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Europe must find its own approach to Iran

Why we cannot rely on American diplomacy in the row over the nuclear deal

Many commentators seem to be relieved: US President Donald Trump may be refusing to certify the agreement on limiting Iran's nuclear programme, but at least he has not terminated it. That relief is understandable considering the temperamental, narcissistic character of the man in power in the White House. You could, however, take a different view of the situation. Yet again, the government in Washington has snubbed the treaty-based management of an international problem. After all, the painstakingly negotiated deal with the Iranian government was unanimously endorsed by the UN Security Council.

The US president revealed his disdain for that organisation in a speech at the UN General Assembly in September, and he expressed that same contempt again more recently. Responsibility for how to proceed with the Iran agreement now lies with US Congress, which has 60 days in which to decide whether to reimpose sanctions on Iran. However, it is questionable whether anything will have been gained by referring the deal to Congress.

The two chambers of Congress presented former President Barack Obama with a number of difficulties over the years as he worked on the Iran agreement. Several of those responsible are still senators and representatives. Profound reasoning is rarely visible in that venerable building and it is doubtful whether any good could come of it all at this specific time – especially since Trump has threatened to take further steps if he is not happy with the result.

The agreement with Iran is not perfect, but international agreements never are. If nothing else, it bought time, and the sophisticated inspection rules it includes were designed to build trust. Both elements have now been destroyed, and this will have an adverse effect on efforts made to deal with other conflicts using similar instruments.

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The UK, France and Germany were right to issue a joint statement immediately following Trump's speech, but we have to be realistic. Such a gesture will not make much of an impact in Washington. Europe and Iran must go their own way together. Limitations on trade and banking transactions must be softened by other mechanisms: visa facilitation for travellers from Iran would be appropriate, cultural and scientific collaboration must be given special status, and town twinning partnerships could be expanded. Nevertheless, we missed an opportunity following the conclusion of the agreement with Iran to advance further initiatives to promote security arrangements in the region.

Setting up a nuclear-weapon-free zone would have been a logical step forward – after all, the Arab League was open to that plan in 2005. Such a focus draws attention to another problem: some powerful figures in Tehran and Qom are undoubtedly warmongers, but so are plenty of politicians in Ankara, Baghdad, Riyadh, Damascus, Erbil and Qatar. The US, Russia, Latin America and Europe supply them, in turn, with enormous weapons arsenals. The statement issued by European heads of government would therefore have had more credibility had we simultaneously called for an arms export freeze, further trust-building initiatives, and efforts to go our own way with the Iranians. These are all things we can do by ourselves – and that is what we should focus on over the next few months.



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