

Revival of the Iran Nuclear Deal under the Biden Administration

Introduction

The aim of this research is to analyze the progress of the Iran nuclear deal under the Biden Administration. The Middle Eastern region has been conflict-ridden for several decades. With regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran competing for dominance in the region, the Middle East is a region where power politics often take place. Several decades into the nuclear game, Iran has finally witnessed significant progress in its nuclear program. A nuclear Iran can alter the regional power status in the Middle Eastern region. It has severe implications in the region that can be detrimental to Western interests in the region.

To avoid these potential negative effects of a nuclear Iran, the Obama Administration struck a deal with Iran called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The deal has been largely stranded after the Trump Administration. Currently, Biden has reached out to mend and better the deal than the 2015 deal.

The JCPOA is a tool for preventing various disastrous regional implications in the Middle East region. Scholars and analysts have talked about the implications for the region if the deal proves to be ineffective. Some analysts have discussed the impact the deal has had on Israel's foreign policy towards Iran after the 2015 Iran deal (Kaye, 2016). A nuclear Iran will just be one step closer to triggering a nuclear war between Israel and Iran which will result in various security dilemmas in the region. Scholars have also addressed the Saudi- Iranian regional rivalry and have talked about the potential outcome of the rivalry if the deal fails to deliver (Guzansky, 2015). A nuclear Iran can motivate regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia to develop its own nuclear program which can lead to a domino theory of weapons of mass destruction. Rich states like Saudi Arabia can also buy nuclear weapons from poorer states like Pakistan or North Korea as a response to safeguard their interests in the region from Iran. This will result in regional instability in the Middle

East. Moreover, considering that 31% of the world's oil comes from the Middle East, a nuclear war in Iran can alter the World Economy in a negative manner (Rapier, 2020).

On the other hand, experts have also analyzed the positives of the deal (Gass, 2018). Fitzpatrick (2015) has analyzed the deal and commends its effectiveness and strong verification process. He focuses on the key successes of the agreement while providing us with a better understanding of the deal under the Obama Administration. Sir Richard Dalton (2016), a senior member of the British diplomatic service noted that the deal was an outcome of profound diplomacy and predicted that it would sustain itself. Even though the deal didn't survive the Trump Administration, his connotations about the 2015 deal are key to negotiating a lasting deal under the Biden Administration.

Although scholars have discussed the 2015 Nuclear deal and its implications, very few have addressed it under the Biden Administration. This research attempts to answer the question- "*What are the implications of JCPOA under the Biden Administration?*" Considering the pace of Iranian nuclear development and the inability of the Biden Administration to conclude the negotiations with a finite outcome, the paper assumes that the ongoing negotiations will fail to produce a long-lasting solution to limit the Iranian nuclear program.

The paper has used primary and secondary resources to understand the past, present, and future of the Iran nuclear deal. Primary sources include News reports and statistical data from reputed think tanks, and secondary sources include journal articles.

The 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal

The Iran Nuclear Deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was signed between Iran and several world powers, including the United States in July 2015. The deal stated that Iran agreed to dismantle its nuclear program to a certain extent and that it will allow more international inspections of its nuclear facilities in exchange for billions of dollars worth of sanctions relief. Advocates of the deal, including former President Barack Obama said that the deal would help to prevent the revival of Iran's nuclear weapons program and thereby limit

the rising tensions between Iran and its regional rivals, including Israel and Saudi Arabia (Robinson, 2021).

The deal was projected by the Obama Administration as a very good deal. Other senior administration officials have also repeatedly testified in the US House of Representatives and Senate in favor of the deal (Riechmann, 2015). Former Secretary of State John Kerry favored the deal and reasoned that if Iran did not sign the deal, then Iran would be free to pursue its nuclear program which would narrow the breakout time. Sanctions had proved ineffective in stopping Iran's nuclear program, and none could argue a better deal. There were several scholars that argued that it might not be a good deal, but certainly an 'acceptable deal' (Marcus, 2015).

However, there were several opposers to the deal. Israel was the strongest opposer; former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it an anti-Israeli step that could lay on the line of survival of the country. Iran has openly threatened to destroy Israel, referring to Israel as a one-bomb nation. Israel considered the deal to be a reward for Iran instead of ensuring the complete disarmament of Israel's nuclear program (Greenberg, 2015).

Seasoned scholars have observed that Iran still has its regional hegemon ambitions, and he has noted that the JCPOA has made this ambition one step closer for Iran. The United States and EU are obliged to defend the JCPOA, which gave Iran more room to negotiate and use the threat of resuming its nuclear program as a bargaining chip to attain more sanctions relief (Petraeus and Jeffrey 2015). Through sanctions relief, the JCPOA has given Iran more freedom to pursue its regional policies. After a prolonged period of the inability of the United States to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons permanently, even the United States admitted that there were loopholes in the agreement (Norell, 2015). Iran constantly threatened to resume its nuclear program by claiming that the US was breaching the JCPOA. This created a huge regional and international security dilemma. Overall, the Iran Nuclear Deal was perceived as ineffective and more detrimental than beneficial.

Why did Trump leave the deal?

Trump has been against the Iran Nuclear Deal ever since its initiation in 2015, calling it ‘the worst deal ever. He considered it a bad deal because it wasn’t permanent and would allow Iran to resume enriching some uranium after a decade and lift other restrictions after that (Berenson, 2018). Ever since he was a candidate for the presidency, he left no chance to call out the architects of the deal such as John Kerry and slam them for their weak attempts to contain Iran’s nuclear progress (Zurcher, 2018). His advocacy against the deal during the elections almost made the retrieval from the deal an agenda during his presidency. After his inauguration as the President, he was bound to act upon his words.

During the Trump presidency, Iranian repetitions of breaching the deal fuelled Trump’s decision to leave the deal. According to Trump’s senior administration officials and the information provided by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran had breached the agreement in numerous ways. By 2017, Trump’s senior officials had identified that Iran had failed to fulfill its nuclear obligation:

- Iran exceeded the agreed limit on heavy water stocks.
- Iran exceeded the agreed limit on its centrifuge numbers.
- Iran restricted the IAEA’s access to inspect its nuclear facilities.
- Iran was not committing to the proper implementation of Section T, which restricts Iran from pursuing specific activities that could contribute to developing a nuclear weapon.

Further claims that do not include the provisions listed in the JCPOA that motivated Trump to leave the deal were:

- Iran was supposedly not meeting the ‘spirit of the deal.’
- Iran was pursuing its ballistic missile program despite UN Security Council prohibitions. (Acton and Blanc, 2017).

After facing immense pressure to stay in the deal from his European counterparts, the Trump Administration finally left the deal in 2018. After the deal was left stagnant, the Trump Administration was free to re-impose nuclear-related sanctions on Iran. Although this action received little political support from Democrats in the United States and the other five JCPOA signatories. Trump’s replacement of the Iran Nuclear deal was a multi-pronged pressure campaign to contain Iran, through Economic sanctions and Deterrence. The United States imposed 17 rounds

of Iran-related sanctions, targeting Iran-related individuals and entities. Trump aims to provide Iran with an ultimatum, whether to cease or persist in the policies that triggered the sanctions in the first place (Pompeo, 2018). In 2019, Trump announced new sanctions on Iran, cutting off all revenue from Iranian oil exports which is the main source of income for the country (Wong, 2019).

Scholars have advocated for Trump's decision to leave the deal, supporting the sanctions placed on Iran by Trump and even rooting for secondary sanctions on Iran for its ballistic missile tests, support for terrorism, and human rights abuses (Kroenig, 2018). On the other hand, the democrats in the United States criticized Trump over his reckless approach leading to the abandonment of the deal. Former Secretary of State, John Kerry defended the deal against Trump's pessimistic nature about the deal, stating that US relations with Iran were stable after the implementation of the deal- "There were no missile attacks on United States facilities. No ships were being detained or sabotaged in the Persian Gulf, there were no protesters breaching our embassy in Baghdad. Iraq welcomed our presence fighting ISIS- John Kerry" (LaChance, 2020).

Trump's decision to leave the deal has also resulted in Iranian leaders taking a firm stance and defending their positions. Former President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani made his stance clear about the outcome of the US leaving the deal-"If the US exits the JCPOA, it will soon regret it" (EFE News Service, 2018). Rouhani opposed Trump's proposal to add additional conditions to the deal that would limit Iran's ballistic missile program. With the end of the Trump Administration, the Iran nuclear issue has been idle. The current President Biden representing the democrat party has been handed over the issue under complex conditions. His approach to the deal has been completely the opposite of that of Trump. US's foreign policy towards Iran under the Biden Administration is going to determine whether the Iran Nuclear Deal will persist or not.

Biden's approach to the Iran Nuclear Deal

Biden's approach to the Iranian Nuclear deal was predictable considering Biden's involvement in the 2015 Nuclear deal that was signed under the Obama Administration. His approach towards Iran at the beginning of his presidency was mainly focused on repairing the bilateral relations between the USA and Iran. However, as Biden tries to renegotiate the Iran

Nuclear deal to mend the flaws in the 2015 agreement, the current President of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi has taken a strong stance during the negotiations. Raisi showed his interest in bringing back the 2015 deal, however, he has been straightforward about Iran's non-negotiability of its ballistic missile program (Naji, 2021). Raisi also does not intend to move forward with the negotiations unless the sanctions are removed. Raisi's attempts at hard lining the deal has been successful in pressuring Joe Biden to a certain extent.

In February 2022, Biden dropped sanctions on Iran's civilian nuclear program in hopes of reconciliation and better facilitation of the negotiations regarding the nuclear deal. Nevertheless, Iran remained non-responsive and continued to stall the negotiations (Gefen, 2022). The year-long Vienna talks have also failed to produce a mutually beneficial deal.

According to International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched up to 60% purity rose more than fourth fifths in the last three months (Tirone, 2022). The steady increase in the stockpile of uranium enrichment indicates the closing window of opportunity for Biden to strike a deal with Iran. David Albright, the founder of the Institute for Science and International Security, said that Iran already has the capability to produce at least 45 kg of highly enriched uranium at 90%. This is enough weapons-grade fuel to produce a nuclear bomb in short order. He estimates that Iran may be able to conduct a nuclear test in six months. (Lynch, 2022).

Moreover, Chinese investment in Iran can undermine the US influence during the negotiations giving more leverage to Iran. Although the situation is dire, the Biden Administration promises a more consistent foreign policy approach than its predecessor. It seems certain that both the United States and Iran desire to return to some sort of arrangement that offers US sanctions relief for Iranian nuclear constraints (O'TOOLE, 2021). With tensions running high, Biden's approach to the deal has been criticized by international actors, republicans, and even democrats of the United States (New York Post, 2022).

Some Analysts have come to the conclusion that a new nuclear deal is not going to stop Iranian aggression. Contrary to pro-JCPOA advocates, some claim that there has been evidence that shows an increase in Iranian aggression after the 2015 JCPOA deal. The Jewish Institute for National Security for America (JINSA) collected data on the major forms of Iran's regional aggression from January 2015, before the JCPOA was adopted to the present (Misztal and Cicurel, 2022a). The data reveals that, although Iran was not directly attacking U.S. troops in Iraq between

2012 and 2018, Iran was engaged in significant regional aggression including against American personnel during this period. This decreases the general public popularity of wanting a new nuclear deal with Iran.

After months of negotiations, the Biden Administration has given up hopes of creating a new deal that is long and strong than its predecessor. The Biden Administration now focuses on short term goals and claim that at least the deal will slow Iran's attack on US troops (Misztal and Cicurel, 2022b).

Conclusion

The Biden Administration has adopted the Obama Administration's approach towards the Iran nuclear deal. Talks between US and Iranian leaders have so far produced nothing. Although there have been comments from both sides stating that a new deal is close, there is no actual substantive evidence to support these comments. Both sides have stalled the negotiations, resulting in a dragged-out negotiation process. Trump's foreign policy towards Iran was inconsistent. His withdrawal from the JCPOA was an important lesson for Iranian leaders. While negotiating for a new deal, Raisi and his government may fear the case of abandonment again by the Biden Administration or any other administration after Biden.

Moreover, Iran has adopted a look East policy. With a greater flow of Chinese and Indian investments, reconciliation with the West may not be a priority for the Raisi government. This could translate to a lesser enthusiasm to join the deal. On the other hand, at least a partial waiver of sanctions is needed in order for Iran to have fully flourished relations with regional powers such as China and India.

Furthermore, negotiations for a new deal come at a time when Iran already has significant achievements in its nuclear program as noted by the IAEA. The possibility of Iran conducting its first nuclear test is not far. Raisi's decision regarding re-joining the JCPOA will depend on the progress of Iran's nuclear program in the next couple of months. With the United States occupied in other regions of the world, Iran has an ideal amount of time to develop its nuclear program while simultaneously pursuing negotiations for sanctions relief.

The Biden Administration is under the pressure of striking a deal before the window of opportunity runs out. Staying in the negotiations will result in an asymmetrical agreement that will be more in favor for Iran. A renewed deal will only prolong the implementation of Iran's nuclear program rather than prevent it. A new deal seems ideal only if the United States uses the time it has bought itself to strengthen its alliances in the region and collectively focus on developing countermeasures to contain the Iranian threat. However, with the US presence needed in almost every major scale modern-day conflict, the chances of excessive US involvement in Iran seem limited.

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