

# What's next for the Iran Nuclear Deal

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The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or Iran Nuclear Deal, signed in 2015, was made to ensure that Iran would cease their uranium enrichment program in exchange for sanctions relief. Iran signed the deal with the United States of America (US), Russia, China and Germany, France and the UK (What..., 2022). Trump pulled away from the deal in 2018, after claiming it was 'too soft' on Iran, bringing back old sanctions, and adding new ones (Landler, 2018). After that, Iran could pursue their uranium enrichment program, claiming that it was for peaceful purposes. As of October 2023, Iran is still sanctioned by the US, EU and the United Nations (UN), though they have continued enriching uranium, and could, in a matter of months, produce enough for a nuclear weapon. 2002 UN Reports indicate that they had 70kg of 60% enriched uranium (Iran, 2022). To make a weapon, you need 20 kg of uranium at 90% enrichment, but once you can enrich uranium, it is a matter of time until you can enrich it to the point of a weapon. The estimated amount of time it would take for Iran to enrich enough uranium for one weapon is under a week (Iranwatch, 2023).

There are risks associated with nuclear proliferation. The most dangerous of which is nuclear terrorism: a terrorist group gaining access to a nuclear device and using it against civilians. Even though that risk is greatly exaggerated it still exists. But also, weak states may struggle to control their nuclear technology and scientists, or even transfer their knowledge allowing other actors to control nuclear weapons (Sidhu, 2008). A few tools have been used in attempting to stop Iran from gaining access to nuclear weapons, but currently, the best option is the JCPOA (Einhorn, 2022). That said, Iran's proliferation could bring more nuclear proliferation, as States like Saudi-Arabia may feel the need to balance against a large threat in the Region.

But the window of opportunity that would allow a return to the JCPOA is closing. The window consists of distance from elections, effectiveness of sanctions and costs of military action. As time passes, US presidential elections

come closer to happening, and this alters the costs of compromising on a deal. On top of that, the BRICS, a group of countries united, among other things, by their dislike of unilateral sanctions, play a critical role in the situation, allowing Iran to avert sanctions. Finally, the costs of US military action are going up: supporting Ukraine, while also transferring more resources to Asia (as are the main goals of US security policy), make war in the Middle-East less desirable (although a war may not be the only option), and domestically unpopular. That makes dealing with Iran's hedging strategy, meaning keeping a short breakout time while not having nukes, an extremely difficult task.

## Nuclear Hedging

Over the years, Iran has inched closer and closer to nuclear weapons. It is assumed that Iranian foreign policy is largely influenced by seeking the survival of the regime. Iran has gone through many hurdles in seeking nuclear weapons, going so far as to enriching uranium up to 83%. If peaceful nuclear energy is your only goal, there is no need to go so far. But, as time goes by, it seems that nuclear weapons aren't seen as absolutely vital for regime survival, despite being extremely desirable. So, what is the role of nuclear weapons in Iranian strategy? Eisenstadt (2023) argues that Iran has a strategy of Nuclear Hedging. That means they seek latent deterrence, as in a dormant nuclear capability that can be tapped if need be. But, since the capability is not there, the costs are not there either, and the program can be exchanged for other foreign policy objectives, such as sanction relief. Simultaneously, they can enhance other power tools, such as maritime, drone and missile capabilities or strengthen proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Palestinian territories (Eisenstadt, 2023).

Following this logic, Iran has something to gain by not having Nuclear Weapons: they can exchange their program for something else, but with a short enough breakout time to produce nuclear weapons in a timely fashion. But they would need something valuable enough to make that trade, like the health of their economy, for example. That was the thinking behind the JCPOA. On the other hand, there is something to gain by having nuclear weapons. Nukes don't make or break a country, Ayatollah Khamenei has pointed out that the USSR still crumbled in 1991, and the US still lost the Vietnam war (Eisenstadt, 2023). They do add costs to attacking a country, because retaliation can be catastrophic. In other words, they buy a great deal of security. In that sense, Iran could increase their security by

detering attacks from Israel or the US, for example.

Currently, few countries worry more about Iranian nuclear capabilities than the US and Israel, so it stands to reason that they would be willing to stop the Persian nation's nuclear program. Anthony Blinken, the US secretary of State has said 'all options are on the table' if diplomacy doesn't work in persuading Iran (Secretary, 2023). What are those options? Sabotage (including cyber), airstrikes/drone strikes, sanctions and invasion. Every single tool here is coercive. Eisenstadt suggests that the US should 'shape' Iran's policy options by adding costs to options undesirable to the US. But they rely on making the Iranian economy unviable or military action.

There are a few approaches one could take, but they stem from two 'roots': keep Iran hedging for as long as possible, as Eisenstadt suggests, or push for another deal as Einhorn argues. Attempting to renew the JCPOA has many limitations, the main provisions of the deal are set to expire by 2031 (Einhorn, 2022). In both approaches, the US would be 'kicking the can down the road', postponing a nuclear breakout, essentially. The other approach relies on force. In the next session, I outline the limitations of both strategies, arguing that the window of opportunity for the US is closing, and, even if they can coerce Iran into giving up the nuclear program, it would be too costly.

## Discussing the two approaches

The first approach relies on stretching Iran's nuclear hedge by shaping policy options. I shall refer to this strategy as shaping. Force, or coercion, is the basis of this approach: economic sanctions, that exploit Iran's dependence on oil exports; and military force, through drone/airstrikes or ground deployment. The success of sanctions depends on the capacity to isolate Iran from the world economy. At this point, we have to discuss the impact of the BRICS expansion, because it gives Iran a degree of insulation from sanctions, benefiting from markets in China and Russia.

The BRICS are a group largely defined by their opposition to unilateral sanctions. Loans from the IMF or World Bank that demand domestic policy changes, for example, are not well liked by the group. Hence the reason for the New Development Bank, an institution that grants loans without the political conditions demanded by western banks. Some analysts posit that the BRICS are more likely to offer small alternatives to the US-led financial system than to radically

replace it. Currently, the group benefits from a global south that wants a larger say in world affairs, and members currently at odds with the West (Adler, 2023). Undoubtedly, it will be hard to build consensus in such a diverse group.

But, there is a stated goal of reducing vulnerabilities to western sanctions. So, looking at the fact that China is buying more and more oil from Iran in the past few months, reaching 1.5 million barrels per day in September (Xu, 2023), and with Iran also supplying Russia with drones and ammunitions for the war in Ukraine (Ziomecki, 2023), there already seems to be a level of sanction-aversion. That is occurring right now, if this sanction dodging continues, as is evidenced by the BRICS expansion, and Iran's economy continues to diversify, imposing economic isolation will be essentially impossible. If that comes to pass, there are no economic means to make Iran give up the nuclear program, the islamic republic is still disconnected from the SWIFT payment system to this day. It appears that there is no way to coerce Iran economically, especially now they have BRICS countries to lean on. However, there are other tools, military ones.

The costs of military action can vary, as can the benefits. An air strike/drone strike on uranium enrichment facilities can buy a few years, 10 at most. But that can escalate, Iran can impose costs on the US by utilizing proxies against US allies in the Middle-East, for example. And that would show revisionism by the US against the order they themselves try to protect (Einstadt, 2023). If they go further, with a ground invasion, for example, it would hurt the larger strategy of containing China. That would be even worse, creating a balancing movement against the threat of US coercive action, as is argued by Walt (1985). Even if the US utilized their military advantage to eliminate Iran's nuclear ambitions, it probably wouldn't be worth it in the big picture.

So, the use of force isn't advisable, and the window of opportunity is fading, if not already gone. What remains is trying to return to the deal. Inevitably, that would require some level of compromise. There were attempts to revive the deal in 2022, but it fell through when Iran demanded that the IRGC be removed from the FBI's terrorist group list. The US did not budge, and refused the demand (Ward, 2022). To understand why there can't be compromise, we must look at US domestic politics. It is exceedingly tough for Biden to incur Foreign Policy losses. There is a bipartisan consensus on opposing the Iran deal. Many republicans criticized the deal and supported Trump when he unilaterally pulled out, democrats oppose alleviating economic conditions for

those who fund terrorism (Congress, 2022). In a polarized political climate, with elections approaching, the cost of compromise only goes up. Essentially, the window is also closing, but these costs don't involve throwing away billions in a military operation, or weaken the US-lead international order.

## Conclusions

No matter which way you cut it, the window for stopping nuclear proliferation is closing. All things considered, it would be better if proliferation could be stopped by peaceful means. However, it may be the case that some opportunity may come up that allows the US to make a deal similar to the JCPOA, that is, economic well-being in exchange for giving the nuclear project. But that is unlikely. The most likely scenario, going forward, is that there are no guarantees against Nuclear proliferation, especially if Russia and China have no problem with a nuclear armed Iran.

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