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Russia's Iranian stakes

Why Moscow will not take part in placing Iran under more pressure. A Russian perspective on the nuclear dispute

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In early July 2019, Iran announced that it had breached the cap of 3.67 per cent on its enriched uranium stockpile permitted by the 2015 nuclear accord. The International Atomic Energy Agency has since confirmed this to be true. This development should really come as no surprise to anyone, however. Tehran had already announced in May this year that, in response to the continued tightening of US sanctions, it would no longer be observing the prescribed thresholds. Tehran gave the remaining signatories of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) a 60-day deadline to negotiate new terms for the nuclear deal.

The Iranian government considers European efforts to offset the impact of the US sanctions to be inadequate. Therefore, Tehran's further suspension of the JCPOA commitments appears inevitable. This puts the future of the accord and Iran's entire nuclear programme in question.

Following the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018, Iran, Russia, China, Great Britain, Germany, and France are the remaining parties to the JCPOA. In the agreement, the EU is represented by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy who also chairs the Joint Commission within the JCPOA. By and large, all signatories remain committed to the deal and have emphasised their willingness to coordinate efforts. All parties regard the unilateral US sanctions as illegitimate and believe that Washington must return to the deal. However, this is where the common ground ends.

Iran fulfilled its obligations

Iran carefully continued to fulfil its obligations for an entire year after the US withdrawal, despite the fact that Washington was imposing increasingly harsh sanctions. Now, however, it invokes Article 26 of the

JCPOA. It states that if a signatory 'reintroduces sanctions', this can be seen as 'grounds to cease performing its commitments under this JCPOA in whole or in part'.

The economic advantages Iran had hoped for, and which it had actually been promised in return for curbing its nuclear program, did not materialise. So now Tehran prepares to pursue a 'less for less' policy. It has started to expand its nuclear program again to show the US that its pressure is, in fact, counterproductive – and to regain its leverage in negotiations over future deals. However, Tehran has no intention of completely pulling out of the JCPOA, let alone developing nuclear weapons. These are all just diplomatic gestures in anticipation of being given more favourable terms in new negotiations, for instance in the event that there's a change in the US government.

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From Europe's perspective, the situation looks somewhat different, however. In a joint declaration, the E3 nations expressed their concerns about Iran's behaviour, stressing that Europe's commitment to the accord was dependent on Iran's ability to uphold its obligations. The statement urged Tehran to reconsider the measures it had already taken and to refrain from taking any further destabilising actions. Failing this, Europe indicated that the suspended sanctions against Iran might be re-imposed.

This approach is problematic insofar as Tehran already believes that Europe doesn't meet its obligations. Despite their vocal declarations, Berlin, London, and Paris were not in a position to oppose Washington's policy. They were blocked by EU law, which was originally intended to cushion the impact of US sanctions. But it has, to date, never actually been applied. All major European companies have withdrawn operations from Iran for fear of US sanctions. The INSTEX trade exchange instrument, which was operationalised nine months later, was intended for trade in foodstuffs and medicines but these are not affected by the sanctions anyway. In the eyes of the Iranian government, the lack of economic cooperation reduces the importance of EU relations.

Europe has failed to build a relationship of trust with Tehran through its participation in the JCPOA. The fact that groups regarded as terrorist by Iran (such as the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz) have been provided shelter by some European countries and that Iran's intelligence services are accused of having committed political murders in

the EU has hindered confidence-building on both sides. Europe's favourable relationship with Israel and with the Gulf states means that Iran is primarily viewed as a destabilising force in the region. The attempts by the E3, particularly France, to push for further agreements has been a source of irritation for Tehran – given the fact that the parties to the existing agreements have failed to implement them.

Russia's role

Russia's position traditionally lies somewhere between Europe and Iran. Moscow's interest in keeping the JCPOA has concrete reasons: it's very clear to the Russian government that the collapse of the agreement would significantly increase the probability of a military conflict in the immediate vicinity of the country's border. Iran has seen none of the economic benefits it was promised, a position that Russia sympathises with.

Moscow believes that it's crucial to maintain the transparency of the Iranian nuclear programme. It's worried that Europe adding pressure already placed on Tehran by the US will not persuade Iran to fully implement the JCPOA and, in fact, is more likely to result in the irrevocable collapse of the accord. Neither does Russia consider Tehran's missile program to be a threat, provided that the country remains a non-nuclear weapon state. Moscow sees the situation in the Middle East as a complex regional conflict involving a large number of actors with opposing interests, which cannot be resolved with unilateral concessions.

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When it comes to continuing the JCPOA, Russia will be an important ally for the EU. However, in the current circumstances, Moscow will not participate in any campaign that puts Iran under pressure to implement the accord to the letter. Russia sees it as wrong and destructive to demand that one side fully adhere to its commitments, while the other side fails to do so. And if Europe wants Tehran to strictly adhere to the JCPOA, it must also make more of an effort itself.

The main reason Iran agreed to the accord in the first place was that it had hoped for economic cooperation with Europe. Therefore, we would expect Europe to actually develop such relations (cooperation with China, limited though it is, continues to exist; Russia was never a priority economic partner for Tehran, and, even under the auspices of the JCPOA, the US was not interested in any kind of significant economic

cooperation with Iran).

Limited EU-Russia cooperation needed

In this context, Russia is simply not prepared to take responsibility for something that Europe cannot deliver itself. Moreover, Moscow has already decided to take a bold step, announcing that, despite the US sanctions, its state-owned energy corporation Rosatom would be continuing operations in Iran. There have also been reports of Chinese companies continuing to purchase Iranian oil. No such actions have been forthcoming from the EU.

At the same time, it's undeniable that cooperation between Russia and the E3 within the framework of the JCPOA is particularly important for relations on both sides. Even the confrontation over Ukraine, which reached a climax in 2014, did not put an end to the constructive dialogue around the Iranian nuclear program. Everything associated with the JCPOA continues to play a pivotal role in the bilateral cooperation between Moscow, on the one hand, and Paris, Berlin, and London, on the other.

Despite the fact that all the other disagreements plaguing the bilateral and multilateral relations between Russia and Europe prevail, this situation just goes to prove that the world powers can and indeed must cooperate when it comes to settling international crises.



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