

# TALKING SANCTIONS, ENDANGERING PEACE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

More than a year ago, the U.S. unilaterally abrogated the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and began to squeeze the Iranian economy using sanctions. The latest round of sanctions were announced in June. Iran announced a week later that it had exceeded a limit set by the JCPOA on its stockpile of nuclear fuel.

The U.S.-Iran conflict is often portrayed in the media as one that involves two flawed actors struggling for supremacy on a complex West Asian stage. But a closer look reveals a simpler underlying reality: the Donald Trump administration is using the U.S.'s clout in an old-fashioned attempt to assert the country's hegemony; Iran is just doing whatever it can to resist U.S. pressure.

The roots of this dispute can be traced back to 1953, when the Central Intelligence Agency orchestrated a coup to remove Iran's elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh. After instituting the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the U.S. encouraged him to establish a nuclear programme.

The U.S. built Iran's first nuclear reactor in 1967. The Shah was clear that his ambitions went beyond nuclear energy, and extended to nuclear weapons. In 1974, he explained that Iran would acquire nuclear weapons "without a doubt, and sooner than one would think." Nevertheless, the West continued to provide nuclear technology to his government.

After the Shah was toppled in 1979, the new government, under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, cancelled his plans for a large nuclear-energy sector, retaining only those facilities that had already been established. Khomeini also declared that nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) were *haram* — forbidden in Islam. Whatever one may think about Khomeini's government, his spiritual injunctions were taken very seriously. When Iraq attacked Iran with chemical weapons, with the tacit support of the Ronald Reagan administration, Tehran refrained from responding in kind despite having the requisite technology.

It is possible that during the Iran-Iraq war, some elements within the Iranian establishment started exploring the possibility of developing a nuclear deterrent. Even if this was the case — and the evidence on the matter is far from conclusive — these activities were definitely stopped by 2003. In the same year, Khomeini's successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued an unambiguous fatwa against nuclear weapons.

Soon after invading Iraq on the false pretext that it had WMDs, the U.S. attempted to build a similar narrative around Iran, which had established a modest programme to enrich uranium to fuel its existing reactors. The U.S. alleged that the fuel was intended for a bomb. These allegations were undercut by U.S. intelligence agencies themselves who reported that "in fall 2003 Iran halted... nuclear weapons... activities". In 2015, after a multi-year investigation, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) went further, declaring that "activities relevant to... a nuclear explosive... did not advance beyond feasibility and scientific studies" and, as a "coordinated effort", were only carried out "prior to the end of 2003".

In spite of these facts, successive U.S. administrations imposed sanctions on Iran, demanding that it completely halt uranium enrichment. It was only during President Barack Obama's second term that the U.S. sought a temporary truce, leading to the JCPOA.

The JCPOA recognised Iran's right to maintain a civilian nuclear programme, but placed significant restrictions on its size and scope for 10 to 15 years. Most importantly, Tehran reiterated that "under no circumstances" would it "seek... nuclear weapons." The IAEA was granted unprecedented powers to inspect Iran's nuclear activities, and has repeatedly verified Tehran's compliance.

So, when the Trump administration ceased to abide by the JCPOA last year, this could only be interpreted as a message that the U.S. was not interested in arms control, but rather in initiating a direct conflict with Tehran.

Over the past year, the U.S. has made threats, mobilised troops and warships, and provoked Tehran by flying military planes dangerously close to its border. However, Washington's primary strategy has been to use economic measures as a weapon. It has prevented foreign entities from trading with Iran, devastating the Iranian economy.

India has also been hurt by these policies. Until recently, Iran was one of India's largest oil suppliers. Even though Iranian oil came with discounts on freight, and favourable terms of payment, the Indian government obeyed Washington's dictates and stopped purchasing oil from Iran in May.

India's investments in Iran's Chabahar port are nominally exempt from U.S. sanctions, but they have been damaged anyway since suppliers are reluctant to deliver equipment. The sanctions have also prevented ONGC Videsh, which discovered the Farzad B gas field off Iran's coast, from pursuing its investments there.

Further, New Delhi has refused to explore several available strategies that could ameliorate the impact of sanctions. China has maintained some commercial ties with Iran by routing transactions through the Bank of Kunlun. U.S. sanctions on this bank have been ineffective since it is carefully insulated from the U.S. financial system. European countries have attempted to bypass sanctions through a special mechanism called INSTEX.

It is revealing that India has failed to join any of these initiatives or to develop its own solution. A few months ago, Prime Minister Modi boasted that India's foreign policy had become "fearless, bold and decisive". Is this fearlessness restricted to India's interactions with its smaller neighbours, or is his government also willing to stand up to the biggest bully in the room and protect India's interests from Washington's destructive policies?

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