



Strengthening U.S. Options on Iran

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In his first speech to the U.N. General Assembly in New York last week, President Donald Trump once again undermined U.S. power and influence in his remarks on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the 2015 international agreement that cut off Iran’s pathways to nuclear weapons. Calling the agreement “an embarrassment,” the Trump administration threatened to decertify Iran’s compliance.¹ Consistent with Trump’s campaign rhetoric, such a move would contradict recent assessments by top U.S. military and intelligence officials, most of America’s closest allies, and key international organizations. It will also isolate the United States, which will be seen as not keeping its word on the global stage.

A move to decertify Iran’s compliance would start the clock on a 60-day window in which the U.S. Congress could reimpose by a simple majority vote nuclear-related U.S. sanctions against Iran. Advocates of this move argue that it would increase U.S. leverage over Iran as well as the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany (the P5+1) to open the door to renegotiating the Iran deal. President Trump claims he will be able to wring new and more stringent concessions from Iran in new talks.²

In reality, President Trump would be effectively pulling out of the JCPOA and isolating the United States internationally. Failing to keep our word on the Iran nuclear agreement would weaken America’s strategic position around the world as well as in the Middle East and invite a new nuclear crisis in the region at the same time the United States faces armed conflict with North Korea regarding its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs.

More than eight months in, the Trump administration has not shown the ability to either conduct the sort of complex negotiations required to restrain Iran’s nuclear program or, worse, manage the likely crisis that would follow a failed renegotiation attempt. However, the damage from Trump’s course of action would not only be immediate: Withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement would also do widespread and lasting damage to American negotiating credibility, leaving both allies and adversaries to wonder whether any deal struck with the United States will hold between presidential administrations.

President Trump's apparent intent to sabotage the Iran nuclear agreement represents strategic malpractice at its worst. He would invite more global instability in a Middle East region already ravaged by civil war and terrorism and create a second nuclear crisis at the same time the United States faces a potential conflict with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

As the Center for American Progress has argued,³ the JCPOA enhances the security of the United States and its allies. The deal represents the best available path to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, and it should be sustained as part of an assertive U.S. regional approach. There is a more realistic path than the current administration's: The United States should pursue a pragmatic course that ensures strict implementation of the deal and increases its own leverage against Iran's destabilizing activities across the region.

America's enduring interest in ensuring the strict implementation of the nuclear agreement with Iran

The JCPOA has advanced America's security interests. It placed strong restrictions on Iran's nuclear program for a decade or more, all while giving the United States and the rest of the world unprecedented oversight of Iran's nuclear facilities. Under the JCPOA, for instance, the Arak heavy-water reactor—once characterized as a “plutonium bomb factory” by American nonproliferation experts⁴—has already had its reactor core removed and filled with concrete.⁵ Iran also gave up 98 percent of its enriched uranium and pledged not to grow its stockpile for 15 years.⁶ Moreover, the International Atomic Energy Agency will monitor Iran's uranium mining and milling facilities for 25 years.⁷

Under the terms of the JCPOA, Iran will remain at least a year away from enriching enough uranium to build a single nuclear weapon if it makes the decision to do so.⁸ If Iran decides to cheat, it is highly likely the United States and its allies will detect violations thanks to the enhanced monitoring provisions in place as part of the deal. Without the agreement, however, the United States and its allies could lose insight into all aspects of Iran's nuclear fuel cycle, from uranium mining to centrifuge production—crucial visibility should America ever need to consider a military option down the road. And Iran will likely advance its nuclear capabilities in the absence of the agreement's restrictions, as its leaders have pledged to do if the United States breaks the deal. Moreover, without the inspections called for in the deal, Iran will find it easier to establish secret facilities and programs.

In short, U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA would risk creating precisely the scenario the agreement's critics fear occurring 10 years down the road—only it will do so now, with fewer constraints on Iran's behavior. If the United States abrogates the JCPOA while Iran is still considered compliant by relevant international agencies, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as well as senior U.S. military leaders, such as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, Vice Chairman Gen. Paul Selva, and U.S. Strategic Command head Gen. John Hyten,⁹ Iran will have a strong incentive to blame the United States for the disintegration of the agreement. Tehran would then be free to pursue a nuclear program without the JCPOA-imposed restrictions, effectively accelerating its nuclear program by more than a decade. Iran would also be able to present itself as the wronged party, making a compelling case that it was abiding by the terms of the JCPOA before the United States reneged on its own commitments, making its own exit from the deal seem legitimate.

Why exiting the nuclear deal is a bad idea

Beyond the fact that the Iran nuclear agreement remains in America's own interests, there are a number of additional reasons why the Trump administration should not undermine the JCPOA:

- **America will be isolated globally and, as a result, will lack the leverage to negotiate a "better" deal.** When the Obama administration negotiated the JCPOA, it did so from a position of diplomatic strength. American and European economic sanctions, including so-called secondary sanctions against foreign companies that did business with Iran, successfully pressured Iran's government into negotiating a deal that placed stringent restrictions on its nuclear program. These sanctions took years of painstaking diplomatic effort predicated on the world's perception that America was acting in good faith. Today, the Trump administration lacks a reservoir of international goodwill and credibility to draw on and possesses neither economic nor diplomatic leverage with Iran or America's own negotiating partners in Europe, Russia, and China. Instead, President Trump appears dead set on isolating the United States by reneging on an agreement critical to global security.

It remains unclear why these governments would reopen negotiations on what they consider to be closed matter, much less why they would support a harder American line in new talks. Indeed, European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini recently stated, "All sides are implementing—so far—fully the agreement."¹⁰ For European and East Asian countries doing business with Iran, sanctions would mean significant economic pain. Without European support—and the reimposition of European sanctions in particular—it is unlikely the United States will be able to strike

a better bargain on Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, if the United States attempts to unilaterally reimpose secondary sanctions on foreign companies doing business with Iran, countries such as China and India will likely ignore or circumvent such measures.

- **Iran will want more concessions, and the Trump administration has a poor track record of negotiating and getting results—even with its own party controlling Congress.** It is extremely unlikely that Iran will make additional concessions to the United States over its nuclear program, particularly given Trump's international isolation on this issue. Moreover, the Trump administration has a poor track record in complex negotiations concerning important policy issues over the course of its first eight months in office. Canada, for instance, has reportedly taken advantage of Trump's attempt to renegotiate NAFTA to press for changes to American labor and environmental laws.¹¹ Similarly, Trump has failed to produce any major domestic policy achievements despite his own party controlling both the House and the Senate. Extending the restrictions of the Iran deal would be an important contribution. But what would Trump offer in return? There is little reason to believe that Trump's combination of bluster, strategic impatience, international isolation, and diminished leverage would produce a better deal. In fact, there are many reasons to worry that the outcome will be a broken agreement, unnecessarily heightening the risk of military conflict or nuclear breakout.
- **It will make the North Korea crisis even more difficult to solve.** The North Korean nuclear program is a problem difficult enough to solve even without the United States presenting itself as an unreliable power that will not stick to the agreements it makes. Whatever slim prospects exist today for a diplomatic resolution of the North Korea question will evaporate should President Trump provide concrete proof that the United States cannot be trusted to honor its agreements. Making matters worse, an inexperienced president, a chaotic White House, an understaffed State Department, and a military already stretched thin by conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, as well as a crisis with North Korea, will face a second, self-inflicted nuclear crisis.
- **It will divert attention and resources away from the fight with the Islamic State.** Diplomatic, and potential military, tensions with Iran and North Korea will divert the United States and its coalition partners from finishing off the Islamic State (IS)—Trump's declared top foreign policy priority. Trump will shift focus and attention toward a manufactured crisis and away from maintaining pressure on IS. This will jeopardize the hard-earned battlefield success of the past two-plus years in Iraq and Syria by providing IS and the rest of the Salafi-jihadi movement with the time and space to reconstitute. In doing so, Trump risks repeating the mistakes of the past when President George W. Bush chose to invade Iraq before finishing the job in Afghanistan.

- **Iran and its proxies will become harder to push back regionally.** With the nuclear issue off the table for at least 10 years, the United States will be able to focus more strongly on Iran's other destabilizing behavior in the Middle East, ranging from Tehran's ballistic missile program to its support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah. But by reopening the nuclear talks, the Trump administration will divert American and regional attention onto an issue that had been settled. Moreover, an understaffed and demoralized State Department will find it all the more difficult for the United States to push back Iran and its proxies across the region if forced to, once again, conduct difficult and complex negotiations on Iran's nuclear program.
- **Sanctions will lose effectiveness and credibility as a U.S. policy tool.** U.S. and EU economic sanctions proved to be a critical factor in persuading Iran to make concessions that brought its nuclear program under greater international supervision. Gradually lifting sanctions provides a critical incentive for Iran to stick to the deal. But if President Trump ditches the JCPOA, sanctions will prove less effective going forward. Target countries would be justified in thinking that, even if they change their behavior, they will not see relief from U.S.-imposed sanctions or that they may as well continue with their behavior since the United States may well renege on any agreement it makes.

Policy options to strengthen implementation of the nuclear agreement and counter Iran's destabilizing actions

While the Iran nuclear agreement remains strongly in America's interests, ensuring Iran complies with the deal will require more work from the United States. Even conservative foreign policy leaders such as Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argue that the United States should, in Royce's words, "enforce the hell out of the agreement" rather than abandon it.¹² Indeed, the United States has a number of policy options at its disposal when it comes to strengthening the nuclear agreement.

Strengthening implementation of the deal

- **Provide additional resources to intelligence agencies and international institutions responsible for verifying Iranian compliance with the deal.** Congress can provide America's intelligence community with sufficient resources to monitor Iran's compliance with the nuclear agreement. Verification of the deal should be a critical task for the intelligence community—if it is not already. In addition, the United States should take the lead to ensure the IAEA—the lead organization that will determine Iran's compliance with the agreement—has sufficient resources, including enough inspectors,¹³ to carry out its work under the JCPOA. Americans and the world need to trust

the outcome should Iran actually violate the deal. The task of verification should belong to professional experts and intelligence officials—not political apparatchiks in Trump’s White House.

- **Strengthen intelligence cooperation with key allies and partners to prepare for the expiration of the JCPOA.** The U.S. administration should strengthen its intelligence cooperation with its closest allies and partners to provide an additional layer of informal oversight regarding the implementation of the JCPOA. One option would be to establish a bilateral or multilateral task force, not only to bolster cooperation now, but to prepare for the day the JCPOA expires. It is not too soon to begin crafting strategies and tactics designed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons after the terms of the deal expire.

Countering Iran’s destabilizing actions

The nuclear deal by its very nature did not and could not resolve all problems between the United States and Iran. Tehran remains a disruptive and destabilizing force in the Middle East and around the world. It backs nonstate militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and supports terrorist networks with a global reach, such as Hezbollah. To counter Iran’s destabilizing actions in the region and worldwide, the United States should deter Tehran and its proxies; defend American allies and security partners in the region; and compete with Iran’s attempts to extend its regional and global influence.

- **Deter.** Iran offers material support, including weapons, to terrorist and militant groups undermining regional stability: Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq. Working with allies and partners in the region, the United States can interdict shipments sent from Iran that are intended for these groups. Moreover, the United States and its regional partners should make clear to Iran that actions taken by Iranian-sponsored groups that destabilize the region—such as the cruise missiles fired by Houthi militants at a U.S. Navy destroyer in the Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint near Yemen¹⁴—will not be tolerated. The United States should establish clear redlines when it comes to interference with freedom of navigation and U.S. naval operations and be prepared to back them up with action. Overall, the goal should be to deter Iranian proxies from taking actions that either inherently destabilize the region or have the potential to ignite a larger conflict.
- **Defend.** The United States can bolster its defense relationships with partners across the region, starting with robust implementation of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit agreements of 2015 and 2016. These agreements provide a framework for security cooperation in areas such as missile defense, maritime security, and special operations training that will help these partners better defend themselves against Iran’s actions. Similarly, the United States should continue to work closely with Israel to counter the threat that Iran and its proxies pose.

Iran's continued efforts to upgrade and expand its ballistic missile arsenal is another dangerous threat that the United States should seek to counter by working in close cooperation with regional partners. The United States should continue the substantial investments it has made to enhance regional partners' missile defense capabilities. It should also step up the efforts of diplomatic, intelligence, and law enforcement entities to prevent sales and shipments of technologies that have helped Iran increase its ballistic missile capabilities.

Iran also needs to know that U.S. policy remains committed to use all tools of national power to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. Should Iran take this path, its leaders must know that, while America does not seek military conflict, the United States is prepared to respond with all means necessary to any attempted Iranian breakout.

Defending against Iran also means trying to deny it opportunities. Because Iran cannot defeat U.S. forces on the battlefield, it has adopted an asymmetric low-cost, high-yield strategy to exploit existing societal divisions to sow chaos and create clients from Bahrain to Lebanon.¹⁵ This hybrid warfare model depends on failed governance and sectarian grievance, which is one more reason why the United States needs to continue to use its leverage with Arab partners, such as Iraq and Bahrain, to take meaningful actions to address societal fault lines before Iran can exploit them.

The United States should continue its support of national security forces in divided societies such as Iraq and Lebanon. These national institutions, however imperfect, provide a way to bolster the sovereignty and independence of these countries and fight terrorist groups such as IS. In Iraq, this means moving quickly to secure agreement from its leaders for a stay-behind force to support the next phase of counter-IS operations and help rebuild the Iraqi Army and Counter Terrorism Service. In Lebanon, it means reversing Trump's dramatic cuts to U.S. support for the Lebanese Armed Forces and calling on Saudi Arabia to reinstate the \$4 billion in aid for the Lebanese army.¹⁶

- **Compete.** Beyond security-focused measures to deter and defend against Iran and its proxies across the region, the United States, its allies in Europe, and its regional partners should compete with Iran's efforts to expand its influence in places such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Support for national security institutions in Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries in the region can be an important component of a strategy to compete with Iran. But competition with Iran should focus on diplomatic, economic, and political measures that would at least indicate that the United States intends to show up for the contest.

These measures will necessarily differ from country to country. In Iraq, the United States should mobilize the members of the counter-IS coalition and the GCC to launch a major effort to help the Iraqi government to provide basic services and assist IS-ravaged communities to recover and rebuild. America should also encourage and support the

demobilization of Popular Mobilization Units and bringing the remainder firmly under Iraqi government control. In Lebanon, a new round of smart financial sanctions could tighten the screws on Hezbollah without collapsing the Lebanese economy.

The United States also needs to compete in a battle of ideas to inspire the people of the region, address longstanding drivers of instability, and offer a better alternative to Iran's ideological agenda. Too often, the Trump administration seeks to use human rights issues as a cudgel against Iran while ignoring the actions of U.S. partners. A more credible, consistent approach would raise the pressure on Iran at home; help deny it opportunities abroad; and position the United States to address drivers of instability in the years ahead.

Many of these measures to deter, defend, and compete against Iran in the Middle East already exist, including congressionally approved sanctions or the U.S.-GCC security cooperation framework created during the Obama administration. However, these measures require the Trump administration to actually take action—an uncertain prospect given the president's track record.

Conclusion

Abandoning the nuclear deal with Iran would represent a strategic blunder of the highest order—especially given the volatile strategic environment the United States confronts not just in the Middle East but also around the world. Instead, the United States should look to strengthen the nuclear agreement at the same time it aims to deter, defend, and compete against Iran across the region.

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