



UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAMME: FROM BUSH TO TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT: *The Islamic Republic of Iran is a sovereign state strategically sitting astride the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf in the Middle East. In the late 1950s, the United States was of great assistance to Iran in starting its nuclear programme for peaceful purposes. But in the 1990s, Iran secretly began to build nuclear facilities which an exiled opposition group disclosed to the world in 2002. The revelation added to the fear of the United States and some European and Middle Eastern countries that Iran intends to have nuclear weapons or at least the capability to make them. Hence, the United States under President George W. Bush Jnr pursued a foreign policy aimed at reining Iran's uranium enrichment. This goal, to a large extent, was achieved following the conclusion of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) during President Barack Obama's administration. Unfortunately, his successor, President Donald Trump, pulled the United States out of the said nuclear deal in 2018. This paper examines United States foreign policy on Iran's nuclear programme from January 2002 to January 2021. For the study, the historical approach was adopted, and data were collected from secondary sources. The paper concludes that the United States is back to square one vis-à-vis its foreign policy on Iran's nuclear programme.*

KEYWORDS: Foreign Policy, Nuclear Programme, IAEA, Sanctions, JCPOA, Uranium Enrichment

INTRODUCTION

It is the right of every sovereign state in the international system, based on the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (hereafter NPT), to initiate and pursue, in its national interest, a nuclear programme for 'peaceful purposes' e.g. power generation, medical diagnosis, agriculture etc. (Blix, 1996; Özcan and Özdamar, 2009). However, as observed in time past and in recent years, not all countries have genuinely limited their nuclear programme to civilian purposes.

Following the United States (hereafter U.S.) detonation of the atomic bomb 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man' over the Japanese cities: Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 06 and 09, 1945, respectively, the Soviet Union (1949), United Kingdom (1952) (hereafter UK), France (1960), China (1964), India (1974) and Pakistan (1998) all tested a nuclear weapon and, became nuclear-armed states. In recent past, North Korea, for prestige, regime security and deterrence sake, tested a total of six nuclear devices in violation of the NPT and the 1996



Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) which it is not a state party to (Ogunnoiki and Adeyemi, 2020).

Now, the inkling of the U.S. and some European and Middle Eastern countries is that the Islamic Republic of Iran, a state party to the NPT, is covertly working towards having a nuclear arsenal in the nearest future or at least the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons, under the guise of pursuing a nuclear programme to boost its electricity generation. Though Iran has repeatedly denied having Possible Military Dimensions (PMDs) to its civilian nuclear programme, its uranium enrichment above the internationally accepted percentage for peaceful purposes gradually confirms the suspicion of concerned countries the world over that its nuclear programme for power generation is a camouflaged nuclear weapons programme.

A nuclear-armed Iran, no doubt, will be perceived by U.S. regional allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia and many countries in the Middle East as a security threat which can trigger an unnecessary nuclear proliferation or arms race in the volatile region (Cirincione, 2006a; ADL, 2020). To forestall in coming years, a security dilemma in the region, the U.S. foreign policy on Iran's nuclear programme has been, for almost two decades, to restrict Iran's nuclear programme to peaceful purposes only.

Against this backdrop, this paper with the objective of taking a critical look at U.S. foreign policy on Iran's nuclear programme from January 2002 to January 2021, has been compartmentalised into six subheadings. In the first subheading, the major concepts used in this study were clarified. The second takes us on an historical excursion *vis-à-vis* Iran's nuclear programme, and the role the U.S. and other foreign powers played. The third throws light on the motives behind the controversial nuclear programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the fourth subheading, which is the heart of this paper, the U.S. foreign policy on Iran's nuclear programme from the government of President Bush to Trump (2002-2021) was thoroughly examined. Lastly, the fifth and sixth subheadings are: our concluding remarks and suggestions respectively.

Conceptual Clarification

It is unsafe to assume that readers of this paper all have an understanding of the concepts used therein. Thus, it is imperative to identify and clarify these concepts here. Three major concepts were used throughout this study. These concepts are none other than 'foreign policy', 'diplomacy', and 'nuclear programme'.

Foreign Policy

In the words of Aluko (1981), "nobody has really formulated a universally acceptable definition of the concept and probably nobody will succeed in doing so". This notwithstanding, a number of scholars in the discipline, International Relations, have confidently composed a befitting definition that best captures what foreign policy is all about (Adeola and Ogunnoiki, 2015; Ogunnoiki, 2018).

According to Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff (1971, p. 23), foreign policy is "the formulation, implementation and evaluation of external choices within one country, viewed from the perspective of that country". Simply put, it is a "stable set of attitude towards the



international environment, an implicit or explicit plan about a country's relationship with outside world" (Wallace, 1971, p. 11).

Diplomacy

"Diplomacy is the conduct of international relations by negotiation rather than by force, propaganda or recourse to law, and by other peaceful means (such as gathering information or engendering goodwill) which are either directly or indirectly designed to promote negotiation" (Berridge, 1995, p. 1). Put in another way, it is "concerned with the management of international relations between states and between states and other actors." (Barston, 2014, p. 1)

Over the years, different types of diplomacy have been identified: secret diplomacy, open diplomacy, gunboat diplomacy, dollar diplomacy, public diplomacy, summit diplomacy, shuttle diplomacy, oil diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, paradiplomacy, cultural diplomacy, triangular diplomacy, economic diplomacy, nuclear diplomacy etc. Most of these kinds of diplomacy are between states: two states (bilateral) or more than two states (multilateral).

Nuclear Programme

Uranium is a natural resource that is mined in countries such as Canada, Kazakhstan and Niger. In it can be found the isotopes – U-235 and U-238. Unlike U-238, the U-235 can trigger a nuclear chain reaction. When mined, natural uranium ore has less than 1% (0.7% to be precise) of U-235. Hence, there is a need for 'enrichment', i.e. the process of concentrating U-235 to a high level by feeding uranium hexafluoride gas (UF₆) into centrifuges (high speed spinning machines) to separate the fissile isotope U-235 from U-238 (Cirincione, 2006a; Henderson, 2009; Iran Watch, 2016; Siegel, 2018; BBC News, 2020; Oberhaus, 2020).

When U-235 isotope is concentrated to 3-5%, it is called Low-Enriched Uranium (hereafter LEU). Uranium enriched to the aforementioned percentage is used to fuel commercial nuclear power plants. When the concentration gets to 20%, it is called Highly Enriched Uranium (hereafter HEU) and can be used for either research reactors or medical purposes. But when U-235 concentration gets to 90% and above, it is called weapons-grade uranium, needed for the production of nuclear weapons (Cirincione, 2006a; Henderson, 2009; Siegel, 2018; BBC News, 2019; Brumfiel, 2019; BBC News, 2020; Laub and Robinson, 2020). At this juncture, it is important to know that once a country enriches uranium to around 20%, the time needed to reach 90% has been halved according to nuclear scientists (Gambrell, 2019a).

The other material used in making nuclear weapons is 'plutonium'. Plutonium cannot be gotten naturally. It is a byproduct of uranium used in nuclear power or research reactors and, when separated or reprocessed from other waste products, it becomes a more powerful explosive than U-235 (Henderson, 2009). In Iran, spent fuel containing plutonium can be gotten from the Arak heavy-water reactor (BBC News 2019; BBC News, 2020; CND, 2020).

The Historical Background to Iran's Nuclear Programme

On December 08, 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower of the U.S. addressed the United Nations General Assembly (hereafter UNGA) on 'Atoms for Peace', which became a programme of his government. Through this programme, the U.S. during the Cold War



provided states with the technology and educational resources for their civilian nuclear programme (Rowberry, 2013).

In the year 1957, a civilian nuclear cooperation agreement known as the ‘Cooperation Concerning Civil Uses of Atoms’ was reached between the U.S. and Iran during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Shah Pahlavi was a pro-Western monarch who ascended the throne 10 years before democratically elected, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq, nationalised Iran’s oil assets in 1951, and was toppled in ‘Operation Ajax’ by the UK MI6 and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1953) (Cirincione, 2006a; Rowberry, 2013). Few years later, the Tehran Nuclear Research Centre (TNRC), in Tehran University, housed a 5-megawatt (MW) research reactor which the U.S. supplied with HEU to fuel it. Called the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), the reactor became operational in 1967 (Cirincione, 2006a; Jahanpour, 2007; IAEA as cited in Özcan and Özdamar, 2009; Rowberry, 2013; Malus, 2018; Regencia and Chughtai, 2018; Gambrell, 2019a; CND, 2020; Cirincione et al., 2005 as cited in NTI, 2020). The following year, Iran joined many countries to sign the NPT on the 1st of July.

In 1974 (four years after the Iranian Parliament ratified the 1968 NPT), Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi created the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) and announced his ambitious plan to build at least 20 nuclear power reactors in the next 20 years which will generate over 20,000 megawatts of electricity for the country (Cirincione, 2006a; Cirincione, 2006b; Kerr, 2009; Albright and Stricker, 2015; Etemad, 1987 as cited in Iran Watch, 2016; Malus, 2018; Regencia and Chughtai, 2018). He started with the Bushehr nuclear power plant, which the building of two 1,200-megawatt nuclear reactors, was contracted to the West German company, Kraftwerk Union AG (a subsidiary of Siemens) in 1974 (see Iran Watch, 2016). But during the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Shah Pahlavi was overthrown and a theocratic government was formed under the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (died in 1989 and was replaced by former Iranian president, Ali Khamenei), who was against Iran committing the un-Islamic act of making, stockpiling or using chemical and nuclear weapons.

In 1980, on September 22 precisely, the Iran-Iraq War broke out, a war in which Iraqi army used chemical weapons against Iranians before it came to a close on August 20, 1988. These radical and violent events from late 1970s to late 1980s led to the suspension of the Iran’s nuclear programme. Though in 1984, Iran restarted its nuclear programme when it opened the Nuclear Research Centre in Isfahan (also spelt as ‘Esfahan’) (Cirincione, 2006a; Sahimi, 2003 as cited in Özcan and Özdamar, 2009; Fanack, 2012; Rowberry, 2013; Albright and Stricker, 2015; IAEA, 2002 as cited in Iran Watch, 2016; Malus, 2018; Ogunnoiki, 2018).

In the early 1990s, Iran’s nuclear programme entered a new phase with the help of Pakistan, China and Russia. The Pakistani nuclear scientist, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan (known for his clandestine sales network of nuclear technology to North Korea and Libya), provided P-2 centrifuges designs to Iran. China on its part supplied Iran with a quantity of uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) or ‘yellowcake’ (see Rowberry 2013; Albright and Stricker, 2015; Gambrell, 2019a) while a Russian research and design institute, NIKIET, provided Iran with fuel rods technology for the Arak reactor (see Rowberry, 2013).



The Rationale behind Iran's Nuclear Programme

Iran, for over two decades, has doggedly pursued its nuclear programme for several reasons. The first of these motives is its desire to become the regional hegemon in the Middle East. Geographically located in the Middle East, Iran has the following advantages over many countries in the region. It strategically straddles the oil-rich Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and, is capable of controlling the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic shipping lane for almost 30% of the world's seaborne crude oil. Also, Iran currently has the world's fourth-largest proven crude oil reserves and second-largest natural gas deposits (Cirincione, 2006a; Özcan and Özdamar, 2009; Vahdat, 2019). Despite all this, Iran strongly believes its ascension as the leading regional power depends on nuclear energy development (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009; Beauchamp, 2015).

Religion is another motivation for Iran's nuclear programme. Iran sees itself as a non-Arab Shi'a state that is 'encircled' by Sunni countries in the Middle East. These Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia are perceived by Iran as a security threat (Ramesh and Tsegaye, 2011). Thirdly is Iran's perception of U.S. influence as the greatest threat to the survival of its regime. Hence, Iran uses its nuclear programme to gain leverage in its relations with the world (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009).

The fourth rationale behind Iran's nuclear programme is none other than, prestige. Iran wants to be on the list of countries with nuclear capability for civilian and possibly military purposes. This brings us to the last but not least reasons which are modernity and internal legitimacy.

In the words of Dr James Worrall, an Associate Professor of International Relations and Middle East Studies in the University of Leeds, "I think actually that Iran's nuclear programme is much more about internal legitimacy than it is about external power – it's about demonstrating power, competence and modernity to the Iranian population as much as it is about gaining some kind of international respect and recognition," (Sandhu, 2020).

U.S. Foreign Policy on Iran's Nuclear Programme: From Bush to Trump Administration

Iran has consistently stated that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes which international law permits, and not to have weapon-grade uranium and plutonium. But contrary to what Iran wants the whole world to believe, are its activities at different nuclear facilities – Natanz Uranium Enrichment Plant, Arak Heavy-Water Reactor, the underground Fordo Fuel Enrichment Plant (also spelt as 'Fordow'), and the secret nuclear facility at the Parchin Military Base (Ogunnoiki, 2018).

On the 29th of January, 2002, George W. Bush Jr in his State of Union address, called Iran, Iraq and North Korea an "axis of evil". Quoting him verbatim:

"States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to



blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic." (CNN.com, 2002)

To deal with the imminent security threat from the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Bush administration would later partake in European multilateral diplomacy.

In the August of 2002, the covert Natanz uranium enrichment plant and the Arak heavy-water reactor were disclosed by Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK) (also spelt as Mujahedin-e-Khalq), the military wing of the exiled opposition group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2005; Cirincione, 2006a; Jahanpour, 2007; Beauchamp, 2015; Gambrell, 2019a). Hence, Iran's nuclear activities in Arak and Natanz were inspected by the nuclear watchdog, International Atomic Energy Agency (hereafter IAEA) in fall 2002 and February 2003 (Kerr, 2009; CND, 2020).

In October 2003, Iran reached an agreement with the EU-3 (France, Germany and the UK) on the suspension of its uranium enrichment activities, the signing and implementation of an additional protocol to its 1974 IAEA safeguards agreement, and its full cooperation in the IAEA investigation (Kerr, 2009, p. 4). Same month and year, Iran supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, reportedly issued a *fatwa* forbidding the production and use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (Collier, 2003 as cited in Eisenstadt, 2011).

On December 18, 2003, Iran signed an Additional Protocol to its NPT Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA in 1974 which grants the nuclear watchdog the right to monitor its nuclear programme (IAEA, 2017). The following year, on the 15th of November, the EU-3 and Iran inked the Paris Agreement which the latter agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment.

In the month of February 2006, Iran ended its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol it signed in December 2003 (Hoge as cited in NTI, 2020). On April 11, 2006, Iran announced that it has produced LEU at Natanz pilot enrichment plant (Masterson, 2020). Same year, the U.S., Russia and China joined the EU-3 (to form EU-3+3) in negotiating with Iran to halt its uranium enrichment (Udum, 2017; Ogunnoiki, 2018). Though the Bush administration was part of the EU-3+3 negotiations to get Iran to stop enriching uranium, it also voted for the United Nations Security Council (hereafter UNSC) resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran *vis-à-vis* its nuclear programme – Resolution 1737 on December 23, 2006, Resolution 1747 on March 24, 2007, and Resolution 1803 on March 03, 2008.

In the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) report, it was stated that Iran had a clandestine nuclear weapons programme which a number of countries in the West called the AMAD Plan. But in the year 2003, the alleged programme which started in 1989 came to a halt (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009; Fanack, 2012; Beauchamp, 2015).

President Bush, during his eight years in office, was unable to reach a substantive agreement with Iran on its nuclear programme. But his successor, the first African American and 44th president of the U.S., Barack Obama, was able to temporarily prevent Iran from reaching the level of weapon-grade uranium with a landmark agreement. Prior to the said nuclear deal were additional sanctions on Iran's anemic economy following the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1929 on June 9, 2010. Also, U.S. and Iran tensions intensified in 2011 as the U.S. alongside its European allies slapped Iran's oil exports with sanctions which forced Tehran to threaten the closure of the Strait of Hormuz (Fanack, 2012).



In 2012, President Barack Obama's government imposed new economic sanctions on Iran which consequently led to the loss of more than 25% of the value of Iranian currency 'rial' against the dollar on the 1st and 2nd of October, 2012 (The Economist, 2012). Also in 2012, the U.S. and Israel allegedly cyberattacked Iran by infecting the computer systems of Iran's Natanz nuclear facility with the 'Stuxnet' virus which affected many of its centrifuges (Fanack, 2012; see Blount, 2019, pp. 98-104; Gambrell, 2019a).

On June 15, 2013, the Moderate, President Hassan Rouhani was declared the winner of Iran's presidential election and, on September 27, 2013, President Obama made a historic 15 minutes' phone call to his Iranian counterpart, the first direct talks between American and Iranian leaders since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The call became important as President Obama and Rouhani did not meet on the sidelines of the UNGA (Roberts and Borger, 2013; Regencia and Chughtai, 2018).

On Iran's nuclear programme, the Obama government played a major role in the P5+1 (i.e. the UNSC five permanent members – China, France, Russia, the UK, and the U.S. plus Germany) rounds of negotiation in Geneva, Istanbul, Baghdad, Moscow, and Almaty from 2010 to 2013. On July 14, 2015, the six world powers signed in Vienna, Austria, the Iran Nuclear Deal, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (hereafter JCPOA), which the UNSC endorsed six days after with Resolution 2231. The 'Implementation Day' of this landmark agreement began on January 16, 2016.

In the said nuclear deal are the following restrictions: Iran can only stockpile 300 kilograms of uranium until 2031 which should not be enriched above 3.67% (prior to the nuclear deal, it had enriched uranium up to 20%), Iran is to reduce its almost 20,000 centrifuges to 5,060 at Natanz until 2026, it is not permitted to enrich uranium in Fordo until 2031, the Arak heavy-water reactor is to be redesigned etc. (BBC News, 2019) In exchange for Iran's compliance, the U.S., United Nations (hereafter UN) and European Union (EU) sanctions on its ailing economy were suspended (which for the UN, it can 'snap back' i.e. reinstate the sanctions if the Iranian State violates the nuclear deal), allowing it to access more than \$100 billion frozen assets. Also Iran was able to ramp up crude oil sales in the international oil market unlike when international sanctions were in place (BBC News, 2019; Laub and Robinson, 2020). From the West, there was a rush by companies e.g. Airbus and Boeing Co. to do business with Iran (Gambrell, 2019a). But this rush was cut short by the 45th president of the U.S. in person of Donald Trump, months after Israel's Mossad agents made away with about 50,000 pages and 163 compact discs' worth of intelligence from a warehouse in Iran on January 31, 2018 (Al Arabiya English, 2018).

Despite Iran's compliance to the JCPOA under the watchful eyes of the Vienna-based IAEA, President Donald Trump on May 08, 2018, unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the nuclear deal his predecessor helped finalise. Left to Trump, the nuclear deal was a flawed agreement because it did not curb Iran's ballistic missile programme and its proxy warfare in the Middle East. Also, that the 'sunset provisions' of the JCPOA (i.e. the centrifuges restriction which expires after 10 years and the LEU stockpile restriction which expires after 15 years) will allow Iran have a nuclear bomb in the nearest future (BBC News, 2020; Laub and Robinson, 2020). But contrary to Trump's point of view is the fact that the nuclear deal was designed to prevent Iran from attaining the capability to make nuclear weapons, and nothing else. Adding the country's ballistic missile programme and its support for proxies that are reportedly destabilising the volatile Middle Eastern region – Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in



Lebanon, Houthi rebels in Yemen etc. to the scope of the nuclear deal is just Trump trying to kill three birds with a stone.

On November 05, 2018, the Trump administration in line with its ‘maximum pressure’ campaign, re-imposed economic sanctions on Iran’s oil and banking sector with the hope that it will come back to the negotiating table, this time around, to negotiate a new and comprehensive deal. Much as Trump initially planned to do this by reducing Iran’s oil exports to ‘zero’, the U.S. granted Significant Reduction Exemptions (SREs) to eight countries (China, Greece, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey) which allowed them to import a limited amount of Iranian crude oil for 180 days. The said provisional waivers for the eight countries expired on May 02, 2019. Furthermore, the U.S. exempted three non-proliferation projects – the Bushehr nuclear power plant, the site of a former heavy water reactor at Arak, and a former underground uranium enrichment plant at Fordo (Borger and Wintour, 2018; Fitch et al., 2018; DiChristopher, 2019; Laub and Robinson, 2020).

On May 08, 2019, exactly a year after the U.S. left the JCPOA, “Iran’s Supreme National Council (SNSC) declared Tehran’s exit from “certain” obligations under the landmark agreement and gave a 60-day deadline to the remaining JCPOA signatories to protect Iran’s interests against U.S. sanctions, or it will restart enriching uranium to a higher degree” (TehranTimes, 2019). On June 28, 2019, the officials of the remaining state parties to the JCPOA – China, France, Germany, Russia and the UK met with their Iranian counterpart in Vienna, Austria, to salvage the nuclear deal from collapsing. To demonstrate to Iran that they are still committed to the JCPOA, the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), which was formed on January 31, 2019, by the three European countries (hereafter E3) that are signatories to the nuclear deal – France, Germany and the UK, became operational on June 28, 2019. This barter cum payment mechanism facilitates trade in food and medicine between European companies and Iran without any across border payment in U.S. dollars being made because, the U.S. has warned that any foreign government or company (including companies within its territorial boundaries) found violating the re-imposed sanctions on Iran will be penalised. Nevertheless, Tehran is not satisfied with the exchange limited to food and medicine. It demanded that the sanctioned Iranian crude oil be included in the barter system (Bulos, 2019; BBC News, 2020; Laub and Robinson, 2020).

On July 01, 2019, Iran surpassed the 300 kilograms stockpile cap on LEU which was confirmed by the UN nuclear watchdog, IAEA (Ali, 2019; Brumfiel, 2019; BBC News 2020). This move by the Middle Eastern country was its first step in reducing its commitments to the JCPOA. Few days after, it made good the threat to exceed the 3.67% threshold of U-235 enrichment to 4.5% following the failure of the remaining signatories of the nuclear pact to deliver the promised economic relief from U.S. sanctions within the 60-day deadline which expired on July 07, 2019 (Gambrell, 2019a; ADL, 2020; BBC News, 2020). This second step, like the first, in scaling back its commitments to the nuclear deal is reversible according to Tehran if, and only if, the signatories left to the JCPOA (i.e. the P4+1 or EU-3+2) desist from renegeing *vis-à-vis* economic relief from debilitating sanctions. In other words, Iran is purposely violating the JCPOA to mount pressure on the remaining state parties to the nuclear deal to keep their part of the agreement according to the international law principle *pacta sunt servanda* (Latin meaning: ‘agreements must be kept’).



Again on July 28, 2019, the remaining state parties to the JCPOA met with Iran in Vienna to save the nuclear accord and get Iran to return to the uranium enrichment and stockpile limits permitted under the accord (AP in CBS News, 2019). This meeting took place amid rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran over the attack on 4 oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on May 12, 2019, and 2 oil tankers – *Front Altair* from Norway and *Kokuka Courageous* from Japan in the Gulf of Oman on June 13, 2019, which the U.S. claimed Iran was behind, a claim Tehran denies (Wintour and Borger, 2019a). To have heightened the tensions was the downing of RQ-4A Global Hawk drone, an American Navy Broad Area Maritime Surveillance-Demonstrator (BAMS-D) with a surface-to-air missile by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (hereafter IRGC) on June 20, 2019. Iran claimed that the drone was in its territorial airspace, an allegation the U.S. countered that the unmanned aircraft was within international airspace (Turak, 2019). Consequently, on June 21, 2019, the U.S. air force was ready for retaliatory airstrikes on three sites in Iran which President Trump cancelled 10 minutes before execution in order to avoid the death of 150 people or more (Wintour and Borger, 2019b). That an attack on oil tankers does not happen again, the U.S. Central Command announced on July 19, 2019, that it is developing a multinational maritime effort called 'Operation Sentinel', for the promotion of maritime stability, to ensure safe passage, and to de-escalate tensions in international waters throughout the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (BAM) and the Gulf of Oman (CENTCOM, 2019).

On September 06, 2019, Iran took the third step to rolling back its commitments to the JCPOA when it announced that it would be adding cascades of more advanced IR-2m and IR-4 centrifuges – previously removed by the JCPOA, and that it would begin enriching IR-4s and IR-6s in greater numbers than the deal permits (Brewer and Tabatabai, 2019; BBC News, 2020).

On September 14, 2019, the Iran-backed Houthi rebels used 10 drones to attack Saudi Aramco's facilities at the Abqaiq and Khurais which led to Saudi Arabia suspending the production of 5.7 million barrels per day (bpd), more than half of its total crude oil output daily (Hubbard et al., 2019). "The event triggered the largest spike in crude prices in decades and renewed concerns of a budding conflict in the Middle East" (Macias, 2020). On November 05, 2019, Iran announced that it will start injecting uranium hexafluoride gas (UF₆) into additional 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges in Fordo Fuel Enrichment Plant. This act was the fourth step in Iran's series of breaches to the JCPOA before the year 2019 came to an end (Gambrell, 2019b).

No sooner had countries the world over welcomed with optimism the New Year than the tensions between the U.S. and Iran were renewed, this time around, placing both foes at the brink of war. On January 03, 2020, Major General Qassem Soleimani of the Iranian Quds Force was killed by a drone strike authorised by President Donald Trump at Baghdad Airport (Burman, 2020; MacKenzie, 2020). Knowing full well that the assassination of the high ranking commander of IRGC may ignite reprisal attacks, Trump the following day threatened Iran on Twitter that the U.S. will attack 52 sites (symbolising the 52 American diplomats and citizens that were held hostage in U.S. Embassy in Tehran for 444 days by Iranian students from November 04, 1979, to January 20, 1981) if Iran retaliated against U.S. nationals or assets (Burman, 2020). This warning fell on deaf ears as Iran fired several missiles against Ain al-Asad air base and Erbil which housed U.S. troops in Iraq (Al Jazeera, 2020).



On January 05, 2020, Iran announced that it will no longer adhere to the JCPOA restrictions on its nuclear programme, particularly the limitation on the number of centrifuges (TASS, 2020). This announcement was the fifth step in its gradual but incremental contravention of the nuclear deal which, is not completely connected to the death of Major General Qassem Soleimani as reported in some electronic and print media because, we would recall that Iran has been reducing its commitments to the nuclear deal every 60 days.

Following the aforementioned announcement, the only thing left untouched is Iran's cooperation with the IAEA, whose inspectors are still permitted to monitor its nuclear programme (BBC News, 2020; Burman, 2020; Vergano, 2020). Consequently, Iran's fifth step affects the 'breakout' time of the JCPOA (i.e. the hypothetical one-year for Iran to produce a single nuclear weapon if it deviates from the agreement, and for world powers to take necessary actions accordingly). As it stands, the said breakout time is now less than a year (Ritter, 2020).

In response to Iran abandoning its obligations as stated in the JCPOA, the E3 on January 14, 2020, triggered the Dispute Resolution Mechanism (DRM) of the JCPOA, a tool created to address concerns about non-compliance (Blanc, 2020; TASS, 2020). This move by the E3 clearly shows that the pressure tactics of Iran intended to make them deliver the promised economic benefits in the JCPOA is not working as expected. Fast forward to the 4th of January, 2021, Iran, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, announced its resumption of uranium enrichment to 20% purity at Fordow nuclear facility. Hopefully, the said enrichment will be reversed if America rejoins the JCPOA during the administration of the incoming 46th president of the U.S., Joe Biden (Cunningham and Fahim, 2021; Eqbali and Malsin, 2021).

CONCLUSION

It is no longer news that in the late 1950s, the U.S. with good intentions helped start Iran's civilian nuclear programme. But many years after, the same U.S. foreign policy aim is to prevent successive governments in Tehran from morphing its nuclear energy programme into a nuclear weapons programme. This policy goal, pursued with the instruments – diplomacy and economic sanctions from Bush Jnr's administration was attained, to a great extent, with the conclusion of the 2015 JCPOA that curtailed Iran's nuclear programme for 10 to 15 years during the Obama administration. Unfortunately, the U.S. is back to square one in that regard, a situation caused by President Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the landmark nuclear deal in 2018.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings in this paper, the following are strongly recommended:

- i) The U.S. should return to the JCPOA and perfect all imperfection in the nuclear deal *vis-à-vis* reining Iran's nuclear programme;



- ii) Iran should return to the acceptable 3-5% enrichment of U-235 for peaceful purposes and, officially declare every yet to be disclosed nuclear facilities on its soil;
- iii) The signatories to the JCPOA should live up to the economic benefits promised Iran for limiting its uranium stockpile and enrichment;
- iv) A hotline between Washington and Tehran is urgently needed to de-escalate tensions and avert a full blown war between the U.S. and Iran in the Middle East;
- v) The IAEA should ensure that it leaves no stone unturned in monitoring and reporting on Iran's nuclear activities from uranium mining and milling, through the conversion process, to uranium enrichment at the different nuclear facilities, or the production of plutonium from reprocessed spent fuel;
- vi) One or two world leaders, preferably from Europe should join forces with President Emmanuel Macron of France in opening the diplomatic window between the U.S. and Iran.

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