

The US and the EU Divergence over Iran: Analyzing the Case of American Withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018

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Abstract

This paper aims to clarify the US and the EU/E3 divergent strategies regarding Iran's nuclear agreement (JCPOA), particularly in light of President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the deal. The US's maximum pressure strategy and the re-imposition of secondary sanctions, significantly undermined the agreement, prompting the EU/E3 to take countermeasures to avoid US secondary sanctions and keep the nuclear deal intact. Despite these efforts, the EU's attempts to preserve the agreement were without much success. The study highlights the primary reasons behind the EU's inability to uphold the agreement. The research also explores the implications of the US and EU/3 asymmetry with reference to the nuclear accord, focusing on the long-term effects on regional and international stability as well as transatlantic relations. Given the critical importance of US and EU collaboration in addressing global challenges and ensuring global security, this paper recommends for the adoption of a coordinated strategy to tackle the issue of Iran's nuclear program.

Keywords:the US; the EU/E3; Iran; Divergent; JCPOA; Nuclear Program

Resumé :

Cet article vise à clarifier les stratégies divergentes des États-Unis et de l'UE/E3 concernant l'accord nucléaire avec l'Iran (JCPOA), en particulier à la lumière du retrait unilatéral du président Trump de l'accord. La stratégie de pression maximale des États-Unis et la réimposition de sanctions secondaires ont considérablement sapé l'accord, incitant l'UE/E3 à prendre des contre-mesures pour éviter les sanctions secondaires américaines et maintenir l'accord nucléaire intact. Malgré ces efforts, les tentatives de l'UE pour préserver l'accord n'ont pas eu beaucoup de succès. L'étude met en lumière les principales raisons de l'incapacité de l'UE à maintenir l'accord. La recherche explore également les implications de l'asymétrie entre les États-Unis et l'UE/3 en ce qui concerne l'accord nucléaire, en se concentrant sur les effets à long terme sur la stabilité régionale et internationale ainsi que sur les relations transatlantiques. Étant donné l'importance cruciale de la collaboration entre les États-Unis et l'Union européenne pour relever les défis mondiaux et garantir la sécurité mondiale, cet article recommande l'adoption d'une stratégie coordonnée pour aborder la question du programme nucléaire iranien.

Mots clés:États-Unis ; UE/E3 ; Iran ; Divergent ; JCPOA ; programme nucléaire

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1. INTRODUCTION

Iran's nuclear program has been a subject of global concern and controversy for many years. Although Iran maintains that its nuclear ambitions are for peaceful purposes, its capabilities have significantly advanced over time. This has led to significant international concern, resulting in various diplomatic efforts and sanctions designed to curb the country's nuclear development. A nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was formally signed in 2015 by Iran, the United States, China, Russia, and the EU/3, which comprises France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, following a series of tough and fruitful discussions. This move is considered a crucial agreement that aimed to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear program in return for sanctions' alleviation.

Under President Donald Trump's leadership, the United States declared a substantial change in its policy against Iran. This transition was underscored by the United States' decision to exit the JCPOA in 2018 and reinstate stringent economic sanctions on Iran, exemplified by its "maximum pressure" strategy. The US' **withdrawal** also was accompanied by the re-imposition of secondary sanctions on companies doing business with Iran. Therefore, tensions between the US and the EU members of the agreement arose because of the US measures.

In this regard, this article aims to investigate the US and the EU/3 opposing strategies regarding Iran's nuclear agreement in light of **Trump's exit** from the agreement. It also aims to highlight European countermeasures to avoid secondary sanctions and the EU's failure to uphold the JCPOA. Essentially, this work strives to deduce the implications of the US and EU/3 asymmetry with reference to the nuclear accord.

Despite the fact that the topic of Iran's nuclear deal following President Trump's leave has been well researched and examined, **many scientific publications** by Achim Vogt and David Jalilvand's "One Year after the Re-imposition of Sanctions",

and Emirhan Kaya's "The United States-Iran Relations: The Trump Impact", have further concentrated on the effects of the new American sanctions on Iran. Additionally, there has been attention to the EU/3 response to the US exit from the deal, as seen in works like FaramarzYadegarian's "Iran's Countermeasures to US Withdrawal from JCPOA and the Trigger Mechanism" and Riccardo Alcaro's "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More than a Failure". However, given the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the topic of US-EU conflict over Iran has not received enough attention or analysis. This work aims to fill that gap by answering the following questions: What methods did the US and the EU take regarding Iran's nuclear program before and following the agreement? To what extent did the United States' exit from the agreement affect EU relations? And what impact did the US and EU /3 divergence over Iran have on regional and global security, in the context of Iran's nuclear ambitions?

To analyze the topic effectively, this **work is based on a comparative-historical approach. This method is used to evaluate US and EU foreign policies from the perspective of unilateralism versus multilateralism. Accordingly,** this method aims to draw attention to the divergent stances and strategies adopted by the US and the EU/3 after the latter's exit. The EU/3 aimed to maintain and strengthen diplomatic ties with Iran as the US withdrew from the agreement and concentrated on applying as much pressure as possible on Iran.

1. The EU- US Approaches towards Iran before the JCPOA

Washington has viewed Iran as a destabilizing force that requires isolation and coercion to change its behavior since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For decades, the US has pursued an active containment policy, employing various types of sanctions aimed at weakening the Iranian regime and limiting its strategic power in the Middle

East (Fayazmanesh, 2003, p. 221). **The United States imposed sanctions on Iran in the 1980s and 1990s in response to its alleged support for terrorism and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, including a full embargo on bilateral trade.** US sanctions stopped all US aid and weapon transfers to Iran in 1984 after the Iran–Iraq War broke out. In addition, President Clinton's 1995 Executive Orders 12957 and 12959 prohibited US commerce and investment in Iran, aiming to isolate Iran economically and diplomatically (Brief History of US Sanctions on Iran, 2017, pp.1-2).

Furthermore, on August 5, 1996, the Iran and Libya penalties Act (ILSA) imposed severe penalties on Iran's oil and gas industry. Additionally, the act sanctioned foreign companies who invest in Iran's oil and gas sector. (Fayazmanesh, 2003, p. 222). Nonetheless, these sanctions substantially affected European companies interested in doing business with Iran, inciting a considerable disagreement between the United States and its European allies.

In contrast, the EU has viewed Iran as a potential partner. Since the early 1990s, the EU has pursued a policy of constructive engagement, which opened new opportunities for dialogue and cooperation with Iran. In 1992, the EU entered a phase of Critical Dialogue, aiming to improve relations in several areas, including trade, energy, human rights, and political dialogue. However, issues related to political assassinations in Germany led to the suspension of the Critical Dialogue in 1997 (Fiedler, 2018, pp. 294-295). Additionally, the Comprehensive Dialogue from 1998 to 2002 addressed issues of mutual interest, such as drugs, refugees, trade, and investment, paving the way for the Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 1999 (Fiedler, 2018, p. 295). This agreement aimed to strengthen political and economic ties between Iran and the EU on various issues of mutual concern.

In a nutshell, while Europe was eager to engage with Iran and strengthen

commercial and diplomatic ties, the United States maintained a tough stance against the country. However, these divergent approaches began to shift toward cooperation after the revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear program in early 2003 (Perthes, 2005, p. 17).

2. International Pressure on Iran's Nuclear Program

Iran has consistently claimed its nuclear program is peaceful and compliant with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, its decades-long covert nuclear activities exposed in the early 2000s with the revelation of two secret nuclear sites violated NPT obligations (Chrysochou, 2017). This raised global concerns over proliferation risks, regional stability, and security, prompting international legal action against Iran.

The United Nations, the United States, and the European Union then jointly imposed sanctions on Iran between 2006 and 2010, claiming that its covert nuclear program posed a threat to international security and stability. In the years that followed, the UNSC adopted four resolutions putting international sanctions on Iran's nuclear program and armaments development: 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008), and 1929 (2010) (Keynoush, 2022, pp. 9-11). It is worth mentioning that these multilateral sanctions had a severe impact on Iran's economy, which, by 2012, was experiencing a deep recession and double-digit inflation. Between 2010 and 2012, real GDP growth decreased from 5.8% to 2.6%, respectively (Saeed, G & Jahan-Parvar, M R, p. 7).

Following a phase of significant political, economic, and financial strain, Iran started to work cooperatively with major world powers to tackle the nuclear issue. As a result, Iran established a nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the US, Russia, China, and the UE/3 (France, the UK, and

Germany) to restrict its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief (Chrysochou, 2017).

3.The Nuclear Pact: The US and EU/3 Initial Approaches

In July 2015, a nuclear agreement was formally signed in Vienna after formal negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, and China) over Iran's nuclear program. In return for the lifting of international sanctions, this deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sought to limit Iran's nuclear program while guaranteeing its peaceful character. Under the JCPOA, Iran pledged to reduce its enriched uranium stockpile, limit the number of centrifuges and accept extensive inspections from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In return, the easing of economic sanctions enabled Iran to reintegrate with the global economy (Fiedler, 2018, p. 297).

The important point to remember is that a major convergence of U.S. and EU/3 tactics led to the creation of a nuclear deal under the Obama administration. In order to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the US and the EU, which includes the UK, France, and Germany, decided on a strategy that included multilateral talks and diplomatic engagement. Prioritizing security concerns and avoiding military conflicts, the United States sought to resolve Iran's nuclear issue diplomatically under President Obama. Likewise, the EU/3 played a pivotal role in formulating a comprehensive diplomatic strategy, as it focused on dialogue and engagement in dealing with security challenges, particularly the Iranian issue. Consequently, the US and the European Union convergent positions towards Iran's nuclear dilemma revealed unprecedented diplomatic collaboration, thereby presenting a unified posture on the potential nuclear proliferation threats posed by

Iran (Chrysochou, 2017).

However, despite their cooperation in reaching a broad international consensus, disagreements between the US and the EU over Iran emerged due to US concerns about Europe's low defense spending, a domestic debate during the Obama administration that strained the JCPOA, and, most importantly, President Trump's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement. These factors significantly altered the diplomatic landscape, creating tensions among the remaining signatories and profoundly affecting transatlantic unity (Schwammenthal, 2018, p. 218).

4. Trump's Withdrawal Motives: Maximum Pressure and Secondary Sanctions

Before delving into the "maximum pressure" strategy that President Trump outlined following the US departure from the deal, it is important to briefly highlight the motives behind that withdrawal. Since the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump has been outspoken against Iran and the JCPOA. As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump stated that this agreement is detrimental for America, for Israel, and for the entire Middle East, affirming to terminate the detrimental agreement with Iran, if he is elected (President Trump Withdraws...2018, p. 514). President Trump issued a warning on January 12, 2018, threatening to withdraw from the JCPOA unless it addressed its flaws (Hellman, 2018, p. 2). Thus, for security considerations and concerns about Iran's ballistic missiles' development, its support for regional radical groups in the Middle East, and the inadequacies of its nuclear program, the US chose to withdraw from the deal. Additionally, diplomatic pressure from US allies in the region, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, played a role (Scazzieri, 2018). These countries believed that the JCPOA did not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and posed a threat to their national security (President Trump withdraws...2018, p. 514).

President Donald Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Accord (JCPOA) on May 8, 2018. Subsequent to this decision, the US reintroduced all sanctions previously removed under the agreement and added supplementary penalties, with most taking effect within 180 days (Belal, 2019, p. 26). The Trump administration used a strategy of "maximum pressure," reimposing sanctions on particular areas of the Iranian economy, such as banking and finance, as well as oil production and sales, instead of negotiating a new nuclear agreement with Iran. This strategy primarily relied on secondary sanctions, which punished non-US businesses that continued to trade with Iran (Nuruzzaman, 2020). Ultimately, through its maximum pressure strategy and secondary sanctions, the US compelled foreign financial institutions to choose between doing business with Iran or the United States, thereby isolating Iran economically and politically (Geranmayeh, 2018).

5. Economic Repercussions of Trump's Withdrawal on the US, EU, and Iran

Other parties to the nuclear deal, such as the US and the EU, were also negatively impacted economically, in addition to Iran, which suffered significant losses during the accord's implementation and when the US withdrew and re-imposed economic sanctions. Their economies fluctuated, with variations in exports, imports, and trade balances. After the conclusion of the nuclear deal in 2015, Iran revitalized its economic ties with both the EU and the US. According to statistics, Iranian exports to the US topped \$1 million, while those to the EU exceeded €1.5 billion. In contrast, the US surplus fell to under \$100 million (Topliceanu, 2021, p. 72). However, after the US pulled out from the agreement, its trade balance progressed, documenting a surplus of more than \$350 million, with

export values reaching their highest point since the financial crisis. In contrast, the EU significantly reduced its trade surplus, which dropped to roughly €561 million (Topliceanu, 2021, p. 72).

According to the data above, the US and EU's economic circumstances after the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement showed that, despite not being among Iran's top international trading partners, the US benefited from its exit in terms of trade. In contrast, the EU, despite experiencing a trade deficit, continued to engage with Iran. This ongoing trade allowed for a continued exchange of imports and exports, placing the EU among the top three of Iran's international trading partners (Aslan, 2018, p. 13).

In the same train of thought, Iran experienced a major economic boom after implementing the nuclear deal, particularly in trade and the oil sectors. Its GDP surged by 13.4% in 2017 (Khajehpour, 2019, p. 11). Imports and exports of goods and services also saw a substantial increase in 2017, surpassing \$100 billion each. In the petroleum sector, oil and gas exports doubled in 2017 compared to 2015, following the JCPOA's implementation (Topliceanu, 2021, p. 75). The figure below depicts Iran's economic growth from 2010 to 2017, emphasizing GDP, imports and exports of goods and services, as well as oil and gas exports.

Fig. 1: Iran's Trade Developments from 2010- 2017(billion \$)

Year	GDP /capita, PPP (\$)	Exports of goodsand services	Imports of goods and services	Oil and gas exports
2010	17389	118,8	94,3	90,19
2011	18009	148,9	102	119,15
2012	15950	144,5	139,2	68,08

2013	15274	123,7	107,9	64,54
2014	15236	100,1	92,9	55,41
2015	13588	76	74,2	31,85
2016	14012	93,6	87	55,75
2017	14536	111,1	106,2	65,82

Source :Topliceanu (2021, p. 75-77).

The remarkable expansion of the Iranian economy was short-lived, nevertheless, since it was followed by a downturn after the US announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and sanctions were reinstated. With oil output declining to 3.8 million barrels per day and exports to 2.3 million barrels per day, the petroleum industry was the one most severely affected. ("Six Charts," n.d.). In 2019, Iran experienced a severe economic downturn marked by a 6% contraction in GDP. A substantial devaluation of the Iranian rial relative to the US dollar and the euro coincided with this fall, which spurred skyrocketing inflation that year, surpassing 30% (Khajehpour, 2019, p. 12).

Overall, the unilateral decision by President Trump to re-impose sanctions on Iran resulted in a severe economic degradation, aiming to isolate the country from the global market. As a result, Iran found itself in a precarious situation, with escalating financial difficulties contributing to widespread instability. The current economic climate, according to President Rouhani, is the most difficult since the Islamic Revolution.

6. The EU's Stakes in Salvaging the Nuclear Deal

European governments have long seen Iran's policies as destabilizing but maintained that engagement, especially through the JCPOA, was the best approach (Alcaro, 2018, p. 14). France, Germany, and the UK (EU/3) stressed the

deal's importance for regional security and vowed to uphold it if Iran complied with its nuclear obligations. Geopolitical, security, and economic interests drove their strong commitment to preserving the agreement.

For geopolitical and security reasons, **the** European Union's dedication to international cooperation, nonproliferation, and diplomacy as means of settling international disputes served as a framework for creating an effective and long-term security architecture. Accordingly, the EU's commitment to preserve the JCPOA aligned with its interests in safeguarding the non-proliferation regime and deterring Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. This commitment helped to maintain stability in the Middle East, which is critical to the EU's security due to its closeness. Thus, any instability in the Middle East posed security challenges for Europe, including a potential refugee crisis and the spread of terrorism (Alcaro, 2021, p. 56).

Beyond geopolitical and security considerations, the EU had substantial economic interests in preserving a sustainable nuclear agreement with Iran. The lifting of sanctions enabled European corporations to access Iran's vast market, abundant natural resources, and strategic location. This provided chances for European corporations to engage in trade and investment, particularly in industries like energy, automobile manufacture, and infrastructure. Therefore, the EU prioritized saving the nuclear deal as a way to boost economic growth and strengthen its position in the Middle East (Perteghella, 2019, p.110).

7. The EU/3's Countermeasures: Navigating US Secondary Sanctions

In actuality, European businesses doing business and investing in Iran suffered as a result of the US pulling out of the nuclear agreement and the reinstatement of secondary sanctions (Hellman, 2018, p. 5). The international community, which included the European Union (France, Germany, and the United

Kingdom), strongly objected to the U.S. withdrawal and the ensuing penalties after that, stating that Iran was fully compliant with the principles of nuclear non-proliferation. The European leaders of France, the United Kingdom, and Germany issued a joint statement on May 8, 2018, expressing their disappointment over the US decision and reaffirming their commitment to pursue and maintain the pact. On the other hand, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini publicly condemned Trump's action, emphasizing that the nuclear agreement with Iran was the result of twelve years of diplomatic efforts as it was effective, fulfilling its goal of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and contributing to world security (Fiedler, 2018, p. 301).

French, German, and British EU leaders unanimously agreed with a set of concrete suggestions made by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to safeguard their interests in Iran and uphold the nuclear agreement. "So we have the duty, the Commission and the European Union, to do what we can to protect our European businesses, especially SMEs," stated President Juncker (European Commission, 2018). This statement demonstrated the EU's commitment to safeguarding the interests of European businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), despite the challenges presented by the United States' withdrawal. Practically, the EU took several steps to maintain ties with Iran and avoid US secondary sanctions, comprising activating the EU Blocking Statute, the European Investment Bank, and INSTEX, subsequent to the substantial endorsement from European leaders for the EU Commission's proposals.

7.1 Updating the Blocking Statute

The EU/3 enacted the Blocking Statute of 2018, commonly referred to as the

EU Blocking Statute, to lessen the extraterritorial execution of US sanctions that were reintroduced after the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. The key aim was to shield European enterprises from US sanctions by forbidding EU entities from adhering to US measures that could negatively affect their operations (Pertghella, 2019, p. 115). Moreover, the regulation allowed European businesses to pursue compensation for the damages resulting from these sanctions. Nevertheless, the statute underscored that companies must adhere to EU law, and the European Commission had the authority to provide exemptions in instances of conflict with the international law (Hellman, 2018, p. 7).

7.2 European Investment Bank

In response to the European Commission's Delegated Decision, the European Investment Bank (EIB) expanded its External Lending Mandate (ELM) to support European investment in Iran, aligning with JCPOA goals. However, due to US sanctions and political risks, financial institutions hesitated to engage, rendering the EU's effort largely symbolic rather than effective in boosting Iran's global economic integration (Pertghella, 2019, p. 115).

7.3 Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX)

In January 2019, France, Germany, and the UK established INSTEX, a European Special Purpose Vehicle designed to facilitate trade with Iran amid US sanctions. It enabled financial transactions for exempt humanitarian goods (e.g., medicine, food) through a barter system, avoiding direct monetary transfers (Immenkamp, 2020, p. 9). However, INSTEX struggled due to its complex setup and exclusion of Iran's crucial oil sector. Ultimately, it failed to deliver significant results, highlighting the broader difficulties of sustaining the JCPOA

under geopolitical pressures(Shindler, 2020, p. 31).

8. The State of EU/3 Failure to Preserve the Nuclear Deal

The EU/3's attempts to restore communication with the US on the nuclear deal and lessen the financial impact of the secondary sanctions on European companies were unsuccessful. Therefore, all the EU's initiatives were dismantled gradually (Scazzieri, 2018).. Many analysts, including Geranmayeh and Rapnouil (2019) argued that the effectiveness of the revived Blocking Statute and the European Investment Bank's measures in 2018 was impeded by the US dollar's dominance of in the international banking system. As a result, numerous European companies chose to terminate their business dealings with Iran to prevent isolation from the American financial system. With regard to INSTEX, even though it was established to facilitate trade with Iran, the mechanism did not reach the desired results, for it encouraged only trade in goods not sanctioned by the US, excluding the oil industry, which was mostly suffering economic sanctions (Alcaro, 2021. P. 63).

In contrast to the EU's contributing role in facilitating US involvement in nuclear talks with Iran in 2015, the EU/3 failed to replicate that achievement following Trump's decision to exit from the nuclear pact in 2018. Accordingly, the US unilateral move has significantly undermined the EU's ability to implement properly the mechanisms of maintaining the JCPOA. So, the EU's failure to match its political ambition to preserve and fulfill its obligations under the JCPOA can be explained by Europe's lack of strategic independence, which is stemmed from its economic interdependence with the United States (Geranmayeh and Rapnouil, 2019). In this context, economic considerations account for the EU's inability to salvage the JCPOA political importance. As the EU/3 trade volume with the US has substantially increased, reaching a level of €360 billion in 2017, compared to its

foreign trade with Iran, about €21 million in the same year, the EU countries could not endanger the US market. Thus, given that the United States is the world's largest economy and the epicenter of global finance, European corporations have strengthened their commercial and investment ties with the US market (Aghaee and Bagheri, 2022, pp. 546-547). Similarly, the EU concerned about losing the US as a valuable partner in addressing global issues, viewed investment with Iran as extremely risky (Czulda, 2018).

Additionally, the EU's inability to defend the nuclear agreement is also attributed to security concerns. Due to the absence of a robust, independent European security mechanism, the EU/3 was compelled to modify its strategies to align with American interests and objectives under the auspices of the United States and NATO. Essentially, the EU's dependence on US assistance to uphold the nuclear agreement highlighted its incapacity to make autonomous decisions and establish itself as a prominent global player. This dependency exposed the Union's vulnerability and excessive reliance on US actions and policies in tackling global concerns (Aghaee and Bagheri, 2022, pp. 538–539).

9.Diverging Paths over the JCPOA: Unilateralism versus Multilateralism

The dispute over the JCPOA during the Trump presidency caused a serious rift in US and EU relations and put the transatlantic relationship under more pressure than any other issue in 2018(Dutta, 2019). The Trump administration directly endangered the EU's role in global governance by pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal. Nevertheless, Europe's eagerness to keep the agreement alive even without much success aimed to highlight that the EU is attempting to become an important security actor in world politics. Besides, the difference in the US and EU/3 approaches regarding the Iranian deal was an outcome of the asymmetry of power between the

two entities. As a global superpower, the US exerted dominance through its military capabilities and economic strength. On the other hand, the European Union was unable to offset **Trump's unilateralist approach** due to its lack of a cohesive military force and the US dollar's unparalleled dominance in global trade (Dimitrova, 2020, p. 4).

Not only that, the rift over Iran provided a stark demonstration that both actors had divergent ways of defining their interests and policies. On the one hand, the EU/3 remained dedicated to the nuclear agreement even after US sanctions were reinstated. It worked diligently to preserve the agreement by engaging with Iran and encouraging its compliance. This underlined the EU's commitment to promote a rules-based international order with multilateralism. On the other hand, the US decision to withdraw from the deal, reimpose severe sanctions on Iran, and pressure other nations to cease dealings with Tehran, relying on its economic power and influence, was motivated by **Trump's inclination towards unilateral decision-making. This approach** reflected the US deepening isolation in international politics rather than seeking broad international consensus (Barghandan, 2018).

Ultimately, while the EU advocated for multilateralism and aimed to maintain the Iran nuclear agreement, the Trump administration's **independent actions** badly undercut these efforts and weakened its credibility in relations with the EU. This divergence in US and EU approaches to the nuclear agreement hampered transatlantic relations, as both parties pursued conflicting principles associated with their national interests.

10.The Ramifications of US-EU Asymmetric Approaches over the Nuclear Deal

Although the United States and the other JCPOA signatories, primarily the EU/3, have **shared** the goal of preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons, the

strategies used to achieve that goal have been varied (Tabatabaia and Tam, 2020, p. 8). This divergence in US and EU/3 policies over the nuclear pact led to the deterioration of transatlantic relations, which had significant geopolitical, security, and diplomatic ramifications. Geopolitically, the US unilateral sanctions on Iran and other countries, along with the EU's failure to fulfill its commitments, prompted Iran to reduce its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA in May 2019. Therefore, Iran intensified this strategic move by installing more advanced centrifuges and resuming uranium enrichment. Most importantly, by violating the terms of the agreement and increasing its enrichment program, Iran extended its influence in the Middle East by supporting militant groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen financially, militarily, and ideologically (Mousavian, 2023, p. 97).

Further, Iran's growing influence in the Middle East has destabilized the region, challenging the U.S., Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. With Iran reaching nuclear threshold capabilities, proliferation concerns have escalated, prompting Israeli operations, such as the assassination of scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and cyberattacks on nuclear facilities to hinder its progress (Collina 2024). The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA under Trump exacerbated regional and global insecurity, leaving no effective strategy to counter Iran's nuclear ambitions.

President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA without proposing an alternative strategy damaged the U.S.'s reputation as a reliable partner in multilateral diplomacy. By disregarding the consensus of key international players (EU, China, Russia), the U.S. undermined trust in collective action, complicating efforts to address global challenges like Iran's nuclear program and North Korea's reluctance to engage in negotiations due to doubts over U.S. credibility. This move weakened

the value of multilateral diplomacy and strained international cooperation.

What is more, other international actors on their parts, mainly Russia and China, had seized the opportunity to align with Iran, forming an axis of influence designed to counter US hegemony. Iran's support for Russia in its war against Ukraine, particularly through the provision of military and technological aid, clearly demonstrates this alignment (Collina, 2024). In a similar vein, Iran expanded its economic, security, and political ties with China through a comprehensive agreement known as the Iran–China 25-year Cooperation Program signed in March 2021. Therefore, by strengthening its alliances with these key global players, Iran has managed to mitigate the impacts of US pressures and maintain its strategic and economic interests (Mousavian, 2023, p. 96-97).

Conclusion

In the early 2000s, the international community, particularly the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations, raised alarms over Iran's nuclear program and its potential threat to regional and global security. In response, they imposed heavy sanctions on Iran. These pressures led to the 2015 signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 nations. The agreement aimed to limit Iran's nuclear development in return for sanction relief and marked a significant diplomatic achievement under the Obama administration, reflecting strong US-EU collaboration.

However, under President Trump, the US unilaterally withdrew from the deal, criticizing its limitations, and reimposed strict sanctions on Iran. This "maximum pressure" policy not only economically isolated Iran but also strained US-European relations. In contrast, the EU/3 (France, Germany, and the UK) sought to preserve the deal, believing it effectively constrained Iran's nuclear program, as verified by the

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). They introduced mechanisms like INSTEX to maintain trade with Iran and bypass US sanctions.

Despite these efforts, the EU's lack of strategic autonomy and dependence on the US dollar limited its ability to counteract American pressure. As a result, many European companies halted operations in Iran, damaging EU interests in the region. This growing divergence between the US and EU weakened transatlantic unity and allowed global powers like China and Russia to increase their influence, contributing to a shift toward a multipolar world order.

Iran's subsequent reduction in its nuclear commitments further escalated regional tensions. The transatlantic divide over Iran's nuclear program highlights the urgent need for renewed cooperation. A coordinated US-EU strategy is essential to address Iran's nuclear ambitions and ensure regional stability. Future research should focus on the potential for effective transatlantic collaboration, especially in light of evolving leadership and global security dynamics.

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