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The Iranian Nuclear Programme: Dynamics of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), American Unisolationism and European Apprehensions

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Abstract

Though Iran claims that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes, yet it may decide to pursue nuclear weapons while taking into consideration the complex geostrategic matrix of the region – a situation that may result in further horizontal proliferation. The permanent five UN Security Council members and Germany (P5+1) signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran in 2015 with the objective to curtail its nuclear ambitions. Since then, it has become a challenge for the European powers – France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (E3 + 1) to maintain trust and keep the deal going. Coercive measures like sanctions on the part of the US against Iran have created a huge trust deficit and resultantly have put the new administration of Joe Biden in a situation of few choices to revive the deal to tackle the Iranian nuclear issue. Sanctions also bittered American European allies especially France, whose companies have big business interests in Iran. This article aims at addressing the issues of the Iranian nuclear program, its nature, purpose, and interests. It also deliberates the European and the US concerns before and after the deal.

Keywords: Iran's Nuclear Programme, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), P5+1, E3+1

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Introduction

Iran's nuclear ambitions have posed a strategic challenge to the regional security order with international implications. The United States, more than any other United Nations Security Council permanent member, was convinced that Iranian goal is to acquire nuclear weapons with the objective to establish regional predominance. On the other hand, Iranian stance remains that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes which solely aimed at meeting energy requirements.¹ In fact, Iranian possession of the dual-use technology has posed real challenges for the non-proliferation regime and stability of the region. Today the issue has become more complex because of the interests and concerns for the regional and international players. Serious tensions between Iran and US between Iran and the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia, at the regional level, shaped the contours of the Middle Eastern politics. The US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2018, has made Iran more suspicious about its behaviour and resultantly it has accelerated uranium enrichment and started bulging the terms of the deal. European states, who were part of the deal, continued to assuage Iranian fears in the aftermath of Trump's withdrawal decision. The assassination of the top Iranian nuclear Scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in 2020 – ostensibly by the Israeli or American intelligence agencies – may not significantly impact the development of the program, but has serious implications for European efforts to address the Iranian nuclear issue.² Joe Biden's victory gave a good amount of hope to the Iranians about the revival of the deal followed by easing of the sanctions, renewed Europeans' optimism about the Iranian nuclear program.

An introspective sense of insecurity among the regional states like Israel and Gulf States has escalated since 2002, when Iranian nuclear program was revealed publicly. It was witnessed with suspicion by the international community that Iran has been engaged in the development of dual-use nuclear technology, that is, nuclear fuel cycle and uranium enrichment that can purposefully be utilised for making nuclear weapons. It is believed that

¹ Henry Sokolski, "After Iran: Back to the Basics on 'Peaceful' Nuclear Energy," *Arms Control Today*, April 2005, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005-04/iran-nuclear-briefs/after-iran-back-basics-peaceful-nuclear-energy>; Agha Ahmad Gul, "Iran's Pursuit of Peaceful Nuclear Technology," *Pakistan Horizon* 65, no. 1 (January 2012): 35–52.

² Farnaz Fassihi et al., "Iran's Top Nuclear Scientist Killed in Ambush, State Media Say," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/27/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-scientist-assassinated-mohsen-fakhrizadeh.html>.

Iran's nuclear ambitions would result in a new wave of nuclear proliferation in the Gulf region, that would pose a challenge to international nuclear non-proliferation regime as well as to the security of the region. European states along with the United States pursued various efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear bomb. Imposing sanctions remained their main instrument in this regard. But the European states soon realised the negative impacts of the sanctions alienated Iran further and resulted in its sternness while pursuing the nuclear program. This realisation led to the signing of the P5+1–Iran nuclear deal with the objective of preventing or delaying Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Interestingly, the deal clearly portrays those Western powers customized their time to tackle the issue in a planned way.

To examine the Iranian nuclear ambitions, its regional impact and European concerns demands analysis of the issue on theoretical and empirical basis. Why do states pursue nuclear capability? The question directly related to this issue has been theoretically explained by various nuclear studies. According to some experts, Iran has pursued nuclear path to address its security issues, and others believe that it is for the purpose of regional hegemony.

Why do States Pursue nuclear weapons: The Iranian case?

The biggest motivation behind the development of nuclear weapons' capability is addressing the security concerns of a state. If a state feels insecure in a regional and international hostile environment, and if it can, it will try to acquire nuclear devices. In an extremely threatened regional security environment "it may see nuclear capability as its only defence".³ Another significant motivation can be the acquisition of prestige domestically and status and influence externally. "If prestige is a declining factor in nuclear weapon acquisition, influence will remain important".⁴ The perception of threat by a state from the neighbours in a competitive regional strategic matrix play a crucial role in the acquisition of nuclear weapons and it had been the main cause for the nuclear proliferation during the Cold War.⁵ Besides security model, there is the norms model (which notes that the states pursue nuclear weapons in order to achieve prestige and address

³ David Zrost, "Why States Pursue Nuclear Weapons Programmes? The Iran Case", Master Papers (Barcelona, 2011), available at ibei.org/ibei_studentpaper04_71879.pdf.

⁴ Mehdi A. Jovini, "The Reflections of Non-Proliferations on Iran's Nuclear Program," *Strategic Outlook*, February 2013.

⁵ Ibid.

normative concerns such as by the United Kingdom and France). Furthermore, a domestic politics model defines states that pursue nuclear devices in order to assuage domestic public opinion, such as in India according to Mehdi A. Jovani.⁶

The security model of the acquisition of nuclear weapon is evident in the thinking of Iranian decision-making circles. They perceived grave security threats from Israel and United States. Although, Tehran leadership claims that their program is not intended for nuclear weapons but for peaceful civilian purposes. Yet in an extended regional hostile environment nuclear weapons' option for a state like Iran would be a rational choice, as it could not win a strategic arms race in the region with a feeble economy due to sanctions. Israel's nuclear weapons and the Gulf states' strategic partnership with the US, their recent normalization with Israel and their massive arms build-up might force Iran to think in terms of establishing a nuclear deterrence. Iranians may think that deterrence and the fear of nuclear massive retaliation would stop the aggressive tendencies of its multiple adversaries in the region. This paradoxical situation has aggravated the threat perceptions of the regional heavyweights, especially Saudi Arabia⁷, which in turn might be developing or purchasing nuclear technology, concerning Iran's motivations in the Middle East.

Motives behind Iran's nuclear ambitions

Iran's goals to acquire nuclear weapons would not be different from those of other potential nuclear weapons states. Iranian policy makers might have been convinced that nuclear weapons capability would give them an edge over potential adversaries and this non-conventional superiority will satisfy their security needs. Iran may also utilise this superiority as a means to establish hegemony over the region.

Iran's quest for a nuclear programme may have several reasons, such as, those related to the unequal treatment of weak states in international non-

⁶ Scott D. Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (December 1, 1996): 54–86.

⁷ Kingston Reif, "Saudi Arabia Threatens to Seek Nuclear Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, June 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-06/news/saudi-arabia-threatens-seek-nuclear-weapons>; Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 3 (2006): 421–43; NTI, "Countries: Saudi Arabia," Nuclear Threat Initiative, July 2016, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/saudi-arabia/nuclear/>.

proliferation regimes, by the nuclear suppliers' group and by the nuclear weapons states' hypocritical and dual behaviour. Iranian ambition is equally important for its requirement of meeting energy needs and diversifying energy resources. It is believed that the alternative energy generated through nuclear power would somehow lessen the issues of obtaining energy from fossil fuels, as price fluctuation in the fossil energy creates pressure on the energy production and supply.⁸ Maleki is convinced regarding the economic rationale of Iranian nuclear development that low-cost and clean energy consideration is one of the basic motivations behind its nuclear power strategy.⁹

Some other researchers consider that 'prestige' is one of the main factors behind Iranian nuclear ambitions. Iran has long cherished a rich history animated with the conquests and greatness of its empires. In both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, Iran had a great experience of Persian imperialism. The Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great in the pre-Islamic era and several kings and sultans of the Islamic era give a unique sense of dignity to the Iranians. Interestingly, the governments after the Iranian revolution allow some legendary and traditional celebrations, for Iranians do possess a sense of honour vis-à-vis their past. For example, the theocratic governments in Iran discourage citizens to publicize the celebration of Cyrus the Great Day on October 29; however, Iranians along with many political figures do support the memorial days on the basis of civilizational pride.¹⁰ Iran still pursues glory and prestige and considers itself to be the custodian of millennia old traditions. The Iranian nuclear programme can not only connect with prestige but may also give them a chance to regain their lost glory – as a Persian pride of Islamic identity. Patrikarakos argues that Iran's nuclear power status can give it a sense of dignity and somehow a prestige level parallel to the nuclear powers of the world and its contemporaries.¹¹ He further notes that regardless of the regime type and the leadership, from

⁸ Kehan Barzegar, "Iran's Nuclear Program," in *The Nuclear Question in the Middle East*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 225–64.

⁹ Abbas Maleki, "Iran's Nuclear File: Recommendations for the Future," *Daedalus* 139, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 105–16, <https://doi.org/10.1162/daed.2010.139.1.105>.

¹⁰ Staff, "Iranians Arrested after Celebrating Ancient Persian King Cyrus the Great," *Reuters*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-rights-history-idUSKBN12V174>. See also <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-mp-calls-for-celebrating-cyrus-day/28789762.html>.

¹¹ David Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran: The Birth of an Atomic State* (I.B. Tauris, 2012).

the Shah to Rouhani, have attached power, prestige and progress with nuclear capability.¹²

Another important factor that significantly explains Iranian nuclear ambitions is its ideology. Since Iranian revolution every successive government has followed its revolutionary strategy that is relatively fixated to Iranian culture with divinity. Historically, revolutionary notions call for change in the global pattern of relationship between the states and also for the renewed political, social and economic trends and structures. According to this perspective, Iran holds a sceptical view towards western powers and regards their selective approach towards Iran due to its noncompliance of toeing US policies. Iran has a particularly pessimistic view of the double standards of European states, the United States, in dealing with the issue of acquisition and development of uranium enrichment. Iran complains about unfair treatment over this issue, as compared to other potential nuclear states, such as Israel. The ideas of independence, justice, fair play, and anti-imperialism and hegemonism have helped shape the ideological orientation of the Iranian conservative leadership that has resultantly given a new purpose and direction to Iran's nuclear policy.¹³

Tehran's leadership seems convinced that Iranian nuclearization would address its security concerns and would provide it a momentous status in the international community – a significance ideological importance according to Islamic revolution's principles. The Iranian supreme leader is also convinced that the nuclear deterrence only has the potential to secure the Islamic revolution in Iran from the designs of enemies like United States, Israel, and others.¹⁴ Khamenei reiterated that Iranian nuclear capability will strengthen the hands of God's soldiers and would serve as a deterrence to the enemies of God.¹⁵ Regional security environment and disparities of power, along with the major powers' influence and presence in the neighbourhood have provided Iran the rationale to pursue nuclear deterrent capability.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 521–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010607084999>.

¹⁴ Patrikarakos, *Nuclear Iran*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Bowen and Brewer emphasized the external dimensions of security as the vital motivation behind Iran's intentions to acquire nuclear weapons capability. According to them Iran's external threats are in abundance and foreign interference and potential threat perception of external aggression have made the leadership concerned about its survival, especially about regime survival.¹⁶ Bahgat also portrays the same point of view, that it is the security matrix in the region that has played a crucial role in the thinking of Iranian policy making circles that indigenous nuclear weapons capability would satisfy their security needs.¹⁷

Overall, security and ideological factors have mainly determined the behaviour of the Iranian policy elite regarding the acquisition of nuclear capability. Iran may feel insecure in a regional environment where the neighbours are hostile and instability in the region everywhere presents a potential to challenge the stability and security of Iran.¹⁸

The Iranian Nuclear Weapons Programme

The Iranian nuclear program is of a dual-use nature. The complexity of dual-use technology generates uncertainty about its potential use. It is declared by the Iranian authorities that its nuclear program is solely aiming for civilian purposes, but the international community alleges, with technical evidence, that it has been trying to develop nuclear devices. The possibility of Iran's struggle to develop or acquire such capability is considered real.

Theoretically, it is believed that there are three basic components of a potential nuclear weapons program; weapons-grade enriched uranium or plutonium, a sophisticated delivery system in the form of missiles, and the technology to transform the enriched uranium or plutonium into warheads that can be delivered.¹⁹ The international community is mainly convinced that Iran has shown the will and capacity to achieve advancements in all

¹⁶ Wyn Q. Bowen and Jonathan Brewer, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge: Nine Years and Counting," *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (July 1, 2011): 923–43, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2011.01011.x>.

¹⁷ Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 307–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860600808102>.

¹⁸ Volker Perthes, "Ambition and Fear: Iran's Foreign Policy and Nuclear Programme," *Survival* 52, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 95–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.494879>.

¹⁹ Jerome R. Corsi, *Why Israel Can't Wait: The Coming War Between Israel and Iran* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2009).

these capabilities, and hence has a clear intention of developing nuclear weapons.

Evidence of the Iranian nuclear programme

There are varieties of evidence regarding the nuclear capability of Iran. Iran had failed to provide the details of its uranium import in 1991. It subsequently provided inadequate information that can be regarded as misgivings and concealment of the facts regarding possession and storage in undeclared locations. It is viewed as contrary to its commitments under International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) safeguards Agreement.²⁰ France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the European Union (E3+1) and Iran debated at length in 2003 in order to address the nuclear related issues at the Natanz nuclear reactor. It was agreed to cease development of the centrifuges at the nuclear facility. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the President in office – a conservative leader – chose the path again by which Iran's activities were already viewed with suspicion, even before the election, as its experiments to extract polonium-210 were highly likely to be used for the purpose of making weapons. The IAEA concerns were declared in its report in 2005 based on their assumptions of enrichment.²¹

Nuclear installations like the centrifuge workshops are supervised and guarded by the Iranian defence ministry. According to the Telegraph report in June 2006, Iran had a secret project called Zirzamin designed for the acquisition and development of weapons' grade uranium in underground secret laboratories under the operational command of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).²²

In 2009, a nuclear facility was unearthed at Fordow in Qom province that houses 3000 centrifuges and has the capability and capacity to produce weapons-grade uranium.²³ Furthermore, Iran has constructed a 54000 centrifuges uranium enrichment facility at Natanz, a heavy water reactor at Arak, and has also developed sophisticated laser-equipment for an

²⁰ Director General IAEA, "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (International Atomic Energy Agency, June 6, 2003), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-40.pdf>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Yonah Alexander and Milton Hoenig, *The New Iranian Leadership: Ahmadinejad, Terrorism, Nuclear Ambition, and the Middle East* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007).

²³ Bowen and Brewer, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge."

enrichment facility near Lashkarabad city. All this shows that Iran wants to develop an indigenous fuel cycle which is regarded as an important ingredient needed to develop nuclear weapons.

Overall, Iran has installed first-generation centrifuges with greater output rate at Natanz enrichment facility to enhance its enrichment capacity. The Arak heavy water research facility is believed to be similar in size to any other reactor used by Israel, India and Pakistan. These facilities could be used to acquire enriched plutonium for military purposes.²⁴ But these are assumptions on the bases of speculation and calculations of international media and intelligence reports.

European and regional concerns

Before the nuclear deal signed in July 2015, international community, specifically the E3+1 (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and European Union) continued to show concerns about the possibility of Iran's development of nuclear weapons and its implications for regional security and stability. Iran since the inception of the program has been claiming that it is intended for civilian and peaceful purposes – specifically for electricity generation to diversify its energy sources and for medical purposes – but its dual-use capability has made the regional and international community concerned about the possible utilization of the fissile material capabilities for military and strategic purposes.²⁵ Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). It is believed that the act of the establishment of various covert plants to enrich weapon-grade uranium or plutonium has violated the basic codes of the non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

There were also concerns that the Iran has concealed sensitive nuclear facilities from the IAEA authorities and even when disclosed it did not give full access to these facilities and research centres. Furthermore, the role of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) in the development of the sophisticated missile system with a capability to launch the nuclear warheads remained the basic concerns of the international community, especially of its neighbours like the GCC countries and Israel.²⁶

²⁴ Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, "A Comparative Analysis of the Policies of the EU and Pakistan on the Iranian Nuclear Issue," *Journal of European Studies* 28, no. 1 (June 2012).

²⁵ Esther Pan, "Iran: Curtailing the Nuclear Program," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 24, 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iran-curtailing-nuclear-program>.

²⁶ Bowen and Brewer, "Iran's Nuclear Challenge."

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA)

A series of talks between Iran and the major powers of the world (France, United Kingdom, China, United States, Russia, Germany, also known as P5+1 or E3+3) resulted in a historic Iran – P5+1 deal, also known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The deal was unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council through UNSC Resolution 2231 on July 20, 2015.²⁷ The E3+1 played a key role in streamlining the deal and facilitating in the process. After various rounds of deliberations in the respective party states' legislatures and decision-making bodies, it came into force on October 18, 2015. The basic aim of the international community was to stop or slow down the pace of Iran's nuclear programme and to possibly roll back its military components. IAEA obtained the supervisory role and had the task to ensure the commitments of Iran under the Deal. Iran, on the other hand, eyed the relaxation of sanctions and trade facilitation with the international community. Overall, the deal set forth the mechanisms to address the longstanding issues pertaining to the Iranian nuclear program.²⁸

The deal document provides the basic commitments that Iran has made. According to these, Iran can modernize its Arak research reactor but can utilise it only for medical and industrial purposes. It has to follow the designs of the reactors according to the ones provided with the deal and according to the guidelines of the IAEA. It has to minimize the production and enrichment of uranium and plutonium for civilian purposes and has not to produce weapons-grade material. Finally, the redesigned reactor power must not exceed 20 MW.²⁹

The agreement provides that IAEA will continuously monitor the construction of the redesigned reactors. It also provides that the modified reactor will have to use up to 3.67 percent enriched uranium in the form of UO₂ with a mass of approximately 350 kg of UO₂ in a full core load.³⁰

²⁷ UNSC, "Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2231 (2015), Endorses Joint Comprehensive Agreement on Iran's Nuclear Programme" (United Nations Security Council, July 20, 2015), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11974.doc.htm>.

²⁸ ICG, "Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report" (International Crisis Group, January 16, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/173-implementing-iran-nuclear-deal-status-report>.

²⁹ P5+1, "JCPOA Annex-1 Nuclear Related Commitments: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action" (US Department of State, July 14, 2015), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/index.htm>.

³⁰ Ibid.

International community will collaborate with Iranian authorities through technical knowledge and know-how to fabricate, test and license the capabilities for the future use of the reactors and the other facilities.³¹

Overall, Iran agreed to open for IAEA live online verification system. It also agreed on the surveillance of nuclear fuel chain in real time. Above all, Iran made a commitment to suspend its nuclear program in lieu of the removal of sanctions at a modest level, and to redesign its nuclear reactors to use only for the development of the civilian nuclear technology.³² After the deal the Iranian nuclear program was regarded as widely monitored and modest one. Iran declared that it would abide by its commitments, but the intent still exists to maintain dual-use technology, that can be transformed for the utilization of military purposes at the time of need.

Post - deal concerns of the European States

Although the deal was agreed upon, yet there are some concerns of the European states expressed regarding the issues that were not discussed in the deal, including the Iranian stance. For instance, they consider the assertive behaviour of Iran a challenge to its implementation in due course. It is viewed with suspicion that the IAEA has no mandate for publicly reporting the activities of the modified Iranian nuclear program. Details on Iran's low-enriched uranium stockpiles and advanced centrifuge research are also kept secret.

Other concerns are related to technical infringements. "Iran's heavy-water production exceeded the JCPOA's 130-metric-ton cap twice – by 0.9 and 0.1 tons in February and November 2016 respectively. Iranian officials, trumpeting their country's change of stature from pariah to nuclear materials supplier, contend that overproduction resulted from improved efficiency and did not violate the JCPOA, since it neither sets a rigid threshold – it estimates Iran's needs at around 130 tons – nor a timetable for exporting the excess for sale".³³ There are also ambiguities, for instance, around the definition of recoverable low-enriched uranium and procurement of material for manufacturing rotors used in advanced centrifuges.³⁴

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kelsey Davenport, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," *Arms Control Today*, March 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

³³ ICG, "Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal".

³⁴ Ibid.

Transformation of the bunkered Fordow enrichment plant into an International Physics Centre with Russian help, where 358 centrifuges will produce stable medical isotopes, has been slow; so, has the modernization of the heavy-water reactor in Arak, a project China and the US co-chaired.³⁵ Above all, the real concern is related to the continuation of Iran's ballistic missile program. It is an issue which is outside the purview of the nuclear deal. The missile system is regarded as the basic component of the nuclear weapon system. Iran has regarded it as a sovereign right to develop weapons for its legitimate defence. Therefore, Iran's ballistic missile system has caused security concerns in the region and beyond. U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 provides Iran to not undertake, until 2023, any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons,³⁶ but the language seems non-binding in nature.

US withdrawal from the Deal and E3+1

Although the deal was hailed as a historic achievement by the Obama Administration, President Trump soon after coming to power in January 2017, challenged the deal and placed it on the review list. He showed doubt on the utility of the deal for American national interests and declared it as flawed. The Trump administration linked it with the human rights issue in Iran. Trump blamed Tehran for obtaining nuclear capability through easing out the sanctions to support and allegedly fund militant groups in the Middle East, especially the ones which are working against the interests of the United States and its allies. Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson noted that several mistakes were made during the negotiation process of the nuclear deal, especially that serious security threats, other than the nuclear, were kept out of the deal.³⁷ The US considers that the deal was a result of a narrow focus of negotiations, for short term gains. It has provided the mechanism to limit Iran's ability to produce nuclear weapons but has given it the access to resources that Iran has been using to fund several proxies in the Middle East. It has also given the competitors of the US, such as China and Russia, a chance to draft separate economic, trade and investment deals

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tytti Erästö, "Dissecting International Concerns about Iran's Missiles," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute-SIPRI, November 15, 2018, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2018/dissecting-international-concerns-about-irans-missiles>.

³⁷ Lesley Wroughton, "Tillerson Accuses Iran of 'alarming Provocations' as U.S. Reviews Policy," *Reuters*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-whitehouse-idUSKBN17L29X>.

with Iran. All this has made Iran capable of meeting its economic challenges, relief from the sanctions, and thus of gaining resources to fund its campaigns in the regional conflicts.³⁸

The United States and its Middle Eastern allies' concern led President Trump to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018.³⁹ The E-3 states specifically pressurised President Trump to uphold the agreement.⁴⁰ However, the Trump Administration pulled out from the deal with a clear hawkish attempt to pressurise Iran, threatening potential implications for the parties to the deal and grave consequences for regional stability. Trump withdrew by announcing that "this was a horrible one-sided deal that should have never, ever been made".⁴¹

The withdrawal created shock waves among the E3 states, Russia, and China. E3 states have, specifically, been trying to convince President Trump that ending the nuclear deal would have an adverse effect upon the precarious security situation in the region. Former US President Obama declared it as a poor choice and was convinced that this decision would make the world less safe. He warned a series of clashes might erupt in the Middle Eastern region.⁴² Iran pledged its commitment to the deal and criticized the United States as a hostile state and alleged that the US had a long history of not honouring agreements. US' Middle Eastern allies, especially hardliners Israel and Saudi Arabia declared it a historic move and a correct response to Iranian behaviour.⁴³

³⁸ Tom DiChristopher, "Trump's Iran Nuclear Deal Review Faces a Dangerous Path," *CNBC*, April 25, 2017, sec. 100 Days of Trump, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/25/trumps-iran-nuclear-deal-review-faces-a-dangerous-path.html>.

³⁹ Sam Fleming, "Trump Withdraws US from Iran Nuclear Deal," *Financial Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/f55b1652-52c3-11e8-b24e-cad6aa67e23e>.

⁴⁰ Steve Holland, "Trump Issues Ultimatum to 'fix' Iran Nuclear Deal," *Reuters*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-decision-idUSKBN1F108F>.

⁴¹ Donald J. Trump, "Full Transcript of Trump's Speech on the Iran Nuclear Deal."

⁴² Mike Calia, "'A Serious Mistake': Read Barack Obama's Statement on President Trump's Decision to Pull out of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *CNBC*, May 8, 2018, sec. Politics, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/08/a-serious-mistake-read-obamas-statement-on-trump-s-decision-to-pull-out-of-iran-deal.html>.

⁴³ Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

The US withdrawal from the deal put a question mark on the E3+1's efforts to halt the Iranian ambitions to acquire enough capacity to make nuclear weapons. The assassination of the top Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, gave a serious blow to the trust between the Iran and the E3+1. Iran declared the assassination an act of terror with alleged Israeli involvement.⁴⁴ According to President Rouhani's statement, "in due time, they will answer for this crime".⁴⁵ Regional adversaries of Iran, especially Israel, have been blamed for a series of such assassinations. The assassination of the Iranian top nuclear scientist has more ramification for peace in the region, particularly for the settlement of the nuclear issue. While Trump's withdrawal from the deal made it a huge challenge to hold the ground, this assassination further aggravated the situation, thus impeding efforts to address the mistrust. These developments may force Iran to re-think its cooperation vis-à-vis the deal. It may revert back to the pursuance of the nuclear programme, rather it may even speed up its efforts to build nuclear capabilities. This will increase the security threat in the region and will put stability and peace at risk.

With the change of administration in the United States, it is hoped that President Biden would reverse the decision of withdrawal from the deal. But the situation is quite complex, and it will not be easy to simply get back into the deal. Trust deficit has increased between the US and Iran, and between the E3+1 and Iran. Iran has issued warnings with an ultimatum to scrap the deal, if sanctions on Iran are not lifted and confidence building measures are not adopted by the US under Biden.⁴⁶ The Biden administration has adopted a three-prong strategy to tackle the stand-off. It agreed to return to the multilateral efforts for the revival of the deal with Iran, lifting some sanctions on Iran, and easing travel restrictions on Iranian Diplomats⁴⁷ On the other hand, Iran has deliberated its concerns and maintained that the US has the

⁴⁴ Muhammad Javad Zarif, "Terrorists Murdered an Eminent Iranian Scientist Today. 8:28 PM," Twitter, @JZarif (blog), November 27, 2020, <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1332345633425022976>.

⁴⁵ Al Jazeera English, *Rouhani Accuses 'Mercenary' Israel of Killing Top Iran Scientist*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz2JmM483ss&t=71s>.

⁴⁶ VOA, "Iran Warns Nuclear Deal in Danger If US Does Not Ease Sanctions," *Voice of America*, February 6, 2021, sec. USA, Middle East, VOA News on Iran, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/iran-warns-nuclear-deal-danger-if-us-does-not-ease-sanctions>.

⁴⁷ Matthew Lee, "Biden Attempt to Resurrect Iran Nuke Deal off to Bumpy Start," *AP NEWS*, February 23, 2021, sec. Donald Trump, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-iran-iran-nuclear-diplomacy-middle-east-fe94f33feaa974d244c0e3cdd6c33dfc>.

habit of dishonouring the agreements. It has declared that it will not respond to any rapprochement until the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration are fully lifted.⁴⁸

The fact of the matter is that Iran wants US to lift sanctions first, whereas the US demands full compliance of the agreement before the sanctions are lifted. The Biden administration has formally declared to start the negotiations on the revival of the deal with the new terms, while also putting pressure on Iran by bombing its supported groups in Syria.⁴⁹ While Iran, in retaliation to the US for abandoning all the nuclear activity and persuading to disassociate with the militant groups in Middle East, has threatened to expel all the IAEA inspectors.⁵⁰ President Biden is playing a dangerous game in which on the one hand he is pressurising Iran to come to the negotiation table by targeting its allies and interests in the region, and, on the other, enticing and offering concessions to Iran to mould its behaviour in a desirable manner. It can get converted into a lethal scenario for regional stability.

American unisolationism and European concerns:

Re-negotiation of the Deal

Germany, France, United Kingdom, and European Union (E3+1) played a crucial role in getting Iran to the negotiation table for the first time and finally ironing away the differences between Iran and the US, and Iran and the E3+1. Bringing the expectation level down of all the parties engaged in the negotiation process, establishing the thresholds and redlines, measuring the will and capacity, remained peculiar features of the negotiation process that ultimately led to the signing of JCPOA. President Trump seriously damaged the image and efforts of the E3+1 which continued to pressurise the US to re-think its decision on the one hand, and on the other continued to deal with Iran in order to ensure that it does not speed up the enrichment of uranium. Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel, and Boris Johnson visited the United States to persuade President Trump not to withdraw from the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ AFP, "US Strikes Iran-Backed Militias in Syria in Biden First," *Dawn*, February 27, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1609635>.

⁵⁰ Staff, "Iran Will Expel U.N. Nuclear Inspectors Unless Sanctions Are Lifted: Lawmaker," *Reuters*, January 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-nuclear-idUSKBN29E0FQ>.

deal.⁵¹ After withdrawing, the US also imposed secondary sanctions on Iran,⁵² implying that any state or company doing business with Iran will also face sanctions, and will not be able to do business with the American companies or banks. This has seriously damaged the European companies' interests in Iran.

France specifically was hit hard because its three major companies Total Petroleum, Peugeot, and Renault faced severe losses after the American sanctions. E3+1 maintained that it is really very difficult to wind down all the businesses in Iran within a short span of six months. The French ambassador to the United States termed Trump's behaviour as pursuing unisolationism – a combination of unilateralism and isolationism policies.⁵³ The French economic minister even has gone to the length of saying that France will protect its 'economic sovereignty,' while condemning the US sanctions.⁵⁴ In 2019 European leaders urged Iran and the United States to restart the negotiations. French President Macron has specifically tried to bring the United States and Iran closer. He tried to arrange a meeting between President Trump and President Rouhani during the latter's visit to the United States in order to address the United Nations.⁵⁵ But the meeting could not be materialised because of President Trump's refusal.

In 2020, while talking to journalists about the actions that the United States has taken in order to respond to Iran's missile attacks against American installations in Iraq – in response to the American killing of General Qasem Soleimani – he called upon the European states, the three signatories to the JCPOA to end the deal. While rejecting Trump's call, and reiterating the

⁵¹ Yochi Dreazen, "European Diplomats Are So Angry with Trump's Iran Decision That They've Literally Created a New Anti-Trump Word," *Vox*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/5/9/17335308/trump-decertify-iran-nuclear-deal-europe-sanction>.

⁵² Karen DeYoung, "Trump Scuttles Iran Nuclear Deal but Offers No Plan for What Comes Next," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-scuttles-iran-nuclear-deal-but-offers-no-plan-for-what-comes-next/2018/05/08/211a91c0-52e5-11e8-abd8-265bd07a9859_story.html.

⁵³ Dreazen, "European Diplomats Are So Angry with Trump's Iran Decision That They've Literally Created a New Anti-Trump Word". See also <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201806/11/WS5b1db893a31001b82571f31c.html>.

⁵⁴ "Iran Nuclear Deal: Europe Strives to Keep Agreement," *BBC News*, May 11, 2018, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44090948>.

⁵⁵ News Wires, "Macron and Other European Leaders Urge Iran, US to Restart Negotiations," *France 24*, September 24, 2019, sec. France, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190924-macron-un-general-assembly-trump-iran-saudi-arabia-united-nations>.

importance of the nuclear deal, European Union's foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell deliberated "Thanks to this deal, Iran is not a nuclear power".⁵⁶ While Iran continued to enrich nuclear material and cross the threshold established by the JCPOA, for which Europeans have shown their concern several times.⁵⁷

Biden's move to the White House now not only raised the hopes for the revival of the deal, but also heightened the European optimism about the management of Iran's nuclear program. In April 2021, the United States joined the negotiations held in Vienna about the nuclear deal. The Iranian officials refused to meet the US delegation face to face till the United States lifts the sanctions imposed during Trump administration. Diplomats from to E3 persuaded Iranian and American officials to sort out the differences. The United States initially signaled that though the negotiations will be very difficult, yet they expect merely establishing "a road map back to compliance for both sides".⁵⁸ In April 2021, the third round of talks was held in which states involved in the negotiations showed cautious optimism. "Major issues remain"; "It's going"; "yes, but very slowly"; "What we did achieve is greater clarification ... clarification doesn't necessarily mean consensus. There still are disagreements and, in some cases, pretty important ones" are few of the statements given by the parties involved in the discussion.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The Tehran leadership time and again emphasises that their nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes, yet in an extended regional hostile environment the nuclear option for a weak state like Iran would be a rational choice, as it could not sustain a conventional arms race in the region with a weak economy badly affected by the US sanctions. Israel's nuclear weapons and the GCC states' strategic partnership with the US and their massive arms build-up would force Iran to think in terms of nuclear deterrence. This

⁵⁶ Michael Lipin, "Why EU Powers Rejected Trump's Call to Leave Iran Nuclear Deal," *Voice of America (VOA)*, January 11, 2020, sec. VOA News on Iran, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/why-eu-powers-rejected-trumps-call-leave-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁵⁷ WNN, "EU Reiterates Support for JCPOA, Expresses Concern," *World Nuclear News*, November 18, 2020, sec. Nuclear Policies, <https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/EU-reiterates-support-for-JCPOA-expresses-concern>.

⁵⁸ BBC, "Iran Nuclear Deal: US Joins Vienna Talks Aimed at Reviving Accord," *BBC News*, April 6, 2021, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56643178>.

⁵⁹ Laura Rozen, "Slow Progress at Third Round of Vienna Iran Talks," *Diplomatic*, April 29, 2021, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/slow-progress-at-third-round-of-vienna>.

ultimately will result in a horizontal nuclear proliferation because other states of the region, especially Saudi Arabia, would surely try to go nuclear as soon as they realise that the Iranians are going to achieve their nuclear capabilities.

Besides the security model, the ideology factor remains another determining factor in the strategic calculations of Iran. Since the Iranian revolution, every successive government is bound to follow its revolutionary ideology that is relatively fixated to Iranian culture and its policy orientations. Its strategic notions call for change in the global pattern of relationship between the states and also for renewed political, social and economic trends and structures. Therefore, according to its revolutionary perspective, Iran maintains a sceptical behaviour towards Western, specifically American policies and regards those policies as pursued to deprive Iran from claiming its legitimate rights. Iran is sceptical of the double standards of western powers in dealing with the issue of acquisition and development of nuclear technology even for peaceful purposes.

As a result of Iran – P5+1 nuclear deal, Tehran agreed to open its nuclear power plants for the IAEA live online verification system. It also agreed on the surveillance of the nuclear fuel chain in real time. Above all, Iran has made a commitment to roll back its nuclear program in lieu of the removal of sanctions at modest level and to redesign its nuclear reactors to use only for the development of civilian nuclear technology. After the deal, the Iranian nuclear program was regarded as widely monitored and modest one. However, the US exit from the deal, under the Trump administration, has resulted in the re-imposition of sanctions against Iran. These sanctions annoyed European allies because they have developed big business interests in Iran. France and Germany specifically resented these sanctions. The French ambassador to the United Nations termed it as the American unisolationism, a dangerous trend that could have caused havoc to the contemporary world order. The French economic minister, though continued negotiations with the United States in order to get French companies' exemptions from the US sanctions, noted that France will continue to protect its economic sovereignty.

Though the E3+1 keep on upholding the deal, it is reported that Iran started violating the terms of the agreement by enriching uranium beyond the threshold established in JCPOA. The new US government under Biden has

opened the avenues of cooperation and the chances remain positive that the deal will be re-signed. The win-win situation for all the parties involved would be: first, the United States re-sign the deal. Second, P5+1 could re-negotiate the deal, before re-signing, and address the loopholes and grey areas in it. Third, such a monitoring mechanism could be defined that would limit Iran's choices and ensure it to pursue the nuclear program only for peaceful purposes. Fourth, try to bring the GCC states on-board in order to assuage their threat perceptions vis-à-vis Iran. Despite all these efforts, one fact will still remain: Iran will be having hands-on-experience of the dual-use technology and any hardliner conservative government in future may still revert back to developing the nuclear enrichment covertly and putting the stability and peace of the region at risk.

The mistrust between Iran and IAEA is running back and forth as far as the case of uranium enrichment is considered. On 23 February 2021, Mr. Grossi, the Director General of the agency had verified and monitored the implementation by Iran of its nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA. However, since that date, these activities have been seriously undermined as a result of Iran's decision to stop the implementation of its nuclear-related commitments, including the Additional Protocol.

In September 2021, on the occasion of signing agreement with Iran on monitoring its atomic facilities through cameras, the IAEA chief said, "Nothing will be sidelined and nothing hidden".⁶⁰ The nuclear talks with Iran, can be said, is reaching to some trust-building level. The region, people of Iran and international community are in dire need of such constructive development and peaceful cooperation.

⁶⁰ Visit at news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099752.