

# How Will the Iran Nuclear Deal Affect Broader U.S. Strategy?

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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## **If the administration cannot convincingly describe a regional strategy into which the agreement fits, allies and skeptics are likely to assume an unspoken U.S. realignment or simple incoherence.**

**T**he next two months, and beyond, will be consumed with debate over the merits of the Iran nuclear agreement. Much of this will necessarily focus on narrow questions raised by the accord: Does it sufficiently limit Iranian nuclear capabilities? Are the verification and enforcement mechanisms sufficient to ensure Iranian compliance? Is sanctions relief proportionate to what is being conceded by Tehran? Answers to these questions will help determine whether the deal advances or sets back U.S. interests.

But even if one concludes, as President Barack Obama has asserted, that this deal sufficiently constrains Iran's nuclear program and is preferable to the feasible alternatives, there's another important question to debate: What are the deal's implications for broader U.S. strategy?

President Obama said Tuesday that the accord was narrowly targeted to Tehran's nuclear program and would not diminish U.S. determination to counter Iranian misbehavior on other fronts. He defended his engagement with Iran by noting, as he has before, that Ronald Reagan negotiated arms-control agreements with the Soviet Union while also calling it an "evil empire." That analogy, however, is not apt. Arms-control agreements with the Soviets were, generally speaking, one element of a broader strategy of containment; they complemented that policy by limiting or rolling back a capability that the Soviets already possessed, bolstering the overall effort to constrain Soviet power and influence.

And in the case of Iran, the agreement seems not to complement U.S. strategy but upend it. After years of opposition to the Iranian regime, Washington is seeking to cooperate with it -- and possibly bolstering the state that some of our allies regard as their chief threat. Under the agreement, the U.S. will acquiesce to the gradual expansion of Iran's

nuclear efforts after more than a decade of opposing them. We will comprehensively lift sanctions on Iran after more than three decades of adding to them. We will facilitate the transfer of funds to Iranian entities after years of seeking to block them. All of this looks like a stark strategic reversal.

Faced with U.S. assurances that our regional strategy of strengthening allies while countering spoilers has not changed, allies such as Israel and Sunni Arab states may be more inclined to infer an undisclosed agenda in our actions than to trust our words. That the administration felt it had to "compensate" allies in the run-up to the deal by offering fresh supplies of arms, new military exercises, and other forms of cooperation suggests that they perceive the accord as neither reassuring nor stabilizing. In other words, it clashes with, rather than complements, a long-standing strategy aimed at fostering stability in the Middle East and the security of allies.

In light of this seeming dissonance, insisting that our strategy is unchanged -- as the president did in his news conference -- when the Iran deal seems to mark a departure will not reassure or convince anyone. There are legitimate concerns that Iran will use its financial windfall from the deal to fund regional misbehavior. The substantive way to address such questions would be for the administration to outline in detail how it intends to counter Iranian policies in the region despite the accord. That includes describing how the U.S. would deter Iranian nuclear advances as the constraints imposed by the deal phase out in five to 15 years as well as describing a security architecture that can head off the spread of nuclear technology throughout the region in response to Iran's newly legitimized status as a nuclear weapons threshold state.

If the administration cannot convincingly describe a regional strategy into which the proposed nuclear deal fits, allies and skeptics are likely to assume an unspoken U.S. realignment or simple incoherence -- both of which argue for returning to the drawing board. Modifying or reversing a deal of this magnitude once implementation begins will be difficult. And putting this consequential nuclear accord in place but leaving the larger strategic questions it raises to the next administration would not be responsible or prudent.

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