

Trump's decision strengthens the hands of hardliners in Iran

As political roller coasters go, there is none as steep and unpredictable as the one shared by the United States and Iran. Consider how the relationship has changed in the past three years. A consortium of nations, including the US, had come to an agreement on Iran's nuclear status in 2015 that put the country's rogue programme on hold for eight years. The newly elected Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, came to power strongly supporting better relations with the West and had offered to continue negotiations on the future of the agreement.

But the new US president, Donald Trump, came to power expressing strong reservations about the nuclear deal and Iran in general. Last week Mr Trump, overruling his own cabinet and ignoring most of Washington's strategic community, refused to certify that Iran was in compliance with the terms of the agreement. This has now opened the door for the US Congress to impose even more stringent sanctions against Iran if it wishes. Mr Trump has called for the other countries that negotiated the deal to make it more stringent and more dependent on Iran changing its support for insurgencies and terror groups. Iran has publicly rejected the idea.

The US president's decision was flawed at a number of levels. By ripping apart an existing agreement, Mr Trump has ensured there is no incentive for Iran to consider further negotiations as he has signalled the US will not honour such texts in any case. At a time when a moderate like Mr Rouhani had come to power, the arbitrariness of the act only strengthens the hands of hardliners in Iran who believe developing a nuclear arsenal is the country's best security bet.

The timing of his announcement could not be worse. Iran's geopolitical standing could not be better. The Islamic State's collapse has meant Iranian-backed regimes are now dominant in Iraq and Syria. Tehran's bitterest opponent, Saudi Arabia, is on the back foot as its famed oil power has been defanged by shale oil and gas and the violent civil war within the Sunni world. There is little incentive for Iran to stop its more unsavoury actions when things are going so well. The US president has torn apart a source of stability in the world system without offering a clear alternative. While Iran is hardly a saint in the international system, it can only be hoped that saner minds will prevail elsewhere in Washington and put any further sanctions on hold.

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