Building on the Iran Nuclear Deal for International Peace and Security
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**ABSTRACT**

After almost 20 months of intense negotiations, Iran six world powers -- Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and the United States -- agreed on a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to resolve the nuclear impasse concerning Iran in July 2015. The deal provided verifiable assurances that fissile material in Iran could not be diverted toward weaponization purposes; the highest standards on nuclear transparency and inspections ever negotiated; and the lifting of US and United Nations nuclear-related sanctions on Iran. The agreement was welcomed by the international community and endorsed by a UN Security Council resolution.

This article examines the major factors that led Iran and the global powers to reach a deal. Those factors included each side's willingness to cash in its main bargaining chips (a short breakout time for Iran and sanctions for the United States), a change in leadership in each country, and a shifting geopolitical context. Foremost, however, was the US willingness to change its demands of Iran from no nuclear enrichment to no nuclear bomb. The JCPOA has had major implications for the global powers and Iran, affecting especially the bilateral US -Iran relationship, the regional security situations, and US domestic politics.

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**Introduction: The foundation of the Iranian nuclear program – laid by the United States**

On 5 March 1957, Iran signed an agreement for civil nuclear cooperation with the United States under the Eisenhower administration’s “Atoms for Peace” program. Iran was seeking to diversify its energy needs, and the United States wished to empower Iran so that it could serve as a buffer state against the Soviet Union. A year later, Iran joined the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and in 1963, it signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, consistent with Iran’s overall political and military stance in opposition to weapons of mass destruction (Rowberry, 2013).

Iran’s first nuclear facility, the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), was built in 1967 by the United States. It was a 5-megawatt nuclear research reactor fueled by highly enriched uranium (HEU; NTI, n.d.). On 1 July 1968, Iran was among the original...
signatories of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was ratified by the Iranian parliament in February 1970 (Rowberry, 2013). In 1973, the Iranian government created the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, to train personnel for its nuclear program and to facilitate nuclear cooperation with other countries.

Iran signed its safeguards agreement with the IAEA in 1974. Starting in the mid-1970s, the United States and Europe raced to nuclearize Iran. The West German company Siemens agreed to construct two 1200-megawatt light water reactors to produce nuclear energy at Bushehr in southern Iran (Nikou, n.d.). Additionally, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reached an agreement with Iran to train Iranian nuclear engineers, and France signed a joint venture agreement with Iran for nuclear fuel production (Inskeep, 2015).

US President Gerald Ford, who was supportive of the Shah of Iran’s nuclear ambitions, issued National Security Memorandum 324 recognizing uranium enrichment and reprocessing in Iran. This memorandum sought to ensure that Iran would consult with the United States “on its prospective reprocessing plans before making any firm decision” (US State Department, 1976). Soon after this memo, Iran decided to forgo the multinational nuclear fuel option and opted instead for a “comprehensive national nuclear program” (Nikou, n.d.). In 1978, after negotiations with the Carter administration, Iran agreed to accept safeguards measures beyond the IAEA’s requirements in exchange for being granted “most favored nation status” with regard to reprocessing nuclear fuel that had originated in the United States (Shajari, 2014).

The Iranian revolution and Western agreement-breaking

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran decided to cancel or shrink the Shah’s ambitious nuclear and military projects, because the new revolutionary government viewed them as an extension of an American dominance strategy in Iran. Instead, of embracing this new policy, the United States and other Western countries chose to withdraw from all nuclear contracts with Iran and sought to isolate the country through sanctions and coercion.

Right after the Revolution, Iranian decision makers had no desire to conduct uranium enrichment on its own soil. It had a 1974 agreement with the French-based consortium Eurodif to fuel the TRR and Bushehr power reactors, eliminating the need for domestic enrichment (Iran Watch, 2007). However, after the revolution, France pulled out of this deal due to US pressure, even though Iran had already paid France $1.2 billion for the project (Pellaud, n.d.). Germany followed suit by abandoning the Bushehr power plant project, despite having already been paid nearly the total cost of 8 billion Deutschmarks (Slavin, 2009).

As explained in The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, Iran tried to convince France and Germany to comply with their commitments, but to no avail (Mousavian, 2012). As a result, Iran was forced to pursue self-sufficiency to ensure that it could complete these unfinished, multi-billion-dollar projects on its own, so as to have the necessary fuel rods for the TRR to operate and produce medical isotopes for patients suffering from cancer.

In 1980, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, initiating a devastating eight-year war. Amazingly, the United States and the West supported the aggressor, even
providing Iraq with the material and logistical means to use chemical weapons and ballistic missiles (Harris and Aid, 2013). Despite suffering more than 100,000 Iranian civilian casualties from this internationally proscribed application of chemical weapons (Bajoghli, 2013), Iran never retaliated in kind and also remained committed to the NPT. Nevertheless, this experience changed Iran’s security calculations, pushing it toward developing sufficient self-defense capabilities to deter any future Arab or Western aggression. The international community’s muted reaction when Iran was targeted by hundreds of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction spurred Iran to become self-reliant in security matters.

In 1995, Iran signed a contract worth $800 million in US dollars with Russia’s Ministry of Atomic Energy for the completion of Bushehr under IAEA safeguards (Global Security). Meanwhile, the United States successfully pressured Argentina, India, Spain, China, Germany, and France to stop cooperating with Iran on the development of peaceful nuclear-related technologies, in clear contravention of the NPT (Sage, 2016). In 1996, US President Bill Clinton signed the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act in response to Iran’s nuclear program, and in 2000 he signed the Iran Nonproliferation Act, imposing sanctions against individuals or organizations aiding the Iranian nuclear program.

In response to these US attempts to deny Iran its legitimate rights to develop peaceful nuclear technology under the NPT, Iran pursued an indigenous, self-sufficiency strategy, within the framework of the NPT but under the US radar. It became capable of enrichment for nuclear fuel production by 2002, shocking the United States and other countries (Farhi, 2005).

The start of the Iranian nuclear crisis and America’s coercion strategy

In July 2003, the IAEA issued a report declaring that Iran had attained enrichment capability but still appeared to be in compliance with the NPT. However, another report released two months later mentioned trace amounts of HEU at the Natanz nuclear power plant. In response, the IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution demanding that Iran suspend enrichment and all related activities for an indefinite period, as well as implementing the Additional Protocol to its safeguards agreement – allowing for the highest level of transparency measures ever devised by the agency. In October 2003, Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, reiterated his fatwa prohibiting the production and use of all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons (Crowley, 2015). This opposition to nuclear weapons is consistent with Iran’s previous policy positions; even the Shah had supported an initiative to establish a nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, and Iran’s revolutionary father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, also expressed strong opposition to nuclear weapon development.

The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003, respectively, served as the impetus for the EU3 to engage with Iran diplomatically, seeking to resolve the nuclear crisis and prevent another outbreak of war (Mazzucelli, 2007). On 21 October 2003, the two sides signed the Tehran Declaration, by which Iran voluntarily agreed, as temporary measures that were not legally
binding, to halve its introduction of gas into centrifuges and to implement the Additional Protocol (BBC News, 2003). In return, the EU3 agreed to respect Iran’s legitimate right to peaceful nuclear technology, remove the Iranian nuclear file from the IAEA’s board agenda, and expand political and economic relations with Iran.

The Iran–EU3 negotiations lasted through 2005, and Iran submitted various proposals through Dr Hassan Rouhani, then its lead negotiator (Davenport, 2015). Iran’s March 2005 offer to the EU3 expressed a readiness to (1) cap enrichment at the 5 percent level; (2) export all low-enriched uranium (LEU) beyond domestic needs or fabricate it into fuel rods; (3) commit to the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 of its safeguards agreement; (4) allow the IAEA to make unannounced and intrusive inspections of undeclared facilities; and (5) engage in no reprocessing of plutonium from the Arak heavy water reactor (Porter, 2012).

The main purpose of the proposal was to ensure that Iran’s civil enrichment program could not be diverted into becoming a nuclear weapons program while also recognizing Iran’s right to enrichment under the NPT. In exchange for these Iranian commitments, Iran’s nuclear file at the IAEA would be normalized and Iran would have broader political, economic, and security cooperation with the European Union (EU). However, although the EU3 countries were favorable toward the offer, the George W. Bush administration spurned it and insisted on its maximalist demand of “zero enrichment” in Iran (Parsi, 2013). Moreover, in January 2005, President Bush declared that he would not rule out military action against Iran (Herald, 2005).

The failed nuclear talks and the 2005 Iranian presidential election

The breakdown of the 2003–2005 nuclear negotiations during President Mohammad Khatami’s tenure contributed to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s victory in Iran’s June 2005 presidential election. After he took office, Iran restarted its uranium conversion facilities in Isfahan, and on 24 September 2005, the IAEA board of governors found Iran to be in noncompliance with its safeguards agreement. On 10 January 2006, Iran resumed enrichment activities at its Natanz plant; on February 3, the IAEA voted to refer the file to the UN Security Council (UNSC). Between 2006 and 2009, the UNSC passed resolutions 1696, 1737, 1803, and 1835, imposing sanctions on Iran, while demanding the full suspension of enrichment and heavy water activities in Iran (IAEA, “IAEA and Iran: Chronology of Key Events,” n.d.a).

In October 2009, a meeting was held between Iran, Germany, and the UNSC permanent representative in Geneva to discuss the possible transfer of Iran’s stockpile of LEU out of the country in exchange for TRR reactor fuel. As part of the swap negotiations, Iran’s top nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, and US Undersecretary of State William Burns held the highest level of direct US–Iran talks since the revolution 30 years earlier (Borger, 2009). Although their negotiations did not achieve an agreement, the Obama administration permitted Brazil and Turkey to intervene. On 17 May 2010, these two countries and Iran reached
an agreement on the transfer of 1200 kg of Iranian LEU to Turkey, in return for which Iran would receive the 20 percent enriched uranium fuel required for operating the TRR. However, US and European officials rejected the deal. Instead, the UNSC immediately passed Resolution 1929, which included an arms embargo and tightened restrictions on financial and shipping enterprises (Sick, 2010).

During Barack Obama’s first term in office, Iranian nuclear facilities came under cyberattack and several of its nuclear scientists were assassinated. According to media reports, the cyberattacks were joint US–Israeli operations and the assassinations were spearheaded by Israel (Sanger, 2012). Nevertheless, in February 2010, Ali Akbar Salehi, chief of Iran’s Atomic Energy Agency, publicly announced that Iran was not interested in enriching uranium to 20 percent or beyond, and that it sought only assurances that it could receive fuel for the TRR and have its nuclear rights respected (CBS News, 2010). In the aftermath of the failed swap talks, Iran was forced to conduct 20 percent enrichment indigenously to create fuel rods for the TRR.

In summer 2011, Russia offered a multistep proposal that addressed all the West’s concerns about Iran’s nuclear activities. It required Iran to (1) allow full supervision of its facilities by the IAEA, (2) implement the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1, (3) limit enrichment to 5 percent, (4) halt installation of new centrifuges, (5) limit the number of enrichment sites to one, (6) address the IAEA’s concerns about “possible military dimensions” of the Iranian nuclear program and other technical ambiguities, and (7) suspend enrichment temporarily. In response, according to the Russian proposal, the EU3 + 3 would recognize Iran’s legitimate rights to enrichment under the NPT and would gradually lift sanctions (Mohammed, 2011).

In September 2011, during his visit to New York for the UN General Assembly, Iranian President Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had mastered 20 percent enrichment and had a growing stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, but he proposed ceasing 20 percent enrichment in exchange for Western-provided fuel rods for the TRR (Vaez and Ferguson, 2011). Moreover, as an act of goodwill toward the United States, he announced the release of two Americans held in Iran under suspicion of espionage (BBC News, 2011). However, once again, the United States spurned Iran’s offers. In fall 2011, the United States and the EU imposed an oil embargo on Iran, sanctioned Iran’s central bank, and introduced two UN resolutions condemning Iran’s record on human rights and terrorism (Landler, 2011). At the same time, IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano publicly expressed doubts regarding the “peaceful activities” of the Iranian nuclear program (Peterson, 2010).

Many rounds of nuclear talks between Iran and the EU3 + 3 failed during Ahmadinejad’s presidency. Iran’s overtures seeking a mutually acceptable deal went nowhere, primarily because the United States maintained that there should not be even a single centrifuge in Iran. This total denial of Iran’s right to enrichment and its blocking of efforts to have fuel rods provided for the TRR sent clear signals to Tehran that the United States was not interested in solving the nuclear issue. The United Kingdom’s then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw
admitted in 2017 that the United States had “blocked” agreements (IRNA 2017). This left Iran with no option but to change its nuclear strategy and accelerate its enrichment program to attain self-sufficiency in nuclear fuel production. However, this acceleration of its nuclear capability and capacity in response to American-led pressure contributed to greater international concern about Iran’s nuclear program and, ultimately, to a consensus among global powers on further sanctions against Iran.

The Iranian nuclear dossier and international law

There was no legal and legitimate basis for Iran’s referral to the UNSC, and the comprehensive punitive measures inflicted on Iran should not have happened in the first place, for the following reasons (Mousavian, 2012).

Regarding Iran’s referral to the UNSC

(1) According to Article XII, Paragraph C of the IAEA Statute, any referral by the IAEA’s Board of Governors to the Security Council is possible if there is proof of diversion of nuclear material to military or prohibited purposes. However, IAEA reports on Iran, both prior to and following the UNSC referral, clearly state that there was no conclusive evidence of the diversion of nuclear materials to prohibited purposes.

(2) Under Article XII, Paragraph C of the IAEA Statute, such a referral to the UNSC requires the following steps:

(a) IAEA inspectors on the ground with access to the member state’s sensitive nuclear information, individuals, materials, and facilities should be the first to report any diversion of nuclear material toward weaponization.

(b) IAEA inspectors should provide a detailed report to the IAEA Director General regarding evidence of efforts toward weaponization by a member state.

(c) The IAEA Director General should then report the matter to the IAEA Board of Governors.

(d) If the IAEA Board of Governors, upon examination of relevant information reported to it by the Director General, finds that a member state is developing nuclear weapons, it can refer that state to the UNSC.

In the case of Iran, the above sequence of events did not take place. Rather, some European and American members of the IAEA Board of Governors themselves judged that Iran was in noncompliance prior to 2003. Therefore, their action was in complete contravention of Article XII, Paragraph C of the IAEA Statute.

(3) Article XII, Paragraph C describes the country referred to the UNSC as the recipient country. It applies to countries that receive nuclear materials or equipment from the IAEA and then misuse it for non-peaceful purposes. In such an instance, this article requires that the recipient country be referred to the UNSC, and that the country should return the equipment or materials to the IAEA. But
in the case of Iran, this provision is not applicable because Iran was not a recipient of nuclear materials or equipment from the IAEA for Natanz enrichment or other activities.

(4) If a country blocks the entrance of inspectors, as North Korea has done, then this matter should be referred to the UNSC. However, Iran has always cooperated with the IAEA, granting the IAEA inspectors a level of access to Iran’s nuclear facilities that has been called “unprecedented … in the history of the agency.” IAEA inspectors carried out more than 7000 man-hours of inspection activities at Iranian facilities from 2003 to 2012. All reports by the IAEA Director General over the past 14 years indicated that the IAEA was able to continue its verification activities in Iran. The IAEA has faced no obstacles whatsoever in carrying out inspections under the safeguards agreement (Hibbs, 2015). As an arms control expert, Mark Hibbs has stated, “Iran had never been cited for any infractions of its safeguards agreement during the 29 years it had been in force” (Hibbs, 2015).

**Iran’s voluntary confidence-building measures met with no response**

(5) The IAEA asked for access within the framework of the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1. Both arrangements are voluntary for NPT member states. Like 80 other countries, Iran was not a party to those arrangements, and applying them to Iran represented a double standard.

(6) After two and a half years, Iran stopped its voluntary suspension of enrichment in August 2005. The IAEA board of governors passed its resolution of non-compliance in September 2005, claiming that Iran had violated its obligations, whereas all previous IAEA resolutions had confirmed that the suspension of enrichment was a voluntary confidence-building measure and not legally binding.

**Additional objections to the IAEA’s referral of Iran to the UNSC**

(7) Requests by the IAEA Board of Governors were based on Iranian non-compliance with its safeguards agreement, which only the IAEA can enforce – not the UNSC. Nowhere in the UN Charter, the IAEA Statute, the NPT, Iran’s safeguards agreement, or anywhere else is authority given to the UNSC to enforce the Safeguards Agreement between Iran and the IAEA.

(8) The legal instruments available to the IAEA in case of noncompliance by member states include terminating nuclear assistance or expelling the country from membership in the agency.

(9) Neither the NPT nor the IAEA requires abandonment of enrichment when a state is found in noncompliance with its safeguard regulations; all they require is that the noncompliance be corrected.

(10) Whereas requests from the IAEA Board of Governors have readily acknowledged that the suspension of enrichment and the implementation of the
Additional Protocol were voluntary and not legally binding. UNSC resolutions have described the same requests as mandatory. Neither the UNSC, the IAEA, nor other international organizations can impose any international treaty on a sovereign state. However, the IAEA was frequently given access within and even beyond the framework of these arrangements.

(11) The noncompliance of a country with its safeguards agreement does not automatically imply that the country is a threat to international peace. Resolutions adopted by the UNSC authorizing coercive measures under Chapter VII are justified when there is a threat to international peace. To date, under Article 39, the UNSC has not determined that Iranian nuclear activities pose such a threat. In two previous noncompliance cases – North Korea in 1993 and Libya in 2004 – the UNSC made no determination of a threat to international peace.

(12) Iran’s enrichment program did not and does not constitute a threat to international peace because Iran has never enriched uranium to weapons grade, and there has been no evidence of weaponization within the Iranian enrichment program. Nothing in international law or the NPT forbids the enrichment of uranium. Several other countries, including both parties and non-parties to the NPT, have enriched uranium without being accused of threatening international peace.

(13) Iran has potential breakout capability to produce a nuclear weapon but has committed to abstaining from doing so. Again, nothing in international law or in the NPT forbids a country from developing the nuclear fuel cycle. Several countries have even achieved a nuclear threshold, where they reach amassed enough as fissile material to have a short breakout toward a bomb but nobody in the international community seems to bother them.

(14) The world powers have questioned Iran’s “intentions,” but there are no international rules and regulations to gauge the intentions of countries. The US National Intelligence Estimate, which represents the consensus view of America’s 16 intelligence agencies, twice confirmed that there is no evidence of weaponization in the Iranian nuclear program. “We don’t believe they have actually made the decision to go ahead with a nuclear weapon,” James Clapper, director of national intelligence, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in 2012 (Risen and Mazzetti, 2012).

(15) Under the NPT, the following actions are permitted:
(a) Members may enrich uranium to any level – even 100%, beyond the threshold needed for weaponization.
(b) There is no limitation on the stockpile of enriched uranium, regardless of a country’s domestic nuclear fuel needs. For example, France and Russia produce enriched uranium beyond their domestic needs and are major exporters.
(c) No boundaries are set on the number and scope of enrichment sites. Therefore, demanding the conversion of a facility or limiting the number of enrichment facilities is illegal (Beeman, n.d.).
(d) There is no cap on number of centrifuges or the quantity of Separative Work Units produced. Nevertheless, the United States has demanded that Iran cap its number of centrifuges and dismantle thousands of current centrifuges in its facilities.
(e) There is no prohibition against building and operating heavy water reactors or reprocessing facilities. There is also no clause requiring member states to abstain from technical conversions of facilities. Nevertheless, Iran has faced demands to convert its Arak heavy water reactor to a small nuclear core and is prohibited from constructing a reprocessing facility.

(f) The maximum level of IAEA inspections is defined in scope and manner within the NPT's Additional Protocol. Therefore, the current demand that Iran open its country to IAEA inspectors beyond the Additional Protocol has no legal basis. There is no other international arrangement beyond the NPT (Muller, 2015).

(16) In IAEA Board of Governance meetings from 2003 to 2005, I heard the US envoy argue that Iran, due to its undeclared nuclear activities, was already in noncompliance with the NPT and that therefore these transparency measures are required for Iran to redeem itself. However, according to former IAEA Chief Mohamed ElBaradei, during the years 2003–2004 three countries (Egypt, South Korea, and Iran) were all in noncompliance with the NPT, yet Egypt and South Korea were both absolved with no requirement of redemptive measures or actions (Goldschmidt, 2009). On the other hand, Iran was entangled in a web of punitive measures and negotiations to have its case cleared. Therefore, it appears that the Iranian nuclear dossier was politically motivated and not based on any technical or legal grounds.

The consequences of America’s coercion strategy

In the aftermath of the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), much debate has taken place over whether the US sanctions strategy brought Iran to the negotiations table, Iran’s breakout strategy brought the United States to the table, or other geopolitical factors played a role.

After the breakdown of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the EU3 in 2005 and Ahmadinejad’s electoral victory, the United States was able to unify the world in imposing a vast number of multilateral sanctions aimed at inhibiting the progress of Iran’s nuclear program and at pressuring Iran into full compliance with the UNSC resolution. In 2005, EU3 ambassadors told one of the present authors that Iran must suspend its enrichment and heavy water activities for at least 10 years. However, the real objective of the US sanctions strategy appears to have been regime change in Iran. Since the revolution, America’s coercive approach toward Iran, consisting of sanctions, efforts to isolate the country diplomatically, and even covert war, has led Tehran to this unavoidable conclusion.

Between 2006 and 2010, four UNSC Resolutions (1737, 1747, 1803, and 1929) imposing sanctions against Iran were adopted. The first three of these were aimed at constraining Iran’s nuclear program, but Resolution 1929 authorized broader financial and economic sanctions against Iran such as banning foreign investment in Iran’s energy sector, restricting credit for trade with Iran, banning arms sales to Iran, and blocking financial transactions with Iran’s banks.

Resolution 1929 had an important impact on the Iranian economy because major international companies and financial institutions stopped doing business with Iran. The toughest phase of sanctions against Iran came in 2011–2012 when the United States and EU imposed sanctions on oil, Iran’s Central Bank, and access to SWIFT (the international
These sanctions reduced Iran’s oil exports by more than 50%, from 2.5 million barrels per day in 2011 to 1.1 million in 2013. They also caused a severe depreciation in value of Iran’s currency (the Rial) and greatly limited Iran’s ability to access hard currency from the oil trade (Newton-Small, 2012). By the end of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, Iran’s economy was contracting by 5 percent of GDP annually, the inflation rate was 42 percent, and unemployment stood at 18 percent.

The debilitating effects of sanctions led many, particularly in the United States, to claim that sanctions forced Iran to the nuclear negotiating table. Certainly, they caused great harm to Iran’s economy, both directly and indirectly, and they contributed to a political climate in which pragmatist Hassan Rouhani could win the presidential election in 2013 with a campaign centered on ending nuclear-related sanctions through diplomacy.

However, if one considers that the main US objective of sanctions was ostensibly to inhibit Iran’s nuclear program, they failed dramatically to achieve their goal; on the contrary, they drove Iran to rapidly develop the level and capacity of its enrichment program. During the sanctions period, Iran increased its level of enrichment from 5 percent to 20 percent, its enrichment stockpile from a few hundred kilograms to over 8000 kg, and its number of centrifuges from 3000 to 22,000. It also developed more advanced centrifuges, going from the IR1 to the IR8 (which is at least 20 times faster), and built a second, fortified enrichment facility in Fordo (Gordon and Nephew, 2017). Therefore, more sanctions led to more enrichment capacity in Iran, as US Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged when he said that Iran was within three months of breakout (VOA, 2014).

**Iran’s 2013 presidential election and the impact of moderate policies**

The eight years of failed nuclear talks under Ahmadinejad gave Iranian moderates the opportunity to make a comeback from their defeat in the 2005 presidential election. Within a hundred days of Rouhani’s election, Iran and the EU3 + 3 reached an interim nuclear deal, or a Joint Plan of Action. Obviously, President Rouhani’s election was a major factor in facilitating this negotiated settlement.

On the US side, President Obama reshuffled his administration as he entered his second term in office. The combination of John Kerry as Secretary of State, Ernest Moniz as Secretary of Energy, and Robert Malley as Special Assistant to the President and White House Coordinator for the Middle East was as important as the combination of Rouhani, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, and Vice President Ali Akbar Salehi on the other side. However, the most important element that made the deal possible was Obama’s shift from the traditional US policy of no enrichment in Iran to no nuclear bomb (Parsi, 2017). Otherwise, even the moderate Iranian negotiators would not have agreed to the terms.

For his part, Ahmadinejad did not care about IAEA resolutions, UN sanctions, or relations with Western countries, preferring a retaliatory “tit for tat” strategy toward sanctions on Iran. As one of authors has explained elsewhere (Mousavian, 2012), in response to UNSC Resolution 1696, which required Iran to stop all nuclear activities, Ahmadinejad inaugurated the heavy water production site at Arak. In response to Resolution 1737, he refused entry to 38 IAEA inspectors and announced installation of 3000 centrifuges at Natanz. His reaction to Resolution 1803 was to announce an
additional 6000 centrifuges. As a response to Resolution 1835, he ordered construction of 10 new enrichment sites and announced that Iran would enrich uranium at 20 percent. Finally, after Resolution 1929, Ahmadinejad postponed negotiations with the EU3 + 3 and set preconditions for Iran’s return to the table. More surprisingly, Ahmadinejad persistently argued that “sanctions have had no effect on Iran” and that UN resolutions were “worthless” papers, in stark contrast to Iran’s actual economic situation (Graham-Harrison and Master, 2010).

In contrast to Ahmadinejad, President Rouhani has consistently demonstrated pragmatism in foreign policy, including his actions regarding the nuclear dossier. During his time as Iran’s chief negotiator from 2003 to 2005, he proposed the most practical and realistic packages to the EU3. They failed only because of the unrealistic US policy of zero enrichment. During his 2013 presidential campaign, Rouhani famously stated the following: “It’s good to have centrifuges running, provided that people’s lives and sustenance are also spinning.” Rouhani also appointed an outstanding nuclear negotiating team, led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (who had been part of the nuclear negotiating team in 2003–2005) and including other brilliant, skillful, and experienced diplomats such as Abbas Araghchi and Majid Ravanchi (Mostaghim, Sandels, and McDonnel, 2013). Zarif, Rouhani, and Salehi had all worked together on the nuclear dossier during 2003–2005 and had similar visions of resolving the dispute through mutual compromise.

Rouhani’s election significantly augured a shift away from Ahmadinejad’s nuclear policy and altered Iran’s image, but his original nuclear strategy of 2003–2005 had never changed. The principles to which Iran and the world powers agreed in November 2013 were exactly the same principles that Iran had proposed in March 2005, and which the United States had rejected due to its insistence on zero enrichment. Otherwise, Iran and the world powers could have reached an agreement in March 2005, preventing the radicalization of Iranian nuclear and foreign policy and a dramatic escalation of the Iranian nuclear dispute.

The Iranian nuclear crisis that began in 2005 was unnecessary because Iran had taken all the steps necessary to ensure successful diplomacy. It showed flexibility with regard to measures and gave objective guarantees on the non-diversion of fissile material toward weaponization such as (1) maintaining enrichment below 5 percent, (2) halting plutonium reprocessing, and (3) implementing the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement to its IAEA safeguards agreement to bridge the gap. Concerns about possible bomb-making routes were addressed by such measures. Europe, China, Russia, and the 120-member Non-Aligned Movement were ready to create an agreement but they failed only because of America’s unilateral objection. Ultimately, in 2015, the crisis was settled through a multilateral approach and respecting international laws and regulations. The Iranian nuclear crisis showed that multilateralism is the most effective approach for solving current global crises.

The geopolitical context

Along with the reasons discussed above, geopolitical circumstances also pushed the world powers and Iran toward reaching an agreement.

Saddam’s downfall in 2003, the failure of America’s military and regime-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab uprisings in 2010, the rise of Sunni extremist terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, the Syrian civil war, the collapse of US allies
in Egypt and Tunisia, the failed NATO–Gulf Cooperation Council military attack on Libya, and the partial occupation of Iraqi and Syrian land by terrorist groups – by 2013, all these factors had ravaged the region with insurgency, civil war, conflict, and sectarianism. These circumstances threatened the national security of Iran, the United States, the EU, Russia, and the entire international community (Anderson 2016).

Despite all the pressure placed upon it since 1979, Iran has emerged as the only stable nation in a very turbulent region. Meanwhile, geopolitical developments have created a rare situation in which the interests of the United States and Iran are aligned in Iraq and Afghanistan. The geopolitical situation and the multiple crises in the Middle East compelled Iran and the EU3 + 3 to rethink their past confrontational policies on the nuclear issue, develop a more realistic strategy, and find ways to resolve the nuclear crisis through diplomacy rather than war.

The Obama administration understood clearly that the more the United States and Iran could coordinate with each other on regional issues, the less likely it was that America would have to launch yet another war or to put additional forces on the ground in the Middle East. Moreover, the US pivot to Asia spurred Obama to urge regional powers, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, to take on a greater role in stabilizing the Middle East (Landler, 2016). President Obama understood how the so-called Arab Spring had quickly turned into an Arab winter, and that Iran could be an influential force in resolving at least some of these crises.

The Eurozone crises, multiple terrorist attacks in different European countries, and the millions of refugees pouring into the EU were among the major security threats facing Europe. Europe’s annual trade with Iran dropped from $32 billion before sanctions to about $9 billion after their imposition (European Commission n.d.). Moreover, the EU has long desired to diversify its gas sources and reduce its reliance on Russian gas supplies, and Iranian gas resources could contribute to this strategy. These factors created a strong desire in Europe to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis peacefully, regain its market share in the Iranian economy, and cooperate with Iran on crisis management in the Middle East.

The landmark “win-win” deal

Numerous factors explain why the JCPOA was a win-win deal for Iran and the EU3 + 3. Iran was under severe sanctions of various kinds, both bilateral and multilateral, that affected its normal relations with other countries. Iran’s goals were to improve its economy, normalize its oil and gas trade, develop its infrastructure, and normalize its political relations worldwide. Since Iran was not interested in developing nuclear weapons and sought only to develop peaceful civil nuclear technology, the best way to demonstrate its real intentions, remove suspicions, and build confidence was to achieve a diplomatic agreement.

The United States and other members of the EU3 + 3 also understood that sanctions could not compel Iran to abandon its nuclear program. Moreover, the military option of wiping out Iran’s nuclear facilities was completely unrealistic, and other members of the UNSC were not ready to support a US attack on Iran. At the same time, it had become clear that Iran’s response to virtually every possible sanction was to increase the level and capacity of its enrichment and heavy water programs, to the point of becoming a nuclear threshold state with a breakout time of several weeks according to some estimates.
These considerations explain why the Obama Administration embraced the EU3 + 3 option of negotiating a deal that would ensure a peaceful civilian nuclear program for Iran and would close all pathways toward weaponization.

The key aspects of the JCPOA were as follows (Feiveson, 2015):

1. Iran would decrease its number of centrifuges from 22,000 to 5060 IR-1s at Natanz for about 10 years.
2. Iran would reduce its uranium stockpile from about 12,000 kg to about 300 kg.
3. Iran would limit the level of its enrichment to 3.67 percent.
4. Natanz would be the only Iranian facility conducting uranium enrichment activities, including research and development, for eight years.
5. Iran’s underground nuclear facility at Fordo would be turned into a nuclear physics and technology center and would not conduct uranium enrichment for 15 years.
6. Iran would keep 1044 centrifuges at Fordo to produce radioisotopes for peaceful uses such as medicine and agriculture.
7. Iran would redesign its heavy water reactor at Arak to reduce plutonium production from 10 kg to about 1 kg per year, thereby eliminating its potential to amass weapons-grade uranium.
8. Iran would implement the Additional Protocol and Subsidiary Arrangement Code 3.1 to its IAEA safeguards agreement, which allows the IAEA inspectors to monitor, at all times, declared nuclear sites in Iran and to verify that no fissile material has been illegally diverted for potential use in making bombs.

These measures ensured a win for the EU3 + 3 because they included robust monitoring, verification, and inspection of Iran’s nuclear program while increasing Iran’s breakout time to about a year. At the same time, they were a win for Iran because all unilateral and multilateral sanctions were lifted, Iran’s right to enrichment and heavy water activities were respected, the international community would cooperate with Iran on peaceful nuclear technologies, and Iran’s foreign relations would be dramatically improved.

Based on the JCPOA, US, UN, and multilateral sanctions on Iran’s energy, financial, shipping, automotive, and other sectors were lifted after the IAEA confirmed in January 2016 that Iran had fully complied with the agreement. Nevertheless, secondary sanctions remained in place, along with sanctions against US banks and firms doing business with Iran.

**Challenges to the nuclear deal**

In the aftermath of the JCPOA, during the remainder of President Obama’s second term and despite the efforts of Secretary of State John Kerry, major international banks remained hesitant to facilitate trade agreements with Iran for fear of violating still-existing US sanctions. Moreover, a US Supreme Court ruling confiscating $2 billion of Iranian money, a new visa waiver law that discriminated against travel to Iran, and many pieces of legislation in Congress seeking to impose new sanctions spurred further distrust and suspicion among Iranians and the international community (Hurley, 2016).

Since the implementation of the nuclear deal in January 2016, the US Congress and both the Obama and Trump administrations have continuously imposed sanctions,
citing as their justifications human rights concerns, terrorism, missile tests, and regional differences. In November 2016, the US Senate unanimously voted to extend the Iran Sanctions Act for 10 years. Iranian authorities slammed this action as a blatant violation of the JCPOA and vowed to respond to it (Varzi, 2016).

**Reading Trump on the JCPOA**

Since Donald Trump assumed office, we have seen relentless efforts in Washington to undo the JCPOA and reverse the Obama administration’s Iran policy. Trump has wildly branded the JCPOA “one of the worst deals” in history and has taken various steps designed to scuttle it. For example, he tasked a White House team with detailing the option of not recertifying the deal, and he attempted to test its provisions by pushing for inspections of Iranian military facilities without justification (Winter, Gramer, and De Luce, 2017). Along with new congressional and administration sanctions against Iran, Trump’s strategic objective of harming Iran’s economy represents a unilateral move that aims to undermine a multilateral agreement (Kaplan, 2016). In October 2017, in line with his rhetoric, Trump decertified Iranian compliance with the nuclear deal, against the wishes of his senior advisors, America’s traditional allies in Europe, and near-universal consensus, which included the IAEA, that Iran was abiding by its end of the deal (Wright, 2017). In committing to this action, Trump sent the fate of the JCPOA to Congress while stating that if Congress would not be “able to reach a solution,” the agreement “would be terminated” (Trump Speech on Iran: The Speech 2017).

In October 2016, Yukiya Amano, director general of the IAEA, stated that “the implementation of the agreement is still fragile” (Press TV, 2016). Under the Trump administration, the sustainability of the JCPOA remains uncertain. Moreover, due to the deep mistrust between the two countries, Ayatollah Khamenei has publicly concluded that the JCPOA experience shows that negotiating with the United States is futile (Tehran Times, 2016).

The Trump administration’s Iran policy represents a complete disavowal of the Obama approach to Iran. Trump’s rebukes of Iran over its regional influence, ballistic missile program, domestic policies, and the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps are nothing new, and, in fact, are in line with traditional US complaints about Iran. However, Trump is treading new grounds in explicitly ruling out diplomacy with Iran and not hiding his desire for regime change. In June 2017, his secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, declared that the United States’ intention was to “work towards support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government” (Pelofsky, 2017). Tillerson further stated in October 2017 that Washington’s “endgame” is regime change (Rogin, 2017). With respect to the JCPOA, Trump stopped short of outright withdrawal from the deal but his decertification signals an aim to provoke Iran into abandoning the deal and receiving international criticism. Trump’s October 2017 Iran policy speech envisaged an all-out confrontation with Iran in the region but offered no specifics on actual policy changes.

Trump’s confrontational, zero-sum approach may not only fail to spur Iranian withdrawal from the JCPOA but also alienates traditional US allies in Europe who helped negotiate the deal, creating unprecedented consensus about Iran, both in political elites and in the public, against ever placing trust in negotiations with the
United States again (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi, 2017). Trump is effectively stoking perennial conflict with Iran, which will only serve to threaten regional stability, the viability of the JCPOA, and will push Iran to expand its means of deterrence (especially its ballistic missile program).

**Beneficiaries of a JCPOA collapse**

Considering the global significance of the JCPOA, the mounting pressure in Washington to scuttle it, and the growing pessimism in Iran about the effectiveness of diplomacy, one must ask who would actually benefit from the deal’s collapse. One of the beneficiaries would be Israel, which has led lobbying efforts against the JCPOA in Washington. However, a broken agreement would likely leave Iran believing that its most strategic option was to restore its nuclear program to pre-deal capabilities. Doing so would, in all likelihood, re-alienate Iran internationally, especially from European powers that have been open to allying themselves economically with Iran as a result of the JCPOA and the Rouhani Administration’s “open-door” economic policy of international reintegration. As such, the threat of a renewed nuclear Iran benefits no one more than the hawks in Israel.

Additionally, heightened tensions with Iran unite Israelis nationally by pushing Israel into a “state of emergency” mode. This development would remove the focus from other issues currently affecting Israel, such as its occupation of Palestinian territory. The Iranian nuclear issue has been a convenient distraction for Israel, one that it may be happy to have once again.

A second prime beneficiary of a sabotaged JCPOA would be Saudi Arabia. Political and sectarian tensions between Iran and the Saudis have heightened drastically over the past five years due to the ongoing war in Iraq and Syria, the Saudi campaign in Yemen, Saudi Arabia’s support of the al-Khalifa family, and its treatment of the Shia majority in Bahrain. Moreover, the JCPOA enabled Iran to reemerge as a major regional oil competitor of Saudi Arabia. The stakes have risen so high as to produce an Israeli-Saudi alliance based on mutual antipathy toward the so-called “Shia Crescent,” namely Iran.

Some have regarded the current tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a new Cold War in the Middle East. A failed JCPOA would play into the hands of Saudi hawks, permitting them to use the backing provided by the United States, the EU, and Israel to re-isolate the Islamic Republic of Iran from the rest of the world for their own benefit. US President Donald Trump’s landmark speech in Saudi Arabia in May signaled a reversal of policy from the Obama administration and an apparent US desire to ratchet up tensions with Iran. One day after a record-breaking 42 million Iranians indicated their desire to engage with the world by reelecting President Rouhani, Trump, while visiting an autocratic monarchy, called on “nations of conscience” to “isolate” Iran (Champion, 2017).

The Trump administration’s main accusation, that Tehran is destabilizing the region, is simply not accurate. Iran is backing the same governments in Iraq and Afghanistan that the United States supports. Meanwhile, Kabul and Baghdad blame Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, respectively, for supporting terrorism in their countries. Former US Vice President Joe Biden acknowledged the role of American allies in fomenting instability in Syria, stating in 2014 that
they poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad, except that the people who were being supplied were [Jabhat] al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world. (Ratnam, 2014)

Furthermore, Iran’s military spending is less than that of Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other Persian Gulf Arab countries, even though its population is greater than all those nations combined (Parsi and Cullis, 2015). Therefore, to claim that Iran has militaristic or hegemonic aims in the region is purely illogical, baseless, and heavily motivated by political propaganda. Even more, the historic July 2015 nuclear deal closed all pathways to a nuclear weapon for Iran, whereas Israel remains the only obstacle to a NWFZ in the Middle East.

Another key winner should the JCPOA collapse would be the radical conservatives in Iran. A JCPOA failure would strongly weaken President Rouhani’s ability to enact his moderate and progressive policy agenda. Since blame for the sabotaged deal would fall squarely on the United States and the EU for failing to live up to their JCPOA commitments, Iran would not be encouraged to pursue further implementation of its side of the agreement.

Although hawks in the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran do not usually find themselves in agreement, the failure of the JCPOA has become their common aim. Conversely, the United States, Iran, and the international community will reap tremendous benefits by staying on the rapprochement course, which is possible only through lasting adherence to the long-term deal. A JCPOA failure promises nothing but further over-militarization and war.

Why America and the international community should support the deal

Numerous reasons can be cited in defense of upholding the JCPOA to maintain win-win relationships among its stakeholders, despite the risk of political backlash:

(1) It is the most comprehensive agreement on nuclear nonproliferation ever achieved. It contains the most intrusive transparency and verification mechanism in the history of the NPT, as well as the maximum level of obligations within the NPT.

(2) It shuts down all potential pathways to a nuclear bomb and can prevent a covert weapons program, although the US intelligence community reported in 2007 and 2011 that it had no evidence that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons program after 2003 (Risen and Mazzetti, 2012). A special 2012 report published by Reuters stated that “The Obama administration, relying on a top-priority intelligence collection program and after countless hours of debate, has concluded that Iranian leaders have not decided whether to actively construct a nuclear weapon, current and former officials said” (Zakaria and Hosenball, 2012).

(3) It increases Iran’s breakout time from an estimated several weeks to months to one year. The deal accomplishes this objective by reducing the number of installed centrifuges from nearly 20,000 to 5060 IR1 centrifuges.

(4) It repurposes the underground Fordo enrichment site into a medical isotope production facility, eliminates the ability to produce and separate plutonium for
a nuclear weapon, caps the level of enrichment to less than 5 percent, and reduces Iran’s LEU stockpile from 8000 to 300 kg.

(5) It includes the ability to reinstate sanctions if any party violates the deal.
(6) The sanctions strategy has already failed demonstrably, because Iran dramatically increased its nuclear capacity to the point of being within three months of breakout.

(7) If the JCPOA is rejected, Iran would suspend international inspections and would be unconstrained in developing its nuclear program.

(8) The war alternative would be a disaster for the United States, Israel, and the region. Top American and Israeli officials have already warned that military action against Iranian nuclear facilities could ignite a catastrophic regional conflict and would be ineffective, if not counterproductive, in delaying Iran’s path to obtaining a nuclear bomb. Meir Dagan, who oversaw Iran’s file as head of Israel’s external spy agency, the Mossad, from 2002 to 2011, has said that an attack “would mean regional war, and in that case you would have given Iran the best possible reason to continue the nuclear program” (Bronner, 2011). Michael Hayden, who ran the US Central Intelligence Agency under President George W. Bush from 2006 to 2009, has warned that an attack would “guarantee that which we are trying to prevent: an Iran that will spare nothing to build a nuclear weapon” (Rogin, 2012).

(9) The IAEA is satisfied with the deal and with Iran’s full compliance (IAEA, “IAEA and Iran – IAEA Reports”, n.d.b).

(10) Proper implementation of the deal would open the door to cooperation on regional issues. The Arab world is in danger of total collapse and the world powers have already failed to manage any of the crises in this region. The rise of terrorism such as ISIS and al-Qaeda is the leading threat to global peace and stability, and Iran is the leading force fighting them. None of the current crises in the Middle East could be managed without Iran’s participation.

(11) Blocking the deal would surely lead to a renewed ascendancy of radicalism in Iran, at the expense of pragmatism.

(12) Rejecting the deal would send a clear message that the United States cannot be relied upon to implement nonproliferation agreements negotiated by its president and agreed to by all six world powers.

(13) Reopening the nuclear talks between Iran and the world powers would not be possible.

(14) Some objectors to the deal claim that Iran sponsors terrorism. However, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned in a classified memo (since leaked) that donors in Saudi Arabia were the “most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide” (Wikileaks, 2009).

(15) Those who argue that Iranian ideology is the key source of trouble in the Middle East must have forgotten that 15 of the 19 hijackers on 11 September 2001 came from Saudi Arabia and that today several thousand citizens from US Arab allies have joined ISIS. All the Sunni jihadist groups – ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front – are the ideological offspring of the Wahhabism injected by Saudi Arabia into mosques and madrassas from Morocco to Pakistan to Indonesia.
The nuclear deal is not a bilateral deal between Iran and the United States, but a multilateral accord between seven countries and confirmed by the EU and the UNSC. As such, it cannot be blocked by a single party. If, as now seems quite clear, Washington opts for a new Iran policy, it risks not only its own international credibility, as it did a decade ago, but also alienating its allies (who are critical to multilateral decision-making) while reinforcing the claims of its adversaries (whom US negotiators in the past have criticized for violating their multilateral norms and responsibilities).

Trump’s main agenda focuses on economic development, which today unites all emerging and developing economies and is vital to global growth prospects. Iran is arguably the most stable country in its region, and it offers huge potential for economic cooperation with the United States and the world.

As explained in a detailed article written by Princeton nuclear scientists and published by the Arms Control Association, the JCPOA provides an unprecedented opportunity, along with the key building blocks and principles, to make progress toward a Middle East NWFZ, possibly as part of a Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone in the region (Glaser et al., 2015). The measures proposed constitute the essential technical steps toward a Middle East NWFZ. Although it is unlikely that this goal can be fully achieved in the immediate future, it should be possible to make progress on a number of building blocks in this direction. If the principles contained in the JCPOA could be regionalized, the initiative of a Middle East NWFZ could be realized. A regionwide commitment not to separate plutonium for any purpose, not to produce HEU, and to limit uranium enrichment to the levels required for power reactors would be verifiable and would provide confidence against possible proliferation risks.

Therefore, the deal is a model for a world free from nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The Iranian nuclear negotiations experienced 10 years of failure from 2003 to 2013, followed by two years of progress and success. The main reason for the 10 years of failure was the inflexible US position, which included a maximalist demand for zero enrichment, zero centrifuges, and zero plutonium, with a refusal to acknowledge Iran’s right to enrichment under the NPT, which transgressed Iran’s bottom line – “I believe that means zero enrichment, zero centrifuges, zero plutonium, and of course an end to ICBM development,” said by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2014 (The Jerusalem Post 2014). As Joseph Rodgers explains in Arms Control, the bottom line of the West was no nuclear weapons in Iran. This was the Obama administration’s ultimate policy but it was not mutually exclusive with Iranian demands for enrichment. With a limited and highly monitored enrichment program, Iran cannot rapidly move toward nuclear weapons without being detected. Iran on its side could not negotiate toward a deal that banned enrichment capabilities entirely (Rodgers, 2015).

Conversely, the main reason for the success of negotiations from 2013 to 2015 was the shift in US policy from zero enrichment to no nuclear bomb, that is, accepting Iran’s right
to operate a nuclear enrichment program within the confines of the NPT. However, we cannot neglect other factors that also contributed to the nuclear deal’s completion.

The Western powers, especially the United States, were not in a position to reach a compromise with Iranian President Ahmadinejad, due to the high political costs involved. The 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani changed the atmosphere, as Rouhani had a track record as a nuclear negotiator and was open to accepting a maximum level of transparency and all objective guarantees to demonstrate that Iran’s nuclear program would not be diverted toward weaponization. For the world powers, these two factors were crucially important to concluding a deal. Moreover, Rouhani’s nomination of Javad Zarif as his foreign minister was another signal that pragmatism was returning to Iranian foreign policy.

However, the major changes in the Obama administration’s second term were another decisive factor. The arrival of John Kerry in place of Hillary Clinton and Rob Malley succeeding Dennis Ross in the White House put Undersecretary of State William Burns in a strong position to negotiate a deal. The US’ main assumption in imposing sanctions was that Iran would give up its nuclear program if the sanctions were sufficiently hard-hitting. During Obama’s first term, the United States was successful in winning support from other global powers to pressure Iran. But the Iranian reaction was shocking. Iran increased the capacity and level of its nuclear enrichment capabilities to the point of achieving a short breakout period. In doing so, it left the United States with a choice: either negotiate before Iran passed its game-changing short breakout window or respond to the reality of Iran as a nuclear threshold state. Unless it wanted to engage in another Middle East war, the United States was virtually compelled to negotiate before Iran passed the breakout threshold. Therefore, although the sanctions had harmed Iran and although a deal based on sanctions relief was attractive for Iran, the sanctions strategy failed to achieve its main purpose of dismantling the Iranian nuclear program.

On the other hand, Iran’s growing role in the region and the spread of disorder, terrorism, refugees, civil war, sectarianism, and failed states forced the global powers to acknowledge that achieving stability in the Middle East without cooperating with Iran was impossible. A nuclear deal could open the door for diplomatic engagement with Iran on regional issues and could restore stability and peace in the war-torn region. All these factors contributed toward enabling the Iranian nuclear crisis to be resolved through diplomacy.

The Iranian nuclear crisis and the factors that led to it were unique, but its resolution serves as a lesson for other nuclear crises, such as the current one in North Korea. Obviously, there are major differences between the two cases. Iran remained a member of the NPT, is a member of all weapons of mass destruction conventions, and never possessed a nuclear bomb; after 12 years of intrusive inspections by the IAEA, no evidence of any diversion of fissile material in Iran toward nuclear weaponization was ever presented. Furthermore, Iran, at the highest religious level, opposes all weapons of destruction in principle, including nuclear weapons. None of this is true of North Korea. However, understanding the bottom lines of each party, defining the end state of a deal, dropping maximalist demands, departing from threatening tactics and rhetoric, and being prepared to make a face-saving deal acceptable to both parties are all lessons from the Iranian nuclear case that could be applied to averting disastrous conflict with North Korea.

Since the nuclear deal represents the first major agreement achieved between Iran and the world powers after the 1979 revolution, it is important to push for the proper
and timely implementation of this agreement through multilateral and international pressure. Doing so would create a precedent for further possible deals between Iran and global powers. Iran is a stable, powerful, and very influential player in the region and in the Islamic world, one that cannot simply be neglected.

US President Trump favors reverting to the traditional US policy of confrontation toward Iran, which was tried by every US administration since 1979 and has failed. The aim of America’s coercive policies for 40 years was to isolate Iran and bring about regime change. Obama was the first US president to try diplomatic engagement as a means of resolving the nuclear issue. The JCPOA proves that diplomacy with Iran works. This is the key lesson that Trump needs to learn and use in Middle East crisis management.

Today, after almost four decades of strained relations, the central concern of the United States is that Iran is the region’s most influential country, whereas US allies in the region are either in a state of collapse or extremely vulnerable. Since Trump is so unpredictable, it is important for Europe, Russia, China, and other world powers such as India to prepare for alternative and adverse short- and medium-term scenarios.

The JCPOA also serves as evidence of the success of multilateral efforts. The world has already experienced the failure of unilateral US policies in Afghanistan and Iraq, which took the lives of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilians, resulted in trillions of dollars of material costs and damage, and fostered the creation of extremist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. We know that today’s regional and international crises cannot be resolved through American unilateralism; the failure of the Iran nuclear deal would suggest that they cannot be resolved through multilateralism either.

The JCPOA, containing the most comprehensive transparency measures on nuclear nonproliferation ever negotiated, represents a major diplomatic achievement. Because President Trump supports business, he could encourage US companies to cooperate in pursuing peaceful nuclear projects with Iran. This collaboration would be the best assurance of the civilian nature of the Iranian nuclear program. While US hosts the world’s largest corporate operators of nuclear facilities, employing those same corporations to partner and cooperate with Iran on nuclear projects would secure trust between the two sides after the sunset provisions of the deal expire. As the JCPOA was the first agreement created from multilateral and high-level direct US–Iran negotiations, the way forward for Washington and Tehran is (1) a full implementation of the JCPOA as the prerequisite for developing trust, (2) pursuing the long-term goal of eliminating the creation and proliferation of nuclear weapons and nuclear terrorism, and (3) collaborating to eliminate the risk of proliferation in the Middle East.

The world must build on the JCPOA to eliminate nuclear weapons from the Middle East and beyond, using it as a model to manage other regional crises through diplomacy, embracing moderate rather than radical approaches to Iran.

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