as such. In May 2019, after intelligence suggested that Iran and its militias were preparing to attack U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, the United States deployed B-52 nuclear-capable bombers, an aircraft carrier strike group, and additional patriot missile batteries to the Middle East to deter Iran. The same week, Iran announced a sixty-day deadline for sanctions relief before exceeding the JCPOA's cap on uranium enrichment levels and later threatened to exceed uranium stockpile limits. Also, in May 2019, following a rocket attack on Baghdad's Green Zone in Iraq which U.S. defence officials blamed on Iran, nonemergency U.S. government employees were evacuated from Iraq. Over the next month, six oil tankers in or near the Strait of Hormuz were attacked, which U.S. government officials have also blamed on Iran, and the

United States deployed an additional 2,500 troops to the Middle East. Escalating military tension has been matched by increasingly bellicose rhetoric from government officials. In June, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif warned that the United States “cannot expect to stay safe”, and President Trump cautioned that there’s “always a chance” of war with Iran. (Gordon, 2020).

Tensions peaked in late June 2019 after Iran downed a U.S. Global Hawk drone in the Strait of Hormuz. In response President Trump approved and quickly cancelled a retaliatory strike, instead he ordered a cyber-attack on the IRGC and Iran’s missile systems and imposing new sanctions on Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and top Iranian military commanders. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other U.S. government officials briefed congress on Iran’s ties with al-Qaeda, raising concerns from Congressional leadership that President Trump would approve a war with Iran by citing the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which grants the president authority to target al-Qaeda and countries supporting the group. On July 1, 2019, Iran exceeded the JCPOA’s cap on uranium stockpiles. Later in July, the United States downed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz after the drone approached a U.S. Navy ship. United States withdrawal from the nuclear deal will allow Iran to leave the deal and to revitalize its nuclear programme, thus unleashing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East with unpredictable and dangerous consequences. The crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme could re-emerge, opening the possibility of military confrontation over it. In addition, a collapse of the deal, which emboldens Iran’s hardliners, could result in more unfettered regional policies which they command over. Also, Iran could within days’ breach part of its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, a move that could eventually culminate in the return of all international sanctions on the country. Iran could also exceed a cap on low enriched uranium. The limit was agreed as part of the nuclear deal that lifted most international sanctions on Iran in return for curbs on its atomic activities (Indyk, 2020).

Iranian Nuclear Deal: An Overview

On July 14, 2015, Iran and the six powers that have negotiated with Iran over its nuclear program (United states, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany collectively known as the P5+1) finalized a “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action”, (JCOPA) that claims to limit Iran’s nuclear program to peaceful purposes, in exchange for broad relief from United States, European Union (EU) and United Nations Sections. The agreement is sweeping: reversing decades of bipartisan U.S policy, and endorsing Iran as a nuclear threshold state able to quickly produce nuclear weapons on an industrial scale in the near future.

Former United States President Barack Obama vigorously defended the international accord to restrain Iran’s nuclear program by saying it cuts off all of Iran’s pathways to a bomb. It, is a very good deal, Obama said in a nearly hour-long address at American University in Washington. He said if the pact is implemented, it would be good for Iran. It would be good for United States. It would be good for a region that, has known, too much conflict. It would be good for the world (Pande, 2015).

Obama stressed that the accord builds on an American tradition of strong, principled diplomacy with adversaries. Drawing a comparison to another controversial presidential speech at American University a half-century ago, Obama argued the nation is on the blink of

another momentous choice. He recalled how President John F. Kennedy called for diplomatic negotiations with the former Soviet Union to curb nuclear tests, in the face of fierce opposition from those who wanted U.S. military action. Obama said the approach the United States took – keeping its military strong, but taking no aggressive action, in favour of patient diplomacy – eventually resulted in several international treaties to limit nuclear activity. The deal would bar Tehran from building a nuclear weapon in exchange for lifting United Nations and Western sanctions that have hobbled Iran's economy. Opponents say provision to verify that Iran is complying with accord is too weak. Obama rebuffed such criticism, saying, this is the strongest no proliferation ever negotiated (Pande, 2015).

Robert Loftis, agreed that the deal is a good deal because the outlines of the agreement are simple: in return for a six-month halt to certain construction and enrichment activities, conversion and diluted of an existing 20 percent of enriched uranium stocks, and intrusive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United States and other powers will offer limited relief from crippling sanctions on Iran's economy. In essence, it deprives Iran of the opportunity to readily further enriched uranium to levels of purity necessary for nuclear weapons. Over the course of this six-month agreement, the sides will explore the possibility of a comprehensive pact that will ensure Iran's nuclear program is limited to civilian purposes and that treats Iran as any other signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. If, during the next six months, it becomes clear that the Iranians are cheating or trying to hide a military program, then the sanctions can be re-imposed immediately and further steps considered (Loftis, 2013). It is worth highlighting that the Iranians made this agreement not just with the United States and its European allies, but also with Russians and the Chinese. The Iranians would have to weigh the costs of crossing its most sympathetic global powers by failing to live up to the agreement. Far from being the historic mistake that most people think, the accord is the first step toward a goal that we all claim to share which is an Iran that does not pose a nuclear threat to our friends and allies. There are those, including in the US congress, who argue that harsh sanctions have brought Iran to the bargaining table and that ratcheting up the pressure even further will bring Tehran to its knees. And therein lies the problem: if Iran concludes that the real aim of sanctions is not the nuclear program, but the destruction of the Iranian regime itself, then the incentives to develop the bomb regardless of the costs are quite compelling (Loftis, 2013).

The same arguments apply to the military option, with even more force. Those who argue for surgical strikes ignore the old military adage that the enemy has a vote in the outcome. They assume that the Iranians will play by the rules. Nothing in recent history suggests that will be the case, and the last 10 years should have taught us something about the costs and dangers of asymmetrical warfare. Unless military action completely destroys the Iranian nuclear infrastructure and wipes out its ruling class and scientists, the Iranians will come to one logical conclusion available which is getting the bomb is their only defence against, future military action Loftis (2013). We cannot be blind to the nature of the Iranian regime. We have many issues with them besides the potential of nuclear weapons. But this is not about trusting or liking the Iranians. It is about seeing if we can negotiate a verifiable agreement to move Iran away from acquiring nuclear weapons. It is time to have trust in our abilities, and to remember the words of President Kennedy: We will never negotiate from fear, but we will never fear to negotiate (Loftis, 2013).

Theoretical Analysis

Liberalist Theory

Liberalism is based on the moral argument that ensuring the right of an individual person to life, liberty and property is the highest goal of government. Consequently, liberals' emphasis the wellbeing of the individual as the fundamental building block of a just political system characterized by unchecked power, such as a monarchy or a dictatorship, cannot protect the life and liberty of its citizens. Therefore, the main concern of liberalism is to construct institutions that protect individual freedom by limiting and checking political power. While these are issues of domestic politics, the realm of international relations is also important to liberals because a state's activities abroad can have a strong influence on liberty at home (Talmaza, 2020).

In examining how the Iran nuclear deal fits into the ideals and optimism laid out in liberalism, the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) lends itself to the best observation. The IAEA's role is primarily to execute the stipulations organized in the deal; that is, to monitor the centrifuges still in use (Iran will go from have 20,000 active centrifuges to 6,104 under the Iran Nuclear Deal) and to oversee the importation of uranium into the country for energy use. With the lens of liberalism, the IAEA would be examined to be an international regime responsible for facilitating the actions of states in an anarchic international system. In this case, the IAEA is being used to keep the actions of Iran in line with the specifications of the deal and, to an extent, check the international cooperation and international peace between Iran and the rest of the international system. Liberals believe that international relations will hopefully lead to peaceful cooperation among all the actors. In this light, the IAEA's role is directly related to the perpetuation of this peaceful cooperation (Talmaza, 2020).

The United States involvement in the Iran nuclear deal, while drastically different from that of the IAEA, fits into a similar box for cause and outcome. Perhaps one of the most important actors in the Iran nuclear deal, the United States' rationale was based, like the IAEA, in the goal of a nonviolent liaison. In liberal terms, their participation is a chief example of hegemonic dominance in the international system and how this propagates the successful interaction between states. Liberals believe that the international system is supported by economic interdependence, and it is oftentimes hegemons, like the United States, that facilitate Interstate communications. In the Iran Nuclear deal, the United States acted both as a catalyst and an inhibitor in their role of bring many key players to the proverbial table, but then upheld the pacific interactions that were sought after in this deal. Talmaza, (2020)

The Iran nuclear deal lands in the realm of liberal theory given the actors working together to ensure the sustenance of global security and interactions. The international Atomic Energy Agency, the United States, and Iran all gathered to negotiate a deal that, to the liberal thinker, had its roots in the purpose of cooperation and peaceful international communications. From the international regime that the IAEA maintains, and the security that United States sought, to the many stipulations that Iran agreed to, the Iran Nuclear deal sets a Precedent for International dealings.

The Trump Presidency and United States withdrawal from Iranian Nuclear Deal

Findings reveals that President Trump decided to withdraw the United States from the nuclear deal and to re-impose the economic sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under it. Trump had long criticized the nuclear deal as “the worst deal ever”. He cited as his reasons for leaving the agreement the fact that the deal did not address Iran’s ballistic missile program or its regional behaviour, and that most of Iran’s commitments under the deal are limited to a 10-15-year period, after which Iran could resume its enrichment and other covered activities that are nuclear related.

What is peculiar about Trump’s decision is that he presented no evidence that Iran wasn’t complying with its obligations. Neither the president nor the foreign countries that support his decision, chiefly Israel and Saudi Arabia, have presented any evidence that Iran is technically in violation of the deal. Instead, the president’s case revolved around perceived defects in the deal itself. The first one is that the deal isn’t entirely permanent; the restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program start to relax about 10 years after the deal was signed. The second is that the deal didn’t cover other problematic things Iran was doing, including ballistic missile development and its support for violent militias around the Middle East (Beauchamp, 2018). In responding to if the reason(s) Trump gave for withdrawing United States from the deal were justifiable, a respondent noted that the reason(s) President Donald Trump gave for withdrawing from the deal is justifiable as he is only keeping faith to the promise he made before coming into office which is to re-evaluate every deal that has been made by previous presidents;

If we look at President Trumps tactics, one thing is overriding which is the fact that he rolled into office on the premise of America first and that every deal that the previous presidents especially Obama have gone into will be re-evaluated. So, if we look at it from that angle, the man is keeping faith to his promise. So, his reason is justifiable against the backdrop that he can get a better deal. Now whether he will get the better deal is what we are yet to see because he has been able to muscle his way in the international scene so, he may in the final analysis get a better deal. I agree that his reason is justifiable because Obama gave too much to Iran which is a nation known for sponsoring terrorism in the Middle East and on that note, Iran shouldn’t have a nuclear weapon at all (Field survey, 2020)

However, other respondents were of the opinion that President Trump should have given room for re-negotiation before removing United States totally from the deal and so, the reason he gave for that singular action is not justifiable.

We have seen Donald Trump playing those cards not only with Iran. He plays it and sometimes he gets away with it but not in all the instances. What happened in North Korea might not be what should be expected in the case of Iran. To me bluff works in some instances even with the trade war between the United States and China. Trump calls the bluff and then there will be a meeting to give room for better negotiations. So, I don’t think his reasons for pulling United States out of the nuclear deal are justifiable. (Field survey 2020).

Furthermore, the respondents stated that,

President Trump wants to isolate Iran and put it under the limelight as a threat to international peace and security in order to deprive Tehran from the benefits it sought from the JCPOA. But he is playing his cards in the worst way possible. By withdrawing and reinstating sanctions, he has already thrown much of his leverage against Iran away. Therefore, the reason United States gave for withdrawing is not justifiable. President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and openly violate the provisions of the agreement may not quite be a gift to Tehran, but it is at least as damaging to the United States as it is to Iran. It isolates the United States and positions it as the wrecker of the deal (Field survey, 2020)

The above sentiments point to the fact that the Trump administration justification for abandoning the deal was a disservice to both America and Iran and by extension the global community. The deal is not built on lies nor will expire in seven years as Trump claims. Rather it puts in place a wide array of restrictions and prohibitions on the most sensitive nuclear activities and it requires permanent, robust international monitoring to detect and deter any future effort by Iran to reconstitute the nuclear weapons effort it had pursued before (Davenport, 2018).

Conclusion/Recommendations

The study has established that the Iranian nuclear deal was put together to prevent Iran from possessing nuclear arsenals. Consequently, the Trump Presidency decision to withdraw the United States from the deal was a disservice to both parties because it exacerbated tensions between Washington and Tehran. With the incumbent Joe Biden administration decision to rejoin the deal, it remains to be seen whether or not America being a principal actor in the peace deal arrangement would be able to muster every available diplomatically clout to ensure that the Iran peace deal is well implemented to the satisfaction of all.

In light of the above, the following recommendations are made.

1. There is need for United States to return as a signatory to the nuclear deal it originally signed and propose for an amendment of the deal to suit the policy of the Biden administration.
2. Iran should still keep to its own end of the nuclear deal since it still has the support of the remaining signatories to the deal.

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