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Iran Nuclear Deal

US President Donald Trump is on his way to destroying the Iran Nuclear Deal, an agreement achieved after a decade of talks which has made the development of Iranian nuclear weapons impossible. It's now clear that Trump's decision to withdraw the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is part of a much wider agenda and is a serious threat to peace in the region.

This paper outlines the background to the deal, what was agreed in the negotiations and why it is now under threat.

Background

The United States helped launch Iran's civil nuclear programme, supplying the country with a reactor fuelled by highly enriched uranium in 1967. Tehran subsequently announced plans to build many nuclear power stations in the country but work was halted following the 1979 revolution. By the late 1980s however, work on the nuclear power stations was re-started, with support from Pakistan, China and Russia.

Iran has always maintained its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes only. Some in the international community have doubted this position however, noting that the country has enriched uranium at a far higher level than is necessary for nuclear power and believing that Tehran has actually covered up the development of nuclear weapons.

The revelation in 2002 of undeclared nuclear facilities in Iran led to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and negotiations with France, Germany and the UK. The Paris Agreement was signed in 2004, in which Iran agreed to suspend its nuclear activities. Cooperation broke down in 2005 however, leading to sanctions on Tehran and the country was referred to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Then President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, insisted on Iran's sovereign right to develop its civil nuclear power capacity, ignoring further sanctions and UNSC resolutions and continuing to enrich uranium as well as building a heavy water production plant at Arak.

Negotiations and further resolutions continued over the following years, with China, Russia and the

United States joining the talks (who along with the original negotiators Germany, France and UK are referred to as P5+1). Tensions increased even further in 2009 when Iran announced it intended to build more uranium enrichment facilities. However, by 2012, US and other intelligence agencies broadly agreed that Iran had given up its nuclear weapons programme in 2003, whilst keeping options open for its redevelopment in the future – maintaining a position of 'strategic ambiguity'.¹

The situation changed following the election of a new Iranian President in the 2013 elections. Hassan Rouhani immediately announced his intention to work with the international community to ease tensions over his country's nuclear programme. Following intense rounds of meetings, the JCPOA was signed by Iran and the P5+1 in July 2015, with the UNSC approving the deal a few days later.

The Agreement

The key points of JCPOA are as follows:

Uranium

Uranium can be used to make fuel for nuclear power plants, but it can also be used for nuclear weapons when enriched further. Iran will not enrich its uranium to a higher level than 3.67% and will reduce its current stockpile by 96% to 300kg, with the excess material sold on international markets, diluted or converted into fuel.

Plutonium

Much of the negotiations concentrated on a heavy-water facility the Iranians have been building near the

¹ 'US agencies see no move by Iran to build a bomb', *The New York Times*, 24 February 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/25/world/middleeast/us-agencies-see-no-move-by-iran-to-build-a-bomb.html?_r=0

town of Arak. Spent fuel from a heavy-water reactor contains plutonium, which can be used to make a nuclear bomb. But Iran will now re-design the reactor, so that it cannot produce weapons-grade plutonium and have agreed not to build any more.

Inspections

The IAEA will take responsibility for monitoring Iran's declared nuclear sites and will be able to request visits to any military site.

Sanctions

The sanctions imposed in an attempt to stop Iran's nuclear programme have devastated the Iranian economy. The agreement allows Tehran to sell oil on international markets and participate in the global financial system. A ban on Iranian students studying nuclear physics will also be lifted, as well as overseas assets unfrozen.

Sanctions

The IAEA issued a statement in 2016 declaring Iran had fulfilled all of its obligations under the JCPOA, meaning international sanctions could start to be lifted.

This meant that Iran had completed the following:

- shipped out over 12 tonnes of enriched uranium to Russia, thus reducing its stockpile to less than 300kg;
- removed over 13,000 centrifuges and associated infrastructure;
- removed and made inoperable the core of the Arak plutonium reactor;
- allowed the IAEA unprecedented access to sites in Iran.

The intention was for Iran to take further steps over the next few years in return for removing all remaining sanctions.

US withdrawal

However, despite the wholly positive outcome of the JCPOA, in May 2018, President Trump announced US withdrawal. He began his speech: 'Today, I want to update the world on our

efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon'. These can only be seen as empty words, given that he was walking away from the deal that does just that. His course of action makes Iranian nuclear weapons more likely not less and suggests that the withdrawal is intended – by the resumption of sanctions – to knock back Iran's role as a significant regional power.

The US withdrawal drew condemnation from the other signatories, who expressed their determination to keep the deal in place despite the possible economic price the US would impose on foreign companies operating in Iran. However, in April 2019, the Trump administration announced the end of the sanctions waiver that had applied to a number of countries, including China, India, Turkey, Japan and South Korea. Taken together with other economic and military pressures, this has put major pressure on Iran's economy.

As a result, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani announced that he would halt some of Iran's commitments agreed under the accord, in line with a dispute resolution mechanism included in the deal. He has not withdrawn from the JCPOA but has appealed to the other signatories to make good on their commitments to the deal, to ease the economic difficulties inflicted by US sanctions. If this happens Iran will revert to full compliance.

Conclusion

The responsibility for the unravelling of the Iran nuclear deal lies at Trump's door. It began with the US withdrawal in 2018, at a time when Iran was in full compliance with the deal.

With increased economic pressures on Iran, and the recent deployment of US aircraft in the Middle East, it seems tensions are being ratcheted up ready to make the case for a new war. It is essential that the other JCPOA signatories step up to the plate and meet their financial commitments to the deal. They must not allow Trump to bully them into the destruction of a crucial diplomatic achievement that had done so much to resolve a longstanding and contentious issue.

