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PRESIDENT TRUMP'S IRAN SANCTIONS GAMBLE

DIVERGENCE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Donald Trump's new Iran policy, with the abandonment of the nuclear agreement and the reimposition of sanctions, reveals a fracture in transatlantic relations. The determination of the US to go its own, more confrontational way to attain further concessions from Iran differs from Europe's preference for diplomacy.

President Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the Iran nuclear agreement (formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; JCPOA) has caused an uproar in Europe and amongst Trump's critics at home. The President's detractors have criticised him for undermining multilateralism, risking an accelerated Iranian nuclear breakout and further destabilising the Middle East. In contrast, his defenders have lauded the President for scrapping an imperfect treaty and sticking to his election season promise to the American people.

President Trump has played a cat-and-mouse game with the other parties of the nuclear agreement

for the duration of his Presidency. Trump's qualms about the agreement, which he has duly termed "the worst deal ever", are in keeping with critiques of the treaty's detractors in the US and internationally. Key concerns of the JCPOA's opponents have been the so-called sunset clauses, which phase out restrictions on Iran's uranium enrichment over a span of 10 to 15 years.

The critics – Trump included – also argue that the agreement with Iran was not comprehensive enough to warrant lifting sanctions on the regime in the first place. The accord has done little to curb either Iran's ballistic missile activities or its destabilising activities in the

Middle East, including support for Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, and entities like Hamas and Hezbollah. The JCPOA was also a central prong of Barack Obama's foreign-policy legacy, which President Trump seems intent on dismantling.

Snapping pre-existing sanctions back into place over a period of 90 to 180 days was arguably the most coercive measure available to President Trump – bar resorting to military action. This is in line with the Trump administration's broader approach to international politics, wherein the preference has been to utilise economic sticks and carrots, often in the form of unilateral threats, instead of relying on diplomatic processes and setting agendas

through multilateral channels. The reimposition of sanctions has also allowed President Trump to project an image of strength for domestic and international consumption – to argue that he is “getting things done” and willing to throw America’s weight around despite the objections of European allies and contingents of the foreign policy establishment in Washington.

This reliance on sanctions is also unsurprising, as the US has traditionally used them more than any other state. However, to have even a remote chance of being effective, namely to change Iran’s policies, the goals of the sanctions regime should be realistic and clearly stated. In this case, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has described the US sanctions against Iran as the toughest existing sanctions regime, and laid out 12 objectives to be met by Iran that extend way beyond the issue of nuclear weapons.

According to Pompeo, Iran must, for example, work towards a peaceful political settlement in Yemen, as well as end threatening behaviour towards its neighbours, including Israel. Such demands appear so pervasive that it makes meeting the conditions difficult in any way other than Iranian regime change – although the administration has so far shied away from

explicitly formulating such a demand.

It is also noteworthy that last time around, when sanctions succeeded in getting Iran to the negotiation table, US sanctions had multilateral backing. Currently this is not the case. Instead, the sanctions regime has placed US friends between a rock and a hard place. The EU has vocally objected to the US sanctions as they risk turning Iran into a pariah, but also have economic implications for businesses operating there. For instance, European companies in Iran are in danger of breaching the US sanctions regime, which may lead to huge fines, not to mention reputational consequences and financial loss.

The explicit recognition by Pompeo that third states will also suffer consequences shows that the US believes it can persuade its allies in Europe and elsewhere to back up its Iran policy, or that the Trump administration perceives little need for international coordination. The reinstatement of sanctions against Iran is thus both a struggle over how to conduct foreign policy and a bout with economic implications for global markets.

More broadly speaking, the unfolding saga over the JCPOA is a reflection of the difficult relationship that has existed between the US

and Iran since 1979, and which has been characterized by mutual animosity. At the same time, it is indicative of the value that the Trump administration places on the transatlantic relationship and the views of its allies. While both the US and Europe strive for increased stability in the Middle East, the divergence between the two sides of the Atlantic over how to deal with Tehran remains stark.

Trump is bent on exerting “maximum pressure” on the Iranian regime, while Europe prefers an incremental approach through diplomacy, which would gradually render Iran a responsible stakeholder in the international rule-based order.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration appears to entertain visions of bringing Europe on board to take a tougher stance on Tehran. This would require a compromise, one where Europe can take solace in having staked a valiant defence for the sanctity of international norms, and which Trump’s team can spin as a foreign policy success. In the current climate of disarray this is a tall order. Still, given President Trump’s haphazard approach to international relations, the chips have yet to fall. /