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Here's What Trump Should Do Post-Nuke Deal

by [Michael Singh](#)

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The United States must explain to its allies how withdrawing from the Iran deal fits into a larger strategy for the Middle East.

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement was predictable. The road ahead is anything but.

The president's decision to pull out of the nuclear accord was well telegraphed and had its roots both in politics and in policy. Politically, Trump committed himself during the 2016 campaign to scrapping the deal, which he variously described as "insane," "ridiculous," and the "worst deal ever."

Yet the decision to withdraw goes beyond politics. The nuclear accord stoked controversy when the Obama administration introduced it in 2015—not merely because of its association with former President Barack Obama. Critics such as myself felt that the deal did too little, for too little time, to restrict Iran's nuclear activities. We believed that the deal was one-sided, granting Iran broad sanctions relief for its restraint in just one area, albeit a vital one. And we believed there was an alternative: not war, but waiting, for sanctions to bite harder.

The allure of reneging on the deal and reinstating sanctions is thus clear. Iran's economy is already reeling—the Iranian rial has lost significant value, forcing the regime to impose capital controls, and widespread protests over economic conditions and other matters have roiled the country. The Iranian regime appears vulnerable, at just the time that U.S. policymakers are searching for ways to counter its aggression across the Middle East. The Trump administration hopes not just to revive but to increase the pre-nuclear deal pressure on Iran and bring Tehran back to the negotiating table, with the White House's "maximum pressure" campaign against North Korea as a model.

But in policy as in life, it's not so easy to turn back the clock. Critics lost the argument over the nuclear agreement in 2015, and since then, the deal has been embraced by much of the world. As a senior U.S. official responsible for Iran policy from 2006 to 2008, I know from personal experience that even when the United States was strategically aligned with its diplomatic partners, sanctions required relentless diplomacy in order to be effective. The United States secured United Nations resolutions as a foundation for a broader, ad hoc sanctions regime, which gave others cover to cooperate—and balanced the pressure campaign with a diplomatic process, which kept even the likes of China and Russia on board.

Conducting such diplomacy today will be difficult. U.S. allies in Europe will be upset that the United States abandoned the nuclear agreement. Even more so, they will be nonplussed that Washington has forsaken the U.S.-European negotiations to fix the deal, which was the Trump administration's own initiative. And their first priority in the wake of the U.S. announcement may be to mollify Iran, preserve the agreement despite the U.S. withdrawal, and head off further escalation of the crisis. Russia and China, for their part, are in a different place altogether—U.S. relations with both have deteriorated in the past decade.

This will be the United States' first effort to erect a secondary sanctions regime amid such a sharp divergence with allies. In previous cases—Russia, North Korea, and Iran the first time around—the United States often disagreed with its partners on tactics, but largely agreed on the nature of the threat and the need for action.

European firms and other multinationals will respect the renewed U.S. sanctions, facing the prospect of the loss of access to the U.S. market. Indeed, many refrained from re-entering the Iranian market due merely to the possibility of the return of sanctions, along with other barriers endemic to Iran. But the inevitable cheating and workarounds, and resistance from state-owned firms and governments, will offset those firms' compliance.

Diplomacy, not just market signals, will be required to amplify whatever pressure the United States can generate alone, and translate that pressure into policy outcomes.

Diplomacy will also be required to manage the policy tradeoffs looming on the horizon. Two of Iran's biggest oil customers are China and India; the former is embroiled with the United States in talks over trade and North Korea, requiring the prioritization of U.S. policymakers. The United States eyes the latter as a key partner in the country's Indo-Pacific strategy, which calls for expanding our network of Asian alliances.

Perhaps most important, the United States has not put its withdrawal from the nuclear deal in any broader policy context. The country lacks a strategy for countering Iran, and partners with whom to share the effort. While Washington has been debating the nuclear deal, Iran has been expanding its power across the Middle East, and the prospects of an Israel-Iran or Saudi-Iran war have been rising.

Going forward, the Trump administration should have three priorities:

First, the United States should finally devise a comprehensive Iran strategy that not only addresses Iran's nuclear activities, but also seeks to repulse Iranian gains across the Middle East and push back on its production and proliferation of missiles. The administration should be ready to explain to allies how the nuclear deal decision fits into a larger strategy for Iran and the Middle East, rather than talking about sanctions in isolation.

Second, the White House should continue to pursue a U.S.-European agreement to strengthen the nuclear accord and should be willing to hold back on sanctions upon reaching one. The tenor of these talks will inevitably shift, from merely supplementing the nuclear deal to perhaps devising a joint roadmap toward reaching a new understanding. But the United States should not throw away the good work it has done over the past few months. Any such accord could be considered a first step and a diplomatic foundation for a new negotiation with Iran and others, which is a more distant prospect.

Finally, senior U.S. officials should engage in an intensive diplomatic roadshow to explain the path ahead to international partners beyond key European allies and to foreign firms, and begin the hard work of limiting diplomatic rifts that adversaries will be keen to exploit. The United States may not find allies terribly receptive to the renewed sanctions push, but listening to the concerns of friends, presenting them with specific requests, and ensuring that the measures do not endanger their security and economic interests can help limit the diplomatic fallout.

However they feel about Trump's decision earlier this month, his critics both foreign and domestic share his desire to prevent Iran from making nuclear and regional gains. Translating that shared desire into a favorable policy outcome will now take all of the diplomatic savvy the president's new national security team can muster.

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