

Death of a Thousand Cuts: Why the US Cannot Oppose Iran Alone

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### **US Policy Response to Iran's Nuclear Program**

On May 8th, 2018, President Donald Trump delivered on his campaign promise of withdrawing the US from the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA), better known as the Iran Deal. This action was taken despite the urging of other members of the deal (China, the UK, France, Russia, and Germany), ultimately making the US decision entirely unilateral. In the wake of this decision, the US foreign policy apparatus must quickly take stock of the options at its disposal because action cannot be delayed forever. In order to reverse the loss of American power and prestige, the US should re-engage with the JCPOA at the soonest point possible before our hand is forced while we occupy a much worse position.

### The Current Context

Under the deal, signed back in 2015, between the so-called P5+1<sup>1</sup> and Iran, the latter country agreed to not pursue the creation of nuclear weapons and to limit its uranium enrichment to civilian purposes; in return for these promises, the incredibly complex system of sanctions imposed upon Iran by dozens of countries around the world were partially or entirely lifted (Beauchamp 2018; Harrell 2018). In the brief period since this has occurred, Iranian economic interaction with the world has increased exponentially with an 800% rise in exports to Europe and various plans/pledges from French company *Total* and the Russian government, among others, to invest billions of dollars into Iran's oil and gas sector; additionally, many non-European countries such as China, India, South Korea, and so on have become larger

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<sup>1</sup> Comprised of: The US, the UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany.

importers of Iranian crude oil (Harrell 2018).<sup>2</sup> By all accounts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), whose inspectors have had extensive access to Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran has to this point been fully compliant with the stipulations of the JCPOA (Al Jazeera 2018). And in response to the news, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani reaffirmed his commitment to making the deal work with the remaining nations, but warned that if Iran could not reach satisfactory economic safeguards, then the nation would “start enriching more uranium than before” (Mousavian).

The lesson to be learned here is this: Iran has already become somewhat integrated into the world economy, and the current administration expresses desire for this status to remain. Furthermore, it is entirely possible for them to follow through on their threats if America tries to threaten that—and few American allies in the region<sup>3</sup> would like to see a nuclear-equipped Iran. So what is available to us?

### Policy Options

Below we will explore three options for future courses of engagement with Iran. At this point it should be noted that disengagement is not listed among them; this is done for the simple reason that total disengagement is impossible. Such would require pulling all foreign or military aid to Middle Eastern allies or Iranian-influenced conflict zones, which would be too complex of a process to complete within a reasonable amount of time. Keeping only feasible options then provides us with the options below:

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<sup>2</sup> Although this has not necessarily translated to impressive gains for all aspects of the Iranian economy (or the people who work within), but that subject would require much greater examination that can be given here

<sup>3</sup> Or around the world, for that matter.

**First:** Engaging Iran unilaterally. Such a process would be much more intensive—financially and attention-wise—than previous interaction with Iran, but it is not, as some have suggested, totally untenable. Such a plan would require three elements:

- 1) Reimposition of sanctions to isolate Iran from American business.<sup>4</sup> This would have the effect of denying to Iran a not-insignificant amount of interaction with the American financial or import sectors. The primary purpose of this action is to prevent American special interests from becoming factors of consideration in actions against Iran.
- 2) Greater military efforts to counter Iranian aspirations abroad, namely in Yemen and Syria. This may be done either through military intervention either through aid-giving or troop deployment, support for local anti-Iran regimes, and possible deployment of airpower to otherwise contain direct threats in the region. Of course, in doing so, we should be careful to not to overcommit to such a degree that would entail public pushback; to attempt and fail, in this case, will be much worse than to have never attempted at all—it provides clear evidence of how far American power may extend in the world to opposing actors.
- 3) Much greater diplomatic interaction with Iran to make our intentions clear, and concurrently negotiate our way to a more agreeable status quo. The rise in the use of so-called kinetic diplomacy in American foreign policy has greatly improved our ability to shape the world with a hammer, but taken away our ability to paint with a brush (Toft 2018). A diplomatic relationship is required to direct this coercive force into a productive direction, rather than being a blindly antagonizing force.

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<sup>4</sup> Although it would be ideal to also isolate Iran totally, the global reimposition of the former network of sanctions is not doable for reasons that will be discussed later.

**Second:** We may try to return to some semblance of the previous status quo of isolating Iran until they are more receptive to our preferences. Although US sanctions themselves may not be very difficult to reimpose—President Trump need only fail to renew the waivers—but the global network cannot be “turned on,” so to speak, at a moment’s notice; the previous sanctions regime were implemented over the course of nine years, through two presidencies, both of whom exerted significant diplomatic power to encourage other countries to officially or unofficially sanction Iran (Harrell 2018). The Trump administration has much less political capital in the world, having long depleted the State Department and continually alienated US allies, making such a process much more difficult.

Of course, there is also the option of imposing “secondary sanctions,” targeting various sectors of Iran’s economy. These penalize businesses which interact with the true target of the sanction, forcing a decision between working with Iran and working with the US (Beauchamp 2018). Doing so against the wishes of other countries, however, may also further damage our already frayed ties with traditional US allies; and furthermore make it more unlikely that they will be willing to comply with more comprehensive and multilateral action in conjunction with the US in the future.

**Third:** We come to the most difficult option: re-entering the deal. Such may not be possible under the current administration, given the Trump cabinet’s extreme hawkiness on Iran,<sup>5</sup> but if the JCPOA remains in effect until either the Trump cabinet shifts its members again (and thus its dominant ideologies), or until a more friendly American administration comes to power, then the option of returning to the deal emerges. Such a course of action would require much less

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<sup>5</sup> Especially by National Security Advisor John Bolton, who has repeatedly called for the overthrow of the Iranian regime, and has given no indication that his thoughts on the matter have changed at all.

American attention and effort, as it is simply coming to the table which is already being run by other members, and thus has the virtue of being the most cost-efficient measure. For a variety of reasons that shall be discussed below, this is—counter-intuitively—the best action available to US policymakers.

### Recommendation

The Trump administration's reputation for sudden decisions is well known, and has already done *deep* damage to American credibility abroad. We must reverse this course of action if we wish to retain our place of power, or else be cursed with irrelevance; an army is not a foreign policy. Increasing military actions while eschewing diplomacy and alienating all but a few fanatic allies also makes America an increasing threat to the world at large. Despite our belief that we are the "indispensable" nation, we are only as important as we make ourselves. Leaving the JCPOA is a further American abdication of responsibility that worsens our position on two fronts: a) Any attempt to reimpose sanctions would necessarily bring us into conflict already unfriendly parties which deal with Iran, namely Russia and China; and b) we lose much of our bargaining power with Iran. While the consequences may be primarily diplomatic for now, imagine a world where the JCPOA falls apart entirely. Iran may very well, as President Rouhani has promised, restart its nuclear program. It should be noted that the argument has been made that Iran having the bomb need not be a catastrophic event; however, were Iran to obtain nuclear weapons after the US failed to unilaterally prevent them from doing so, then it would show the world that even moderately powerful nations can overcome the US, and, if the North Korean model is anything to go by, the quickest way to international legitimacy is to obtain a nuclear arsenal. This does not necessarily mean there will suddenly be a rush of nuclear

proliferation. This event, though, does provide information to all potential US enemies: the difference between regime change and long-term survival may lie in the possession of the ultimate deterrence.

Rejoining the JCPOA is not a panacea, of course. Coming back to the table with our nation's tail between our legs is obviously far less than optimal. It would, though, give the US a chance to reassert some power by ensuring that Iran sticks to the terms of the agreement by way of more powerful (and legitimate) responses when or if material breaches can be established; and if the deal fell apart while the US were working *with* other nations, it would find itself in a far superior position to call for global sanctions against Iran. Our ego, perhaps, would have to be curtailed, lest we risk running our credibility thin anyway—amending mistakes is one thing, but refusing to acknowledge them at all provides evidence to the world at large that American does not understand its own weaknesses and might thus still be susceptible to them.

Whatever the cost of returning to the table, it is sure to be much smaller, both by soft power and hard power measures, than forging our own path. American power is generated by our leadership, not the other way around. If we abandon the helm, then we just might realize—too late—that another, perhaps unfriendly, helmsman has taken it up.

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