



The Trump Presidency and Iran's Nuclear Deal

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Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections has raised serious questions about whether the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a landmark nuclear accord signed in July 2015, has a future.

The election of Donald Trump as US President potentially means very uncertain times for the future of US-Iranian relations. For example, during his presidential campaign trail, Trump **declared**—“My number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran”. If the Trump administration acts on his campaign rhetoric, there is a distinct possibility that it will be overwhelmed by multiple contradictions and problems.

The Iran Nuclear Deal

The deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), stripped Iran of the ability to develop a nuclear weapon system into the next decade in exchange for the gradual lifting of crippling sanctions. The deal holds Iran to agree to cap enrichment levels of uranium at 3.67 percent for the next fifteen years, which will cut the Iranian enrichment capacity by two-thirds. Under the agreement, Iran ended up shipping the lion's share of its 20 percent enriched uranium abroad. The deal also provided for more intrusive monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, and for the heavy water reactor at Arak to not produce weapons grade plutonium. On November 20th 2016, as a gesture of good will, Iran shipped its remaining heavy water abroad as well. Thus, the breakout capability of Iran to potentially make a nuclear bomb was noticeably extended from two-months to a year, giving further assurance to the international community that the Islamic Republic will not be closer to making a bomb any time soon.

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In exchange, Iran would be relieved from the nuclear-related sanctions, and if it violates the agreement, the sanctions will be re-imposed through a snap-back mechanism built in to the agreement. Since the signing of the agreement, all the reports by the monitoring agencies, including the IAEA, indicate that Iran has abided by its end of the bargain. Seen in this context, it is easy to understand the expression of concern and apprehension surrounding Trump's ascent to power among many members of Iran's ruling elite.

What President Trump could mean for US-Iran relations

Two very different futures in US-Iran relations may lie ahead.

- ***Withdrawal***



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First, the Trump administration may decide to withdraw from the nuclear deal, impose further sanctions on, and try to isolate Iran. Trump may seek better ties with Russia and tolerate the Assad regime in Syria in an attempt to defeat and dismantle the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Trump has declared the defeat of ISIS to be his number one priority in the Middle East and seeks to partner with the anti-ISIS coalition. Yet Iran has been actively involved in the war against ISIS in Syria in alliance with Russia.. It thus remains to be seen how the Trump administration could resolve this contradiction if it tries to defeat ISIS whilst simultaneously escalating tensions with Iran.

Since the Republicans currently control both houses of Congress and many of their members were opposed to the deal when it was signed, bolstered by their electoral victory, they may introduce new bills demanding the renegotiation of

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the agreement, or prevent sanctions relief, and propose the imposition of new US unilateral sanctions on Iran. In November 2017, the US Senate passed a bill with a vote of 99 to 0 to extend the Iran sanctions for another decade, and the Obama administration—which previously had threatened to veto such a bill—has stated that the president is not likely to veto it. In addition, the Trump foreign policy team has stated that they plan to impose new sets of sanctions on Iran for its missile defense system. These new political developments are certain to evoke a reaction from Tehran in kind. If such an escalation of the anti-Iran campaign in Washington continues, despite the Islamic Republic fulfilling its obligations under the nuclear deal, absent new diplomatic breakthroughs between Tehran and Washington, in all likelihood, the deal as we know it now would be dead and Washington's tensions with Tehran would grow. If this outcome materializes, it would undermine the Rouhani administration and the moderates and would strengthen the position of hardliners in Iran's factional politics.

President-elect Trump, who identified the nuclear pact as “disastrous” and “the worst deal ever” and labeled the Islamic Republic as “the foremost terrorist state” is less likely to oppose further congressional sanctions on Iran. Hence, while the newly appointed Secretary of Defense, General James Matthis, has stated that he would not be inclined to scrap the nuclear deal, he has also stated publically that it is not ISIS but Iran that is the single most critical security threat to the United States. Additionally, the powerful pro-Israeli lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the neo-conservatives and influential foreign policy voices on the right—like the National Security Adviser, General Michael Flynn, John Bolton, James Woolsey, and Newt Gingrich— have been pushing hard for further containment of and confrontation with Iran.

From the Netanyahu administration's standpoint, discarding the nuclear deal would have a dual impact. On the one hand, such an initiative would prevent the Islamic Republic from reaping the benefit of sanctions relief, thus allowing it to expand its economic and political influence in the region- an undesirable outcome for the Israeli leadership.-On the other hand, unilaterally tearing up the deal would remove all the inhibitions on the part of Iranian leaders to develop a nuclear arsenal, another undesirable outcome for Israel. To prevent this from happening, US/Israeli cyberattacks on Iran's nuclear program, using sophisticated worms such as Stuxnet, or even military strikes, could be ordered in future.

The Israeli leadership would therefore most likely favor an option in which the current nuclear agreement would stand, but with a new interpretation which would prevent Iran from receiving the full economic and political benefit of sanctions relief. In other words, the nuclear agreement should not lead to normalization of relations with Tehran and the policy of containment of the Islamic Republic with *the ultimate goal of regime change* should persist. It is also important to note that, since Trump's cabinet is so far is dominated by hard-liners, they are likely to be in favor of accelerating pressure on Tehran and ensuring that it does not reap the benefit of sanctions relief and expand its regional power.

- ***Limited Rapprochement***

The second option offers a different outlook, one that serves both countries' national interests, whereby the Trump administration could consider seeking a limited rapprochement with Iran, holding out the prospect of future diplomatic— if not commercial—ties between the two countries. This option uses the nuclear deal as a way to ease tensions between Tehran and Washington on other

longstanding problems. This approach will also render Iran more responsive to cooperation on specific issues of regional conflict such as the fight against ISIS and the Taliban while at the same time making progress toward possible venues for cooperation, such as shaping the future of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

The advantages of this approach will outweigh its costs, as Tehran and Washington are likely to find several overlaps in pursuit of their foreign policy interests. Moreover, this approach would allow Washington to build up a new momentum to accommodate Tehran's emerging economic interests while also using its leverage over the country's regional role to mitigate the negative impact of instability in the Middle East. The challenge is to recognize that building trust and sustainable cooperation between Tehran and Washington is the key first step to reversing the troubled and tumultuous status quo of tensions and enmity between the two nations.

While Trump may not seek a new sanctions regime against Iran so long as the latter abides by its obligations, the influence of neo-conservatives in his administration probably means that the removal of first-order sanctions, imposed by the US, is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Tehran's Reaction

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has noted that the election of Donald Trump as the US president will have no effect on Iran's foreign policy conduct. Rouhani has also stated that the nuclear deal is independent of the new US administrations' decision and cannot be rescinded by the government's change in Washington. "Iran's sagacity," Rouhani has **asserted**, "was in having the nuclear deal endorsed as a resolution by the UN Security Council and not just

an agreement with a single country or administration, so it cannot be changed by decisions of one government.” A recent US Senate vote to extend the sanctions on Iran for ten more years is likely to undermine Rouhani’s position, who sees that his chances of getting re-elected in May 2017 are quickly vanishing under the threat of further sanctions by the United States. Sensing that, given these sanctions, he cannot ultimately make good on his promise of an economic renaissance after the nuclear deal, Rouhani **was emphatic**: “If the Iran Sanction Act is carried out, it will be a clear and obvious violation of the [nuclear] agreement and will be met with a very harsh response from us.” The Obama administration has said that the new round of sanctions did not violate the nuclear agreement.

The United States, one observer notes, cannot unilaterally unravel or amend the agreement without violating international law. Any attempt to directly undermine the deal or even renegotiate it **will isolate** the United States- not Iran. Beyond Iran, pulling out of the deal would also risk intensifying tensions in the region, most notably in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan, countries in which Iran has **played a significant role**. This choice is equally fraught with difficulties in part because several key nations have signed off on this agreement. Thus, unilaterally negating or sabotaging the nuclear agreement is likely to have serious international implications beyond the region. The United States is likely to emerge out of step with the UN resolution and **all the signatories to this agreement**.

Furthermore, such a policy is imbued with so many deep uncertainties that it may backfire. The real question is, then, what exactly can the United States do if Iran continues to abide by its obligations under the nuclear deal and continue its rapprochement with the European Union by simply deepening their

commercial and trade ties with those countries? Cognizant of the unpredictability surrounding the future of US policy toward Iran, the Islamic Republic has kept the option of walking away from the deal open, while not abandoning its “Eastern Strategy” that is predicated on maintaining its extensive bilateral ties with Beijing and Moscow. The Islamic Republic is likely to continue to maintain these ties as an insurance policy against the possible continuation or escalation of Washington’s policy of containment and confrontation. Along the same lines, should Trump adopt hostile policies toward Iran, this will likely empower the Islamic Republic’s hardliners, creating more political pressure on the moderates there, thus complicating their chances of winning the 2017 presidential elections. Should this scenario materialize, Tehran is *likely to assume* a more aggressive regional policy posture in response to Washington’s belligerence.

The Future: which option will Trump take?

In an interview with CNN in September of 2015, Trump the businessman revealed his concern about America being shot out of the Iranian market, while the Chinese, the Russians and the Europeans have expanded their trade and commercial ties with Iran since the *signing of the agreement* in July of 2015. Trump should know that the US cannot hope to emerge as a major economic partner for Iran by imposing a new set of sanctions or ratcheting up political pressure on Tehran. It may turn out that Trump, like his Republican predecessors, would conclude that US bilateral trade, military and political ties with its Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies are much more significant than Iran.

It is also likely that Trump, the candidate of the Republican Party, who had to appeal to that conservative constituency, would turn out to be different from

the Trump the president. He may find it necessary to move ideologically to the center and heed the centrist logic of power politics. His past record as a businessman, who regularly funded the political campaigns of both Democrat and Republican politicians, and repeatedly changed his position on political issues during the presidential campaign, may predispose him toward adopting an erratic as well as a pragmatic course with no clear political vision. This may lead to a foreign policy style that would be more transactional rather than ideological.

However, having won the presidency as a Republican candidate, he could be captured by the very party establishment that he derided during his campaign. So far his campaign promise of “draining the swamp” has turned out, in practice, to involve filling his administration with hawks from the Republican Party, Washington insiders and the Wall Street establishment. Therefore, it is possible that he will decide to outsource his Iran policy to a cabinet dominated by conservative hardliners. In that case, the anti-Iran agenda discussed above would become ascendant. In the past, many Republican politicians have stated that the complete political capitulation of Tehran is the only acceptable outcome that they would support. However, if he chooses to play an active role in formulating his administration’s Iran policy, then Trump the pragmatist may have the sway.

While the early signs are not promising, it is simply too early to know which option the Trump administration will choose and what the details of his future policies might be, but there is no reason to believe that things will improve beyond present conditions, and more than likely, there is reason to believe that Trump may be a far better ally to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Saudi Royal family than was the Obama administration, a realistic possibility for

which Tehran has surely a contingency. How these emerging realities will play out in coming months and years remains to be seen. The choice for the Trump administration—engaging or isolating Iran—couldn't be more stark and profound.

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