

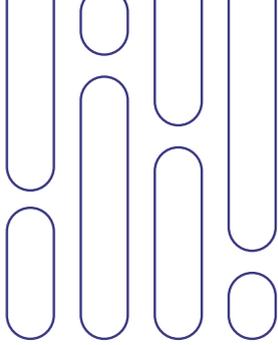
REPORT

Europe and the Impact of the New Call to Amend the 2015 Iranian Nuclear Deal

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On December 7, 2020, the European troika (France, Britain and Germany) opened an intense debate about the Iranian file as these countries view the nuclear escalation plan adopted by the Iranian Parliament with extreme concern. Prior to this, a remarkable statement with significant implications was made by German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. In an interview published by the weekly news magazine Der Spiegel on December 5, 2020, Maas pointed [to a joint German position with both the UK and France](#) on the Iranian file. The core point of his comments was that returning to the current nuclear deal with Iran is inadequate and that there should be “a kind of a ‘nuclear agreement plus’ deal, which is also in the interest of us.”

Maas also proposed additions to the original nuclear deal such as action against Iran’s ballistic missile program and its regional role. The significance of these remarks lies in the fact that they are closely related to the calls from other parties to change the regional and international approach towards the Iranian issue.

In conjunction with the altered position adopted by the three European countries participating in the nuclear deal, US President-elect [Joe Biden](#) stated in an interview with New York Times foreign affairs columnist, Thomas L. Friedman, in December 2020, that he is ready to repeal the sanctions and return to the nuclear deal but with multiple conditions, foremost among these are Iran’s compliance with its nuclear obligations and addressing its missile program and regional role.

Meanwhile, Iran – and President Hassan Rouhani’s team in particular – hopes

that there could be an unconditional return to the nuclear deal and an end to sanctions. In this regard, [Rouhani said](#) that the coming year will see the end of the US maximum pressure campaign against Iran, which indicates that there is a huge divergence in positions between Rouhani and other parties to the crisis. In the meantime, the regional powers are waiting to see whether the West will adopt a new approach when it comes to dealing with Iran, or whether it will pursue a similar approach to what was witnessed under Obama's presidency. This approach threw the region into an impasse.

I. European Moves and Motives

The Iranian file is highly important for the European countries, especially the UK, France, and Germany since it is closely linked to European security in a direct way. This explains the momentum created by the troika in relation to the Iranian file, particularly amid European concerns about Iran's nuclear policies during the current transitional phase.

The troika's position was previously announced on November 19, 2020, when the [French presidency announced](#) that the Iranian nuclear deal has reached a dangerous threshold, reiterating the necessity of expanding negotiations with Iran to include its regional role and ballistic missile program. Following this announcement, [a meeting was held in Berlin](#) on November 23, in which the troika's foreign ministers participated. The ministers, in their talks, focused on the nuclear deal and the continued Iranian violations of its provisions. The meeting also discussed the Iranian missile program and the broader Iranian regional role, which indicates that the European troika countries have started to outline a new formula to handle the Iranian issue in light of the variables surrounding the crisis, especially Iran's violations of the deal's provisions and Biden's vision on how to address this matter. To a large extent, the troika's decision to stay in the nuclear deal after the US withdrawal from it in May 2018 was principally related to Europe's tense personal relations with US President Donald Trump despite the cross-Atlantic consensus that Iran poses a danger, especially the files related to Tehran's ballistic missile program and expanding regional clout.

This consensus may be the reason why the European states did not fulfill their promises on the ground to Iran or provide any incentives for the survival or the effectiveness of the nuclear deal. Even though the Europeans did not reimpose sanctions on Iran, they implemented the US sanctions package, and their [dealings with Iran declined](#) to their lowest levels.

However, given this new development, it is clear that the European parties have reassessed their position, taking into account a host of important developments since the signing of the nuclear deal: the end of the Trump era and the election of a new president willing to repair US relations with the Europeans and coordinate relations to restore Western influence at the international level.

This is in addition to impeding the path of those who advocate re-establishing relations with Iran based on the “return-for-return” approach. This means Iran returning to observing the nuclear deal’s provisions in return for the US rejoining the deal. There is an opportunity for this because of the harsh circumstances which Iran is facing following the US sanctions imposed by President Trump. His administration imposed these sanctions in response to Iran’s non-compliance with the provisions of the nuclear deal. The sanctions targeted Iran’s oil and financial sectors, which [led to the deterioration of the country’s economy](#) and caused the political system’s popularity to plummet.

The European parties also considered the fact that there is a shortcoming in the nuclear deal itself, which makes the Iranian nuclear program, as time passes, a source of threat and presents a major flaw in the global drive to curb nuclear weapons proliferation. This is in addition to the failure of the P5+1’s bet that the deal would encourage greater openness in relations with Iran’s political system in a way that could change its behavior and the nature of its ideological hostility towards the West. Rather, Iran exploited the nuclear deal to strengthen its political system and its ideological foundations which are hostile to the West. Another unwelcome result was Iran’s regional expansion following the signing of the nuclear deal which undermined security and stability across the region. Iran’s interventions in the region also posed security threats to Europe such as the flux of illegal immigrants and the surge of terrorism, as well as the strengthening of Tehran’s ballistic missile arsenal, especially long-range missiles, which could hit deep within European territory. This in addition to Iran [threatening the security of maritime navigation](#) and the movement of trade across the key straits and maritime routes in the region.

In addition to all these developments, the European parties considered Iran’s “unconditional” return to the nuclear deal as an unwise move because it would lead to more regional chaos and fuel Tehran’s policy of regional resistance. In particular, this would be an unwise move without taking into account the interests of the region’s countries.

The Europeans also consider the likelihood of rivalry intensifying among the regional powers as well as the increase in regional disputes, proxy wars and asymmetrical warfare in case the interests of the region’s countries are ignored. This is in addition to a bigger role for global powers such as China and Russia, with both countries prepared to expand their influence across the region, all at the expense of the Western powers.

II. European Messages to the Parties Involved in the Iranian Crisis

The recent remarks by the German foreign minister conveyed implicit messages to the other parties involved in this critical situation. The first message was that

the Europeans are attempting to build a bridge with US President-elect Joe Biden in relation to Iran. The second message was that the Europeans are in line with Biden's conditional return to the nuclear deal, which is part of a more integrated approach in dealing with the Iranian file.

This approach is essentially encouraging Biden to take advantage of Trump's legacy and to start work as early as possible on outlining a formula to address the nuclear issue with Iran as well as tackling the issues surrounding Iran's ballistic missile program and regional behavior. This integrated approach will allow Biden to take advantage of the presence of Rouhani's administration while it is still in office.

The remarks also indicate that Europe stands by Biden and is prepared for [joint cooperation and coordination](#) in order to outline a comprehensive approach to address the dangers posed by Iran.

Furthermore, Europe could return to cooperating with the United States in tightening the pressure on Iran to prompt it to abide by the new understandings, which embody the concerns mentioned above.

Also, the European position sends a strong message to Iran that the European parties to the deal will not allow Tehran to continually violate its nuclear obligations with the international community, especially as the Iranian Parliament has voted in favor of an escalatory plan, subsequently approved by the Guardian Council. The European position also indicates that European silence towards Iran's nuclear deal violations during President Trump's term has ended and that the Europeans will not be soft on Iran in the next stage. In addition, they will not allow the possibility of nuclear escalation to be used as a pressure card by Iran to force them to remain silent over the dangers and threats it poses to the region and the world.

The European position also shows that reviving the nuclear deal will not be an unconditional gift to Iran without addressing European and regional concerns about its ballistic missile program and regional interventions. Besides, the European position indicates that the Europeans could join any US steps taken against Iran, including the possibility of reinstating international sanctions and the activation of the snapback clause, which they previously rejected when requested by President Trump.

The last message is a reassurance for the region's countries that there will be no immediate return to the nuclear deal in a way that endangers the region's security and threatens European security. There is strong regional opposition to discussing partial issues with Iran without taking into consideration the whole list of concerns regarding Iran's actions and behavior. Rather, the Gulf states seek to be consulted in the next phase of understandings and negotiations to ensure regional security and stability and to avoid any repetition of the events that followed the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015. This inclusion of the Gulf states provides them with an opportunity to express their fears and demands to ensure the longevity of any prospective settlement and prevent regional rejection.

III. Influencing the Iranian Position

For Iran, there is no doubt that the new European position on amendments to the nuclear deal is a reversal of the previous European position announced during the Trump era. Moreover, it is a departure from one of the well-established European principles in relation to this file. Europe had always considered the nuclear deal to be a critical pillar, which from a security perspective provides an effective formula to address the issue of nuclear proliferation at the global level. The Europeans had thought that the nuclear deal would prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. The fear was that if Iran transgressed this threshold, it would pose a threat to regional and global security and stability.

Yet Iran deems this as a return to the US-European coordination against Iran, which will fuel distrust towards the Europeans. [Basically, there has historically been a state of distrust between the two sides fueled by previous experiences since the beginning of the nuclear negotiations in 2003. Recently, Iran, especially the supreme leader and his loyalist current, has heaped accusations on Europe and considered that the European position is not very different from the US position on the issue of the sanctions imposed by Trump.](#) Rather, the Europeans are role playing.

The supreme leader and his loyalist current also said that Europe's intention to stay in the nuclear deal is because the Europeans want to keep a close watch over the nuclear program, maintain the current trajectory of understandings, control existing interactions and prevent the situation from getting out of control. Hence, the remarks of the German foreign minister are nothing but an expression of the true European position and intent in relation to the nuclear deal.

It should also be noted that the proposals put forward by the German foreign minister regarding the need to include additional terms in the nuclear deal are nothing new. These points were strongly raised during the Vienna negotiations, which resulted in the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015. [Iran has categorically been and is still refusing to add the additional terms to the nuclear deal.](#) Iran viewed the nuclear deal as an agreement addressing only concerns about its nuclear program. It also has and still considers the issues surrounding its ballistic missile program and regional behavior as non-negotiable "sovereign issues." Iran considers including these issues in any negotiations as a targeting of the Iranian political system's security and survival.

Of course, Iran has been preparing over the past period for the negotiations option and the US or European demands in this regard by [amassing important pressure cards.](#) It has reduced its nuclear commitments, hence boosting twelvefold its stockpiles of enriched uranium, much more than what is allowed under the nuclear deal, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Iran has also increased its stockpile of heavy water, resumed activity of a number of centrifuges, installed more advanced centrifuges and has also obstructed the activities of the IAEA.

To impose more pressure, Iran has started to play with the card of nuclear ambiguity. The IAEA has confirmed this, revealing there are secret sites related to Iran's nuclear program. Iran has also hinted at enriching uranium at 20 percent purity and operating more centrifuges in the Natanz facility based on an integrated escalation plan adopted by the Iranian Parliament. The plan aims to lower the chances of amendments being made to the nuclear deal. This is in addition to Iran refusing to link the nuclear deal to other issues such as its missile program or regional behavior.

IV. The Possible Consequences

With Biden soon to take office, it seems that all the concerned parties agree to a diplomatic approach to address the differences with Iran. If this is the way things will proceed, negotiations are likely in due course. Of course, before any negotiations, each party will attempt to boost its levers and strength and raise the ceiling of its demands according to the strength and scope of its influence. The new European position could be considered as an example of this.

Anyhow, the European position will have various consequences. First, it will lead to US-European coordination regarding the pressure imposed on Iran to arrive at comprehensive understandings which address the concerns shared by the Europeans and Americans as well as the regional powers. This coordination could result in either introducing alternatives or exerting broader joint pressure on Iran. This shift in the European position also provides the regional countries an opportunity to intensify their pressure to force Iran into negotiations to address the chaos and instability it has caused in addition to curbing the dangers posed by its missile program. The latter has become a means to launch attacks targeting the sovereignty of countries, striking their vital interests and stirring up disputes and wars. It also [allows them to be part of any understandings](#) within the framework of a comprehensive settlement, not a partial solution which will not survive as was the case with the nuclear deal signed in 2015.

This pressure will increase Iran's suspicions towards the Europeans, and may lead it to adopt a harsher position and attempt to boost its pressure cards. [Some of the signs of Iran adopting harsher positions and acting preemptively to ward off pressure](#) have emerged. The Iranian Parliament voted in favor of a plan to restrict inspections inside Iran's nuclear facilities. It also gave a one-month period for the full revocation of the sanctions targeting the country's banking and oil sectors. The Parliament also made it obligatory for the Iranian government to suspend the voluntary enforcement of the Additional Protocol in case the parties to the nuclear deal do not fully lift the banking and oil embargo.

The Iranian Parliament also approved a law making it obligatory for the Iranian government to raise the rate of uranium enrichment to 20 percent within two months, which coincides with Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021. This provides an opportunity for Iran to gauge Biden's intent before escalating further.

The Guardian Council approved this plan.

However, there is no doubt that Trump has left a useful and important legacy for Biden and Europe to take advantage of in relation to the Iranian file. They could build on Trump's legacy rather than dismissing it. Iran faces unprecedented pressure and sanctions as well as challenges to its political system. If Europe joins the US position, it could create an existential dilemma for the Iranian political system, forcing it to either negotiate or face a possible collapse.

In the end, it could be said that the European position adds more hindrances to the Iranian efforts to secure an unconditional return to the nuclear deal. It will be a huge frustration for Rouhani and his team who have always hoped there would be a substantial change in the US position and a possible return to the deal without conditions.

On the other side, this position will strengthen the position of the conservatives and radicals, and this will [impact the outcome of the presidential elections if the issues remain unresolved.](#)

As the conservatives took control of the Iranian Parliament in the elections held in February 2020, the Iranian presidency and government in the next presidential elections in June 2021 will likely fall under the control of Iranian hardliners. Neither the United States nor Europe wants this to happen, given the impact it could have on the course of negotiations amid growing concerns that Iran could cross the nuclear threshold.



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