



America Has A Plan To Dismantle The Iran Deal; Now It Needs One For The Aftermath

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With President Trump's pick of John Bolton as National Security Advisor raising the chances of a U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Washington must be ready in its aftermath to pursue a bold, broad, and effective strategy to restrain Tehran's nuclear dreams and hegemonic ambitions.

That's because a withdrawal, which would probably come in May, would create new challenges for Washington by complicating relations with European allies who oppose a U.S. withdrawal, probably driving Tehran closer to U.S. adversaries in Moscow and Beijing, and perhaps convincing Iran to attack U.S. interests more aggressively in the region or beyond.

Whether Washington should withdraw from the U.S.-led deal is a close call, which explains why experts in and out of government land on different sides. While Bolton favors a withdrawal, Defense Secretary James Mattis told Congress last fall that he opposes it. When the Foundation for Defense of Democracies convened 20 Iran experts recently, they split down the middle on the question.

To be sure, the deal is tilted toward Iran, providing tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief to Tehran in exchange for only temporary limits on its nuclear development and no limits at all on its development of ballistic missiles, its terrorist sponsorship, or its efforts to destabilize other governments. At a basic level, however, Iran seems to be complying, which it won't have to do if the deal collapses.

The question of continued U.S. participation arises because the 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act requires the President to certify every 90 days that Iran is complying with the deal and isn't taking other steps to advance its nuclear program, and that sanctions relief continues to serve U.S. security interests.

To this point, a president who disparaged the nuclear deal as the worst diplomatic agreement in U.S. history was convinced not to withdraw by Mattis as well as National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Trump, however, has picked Bolton and CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who both strongly opposed the deal, to replace McMaster and Tillerson, respectively.

Apart from the personnel moves, the writing may already be on the wall. Trump set a May 12 deadline for U.S. and European officials to craft a plan that would address his three major complaints - either by renegotiating the nuclear deal with Iran or cutting a side deal between America and Europe.

First, Trump complains, the deal expires in about a decade, lifting all restrictions on Iran's nuclear efforts and mocking President Obama's boasts that it closes all Iranian avenues to nuclear weaponry. At that point, Tehran can enrich enough uranium, at a high enough level of purity, to make atomic bombs.

Second, and despite Obama administration assurances to the contrary, the deal doesn't cover Iran's ballistic missile program, even though Tehran's nuclear and ballistic ambitions are closely related. That's because Iran continues to test longer-range missiles on which to mount nuclear warheads, rejecting Europe's plea to curtail its ballistic activity in order to persuade Washington not to withdraw.

Third, despite the promises of Obama's negotiators to secure "anywhere, anytime" inspections, Tehran won't give International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors access to military sites, and the deal provides no process to force Iran to back down. That, in turn, undercuts IAEA findings that Iran is complying with the deal. It's complying to the extent that the agency can certify that much.

If, as expected, the United States and Europe can't craft a plan and Washington pulls out, it will face big challenges. Two immediately come to mind.

First, Washington must convince its European and Asian allies not to undermine the tough sanctions that would return. Faced with the choice of trading with Iran and maintaining access to the U.S. dollar, multinational firms presumably would choose the latter. But the European Union is now discussing whether to give its firms access to emergency credit lines and funding support if they face new sanctions, perhaps enabling them to sidestep the sanctions and maintain their new ties to Iran.

Second, Washington must launch a broad, sustained effort to rally the world to address the full range of Iran's nefarious behavior. The President would have to make a strong public case at home and abroad, and also work with Congress and U.S. allies on new sanctions and other measures to isolate the regime, restrain its military, weaken its economy, and threaten its hold on power.

If the president truly believes that the nuclear deal is as bad as he says, then he needs an effective strategy for its aftermath.

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