



US and Iranian Diplomatic Campaigns in the run-up to Snapback Sanctions: An Assessment

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Introduction

On 8th May, 2018, when the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) -- which provides for lifting of all nuclear-related economic and financial sanctions in exchange for Iran implementing the strict limitations placed on its nuclear program -- the US gave a wind-down period of 90-180 days after which it would re-instate all the sanctions it had waived as part of the accord. The first tranche of sanctions targeting Iran's automotive sector, trade in gold and other key metals and also on the purchase or acquisition of US dollar banknotes by Iran snapped back on August 6. Remaining sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector, petroleum-based transactions, and transactions with Central Bank of Iran will come into effect on November 5. In run up to the return of American sanctions, Iran was closely working with the remaining signatories – France, Germany, the UK, China and Russia – to ensure that it receives the economic dividends promised in return for Iran meeting its nuclear obligations under the agreement. This paper examines the pressure campaign that the US has mounted to get its allies onboard to make the American economic sanctions effective in forcing Iran to change its 'malign behaviour' in the region. Secondly, it analyses the diplomatic offensive of Iran to mobilise international opinion in the favour of the continuation of the JCPOA, notwithstanding the US withdrawal and the return of unilateral American sanctions. It briefly examines the implications of the mounting economic pressure and domestic unrest for Iran's domestic politics.

US Pressure Campaign for Changing Iran's 'Malign Behaviour'

The primary reason put forward by the Trump administration for its withdrawal from the multilateral nuclear agreement with Iran was that the agreement provided economic benefits to the Islamic Republic, allowing it to consolidate its destabilising influence in the region. Iran's ideological and geopolitical influence -- advanced through a number of Islamist movements in the

Arab world -- is seen as threatening and destabilising by conservative Gulf monarchies supported by the United States, namely the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. They see Iran's support for Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi'ite political militias in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, and Assad in Syria, as support for terrorism and aimed at creating Iranian proxies in the Arab world. Resonating its allies' concerns in the region, Trump administration, by withdrawing from the nuclear agreement and re-imposing sanctions, seeks to deny Iran the financial capacity to continue what the US Secretary of State has called Iran's 'terrorist and malign behaviour' and its geopolitical project of constructing a 'corridor stretching from Iran's borders to the shores of the Mediterranean.'

Trump's new Iran strategy has been about supporting American allies in the region to take an active role in containing Iran, both through diplomatic and military means. For instance, the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center, a seven member body including Saudi Arabia and the six GCC countries was announced in May, 2017 with the intention of strengthening cooperation on countering the financing of terrorism. The body is now leading the efforts to limit Iran's influence by targeting access to financial network by Iran and its regional ally Hezbollah. It identified and shut down an extensive currency exchange network in Iran and the UAE that was transferring millions to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force.² It targeted Hizbollah-related individuals, including its highest decision making body -Shura Council, Iran's Central Bank Governor and Iraqi-based al-Bilad Islamic Bank for moving millions of dollars for the IRGC-QF. In June, the US House of Representatives passed legislation calling for sanctions to be imposed on two Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq: Qais al-Khazali's As-Saib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Akram al-Kaabi's Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.³ AAH under Qais al-Khazali ran in Iraq's May 12 elections and received 15 seats as part of the "Conquest" list, led by Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of powerful Iranian-sponsored Badr Organisation. In order to counter Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait are playing a crucial role in reconstruction of Iraq. They've offered to step up energy cooperation with Iraq to help it meet its energy demand, after Iran cut off the electricity supply to Iraq due to unpaid bills in early July, exacerbating the country's power crisis creating widespread protests across several provinces in southern Iraq.

Saudi Arabia and UAE, two major oil producers of the Gulf, are also key players in the American strategy of building maximum pressure on Iran by striking on its oil revenue. When the US threat of bringing Iranian oil revenue to zero sent oil prices soaring, President Trump pushed Saudi Arabia to boost its oil production to its maximum capacity, thus jeopardised the fragile truce among OPEC producers, wherein Iran along with Venezuela had threatened to veto proposals to boost output. So as to not disrupt the global oil market, in a return to Obama-led policy, Trump administration has decided to consider waiver for certain countries. Under previous sanctions regime, countries were allowed to import Iranian oil as long as the purchasing country's overall Iranian imports fell by 20 percent every 180 days.⁴

The UAE, which has been taking measures to expand energy partnership with India and China beyond a buyer and seller relation, is assuring the two largest consumers of Iranian oil, that

the UAE along with Saudi Arabia can make up for the oil-shortages created by sanctions on Iran. In late June, during the UAE Foreign Minister Zayed al-Nahyan's visit to New Delhi, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) tied up with Saudi Aramco to invest \$44billion in Ratnagiri refinery and petrochemicals complex in Maharashtra. ADNOC has also signed an agreement to store about 6 million barrels of crude oil at India's maiden strategic oil reserve in Mangalore.⁵ Similarly, during President Xi Jinping's visit to the country in mid-July 2018, ADNOC and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) resolved to explore upstream and downstream business opportunities and the possibility of storing ADNOC crude in China.

India was an early stop in the US campaign to mobilise its allies against Iran. Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations called on Prime Minister Modi in late June. While offering to work with India to continue its Chabahar port project in south-eastern Iran, she asked that India reduces its dependence on Iranian oil. Evidently, the United States is aware that the Chabahar project is not only crucial to India's developmental efforts in Afghanistan, but also that if India's role in the project was to be stymied by American sanctions; Iranians would waste no time in inviting China to take a major role in Chabahar. On the question of importing Iranian oil, India has maintained that it would continue to buy oil at competitive prices, and increased its oil imports from Iran in the previous month, after Tehran offered almost free shipping and an extended credit.⁶ However as the sanctions on oil kick in November, India would be under increasing pressure to reduce its purchase of Iranian oil.

After India, the US delegation was in Turkey to persuade its NATO ally. Turkey's relations with the United States have been on a downward spiral since the US supported Syrian Kurds on Turkey's southern border. Given its dependence on Iranian oil and gas, Turkey decided that it won't be joining the US efforts to block Iranian crude exports. President Erdogan argued "Iran is both our neighbour and our strategic partner," and severing ties with Tehran on America's whim goes against Turkey's "understanding of sovereignty."⁷ Turkey is cooperating with the EU allies against the US-imposed sanctions.

Discrediting the Iranian leadership or pursuing Regime Change?

As the US sanctions seek to maximise financial pressure on Iran, the crucial part of Trump's strategy is to discredit Iranian leadership, just when it is fire-fighting domestic unrest resulting from a major currency crisis. Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State, recently made an address to the Iranian-Americans. Assailing the Iranian leadership, he argued that the "level of corruption and wealth among Iranian leaders shows that Iran is run by something that resembles the mafia more than a government." "On foreign policy, the regime's mission of exporting the revolution has produced a decades-long campaign of ideologically-motivated violence and destabilization abroad. Assad, Lebanese Hizbollah, Hamas, Shia militant groups in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen feed on billions of regime cash while the Iranian people shout slogans like "Leave Syria, think about us."⁸ Reportedly, protesting Iranians are increasingly questioning their leadership's profligate geopolitical entanglements in Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere. But the history of American interference, especially the powerful memory of US sponsored coup against the

democratically elected Mossadegh government, means that support from the United States could only discredit the protests as playing into the hands of a hostile power undermining the nation's sovereignty, and justify the forceful crackdown by the hardline Revolutionary Guards.

In Iran's political culture, the US is seen as an imperial power, whose interventionary wars have destabilised two of Iran's neighbours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, in the face of Trump administrations' threatening rhetoric, the Iranian leadership would seek to rally the Iranian masses behind a hardline nationalistic posturing. The US support for the National Council of Resistance of Iran, political wing of Mojaheddin e-Khalq (The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran), an exiled Iranian opposition group dedicated to regime change in Iran is going to be counterproductive. The Left leaning MEK had participated in the Islamic Revolution. After it fell out of favour with the Islamist clergy who consolidated their power in the Islamic Republic, Saddam Hussein allowed it to operate from Iraq, from where it engaged in terrorist activities against the Islamist leadership in Iran. Given the fact that it supported Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war, the group is seen as a traitor in Iran and virtually has no support among Iranians. Long listed as a terrorist group for killing American personnel in Iran in 1970s, in late 2012 it was delisted by the State Department.

The MEK, working hand in glove with Israel's intelligence agency, was the first to publically reveal Iran's uranium enrichment activity in 2002. Allegedly, the MEK carried out assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, even when the Obama administration was negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran. The group continues to accuse Iran's government of conducting secret research with the aim of developing nuclear weapons, and is now being openly supported by Iran hawks in the Trump administration. Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani and former House speaker and Trump advisor Newt Gingrich were speakers at the 'Free Iran' event organised in Paris on June 30.^{th9} National security adviser John Bolton, though he was not at the rally this year, has also endorsed the group's push for regime change in Iran. However, Jim Mattis, the US Secretary of Defence, has argued that the US is not pursuing regime change in Iran; instead, the goal of the United States was to change Iran's behaviour. By supporting Iranians protesting against the dire economic situation brought about by the domestic mismanagement and the effect of American sanction, the Trump administration is hoping that mounting pressure from below would force the Islamic Republic to heed to the voices of its constituency and change its behaviour in the region. But United States' threatening rhetoric in the aftermath of its withdrawal from a multilateral agreement will only provide substance to Iranian leadership's representation of the United States as the imperialist power implacably hostile to the Islamic Republic.

Iran's Diplomatic Offensive to Save the Nuclear Deal

Iran is determined to meet its obligations under the JCPOA as long as the Europeans are earnestly trying to provide Iran with the economic dividend promised in the agreement, notwithstanding their limitations in doing so, given the threat of American secondary sanctions and the US refusal to give exemption to European business operating in Iran. Facing massive unrest over flagging economy, Iran cannot afford to withdraw from the deal and have a complete falling out with the

West, including Europe. Therefore, Iran's strategy is to disparage American administration for sabotaging a multilateral deal and forcefully deal with American threats, while working with European signatories to develop an economic package to salvage the nuclear deal.

Before the ministerial level meeting of Joint Commission responsible for implementing JCPOA -- convened at the request of Iran in early July in Vienna -- Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei underlined that any decision to keep the JCPOA running without the US should be conditional on "practical guarantees" from the Europeans. In terms of 'practical solutions' protecting their business from the US sanctions, France, Germany and the UK have decided to maintain trade with Iran independent from the US dollar system.¹⁰ However, the EU's bid to use its lending arm, European Investment Bank, to do business in Iran is largely symbolic, given the bank's fears that dealing with Iran would jeopardize its ability to raise money on U.S. markets and have far reaching consequences for its operations.¹¹ The most powerful measure taken by the EU is the 'blocking statute,' which gives legal cover to European firms operating in Iran, forbidding them from complying with US sanctions, and allows them to recover damages from such penalties, while nullifying any foreign court rulings against them. The measure, much like the trade independent of the US dollar, will be effective in keeping small and medium size European enterprises operating in Iran. It entered into force on August 6, when first round of US sanctions came into effect. Delivery of five passenger aircraft by Franco-Italian Company ATR to Iran, just a day before the sanctions deadline, was hailed in Iran as a positive step taken by the European Union to fulfil its obligations subject to the bilateral deals signed in the aftermath of the 2015 international nuclear accord.¹²

Given the doubts about the ability of Europe to diverge with the United States on major issues, Iran has doubled down on its policy of cultivating relations with countries outside the influence of the West. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tehran in January, 2016 -- within days of lifting of nuclear sanctions on Iran -- Supreme Leader Khamenei argued that Iran had never trusted the West, and called for greater economic and security ties with China. Beijing and Moscow have reiterated their 'unwavering support' for the comprehensive and effective implementation of the JCOPA. Hosting President Rouhani on a working visit on the sidelines SCO meeting in Qingdao, President Xi Jinping argued that 'JCPOA is an important achievement of multilateralism, and is conducive to promoting peace and stability in the Middle East, as well as upholding the international nonproliferation regime.'¹³ Maintaining longstanding Chinese position of 'solving international disputes and hot spot issues in a peaceful manner,' President Jinping argued that China is willing to boost cooperation with Iran within multilateral frameworks and promote the establishment of a new type of international relations.¹⁴

Allaying fears that United States, which has been imposing hefty tariffs on the Chinese exports to the country, would be in a position to pressurise China into cutting its oil imports from Iran, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi -- meeting FM Zarif on the sidelines of ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Singapore -- stated support for the JCPOA in no uncertain terms. "China always holds the view that JCPOA is a multilateral deal which is verified

and approved by the United Nations Security Council and accords the common interests of all parties and the international community, which must be respected and safeguarded so as to maintain the authority of the United Nations, the effectiveness of multilateral deals and the credibility of the international rules.” There is a view, that China not only is backing the global consensus against protectionist threat to liberalised economy that has left United States increasingly isolated, its tariff war with the US is poised to benefit Iran. As China retaliates by slapping duties on US oil imports in retaliating against, Iran will lock more of Chinese market share by offering Iranian crude oil at attractive prices.¹⁵

China’s energy dependence on Iran and Belt and Road Initiative which envisions Iran as an important bridge linking Central Asia with Persian Gulf and Europe squares well with Iran’s need for investments for infrastructure projects. In March, 2018, CRRC Nanjing Puzhen Rail Transport signed a contract to provide up to 85% of funding and parts for assembly at Iranian train manufacturing company Wagon Pars, responsible for metro project in Iranian cities of Ahvaz, Tabriz, and Shiraz.¹⁶ Another Chinese company signed a deal with Iran’s Ministry of Roads and Urban Development to build a railway between the cities of Shiraz and Bushehr in the country’s south with \$700 million of investment. In July 2017, China’s Exim Bank (the Export-Import Bank of China) inked a contract with Iran’s Bank of Industry and Mine to finance \$1.5 billion for electrification of Tehran-Mashhad railroad.¹⁷ The high speed railway line between capital Tehran and Mashhad on the north-eastern border near Turkmenistan and Afghanistan would connect Central Asia with Persian Gulf, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Underlining the strategic nature of its relation with Iran, Russia has strongly objected to the linking of Iran’s ballistic missile program with the nuclear agreement.¹⁸ Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to the Supreme Leader Khamenei, visited President Putin days before the latter was scheduled to meet President Trump in Helsinki. In Moscow, Velayati argued that Trump’s ‘unreliable’ actions made Tehran’s close ties with Moscow all the more necessary. During Velayati’s visit, Tehran and Moscow signed a deal that would allow Tehran to use Russia as a transit country for international products.¹⁹ Since Russia’s military support for Assad in Syria’s war in 2015, and stepped-up Iranian military assistance, which together allowed Assad to take back large amounts of territory from rebels and ISIS, Iran and Russia have cultivated a closer relation in the name of tackling ‘regional terrorism.’ Israel, which has repeatedly struck at Iranian and Syrian targets in Southern Syria, has persistently mobilised Russian support for restraining Iranian actions in Southern Syria, close to Golan Heights, an area occupied by Israel since 1967 Middle East War. Iran for its part has supported Russian-led effort to impose Syrian government control over the South of Syria, but only after the anti-Assad fighters who control this so-called ‘southern zone’ have been routed.²⁰

After the US’s denial of exemptions from economic sanctions blocked the efforts by European airframers ATR and Airbus to deliver new airliners ordered by Iran Air after earlier sanctions were lifted, Russian aircraft manufacturer Sukhoi is set to take a larger role in Iran. Russia, in order to reduce its civil aviations exposure to US sanction regime on rogue states, is

investing in ‘indigenization’ of the Sukhoi Superjet SSJ100. At the Eurasia Airshow 2018 in Turkey’s Antalya, Sukhoi Civil Aircraft (SCAC) introduced the SSJ100R, a customized variant with share of American-made parts below 10%, making it possible for Iranians to lease or purchase the plane without seeking the permission of US Treasury’s Office for Foreign Assets Control. Iran Airtour and Iran Aseman signed contract to purchase a total of 40 passenger aircrafts.²¹

As part of Iran’s diplomatic campaign of building global consensus in favour of the continuation of the JCPOA and also in line with Iran’s strategy of strengthening ties with non-Western countries, Iran’s Foreign Minister visited the recent BRICS summit and the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Johannesburg and Singapore, respectively. In a major diplomatic coup for Iran, the BRICS Johannesburg declaration urged all parties to the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal to fully comply with their obligations and ensure the full implementation of the agreement to promote global and regional peace and security.²² Earlier in June, Zarif, on the invitation of South Africa, had led a high-ranking political delegation to hold talks on the ways to boost bilateral cooperation and exchange views about the future of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal after the US withdrawal.²³ In Singapore, FM Zarif signed a Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN. The bill to join TAC was presented to the Iranian Parliament first in 2013, at the heights of previous sanctions. It calls for Iran’s close cooperation with the international organization to help boost the country’s economic prosperity. The Expediency Council had ratified the bill in July this year, putting an end to the dispute between the parliament and the Guardian Council over the bill.²⁴

Iran taking a Hardline Position vis-à-vis the US

When the US threatened a virtual energy blockade on Iran, pressurising its allies to commit to its declared objective of “reducing to zero Iran’s revenue on crude oil sales,” President Rouhani, speaking from a European platform in Bern, took a hardline position on the issue. Rouhani’s statement that ‘they don’t understand the meaning of this statement, because it has no meaning for Iranian oil not to be exported, while the region’s oil is exported’, was widely interpreted as a thinly veiled threat that Iran would retaliate by closing down the oil lanes of Strait of Hormuz, linking oil rich Gulf States to the outside world. Rouhani’s hardline approach towards American threats has a domestic political logic as well. It was welcomed by Rouhani’s conservative detractors, including Revolutionary Guards, and is helping to forge a semblance of elite unity in times of domestic unrest and external threats. Revolutionary Guards, who see the confrontation with the United States as strategic not tactical, are the architects of Iran’s unconventional and asymmetric strategy of involving Iran in geopolitical arenas involving the United States. Beholden to the ideological revolutionary worldview that sees the United States as the ‘enemy other’ of the Islamic Republic, they sided with conservative ‘principlists,’ who were suspicious of moderates’ motives behind the nuclear agreement with the United States. Now that the US has withdrawn from the deal, the Revolutionary Guards are resonating Ayatollah Khamenei’s concept of ‘resistance economy,’ which securitises the economic domain as an arena of war as a result of the American sanctions. Ali Jafari, the commander-in-chief of the IRGC, addressing students at Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, reasoned that ‘oil sanctions are an opportunity to get rid of the country’s

oil-based economy.’²⁵ ‘Economic pressures and domestic mismanagement have caused dissatisfaction among people, but there is no insecurity in the country,’ Jafari argued. These notions of ‘economic war’ and ‘resistance economy,’ framed within the anti-imperialist revolutionary discourse, are however, rhetorical devices justifying leadership’s defiant position to Iranian people reeling under economic pressure. But, the Iranian leadership is aware that the narratives of ‘resistance economy’ and ‘economic war’ -- stepped in the ideology of the Islamic revolution -- are unlikely to convince a major section of Iranian populace seeking to improve their economic lives after almost four decades of sanctions. Therefore, pursuing a pragmatic course of action, Iran would seek to cement its economic and trade relationship with Europe, while deepening the strategic dimension of its relations with Russia and China.

Conclusion

The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, in a reference to interventionist US policies in the region has called the United States the ‘global arrogance.’ In his speeches he has pointed out that the US has long pursued regime-change by creating internal strife or what he calls the ‘Soft War.’ Therefore, Iran is not going to negotiate with the United States, while its top officials are rousing Iranians against their leaders. Rejecting President Trump’s offer for unconditional talks, Iran clearly stated that US must return to the nuclear deal for any talks to happen. Therefore, Trump’s tactic of threaten-and-negotiate is unlikely to succeed with Iran, which already came to negotiating table once following an intensive campaign of multilateral economic sanctions. Notwithstanding the hardball negotiations with EU-3 and their limited success in offering practical solutions to ensure economic dividends promised in JCPOA, Iran will continue working with Europeans to keep the agreement afloat.

Iran’s diplomatic offensive in the run up to the deadline for American sanctions to snap back, has been about cementing its ties with Asian countries in order to maintain its share in the global oil market while communicating to the world that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a responsible member of the international community, meeting its nuclear obligations, and should be supported against the United States, which has violated a multilateral, internationally recognised agreement.

Domestically, in the long term, the atmosphere of insecurity created by the renewed American sanctions and the revival of ideological discourse of resistance vis-à-vis the United States will empower the hardline principlists in Iran’s factional struggle for power.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

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