



## Iran DECERTIFIED! – Now What?



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Five days short of the second anniversary of the JCPOA Adoption Day, President Trump did what he had been threatening to do since he came to the White House and what many around the world had been counseling him against. He decertified Iran's compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – the agreement signed between the P-5 + 1 (Germany) and Iran. Soon after taking over as President, he had ordered an interagency review of the US' Iran policy. Before the result of this review was ready, the mandatory US condition of certifying Iran's compliance came up in July 2017, as it does every 90 days. The Trump administration reluctantly granted the certificate then. But, as the requirement came up once again in October, President Trump chose to decertify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA.

US Congress now has 60 days to review whether it should re-impose on Iran the American sanctions that had been suspended a couple of years ago. It is unclear as of now whether the Congress will take this step. Though the JCPOA has its share of Democrat and Republican opponents in the Congress, but once former President Obama had granted it the necessary approval, the agreement had widely come to be accepted as a solution to the protracted Iranian nuclear imbroglio that needed to be given a chance.

The idea behind the 10-15 years time-bound freeze on Iran's enrichment and plutonium production activities was to use this period constructively to engage with the country and gradually mainstream it into shedding its threat perceptions that fuel the need for nuclear weapons. Confidence building between USA and Iran, as also amongst the major regional players, was to have been the focus of this period. President Trump, however, was never satisfied with the narrow focus of the JCPOA. He has argued that the agreement should also have satisfied itself on two other counts – to stop Iran's 'meddlesome' activities in the region including its support to terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah; and to rein in its missile programme.

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Since the JCPOA did not include these two issues, President Trump wants the agreement scrapped or renegotiated to include them. The recent act of decertification is meant to build pressure on this front. However, it is unlikely that this would work. At this moment, supported as Iran is by the other actors party to the JCPOA -- European Union, Russia and China --, and by the IAEA which has endorsed its compliance with the agreement, Tehran is not going to accept any new conditions or even renegotiations. In fact, a re-opening of negotiations could actually end up killing the deal since President Rouhani's move for manoeuvre—always small—would only grow smaller in such an eventuality. As it is, the quick economic gains that the Iranian public was expecting after the lifting of sanctions—which were unrealistic to start with—is slowly leading to impatience and disenchantment. This sentiment could then be utilized by the naysayers of the deal, particularly the hardliners in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Council, to fan greater nationalism that could bring back the days of hostility. Moreover, there are multiple power centres in Iran: the Supreme Leader, the clerics, the IRGC, and moderate political leaders. The influence exerted by each keeps varying, making decision making a difficult proposition. Jettisoning the deal, therefore, would unravel a complicated scenario at a time when the US-North Korean stand-off is threatening to spin out of control too. It would be best if the Trump administration were to find more sophisticated ways of pushing its agenda by first deepening its economic engagement with Iran and then demanding more concessions. After tasting the carrots, the fear of their loss would matter more.

What does the act of decertification mean for India? Fortunately, for now, it changes nothing. Even if the US Congress decides to re-impose sanctions, these will be unilateral American sanctions with no implications for others. The conclusion of the JCPOA heralded a new dawn of opportunities for India and Iran to pursue a bilateral relationship that has been interrupted several times before. The possibilities of cooperation run across varied sectors, such as agriculture, banking, oil, petrochemicals, natural gas, and ports, to name a few. Some of these are still being explored and others implemented in the wake of several high profile visits, including that of the Indian Prime Minister last year.

Looking at the big picture, Iranian oil and connectivity doorways, American goodwill, and a principled stand on non-proliferation are all equally important for India today. Striking a balance between these will require deft diplomacy that can keep national interest over binding alignments or alliance encumbrances. In case Iran and the USA were to slide back into a hostile relationship, it would be a challenging proposition for India to keep all its interests afloat. Therefore, it would be best for India to join its voice with all those highlighting to the US the relatively constructive framework that

the JCPOA offers. Iran too must be counseled to remain compliant despite all provocations. If the vicious cycle of mistrust and hostility has to be broken in favour of confidence, the JCPOA must be given a chance. It could turn out to be a strategic game changer, with implications beyond the 10-15 years that it envisages.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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