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Understanding the Iranian nuclear deal Why the deal and what it achieved

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President Trump's decision to back out of the Iranian nuclear deal last year has had limited impact on the public, for few seem to have taken into account the circumstances of the deal itself, and the consequences we potentially face by the US withdrawal.

Until 2015 Iran had a flourishing business in the nuclear industry, with approximately 20.000 enrichment machines in full production. These machines are responsible for enriching natural Uranium, which contains an average of 1% (in natural state) of the U235 isotope necessary for nuclear use, to 19% as they were achieving up to 2015. This enrichment process, however, requires that the percentage is increased to over 90% if it is to be used for nuclear power, a task Iran was working on, and was well within their reach. True some of those plants were second rate, if any, but others were much more advanced; it was a matter of time before Iran perfected the enrichment process.

In 2015 a deal was signed between eight parties: EU, Iran, US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany, which was presented by Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security, and Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister. This agreement was put in black and white through the Joint Statement by the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarid document. The

US Administration, however, issued the Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's Nuclear Program, where it laid out its interpretation of the deal. This second document immediately became a source of discontent as Iran disagreed with the interpretation on several points by the US, an issue which remained unsolved, but kept the deal alive despite these differences.

This deal pursued the introduction of limitations in the Iranian nuclear program in three distinct areas: enrichment, reprocessing and the monitoring of the program at all levels. This monitoring was being conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which, from the moment this deal was signed until US's withdrawal, included free and unrestricted access to all facilities and personnel, and permanent monitoring of the enrichment process by way of sensors and other means. In addition to this, the two enrichment facilities located in Natanz and Fordo would be limited in the first case, and redesignated a nuclear research center in the second, grounding its enrichment capability.

In return for this deal, the EU, UN and US would cease all nuclear related sanctions against Iran, with the UN also including a resolution specifying certain measures for a mutually agreed period of time. Even Russia had blocked its weapons deals with Iran through the cancellation of the sale of specific military equipment in return for the compliance with the nuclear agreement, a commitment which has now been broken after the US withdrawal.

Critics of the deal were initially concerned that once the time frame for this agreement expired, Iran would be in a position to produce nuclear weapons in the short run, as research would inevitably continue during this period, an allegation hardly credible as one of the tasks assigned to the IAEA was to monitor all the research programs to be carried out, and could have easily picked up on any project leading to the production of nuclear weapons.

Toppling the deal

Shortly after the deal was signed, the deputy to the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi appeared before national television to clarify that Iran was in no way being limited in its weapons development program by this deal and could, therefore, provide allies with weapons as well as import them at will, an unfortunate statement which immediately was met with great concern from all the signing parties.

In 2018, President Trump decided to withdraw from the agreement, an unexpected move which shocked the rest of the signatories to the core, and resumed the sanctions in force

before the deal was signed. Those who remained in the deal continued to demand Iran to stick to its side of the bargain, but Iran no longer felt bound to its obligations and now threatens to retake the nuclear program where it left off in 2015, unless the US backtracks on its decision. In a good will measure, Iran has continued to comply with the restrictions imposed by the deal, albeit a warning from Javad Zarif that Iran is rapidly running out of patience. Earlier this week, Iranian President Hasan Rohani gave the rest of the signatories sixty days to resume the agreements reached before it retakes the nuclear program where it left off, a threat which will inevitably send a disturbing message to the European partners. In addition to this, the blocking the Strait of Hormuz, where around one third of world oil exports go through, has already been suggested, a measure which is sure to affect Europe gravely, unlike the US, a fact that may well be part of the overall scheme.

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And now, it's Europe's time

When President Trump announced US withdrawal from the nuclear deal from at White House he made it clear his administration would reinstate the highest level of sanctions on Iran on account of its nuclear program, which could be extended to include any country willing to aid Iran in its pursuit of a nuclear weapon. This statement in itself is surprising as only Russia and China are in a position to provide this aid, but both countries happen to be on the right side of the deal.

The greatest flaw in this unilateral decision lies in the fact that there seems to be no Plan B, as sanctions by themselves don't prevent Iran from retaking the pursuit of a full nuclear technology, now completely unsupervised, and creates a commercial dilemma where there was none since the signing of the deal. The final goal of the deal was to prevent Iran's

pursuit of a nuclear weapon. For three years the deal worked, but now the road has been left wide open for Iran to resume its program in exchange for nothing.

Iran now faces the question of whether to continue the deal with the rest of the signatories or back down now that the deal has been called off by the US. It all depends on EU, Russia and China to be able to compensate economically for the damage US sanctions are bound to have on the Islamic republic. Should Iran begin a full enrichment process again and develop a nuclear weapon, there is great concern that the US Administration will have to face the consequences on its own, having jeopardized the confidence of its traditional allies. President Trump's view may well be "nobody backs the US anyway when it deploys its forces overseas", which seems like a perfect valid argument. The problem are the consequences we all face if the gamble goes the wrong way.

This backing down from this agreement has left the EU in a conundrum, as its oil and gas imports will suffer significantly, and retaking the imposition of the restrictions from EU partners on Iran are sure to benefit no one. Russia, China and the EU are still hopeful the deal can be saved, but room for renegotiating is scarce if the US is going to retake its sanctions unilaterally.

However, the potential consequences are not limited to commercial ties between Europe and Middle Eastern partners; the balance of power established following World War II, if it was ever achieved indeed, and in which the US was instrumental in establishing and leading, is now in clear danger of disappearing altogether. A flourishing military nuclear program in the heart of the Middle East is a disturbing reality which will inevitably shock Saudi Arabia as well as Turkey, who will now find themselves at the foothills of a nuclear power, well within their reach. Between 2015 and 2018 there was full guarantee that no nuclear technology was being developed in the region for military purposes. That reality is now history.

President Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal has to be seen in the proper perspective however. Though there is perhaps a commercial aspect behind this new policy, this is probably an added consequence rather than a cause: it seems more plausible that the US Administration has tired from European constant dependence on US aid. With regards to the EU Defense scheme, Wolfgang Ischinger, chairman of the Munich Security Conference pointed out last year that "the biggest European State (Germany) is all for victory over Islamic state in Syria and Iraq; we take photos, but we leave the dirty business of shooting to others", a statement difficult to contest in light of Europe's force provision for the conflicts which have been shaking the world for the last several decades, always limited and, in many cases, inexistent. But, regardless of the reasons which have made

President Trump bet on this policy, Europe now has the chance to stand up for itself, or will most likely face the consequences of a commercial and security dilemma it hardly has a chance of overcoming as a joint European military action is highly improbable out of lack of sheer will, if the US is not going to back it up.

Future prospects

The sanctions imposed by the US on Iranian goods are expected to strain the Islamic republic to an extent Europe and its remaining partners can hardly compensate for, but time is running short as Iran's patience is quickly draining. China is also embedded in a fragile position as it is already deep down involved in a commercial war on its own with the US and, at the same time, imports most of its oil from Iran, facing therefore the consequences of a commercial melee from two different fronts.

Europe now faces the three options: the first and most unlikely is to manage to find a way for the US to backtrack on its decision. The second is to compensate for the economical debacle Iran faces with the reintroduction of the nuclear related sanctions, and finally to stand firm should Iran decide to drop out of the deal in two months time. But all these options require a firmness Europe is hardly capable of putting up as the use of force could well be at the end of the line, an option the European community lacks the will for unless the US joins in, a move not to be expected, and Iran is aware of this lack of will.

With the deployment of an aircraft carrier to the region, the US expects that despite pulling out of the deal, Iran will step down from its nuclear war technology without having to compensate for anything; it's either grounding their nuclear ambition, or it get ready for war.

The Strait of Hormuz has suddenly and unexpectedly become the world's next hotspot, which can potentially be the spectator of the deployment of US, Iranian, Russian, Chinese and, perhaps although improbable, European naval forces, in the same patch of sea, tilting the balance of power in the region.

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