

Trump's Nuking of JCPOA

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Abstract

The JCPOA was seen as an agreement that had the potential to transform the decades old hostile relationship between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This, however, did not happen as the JCPOA- a signature foreign policy achievement of then President Barak Obama, was systematically demolished by his successor in office, President Donald Trump. This paper looks at the reasons that underlined President Trump's decision to withdraw from the commitments made by the USA under the JCPOA and its repercussions.

Keywords: JCPOA, President Obama, President Trump, Nonproliferation, Iran, Middle East,

I. Introduction

Iran and the United States of America were close partners in world politics for most of the Cold War period. Iran under Shah Reza Pehlevi was an important ally of the United States in the Middle East. This cosy relationship with Iran turned bitter when the Shah was swept away from power in the Islamic revolution that gripped Iran in 1979. Power in Iran now moved into the hands of the conservative Islamic clerics who are a dominant influence in the deeply religious society of Iran. The new regime was negatively predisposed to USA as they saw USA as the prime supporter of the oppressive regime of Shah Pehlevi. The Shah seeking shelter in USA after his ouster only worsened the situation. With this began a period of deep hostility between the United States and Iran in which Iran and its leaders described the United States of America as the leader of the satanic forces of the world who are out to destroy the Islamic revolution in Iran. This hostile attitude of the Islamic rulers of Iran was fully reciprocated by the Americans who saw Iran as part of an axis of evil in world politics. All this was set to change with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action¹ (JCPOA) agreement. The JCPOA was a welcome break in this close to four decades of relentless hostilities between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Concluded on 14 July 2015 by China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States, the European Union, and Iran (Rosenthal 2016: 98), the JCPOA brought the two mutually hostile countries on the negotiating table and was a major diplomatic breakthrough. The deal also addressed one of the primary concerns of US foreign policymakers pertaining to Iran trying to obtain nuclear weapons. It created multiple barriers to prevent Iran from building a nuclear device in the near future. This was an important goal as a nuclear capable Iran would upset the power balance in the Middle East and would make the whole world a more dangerous place. For all these reasons, the JCPOA was seen as the corner stone of the foreign policy achievements of President Obama, something comparable to the breakthrough achieved by President Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in improving the strained relationship of the United States with the People's Republic of China in 1972. (Ambrose 2011: 233)

This cursory look at the merits of the JCPOA leads us to an important question: what circumstances persuaded President Donald Trump to invest so much political capital into dismantling an agreement that outrightly promised to contain the nuclear ambitions of Iran. This paper explores the reasons behind the decision by President Trump to withdraw from the JCPOA. The agreement was seen as a major diplomatic breakthrough between the United States and Iran and held the promise of preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons in the middle east. The JCPOA was however thoroughly battered by candidate Trump in his election campaign for the office of President and he upheld his promise of withdrawing US from the agreement once he became President. The JCPOA was an executive agreement signed by President Obama and it did not have the approval of the Senate. This fact put the fate of JCPOA completely in the hands of Trump and he demolished it with the full force of his fury. Trump believed that he could extract a better deal from Iran and this belief ultimately leads him to the decision to withdraw USA from its commitments under the JCPOA.

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The JCPOA and its Aftermath

On July 14, 2015, a breakthrough was achieved in the relationship between US and Iran with the signing of the JCPOA. It held the potential of ending decades of hostility between United States and the revolutionary government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was a major diplomatic victory for President Obama and it was considered to be one of the highlights of his term as president. It was a major diplomatic victory for President Rouhani as well. It cemented his position as a moderate cleric in the Iranian political system and allowed him to consolidate his hold on power. The JCPOA also boosted Rouhani's popularity among the people of Iran as the agreement held the potential of easing the economic hardship being faced by the people of Iran. This became evident in the huge majority by which Rouhani won his re-election as president in 2017.²

Even when the JCPOA was signed, there was tremendous opposition to the deal in US policy making circles. Particularly opposed was the Republican Party and the candidates who were competing for the nomination of the presidential candidate of Republican Party. Among these, the most vociferous was Donald Trump.³ The Republican Party and its leaders have a long past of opposing the Islamic revolutionary government of Iran. Republican have always been opposed to any kind of compromise with the Iranian government led by clerics. Reagan was always livid with Iran and who can forget President Bush describing Iran as part of the axis of evil. Looking at it from a distance, we can see a continuity between the Republican party's thought process and its reflection in the thinking of Donald Trump. There has always been a strong undercurrent of a negative perception of Iran in United States after the events that unfolded in 1979 and thereafter. In view of this, it needs to be underlined that President Obama took a huge political risk and went against the flow in negotiating an agreement with Iran to limit its nuclear options. The presence of a liberal president in Iran facilitated the process and Obama seized the opportunity when it presented itself.

As it turned out, however, the person most opposed to the deal is able to win the presidency and Donald Trump is not someone who is bothered about diplomatic niceties when it comes to getting what he wants. What Donald Trump really wanted was to pursue an agenda that would cement his parties majority in both chambers of the Congress and also clear the path for his victory in the next presidential election. The JCPOA came in handy for this purpose as he was able to beat the drum to show that he is the true saviour of American national interest and that the democrats under Obama compromised with the security of the United States of America. (Sanger, 2016)

Another complication was presented by the fact that the Democrats did not have a majority in the Congress when the JCPOA was signed. This detail had a very significant consequence for the future of the nuclear agreement with Iran. Due to a lack of majority, President Obama did not table the agreement for the approval of the Senate, and without the approval of the Senate, the agreement was reduced to the status of an executive agreement signed by the President. Such an executive agreement can be easily overturned by an executive order signed by the next president and this is exactly what happened. If the deal had the prior approval of the US Senate, then it would have been much more difficult for Trump to walk out of the agreement.

Trump's efforts to strangulate the JCPOA

Donald Trump did not waste any time and soon after taking over as president he puts himself to the task of dismantling the JCPOA. Trump started ripping into the deal by looking for excuses to justify his refusal to certify that Iran is in compliance with the deal. The agreement required the president to certify that Iran is in compliance with the provisions of JCPOA. The Congress could continue to ease sanctions on Iran only after receiving this certification from the President.

The primary argument in Donald Trump's opposition to JCPOA was his assertion that the agreement only delays the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran and it fails to eliminate this possibility. He also pointed out that the agreement does nothing to stop the development of Iran's ballistic missiles. Another concern of Trump was regarding Iran's power play in the middle east and he believed that a comprehensive agreement with Iran should have been able to put a check on Iran's activities in the region. (Haass, 2020: 178)

Trump finally withdrew United States from the JCPOA in May 2018. (Landler, 2018) In his address from the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, Trump described JCPOA as "a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made.... It didn't bring calm, it didn't bring peace, and it never will."⁴ Trump justified his withdrawal from JCPOA as the fulfilment of his campaign promise and presented it as his duty to end US involvement in an agreement that was inherently flawed.

In addition to announcing the ending of America's commitments under JCPOA, Trump also revealed plans to reimpose sanctions on Iran. He also added that US would look at imposing new sanctions in order to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability. In this line of thinking, he was supported by the neo conservatives and hardliners in his cabinet such as his National Security Advisor John Bolton. He also received support from regional adversaries of Iran such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu, hailed Trump for a "historic move" and "courageous leadership."⁵

This unilateral withdrawal of USA threatened to not only waste what was achieved by JCPOA after almost two years of diplomatic efforts, it also created a rift between US and its West European allies, who were not in favour of abandoning the agreement. Britain France and Germany were also wary of the prospects of getting caught in the web of US sanctions for doing business with Iran.

In a response to Mr. Trump's decision to withdraw from the agreement, former President Obama stated that the step would lead to "a losing choice between a nuclear-armed Iran or another war in the Middle East."⁶The Iranian reaction was, however, subtle, and it declared that it would continue to abide by the terms of the existing agreement. Iran realised that it did not want to go in the direction of reimposition of economic sanctions that had been crushing its economy. Trumps decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal also endangered Rouhani's political capital as he had banked heavily on the possibility of economic revival of Iran which could only be made possible by the withdrawal of economic sanctions. Further, the breakdown of the nuclear agreement opened the gates for hardliners to capture power in Iran. In the elections held in 2021, Ebrahim Raisi-a hardliner, goes on to win the presidency. (Yee, 2021)

Trump always liked to project himself as a great deal maker and believed or would like all to believe that he had it in him to solve some of the trickiest problems in global politics such as the powder keg like situation in the Middle and the recalcitrant regime in North Korea. Trump argued that his decision to junk JCPOA would lead to a better agreement. By unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA, and reimposing sanctions on Iran, Trump had hoped to bring Iran on the negotiating table and make it accept an agreement that would make it impossible to develop nuclear weapons in future. He described it as the maximum pressure campaign which he believed had yielded results with North Korea and had brought it to the negotiating table.

Although Iran did not immediately withdraw from the JCPOA, time goes on to reveal that President Trumps maximum pressure campaign failed to budge Iran into returning to the negotiating table for carving out an agreement in accordance with the whims and fancies of Trump. "President Trump cannot expect to be unpredictable and expect others to be predictable," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a speech at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute last month. He added, "Unpredictability will lead to mutual unpredictability, and unpredictability is chaotic." He was perhaps summing up Iran's response to the U.S. President's "maximum pressure" policy.⁷

Israel was obviously very pleased by this decision of Trump and till the time he was in the President, both Trump and Israel continued to make efforts to ensure maximum provocation of Iran to force Iran to do something that would justify his killing of the JCPOA and make it impossible for the next president to reach any compromise with Iran. One example is the killing of a top general of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani was taken out in an American drone strike while he was on a visit to Baghdad. (Arango et.al., 2020) To Iran's credit, it must be said that they continued to remain in compliance with the deal even when Americans refused to do so and avoided taking the bait of provocation dangled by Trump.

Trump's actions while in office added new knots to an already very complex problem and the administration of President Joe Biden is finding it extremely difficult to reach an understanding with Iran. (Crowley & Jakes, 1922) Iran has also added new demands, that are unrelated to the nuclear issue, to the ongoing negotiations that underway for reviving the nuclear deal. It is now seeking explicit guarantees from US that the next President would not be able to walk out of any agreement reached. While no compromise is in sight, Iran continues to make steady progress in its nuclear fuel enrichment capabilities. It should soon be possible for Iran to refine nuclear material to the purity levels required for building a nuclear bomb.

These developments clearly indicate that the JCPOA negotiated by President Obama was indeed a very sound strategy. The agreement had capped Iran's nuclear ambitions in return for relief from economic sanctions and would have worked to provide stability to the region. In contrast, Trump's decision to scrap the JCPOA has actually worked to push Iran closer to development of a nuclear weapons capability. Besides, his maximum pressure campaign has had no effect whatsoever on dampening Iran's interventions in the middle east.

Implications of Trump's Decision

From this discussion we can safely conclude that it was Trump's predetermination to end the deal that ultimately leads to the collapse of JCPOA. He had already made up his mind that JCPOA is a bad agreement and after becoming president he systematically guided the agreement to its demise.

An important outcome of this episode was the message that any agreement with United States cannot be trusted upon to be followed by the next U.S. President. It also put a question mark on the US' leadership of world politics about which trump was very clear that he's not bothered with what the rest of the world thinks and his only priority was to make America first which was his campaign slogan and agenda of his presidency. Although it's difficult to believe and understand how he was going to make America great again by relinquishing the US' leadership of world politics as we all know US' influence in world politics is one of the primary reasons for sustenance of USA in world politics as a first rate power.

II. Conclusion

The failure of President Trump to persuade Iran to agree to a revise the JCPOA through his campaign of exerting maximum pressure shows that President Obama's use of carrot and stick policy was more effective in containing the nuclear ambitions of Iran. The JCPOA was a great agreement as it brought together two enemies to the negotiating table and it contained the possibility of improvement in the perpetually hostile relationship between United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. It also made an important advancement in the direction of putting lid on Iran's nuclear ambitions and boosting the cause of nuclear non-proliferation. All this came to a knot when Trump becomes the President of USA and unleashed his big wrecking ball to demolish the Obama era nuclear deal with Iran.

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