

Europe's Struggle for Autonomy in the Iran Nuclear Problem: Navigating US Pressure and Maintaining Credibility

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In today's international arena, the Iran nuclear issue has emerged as a significant challenge for Europe in pursuit of autonomy. Since the implementation of strict economic sanctions by the US, the European Union, and other nations in 2011/2012, Europe has been caught in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, Europe acknowledges the concerns over Iran's nuclear program and its potential to develop weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, Europe recognizes the need to engage in diplomatic negotiations and provide incentives to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions and ensure regional stability.

To address these concerns, the European Union initiated talks with the Iranian government, aimed at reassuring the international community that Iran was not developing nuclear weapons. These talks sought to provide the Iranian regime with incentives to develop proliferation-proof nuclear technologies while guaranteeing their security. However, Europe's efforts have faced challenges due to the pressure exerted by the United States. The US has been actively urging the international community to impose sanctions on Iran, motivated by concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons capability, regime dynamics and national self-interests in the region. As a result, the United States has sought to rally support for its sanctions policy and push European countries to align their strategies with American interests.

The Iran Nuclear Deal marked a significant diplomatic achievement in addressing concerns about Iran's nuclear program and promoting non-proliferation efforts. The role the European Union has played in facilitating negotiations and upholding the agreement has been instrumental. However, the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA introduced a new set of challenges for the EU.

This paper examines the complexities faced by the EU in maintaining the JCPOA, including its reliance on US support, the erosion of its credibility, and the opportunities and limitations for the EU to play a proactive role in preserving regional stability and advancing its own diplomatic engagement. By analyzing current developments and lessons learned, this

paper seeks to provide insights into the evolving dynamics of the Iran Nuclear Deal and the EU's position within it.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015, under the UN Security Council approved Resolution 2231 (2015), by Iran and six international powers: the United States, China, Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (also known as the P5+1). The deal's goal was to resolve concerns about Iran's nuclear programme while also preventing the development of nuclear weapons. The pact attempted to limit the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief.¹ The agreement guaranteed Iran's nuclear programme remained peaceful by establishing severe constraints, monitoring procedures, and inspections.

The UNSC resolution supports the JCPOA, allows for specific exemptions from existing restrictive measures, and sets the timeline and obligations that all parties must make to remove restrictive measures against Iran.² Despite the procedure building up to it being lengthy and complex, the JCPOA exemplifies what European diplomacy and successful multilateralism can accomplish within the rules-based international system.³

The P5+1, through the agreement, aimed to slow down Iran's nuclear programme so that if Tehran opted to pursue nuclear weapons, it would take at least a year, allowing Western powers time to respond,⁴ which does not seem to be the case anymore due to the level of

¹ Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?," Council on Foreign Relations, July 20, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

² "Nuclear Agreement – JCPOA | EEAS Website," European External Action Service, August 18, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/nuclear-agreement-%E2%80%93-jcpoa_en.

³ "Saving the Iran Nuclear Deal | EEAS Website," European Union External Action, July 14, 2020, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/saving-iran-nuclear-deal_en.

⁴ Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal".

enriched uranium the regime has acquired. Additionally, the agreement established that if any signatory believes Iran is breaking the deal, the UN Security Council could vote on whether sanctions relief should be extended. This “snapback” mechanism will be in place for ten years, following which the UN sanctions will be lifted permanently.⁵

The deal’s current importance stems from its ability to answer concerns about the Iranian nuclear program. Despite US’s withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, discussions for its revival and enhancement as a method of promoting non-proliferation goals, regional stability, and diplomatic engagement persist. Several signatories to the agreement have shown interest in returning to compliance. Restoring and strengthening the agreement might help to maintain regional stability, alleviate nuclear proliferation worries, and confront Iran’s nuclear goals via diplomatic engagement.

Since 1945, when the United States used nuclear bombs against Japan, nuclear weapons have played a significant role in international affairs. Despite the hopes of many observers, the collapse of the Soviet Union did not lessen the significance of nuclear weapons in world politics, ushering in a nuclear era marked by dread and multipolarity.⁶ Iran’s nuclear deal is the most comprehensive non-proliferation agreement in history, a clear success, and the most important security agreement since the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in 1987, between Washington and Moscow.⁷

According to Edward H. Carr, the modern world is divided by the specific interests of many persons and organisations; order is therefore founded on power rather than morality in

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Antonia POP, “Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal - between the Realistic and Liberal Paradigms,” *CES Working Paper* 12, no. 2 (September 2020): 100, <https://ideas.repec.org/a/jes/wpaper/y2020v12i2p100-110.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

such a conflict-ridden atmosphere.⁸ As a result, the Iranian nuclear deal was signed not to promote peace and security throughout the international system, but solely to reflect the nations' national interests. Kenneth Waltz developed the rational deterrence theory to explain the proliferation of nuclear weapons, arguing that once numerous states have obtained nuclear capacity, direct conflict between nuclear powers is improbable since mutual devastation is virtually certain.⁹ As a result, nuclear weapons are a sensible reaction by nations seeking to preserve their interests, because security is the ultimate test of a state's survival under a realistic view of the world.¹⁰

Both the American and Iranian parties arrived at the bargaining table with years of accumulated dissatisfaction and distrust. The negotiation of the agreement depicts the interplay of states, each with its own agenda of stakes that determines strategies and the conclusion. The involvement of persons from at least six nations and many cultures from the United States and Europe, as well as the Middle East and Asia, added to the complexity of the negotiating process.¹¹ However, it is key to consider the complexity of the Iranian foreign policy decision-making process, with several centres of authority, to understand the convolution of the negotiations.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is loyal to its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has a say in security issues in addition to the government.¹² Understanding Iran's attitude to the discussions and its commitment to the deal requires understanding the IRGC's posture and engagement. Ayatollah Khamenei wields considerable

⁸ W Julian Korab-Karpowicz, *On the History of Political Philosophy* (Routledge, 2015).

⁹ William T. Tow, "The Nuclear Waltz: Rational Actors, Deterrence and Nuclear Non-Proliferation," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 541–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2014.937371>.

¹⁰ POP, "Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal", 101-103.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103

¹² *Ibid.*, 102.

power and influence over the country's political and military policies. His approval and backing are critical to the effective execution of the Iran Nuclear Deal. The Ayatollah's stance on the agreement has a significant impact on domestic support and can affect its implementation and sustainability. The role of the IRGC and the Ayatollah in guaranteeing compliance with the nuclear deal's stipulations is of extreme importance. If these powerful entities do not support or commit to the agreement, it may weaken its efficacy and cast doubt on Iran's intentions. Comprehending their influence and interests makes it possible to navigate potential challenges and maintain alive a robust and sustainable agreement.

The Impact of the Deal on the Middle East

The Iran Nuclear Deal has a variety of implications for the Middle East (ME). The agreement helped to strengthen Middle Eastern stability and alleviate security worries among neighbouring nations by restricting Iran's nuclear programme and minimising the potential of a nuclear weapons race; addressing nuclear proliferation concerns diplomatically can promote confidence-building measures and lower tensions. However, the withdrawal of the US in 2018 from the JCPOA and the continuance of imposed sanctions on Iran hindered any kind of alleviation in security matters in the area. While Iran did not withdraw completely from the 2015 pact, only partially,¹³ it no longer respects the limitations on nuclear enrichment levels, the number of uranium centrifuges it runs, or the volume of uranium refined.¹⁴

Nonetheless, having the agreement withstood, regional dynamics may have been altered if Iran were to be allowed to reintegrate into the global economy and perhaps increase its influence. It has the potential to change Iran's connections with other Middle Eastern actors, perhaps leading to adjustments in alliances and strategic considerations. Possible ramifications

¹³ POP, "Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal", 107-8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 106.

might include the fostering of ongoing proxy battles in the region. The full execution of the agreement could have also had an impact on Iran's behaviour and level of participation in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Reduced economic pressures on Iran can provide the regime with additional resources to help its regional allies, thereby altering the dynamics of these wars. Conversely, having the JCPOA a non-nuclear proliferation essence, the development of bilateral and multilateral treaties may broker further stability in the ME along with the revival of the Nuclear Deal.

Nevertheless, unregulated Iranian nuclear development possesses major challenges for the region and the international arena. It might allow Iran to redirect civilian activity to military purposes and it may create an overwhelming desire to mimic among Iran's neighbours, particularly its biggest foe, Saudi Arabia. A Middle East nuclear weapons race would be a potentially catastrophic blow to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a bedrock of world security to which all nations in the area (except Israel) are signatories.¹⁵ The possible ramifications of the Iran Nuclear Deal have alarmed certain nations in the area, particularly those who see Iran as a danger. As a result, some regional players have pursued their own security plans, such as strengthening military capabilities, strengthening connections with Western powers, or engaging in proxy conflicts. These reactions have the potential to further alter the Middle East's security situation.

The efficiency of reviving the JCPOA, as well as regional views of its success or failure, may affect the nuclear ambitions of other Middle Eastern governments. Fear of Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons would plunge the region into a new catastrophe. If diplomacy fails to curb Iran's nuclear capacity, Israel will most likely use kinetic and cyber tactics to try and do so. Recent sabotage strikes blamed on Israel in April 2021 and July 2020 at the Natanz

¹⁵ Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More than a Failure," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 1 (January 2, 2021): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1876861>.

facility, and the killing of leading nuclear weapons scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh in November 2020, only briefly slowed Iran's development while prompting it to break JCPOA restrictions.¹⁶ Despite the dismal outcomes of earlier covert operations, Israel's Defence Forces are apparently developing military options to target major Iranian nuclear installations with more force.¹⁷ One worry was that Israel might continue to launch pre-emptive military strikes against suspected nuclear facilities in Iran.¹⁸

Concerns about a potential weapons race may push neighbouring nations to investigate their nuclear programmes as a deterrent, leading to additional regional instability and complicating non-proliferation efforts. The international community, especially Europeans, wish to avoid at all costs a Middle East arms race and a pre-emptive Israeli assault on Iranian installations, which could quickly develop into a destabilising confrontation. Some analysts believe Europe's conflict-averse politicians dread US military action more than Iran's nuclear aspirations.¹⁹

It is vital to emphasize that the real consequences of the Iran Nuclear Deal are dependent on a variety of geopolitical, economic, and local circumstances. Analysing these consequences necessitates continuously monitoring and evaluating regional trends, diplomatic ties, and security dynamics among Middle Eastern governments.

The EU's Role in the Negotiation of the Iran Nuclear Deal

European presence during the JCPOA negotiations facilitated diplomatic dialogue between two long-standing rivals, the US superpower, and regional hegemon, the Islamic

¹⁶ "Middle East and North Africa," *Strategic Survey* 122, no. 1 (December 4, 2022): 317, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597230.2022.2145094>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?"

¹⁹ Aaron Allen, "Europe's Role in Reconstituting the Iran Nuclear Deal," CEPA, April 19, 2021, <https://cepa.org/article/europes-role-in-reconstituting-the-iran-nuclear-deal/>.

Republic of Iran. Between 2003 and 2015, the ‘E3’ of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (UK) expended significant political and diplomatic resources to ensure that Iran provided verifiable assurances that its nuclear project was only for peaceful purposes.²⁰ The E3 obtained backing from their fellow EU allies, overcome US opposition to engaging Iran, and found common ground with Russia and China, assuring that both dialogue and pressure on Tehran would be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council.²¹

The resolution of the Iran nuclear question has been a key piece in European Security Strategy documents during the twenty-first century since its first publication in 2003, which has also continuously highlighted the transatlantic partnership as an important asset in foreign and security policy.²² For Europeans, resolving the nuclear conflict is also a method of regaining access to Iran’s market, particularly in the lucrative energy sector, and creating a more favourable atmosphere for political conversation with Tehran on a variety of problems ranging from regional flashpoints to human rights.²³

As Ricardo Alcaro (2021) highlights in his work “*Europe’s Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal*,” European nuclear diplomacy with Iran has been founded on this set of interests, as carried out by the E3 and the EU High Representative (E3/EU) on behalf of the entire EU.²⁴ However, Europe’s pursuit of its interests in the subject was and remains inextricably linked to its capacity to win US support since the nuclear problem has sharpened the long-running

²⁰ Alcaro, “Europe’s Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal,” 55.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Council of the European Union, General Secretariat of the Council (Council of the European Union), “European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World,” *Publications Office of the European Union*, 2009, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/d0928657-af99-4552-ae84-1cbaaa864f96/>.

Council of the European Union, General Secretariat of the Council, “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” *European External Action Service*, March 24, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-0_en.

²³ Alcaro, “Europe’s Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal”, 55.

²⁴ Ibid., 56.

ideological-geopolitical battle between Washington and Tehran.²⁵ Because Europeans lack the power assets to undertake coercive diplomacy successfully on their own, the necessity to first construct and then protect a bridge between the US and Iran has always been at the heart of their actions so as to safeguard European interests.²⁶

The most pressing issue driving the E3's initial approach to Tehran in the fall of 2003 was conflict avoidance. Iran, as part of the NPT, is subject to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verification procedures. By that time, the IAEA had established that Iran had neglected to declare activity on sensitive nuclear activities, most notably uranium enrichment, which could be used to produce nuclear fuel, causing major international concern.²⁷

The E3/EU established the diplomatic space to resolve the issue outside of the framework of the US-Iran rivalry by framing the disagreement with Iran as one of non-proliferation compliance. The E3/EU provided the groundwork for a recognised normative framework in which Washington and Tehran might engage by focusing on Iran's non-proliferation responsibilities rather than its regime.²⁸ This normative framework further bolstered the E3/EU's push for a multilateral effort to address Iran's nuclear issue.²⁹ This separation of the nuclear issue from regime dynamics was key to brokering the deal in 2015.

The High Representatives of the European Union (Javier Solana, Catherine Ashton, and Federica Mogherini, respectively) defined the agenda for the E3/EU+3-Iran talks, coordinated bilateral interactions and plenary discussions, and even negotiated the phrasing of sections of

²⁵ Ibid., 57.

²⁶ Tom Sauer, "Coercive Diplomacy by the EU: The Iranian Nuclear Weapons Crisis," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (April 2007): 613–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590701200620>.

²⁷ Michael Adler, "Iran and the IAEA," United States Institute of Peace, October 10, 2022, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iaea>.

²⁸ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 58.

²⁹ Ibid.

the final agreement.³⁰ The E3/EU also kept the US involved in the Iran negotiations by matching their sanctions system with a set of nuclear-related constraints imposed by Washington. Going beyond (but still relying on) the United Nations sanctions, the EU imposed an embargo on Iranian oil and gas imports, prohibited the provision of insurance and reinsurance services, and cut Iran off from international financial markets by ordering Swift, a Brussels-based company that operates interbank messaging, to disconnect most Iranian banks from its system. The imposition of sanctions demonstrated that Europe was prepared to pay a price to get Iran to the bargaining table.³¹ Because Iran could be enticed into a compromise by the possibility of regaining lost trade with the EU, the Obama presidency was able to limit its compromises, as the US only agreed on allowing Iran to trade with Europe (and others), but kept US-Iran economic interactions extremely limited, as all non-nuclear related restrictions remained in place.³²

The E3/EU made it easier for Iran and the US to reach the JCPOA by removing the nuclear problem beyond the restricted scope of the US-Iran bilateral conflict; they were able to do so because they reframed the worry about Iran's nuclear development as moral rather than ideological and geopolitical.³³ At the same time, the dual track strategy designed by the E3/EU created a dynamic of reciprocal approximation inside the context of a UNSC-sanctioned diplomatic framework that both the US and Iran finally found hard to resist.³⁴

³⁰ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 59.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

US Withdrawal from the JCPOA

On May 8, 2018, US President Donald J. Trump officially announced that the JCPOA was no longer in the United States' best interests and, therefore his government would reimpose sanctions and announce withdrawal from the agreement.³⁵ Already during the 2016 presidential campaign, President Trump had labelled the pact a “disaster” and “the worst deal ever negotiated,” vowing to exert unilateral pressure in the hopes of including Iran's missile programme and threatening behaviour in the region into a bigger solution.³⁶

Despite the IAEA's fourteen assessments that Iran was following its obligations, the US withdrew from the pact.³⁷ Trump's approach is based on the belief that the JCPOA fails to fulfil the aim of a nuclear-free Iran and merely delays its goal of becoming one. The Trump administration attempted to delegitimize Iran as much as possible to impede its readmission into the international community; the US fully accepted the idea that Iran is the primary, if not the only, source of regional instability.³⁸

Following US unilateral withdrawal, Trump imposed a policy of “maximum economic pressure” on Iran in his final year in office (2020),³⁹ enabling, therefore, the so-called ‘snapback’ mechanism established in UNSC 2231 (2015), without being participatory of the agreement anymore.⁴⁰ The Trump administration's stance was predicated on the assumption that continued economic pressure and sanctions would drive Iran to renegotiate the JCPOA,

³⁵ Allen, “Europe's Role in Reconstituting the Iran Nuclear Deal.”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, “Getting to a New Iran Deal,” *Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/getting-new-iran-deal>.

³⁸ POP, “Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal”, 105.

³⁹ “Middle East and North Africa,” *Strategic Survey* 121, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 274, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597230.2021.1984118>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

with the remaining signatories chastising the US for its unilateralism, US actions at the time caused a schism between Washington and Brussels.⁴¹

Since Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, Tehran accused the US of breaking its pledges and chastised Europe for surrendering to US unilateralism. Iran, having partially withdrawn from the agreement,⁴² increasingly hampered the IAEA's capacity to monitor its facilities since 2019, while promising to increase cooperation with the agency later in March 2023.⁴³ Such a pledge came months after IAEA inspectors discovered uranium particles enriched to 83.7 per cent at Fordow, very close to weapons grade, causing worldwide outrage.⁴⁴ Maximum pressure did not result in any policy changes; Iran, on the other hand, seems to have found its way to navigate across sanctions, angrily, pushing further and further away from its duties under the JCPOA.⁴⁵

In June, this year, the IAEA announced that Iran had gathered more than quadruple the amount that the IAEA deems a "significant quantity" of highly enriched uranium required to make a single compact nuclear bomb.⁴⁶ Given its present stockpile and number of operational advanced centrifuges, Iran could enrich one bomb's worth of weapons-grade uranium in 12 days and eight bombs' worth in three months, according to a report by the Washington-based Institute of Study of War (ISW) issued on the 9th of June 2023.⁴⁷

⁴¹ POP, "Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal", 105.

⁴² Ibid., 107-8.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal".

⁴⁵ "Middle East and North Africa," *Strategic Survey* 121: 274.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Andie Parry et al., "Iran Update, June 9, 2023," Institute for the Study of War, June 9, 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-june-9-2023>.

Europe's Self-Inflicted Negligence

When Washington withdrew from the JCPOA, the Europeans felt they might rescue it by safeguarding EU-Iran trade links.⁴⁸ France, Germany, and the United Kingdom established the INSTEX barter system to allow transactions with Iran outside of the US financial system; INSTEX was only used once before France and Germany announced its demise in 2023.⁴⁹ When this attempt failed, the EU-backed French-led shuttle diplomacy between Tehran and Washington, also failed. Finally, the E3/EU focused their efforts on assuring that Iran would not formally exit the deal for as long as it would take the US to reverse course.⁵⁰

The E3/EU initially sought to establish a space for lawful commerce large enough for Iran to continue adhering to the JCPOA while remaining small enough for the US not to see it as a threat to its maximum pressure policy. Nonetheless, the idea of President Trump's new strategy was to shut off any source of foreign funding for Iran.⁵¹ The imposition of extraterritorial sanctions successfully deterred third parties from conducting business with Iran by threatening to cut them off from the US economy and even the US dollar system.⁵² This meant destroying any opposition to the US-imposed sanctioned regime, even if it came from European allies. All the parts of the E3/EU's opposition strategy gradually came apart one by one.⁵³ President Trump showed no regard for European concerns, forcing EU corporations to follow US rather than European rules, and rejecting French mediation efforts. As a result of

⁴⁸ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 62.

⁴⁹ Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal".

⁵⁰ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 62.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵² "Middle East and North Africa," *Strategic Survey* 121: 275.

⁵³ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 63.

Europe's inability to safeguard EU firms from US extraterritorial sanctions and the ultimate demise of INSTEX, Europe's standing in Iran eroded.⁵⁴

European performance appears to have been excruciatingly ineffectual. Such a severe criticism, however, is incorrect, as Alcaro (2019) points out in his work: Europe's efforts were not in vain, specifically, despite being at odds with both Iran and the US, the E3/EU have manoeuvred in such a manner that they remain important to both parties, always retaining the diplomatic option.⁵⁵

Learned Lessons for Brussels

European reliance on the US has been exemplified by its limited ability to engage in coercive diplomacy, exercise strategic autonomy, and preserve economic and financial independence. The JCPOA exemplifies that Europe lacks the essential power assets to take autonomous action to become a strategic independent global actor pursuing its own strategies. Because the EU lacks strong military cohesion and collective defence capabilities, it is unable to exercise influence by coercive methods. As a result, Europe relies on the United States' political, and military might to exert pressure on Iran, and respectively, the Middle East, to preserve a conducive environment for discussions.

Europe's pursuit of its interests in the Iran nuclear problem is inextricably linked to obtaining US backing. The EU's need to build and preserve a bridge between the US and Iran further demonstrates its excessive reliance on Washington. Europe's efforts to establish diplomatic spaces, engage in shuttle diplomacy, and cooperate with the United States highlight

⁵⁴ Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

the continent's reliance on US actions and policies. This dependence diminishes Europe's strategic autonomy and hinders its capacity to affect outcomes on its own.

Extraterritorial sanctions imposed by the United States, that have limited Europe's economic and financial freedom demonstrate the Union's fragility and reliance on the US, even in economic affairs, the main source of soft power of the Union. This lack of economic independence further erodes Europe's ability to use any kind of inducement to pursue its own interests.

Therefore, Europeans' position in Iran has eroded, with Iran accusing Europe of hedging towards US unilateralism. European negligence and the need for US backing have resulted in a policy approach of disengagement with the ME, European credibility and bargaining leverage have been severely damaged.

Current developments of the JCPOA

Upon assuming the presidency in 2021, US President Joe Biden appeared poised to fulfil his campaign pledge of restoring the previous state of affairs regarding the JCPOA.⁵⁶ Because Iran declined to meet directly with the US while sanctions remained in place, the European Union and the other five JCPOA parties - China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom - functioned as mediators in what was dubbed "proximity talks", which started to take place in Vienna 2021.⁵⁷ With new demands largely left aside for some time, the US and Iran concentrated on a shared aim of 'compliance for compliance,' under which both would return to their promises.⁵⁸ However, one major hindrance in reviving the agreement has been the US designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) under the Trump

⁵⁶ "Middle East and North Africa," *Strategic Survey* 122: 309.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

administration, which Iran insists should be lifted.⁵⁹ This backlisting was a way to further ensure that future presidencies could not restore the JCPOA.

While discussions seemed to be progressing, Iran demanded that the US make the first move by removing economic sanctions since they were the ones who withdrew from the accord.⁶⁰ Talks stalled at that point. When discussions resumed in late 2022, Iran submitted maximalist demands. The demands included access to the US financial system, the removal of US soldiers from the region, security assurances, reimbursement for lost commerce due to sanctions, verification of sanctions removal before fulfilling its JCPOA responsibilities, and the removal of Trump-era designations of Iranian entities.⁶¹ Many of the sanctions imposed by Trump were set on purpose to prevent a future president from reinstating the JCPOA, but others, such as those concerning human rights violations, had no connection to the agreement and would not impede its implementation.⁶²

On the other side, the US has demanded that Iran return to full compliance with its nuclear obligations under the JCPOA; this entails Iran complying with nuclear program constraints such as lowering enriched uranium stocks and regulating the amount of enrichment.⁶³ Additionally, Biden is likely to take a few unilateral moves to improve ties with Iran.

While urging Iran to respect human rights, halt missile testing, and withdraw from Yemen, it seems Biden will not include non-nuclear demands as a prerequisite for obtaining a

⁵⁹ “Middle East and North Africa,” *Strategic Survey* 122: 310.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ David E. Sanger, Lara Jakes, and Farnaz Fassihi, “Biden Promised to Restore the Iran Nuclear Deal. Now It Risks Derailment.,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/31/us/politics/biden-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

JCPOA agreement, as the Trump administration did.⁶⁴ With many Obama officials who negotiated and pushed the agreement expected to fill its ranks, the Biden administration will undoubtedly follow Obama's lead in prioritising decreasing Iran's perceived nuclear threat.⁶⁵

According to the *New York Times* (2023), the Biden administration has been covertly talking with Iran to restrict Tehran's nuclear programme and free imprisoned Americans as part of a bigger US attempt to lessen tensions and the potential of armed conflict with the Islamic Republic.⁶⁶ The US objective is to establish an unwritten, informal accord, which some Iranian officials refer to as a "political cease-fire;" it would seek to avert a further escalation in a long-hostile relationship that has become increasingly tense in the past few months.⁶⁷ The indirect discussions, some of which took place this spring in the Gulf Arab state of Oman, signal a return to diplomacy.⁶⁸

Iranian authorities have stated that Iran will suspend violent attacks on American contractors in Syria and Iraq by regional proxies, enhance its cooperation with international nuclear inspectors, and desist from supplying ballistic missiles to Russia.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, there are indications of growing arrangements, such as the US authorizing Iraq to pay energy obligations to Iran, subject to restrictions on the use of funds.⁷⁰ According to the State Department, the funds would be confined to use by US-approved third-party merchants for food and medication for Iranian nationals. However, this might ease fears that the Biden

⁶⁴ Paul Fraioli and Benjamin Rhode, eds., "Prospects for the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Strategic Comments* 26, no. 8 (September 13, 2020): i–iii, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2020.1853381>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Michael Crowley, Farnaz Fassihi, and Ronen Bergman, "Hoping to Avert Nuclear Crisis, U.S. Seeks Informal Agreement with Iran," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2023, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/14/us/politics/biden-iran-nuclear-program.html>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Crowley, Fassihi, and Bergman, "Hoping to Avert Nuclear Crisis, U.S. Seeks Informal Agreement with Iran."

administration is funnelling billions of dollars to a cruel authoritarian dictatorship that is murdering protestors, backing Russia's Ukraine war effort, and sponsoring anti-Israeli proxies such as Hamas and Hezbollah.⁷¹

Nevertheless, for the first time, European signatories to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal are planning to violate the pact by refusing to relax sanctions on Tehran's missile use in October, as originally stipulated in the agreement.⁷² Iran rejected proposals to incorporate ballistic missile restrictions during the JCPOA discussions, therefore, UNSC Resolution 2231 imposed restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile programme through imposed sanctions, which were set to be lifted in 2023.⁷³

The restrictions barred Iran from building nuclear-capable ballistic missiles and restricted the purchase, sale, or transfer of drones capable of flying beyond 300 km to or from Iran without UN approval.⁷⁴ Regardless of sanctions expiring in October this year, diplomats from the European Union and the United Kingdom are defending their actions of keeping sanctions by noting Iran's violations of the accord, notably the sale of drones to Russia for use in its conflict against Ukraine; since October 2022, Russia has been striking critical infrastructure in Ukraine with drones provided by Iran.⁷⁵ Concurrently, on June 9th, 2023, the Biden administration reported that Iran is assisting Russia in the construction of a drone manufacturing complex in Yelabuga, Tatarstan, Russia, highlighting the expanding military collaboration between Tehran and Moscow despite Western sanctions.⁷⁶ This has exerted

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Tuqa Khalid, "UK, France, Germany to Breach Iran Nuclear Deal over Drone Supplies to Russia: Report," Al Arabiya, July 2, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/07/02/UK-France-Germany-to-breach-Iran-nuclear-deal-over-drone-supplies-to-Russia-Report>.

⁷³ POP, "Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal", 105.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Khalid, "UK, France, Germany to Breach Iran Nuclear Deal over Drone Supplies to Russia: Report."

⁷⁶ Parry et al., "Iran Update, June 9, 2023."

pressure on the EU and the UK to take a consolidated and coercive stance to make Tehran come back to its senses.

Concluding Remarks

The United States' unilateral exit from the JCPOA presented European Union leaders with a significant challenge ahead. The US's attitude towards Iran has been immensely destabilising for Europe. European countries have tried to guarantee Iran receives sufficient economic rewards to encourage Tehran to remain in line following the US exit but have failed to do so.⁷⁷

Too much reliance on the US not only restricts the EU's strategic autonomy but also its capacity to pursue its objectives through incentive or coercion. Furthermore, the European Union's fragility has been highlighted by its failure to safeguard EU enterprises from extraterritorial penalties imposed by the US, which has damaged its economic independence and soft power. The recent developments in the JCPOA emphasize the difficulty that Europe faces as a mediator between the US and Iran. Trump's unilateralism in America heavily influenced Europe's understanding of the necessity to build an independent foreign policy.

However, European efforts to keep the diplomatic option open to restore the deal has allowed for talks to be resumed under Biden's administration. The dispute between the United States and Iran over the lifting of economic sanctions, as well as both parties expressing their demands, has stymied progress towards resurrecting the accord.

Overall, Europe's attitude toward Iran's nuclear programme has eroded as it seeks to express itself freely and preserve its own interests. The over-reliance on the United States, as well as the difficulties in preserving credibility in discussions with Iran, have limited Europe's

⁷⁷ POP, "Diplomatic Negotiations and the Iran Nuclear Deal", 106.

capacity to influence outcomes on its terms. European states need to strengthen their military capabilities, pursue more economic independence, and take a more proactive attitude in global affairs to better their position.

There is a compelling case for the European Union to expand its involvement in Middle Eastern foreign policy, particularly regarding human rights. As a major global player, the EU has the economic, diplomatic, and political clout to make a substantial contribution to promoting and protecting human rights in the area. The EU can stimulate conversation, support responsibility, and push for substantial reforms to address human rights problems by actively engaging and utilising its ties with Middle Eastern nations.

Furthermore, it is critical to address the inconsistencies and double standards that have been noticed in the response to Iran's human rights abuses and nuclear ambitions. While the West has imposed sanctions on Iran based on human rights breaches and fears about nuclear proliferation, it is worth noting that, indeed, comparable concerns about human rights abuses and nuclear capabilities exist in the context of Israel. As a responsible global actor, it is critical to support a consistent and equitable approach. The EU and its Western allies should explore working with all relevant parties to consistently defend human rights principles and non-proliferation objectives in an impartial and solidified manner across the entire region.

The EU can play a critical role in encouraging peace, security, and respect for universal rights in the Middle East by taking a broad and principled approach to human rights. It should aggressively explore diplomatic routes, participate in constructive conversation, and use its economic influence to support human rights, encourage non-proliferation efforts, and contribute to the region's overall peace and inclusion.

Given the present events between Russia and Iran, the European Union is in a unique position to play a critical role in encouraging regional stability and dialogue. The EU's

diplomatic channels and economic leverage can help resolve the concerns raised by Russia and Iran's increasing alliance. The EU should recognise the importance of this partnership and its possible repercussions, both in terms of regional dynamics and larger international relations. The EU can promote its goals of encouraging peace, stability, and respect for international standards by constructively engaging with all relevant parties, including Russia, Iran, and other regional players while consolidating its foreign policy strategy and destringing from Washington.

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