

## Trump To Poke Holes In Iran Deal, Not Rip It Up

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**On the campaign trail, candidate Donald Trump frequently vowed to "rip up" the Iran nuclear deal**—a near-impossible promise to keep considering that the agreement is roughly the size of a large phonebook, making it physically the biggest multilateral treaty negotiated since World War II.

**The hardline rhetoric remains, but Trump is unlikely to keep his word.** The president still refers to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the official name of the document signed by the U.S., Iran, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia that placed strict limits on Iran's nuclear program for the next 10-15 years in exchange for sanctions relief, as "an embarrassment to the United States."

Moreover, he denies the assertion of experts, including members of his own administration, who confirm Tehran is complying with the terms of the agreement.

"Absent indications to the contrary, it is something the president should consider staying with," Defense Secretary James Mattis said on Capitol Hill this week.

**Expect Trump to claim Iran is not complying with the agreement** when the next deadline for presidential review arrives on Oct. 15. Under the 2015 law approving the JCPOA, the president must certify in a letter to Congress every 90 days that Tehran is living up to its promises. If he says no, Congress has 60 days to decide whether to reimpose sanctions.

**Decertification doesn't automatically kill the Iran deal.** Trump seems to know that. If he really wanted to "rip up" the accord, he could have simply refused to extend sanctions relief, a clear violation of the deal. The JCPOA itself requires the U.S. president to formally waive sanctions on Iran's oil and banking sectors every 120 days, which Trump has done three times so far this year, most recently in September.

**Instead, Trump will punt the issue to Congress,** essentially forcing lawmakers to reconsider their approval of the plan. Voting to reimpose sanctions on Iran would clearly violate the accord's terms, giving Iran an excuse to restart its nuclear weapons program, according to Tyler Cullis, a sanctions expert with the National Iranian American Council.

**The odds of that scenario playing out are slim.** Although restoring economic penalties requires only a simple majority vote in both chambers of Congress, many lawmakers who once opposed President Obama's signature foreign policy achievement seem reluctant to abandon it. Even Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), a fierce Iran hawk, has hinted that Congress will hold off on sanctions

until the administration can work out a new approach for dealing with Tehran's ongoing Middle East mischief.

**So why put on this charade? Most likely, Trump thinks he can pressure Iran into giving him a "better deal" by renegotiating some of the pact's terms,** says John Glaser, a Middle East expert at the Cato Institute. Critics of the deal have long complained that it does not sufficiently address Iran's burgeoning ballistic missile program, nor its support for terrorist groups like Hezbollah.

**However, none of the other signatories is on board.** By taking an approach that is long on sticks but short on carrots, Trump is not giving the Iranians much incentive to bite.

Plus, many European firms, from multinational oil and gas giant Royal Dutch Shell to French automaker Renault, have benefited from resuming business with Tehran. France, Germany and the U.K. have all said they will honor the pact, which is also enshrined in a United Nations resolution, if the U.S. tries to sabotage it.

**Most experts see little upside in what Trump is trying to do.** Glaser argues that Trump is setting himself up for a self-inflicted wound, diminishing America's global influence without getting anything in return.

"It's cutting off your nose to spite your face," Glaser added.

**More pressing is how North Korea would view the U.S. renegeing on yet another international agreement.** Pyongyang knows that the U.S. has a bad track record on this front; in 2002, the Bush administration notoriously withdrew from the Agreed Framework, a JCPOA-like nuclear accord with North Korea, citing inconclusive evidence that the North Koreans were "cheating."

Moreover, Trump has already burned through most diplomatic options for resolving the nuclear standoff there. Trying to reimpose sanctions on Iran would deal a further blow to Washington's credibility and give Pyongyang yet another excuse to stay away from the negotiating table.