

VANITY FAIR

“All Ego, Zero Strategy”: Has Trump Set The U.S. On A Path To War With Iran?

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On Tuesday afternoon, **Donald Trump** announced, with deep breaths and discomfiting wheeziness, that he would be pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal that had been painstakingly forged by the administration of his predecessor, **Barack Obama**, and the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—the U.K., Russia, France, and China—plus Germany and the European Union. The decision itself, implemented with Trump’s oversized signature and accompanied by his most presidential mug, was a foregone conclusion. “This was absolutely an inevitability,” said a current administration official. “The last time he re-certified, the president made clear that he would not do so again.” It was such a *fait accompli* that the story was soon overtaken in the cable-news vortex by the latest disclosure from **Michael Avenatti** in the enduring **Michael Cohen** saga.

But there was also some mystery surrounding what might happen after Trump exited the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, followed by his martial national security adviser **John Bolton**. In the immediate aftermath, there were few clues as to what should come next, which was also not a surprise, given that Trump’s description of the Iran treaty’s faults was minimally articulate. It was, he declared, a “horrible one-sided deal”; “It didn’t bring calm, it didn’t bring peace, and it never will.” As one former State Department and National Security Council official who worked on the Iran negotiations characterized Trump’s stance toward Iran, “All ego, zero strategy.”

The strategic consequences of Trump’s action, very much an afterthought up to now, are now coming into focus. Notably, the president doesn’t appear to grasp the position he has put our allies in. “Trump may have aimed at the Iranians, but he’s hit the Europeans,” a former senior U.S. official told me on Tuesday, hours after the president announced that the United States would pull out of the Iran nuclear deal. “It’s not only a challenge to the substance of what was agreed along with the French, Germans, and British—not to mention the Russians and the

Chinese—but in addition, it’s a challenge to the way they work: they seek carefully crafted multilateral agreements through painstaking negotiations. We’ll see if that repudiation of form, as well as content, has repercussions elsewhere.”

What comes next is murky—but the stakes are high. “Now we’ll have to see if the Europeans are able to convince the Iranians to keep the deal alive, despite the U.S.’s withdrawal,” the current administration official told me. But they cautioned, if the Europeans are unable to entice the Iranians to remain in the accord despite the U.S. exit, “We risk a new de-stabilizing crisis in the region.” There are three possibilities for how things may play out.

I. The Europeans and Iran Stay In the Deal

On the heels of Trump’s announcement, Europe was quick to telegraph its intention to uphold the Iran nuclear deal. In short, Europe won’t reinstate the sanctions on Iran waived under the agreement but will continue to enforce the constraints on Tehran intended to prevent it from achieving nuclear capability. “As long as Iran continues to implement its nuclear-related commitments, as it is doing so far, the European Union will remain committed to the continued, full, and effective implementation of the nuclear deal,” **Federica Mogherini**, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said Tuesday. French President **Emmanuel Macron**, German Chancellor **Angela Merkel**, and British Prime Minister **Theresa May**—the three of whom have spent months trying to convince Trump not to withdraw—echoed the sentiment in a joint statement.

One foreign diplomat stressed to me on Tuesday that “Europe is united on this,” but another told me it is “hard to say how things are going to evolve.” Much of what comes next will depend on what Iran does. For now, it seems Tehran is staying in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the deal is formally titled, but its compliance is conditional. On Tuesday, Iranian President **Hassan Rouhani** said he would send Foreign Minister **Mohammad Javad Zarif** to China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom to discuss the U.S. withdrawal, but he warned that Iran could restart its nuclear program within weeks in response to what he views as a violation of the deal by the U.S. “If necessary, we can begin our industrial enrichment without any limitations,” Rouhani said. “Until implementation of this decision, we will wait for some weeks and will talk with our friends and allies and other signatories of the nuclear deal, who signed it and who will remain loyal to it. Everything depends on our national interests.” Zarif wrote on Twitter, “I’ll spearhead a diplomatic effort to examine whether remaining J.C.P.O.A. participants can ensure its full benefits for Iran. Outcome will determine our response.”

In response to US persistent violations & unlawful withdrawal from the nuclear deal, as instructed by President Rouhani, I’ll spearhead a diplomatic effort to examine whether remaining JCPOA participants can ensure its full benefits for Iran. Outcome will determine our response.

Convincing the Iranians to remain in the J.C.P.O.A. will be a tough sell, especially as the economic relief that Iran has experienced since the deal was signed in 2015 falls short of the benefits they were promised. “The Europeans are invested in the deal but it remains to be seen if they, along with the Russians and the Chinese, can offer enough economic benefits to the Iranians that will enable them to rationalize keeping their commitments to the deal,” **Suzanne**

DiMaggio, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, told me. **John Glaser**, the director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, said that Iran, in the immediate term, “will gladly play the role of victim, noting that the United States violated the agreement.” But Rouhani and Zarif could also turn the tables on the Trump administration, re-stating their commitments to the remaining parties to the deal, and thus isolating the United States. With the right series of moves, Iran could make Trump appear to be the noncompliant rogue power driving another wedge between the U.S. and its traditional allies.

The administration, for its part, is hoping that Europe plays along. On Tuesday, Trump announced that the U.S. would begin “instituting the highest level of economic sanction” against Iran and that “any nation that helps Iran in its quest for nuclear weapons could also be strongly sanctioned by the United States.” The Treasury Department will begin re-imposing nuclear-related sanctions on the Iranian regime gradually over the next 90 to 180 days. And on Twitter, **Richard Grenell**, the recently confirmed ambassador to Germany, issued an ominous warning to German companies operating in Iran:

As @realDonaldTrump said, US sanctions will target critical sectors of Iran’s economy. German companies doing business in Iran should wind down operations immediately.

Whether Iran will stay in the deal is contingent on how effectively the remaining parties can insulate Iranian businesses against these sanctions. “This is untested territory, and it will be interesting to see how [the European Union] plays its position,” the former N.S.C. and State Department official told me. “They are not without leverage—since U.S. sanctions are only really effective with their cooperation, and they could push back on the U.S. given the bogus grounds on which it pulled out.”

The incentive to skirt the impending U.S. sanctions is not just limited to Iran either. The total value of goods imported and exported to Iran from the European Union in 2017 was nearly \$25 billion. But **Ian Bremmer**, the founder and president of political-consultancy Eurasia Group, stressed that this will be no easy feat. “It is really hard to do because a lot of European companies—even if the European Union tries to insulate them against American penalties—are going to say, ‘We can’t do this, we have to do business with the United States, do business with American banks, secondary sanctions are going to hit us, so, we have to stay out,’” he told me. “We have heard very clearly from Trump that they want to punish the Iranians for what’s an unacceptable deal, and that makes it really hard for the Europeans to keep doing business. The Russians and the Chinese will, but the Europeans won’t.”

One congressional staffer provided a blunt assessment. “The U.S. financial system is the world’s biggest. There is not a chance that this deal can work without the U.S. acquiescing to it. It won’t work,” they told me.

II. The U.S. Strikes a New Deal

Bolton, on Tuesday, was euphoric. “We’re out of the deal. We’re out of the deal. We’re out of the deal,” the notorious hawk and cheerleader of regime change in Tehran said at a press conference on Tuesday. But he did not dismiss the premise that the United States would reach a

deal with our European allies, Russia, and China to prevent Iran from achieving a nuclear capability and address its de-stabilizing behavior in the Middle East. “He’s prepared to look at discussions on a much broader resolution of the malign behavior that we see from Iran,” Bolton said of the president. “We’ve been in discussions already with our allies on that. We’ll be continuing it beginning, literally, early tomorrow morning.”

Bolton’s optimism, however, seems far-fetched to many. “I hold out a faint hope that after a couple of days of shock, POTUS will clarify that he only meant that we needed to improve the agreement,” a former senior State Department official told me. “In other words, treat this as shock therapy to jolt all parties into negotiating an improved deal. But I admit that is grasping at straws.”

What a reconfigured deal would look like remains a mystery to the foreign-policy experts and diplomats I spoke with. “I think it is magical thinking,” the former N.S.C. and State Department official said in reference to the Trump administration getting its wish list for a new deal with Iran, which includes arresting Iran’s ballistic-missile program and ceasing its support for what the U.S. deems as terrorist and extremist organizations, among other things. “But even if that was achievable—not so much a nuclear deal as an entire bilateral relationship in one document—what is the point of violating the J.C.P.O.A. and releasing Iran from its obligations? Those involved in the deal have said it many times, but dealing with Iran’s de-stabilizing behavior is much better if we can do so without it being armed with nuclear weapons.”

Some argue that Trump pulled out of the deal, despite not having an alternative to the J.C.P.O.A., to gain leverage over the Europeans and force them to come up with a solution, but whether this will work remains a question. “Trump may hope to use this time to frighten the Europeans into capitulating on his demands that they join the U.S. in imposing harsher terms on Iran under an expanded J.C.P.O.A.—though not one negotiated with Iran—and to address non-nuclear issues like ballistic missiles and support for proxies,” Glaser said. “By all accounts, Europe will not play along.”

Others, however, doubt that the Trump administration is even interested in striking a deal. “Trump doesn’t seem to understand or simply doesn’t care to understand how difficult it has been to build and sustain a coordinated approach to address Iran’s nuclear program,” DiMaggio told me. “Instead, he’s keen to blow up years’ worth of diplomacy without offering a viable alternative. This rift in the transatlantic alliance won’t be easy to fix.”

Over the past year, European allies have sought to come up with a solution that would appease Trump and keep Iran in the deal but their efforts have failed. “He’s been stringing everyone along about ‘fixes’ when we know he’s just always wanted out of the deal, facts aside,” a second congressional staffer told me. “Feels like we’ve seen that movie before and the question becomes, ‘Do we attempt to go down this path again, when we know he can get out of the deal, at any time, for any reason?’ It almost becomes a, ‘What’s the point?’—given how political and unpredictable this president is.”

III. Iran Pulls Out of the Deal

Within the diplomatic community, there is a fear that Trump's decision will inevitably lead to Iran pulling out of the nuclear deal and racing to obtain a workable bomb. By reneging on the 2015 deal, some experts argue that Trump will have empowered Iranian hardliners and tanked any chance of implementing a broader framework to address Iran's de-stabilizing behavior. "The hardliners in Iran that said from the beginning that the United States could not be trusted have just been proven right. Reformists who support diplomacy, like President Hassan Rouhani, have correspondingly taken a hit," Glaser said. "That dynamic makes it somewhat unlikely that Iran continues to implement the stringent terms of the J.C.P.O.A., especially since they aren't getting any of the economic benefit they were promised in return." As **Antony Blinken**, who served as deputy national security adviser and deputy secretary of state under Obama, explained, that puts the U.S. on a collision course with Iran. It gives "Iranian hardliners the excuse to speed again toward the bomb, without a united, international coalition to oppose them, or inspectors to expose them," Blinken told me.

Bremmer agreed. "It just means that it is more likely that we see military strikes. I mean, the Israelis have already launched military strikes against the Iranians in Syria," he told me. "They have told the Iranians that they find unacceptable their permanent presence there, the Iranians have not responded, and I am sure a part of the reason for that is that they don't want to give the Americans any reason to leave the deal. Now that they have done so, I assume that the gloves are off for the Iranians, and it makes mutual military escalation between the Israelis and the Iranians much more likely, as well as the Iranians using their proxy, Hezbollah."

Whether mounting tensions between Israel and Iran lead to a broader war in the region is the trillion-dollar question hanging in the air in Washington, as America still grapples with the fallout from another disastrous, arguably unnecessary war in the Middle East. For supporters of the president's decision, it feels like America is finally back in control of its destiny. "For the first time in a long time, America is driving events again," the first congressional staffer told me, dismissing the premise that it was the Iran deal or war. Under Obama, they said, "it was America responding to our adversaries . . . it always felt very passive and we weren't dictating the course of events." Now, they added, "Everything is about, what will America do?" For the rest of the world, however, and for much of the foreign-policy establishment, there is a countervailing fear that as diplomacy breaks down, the Trump administration will have less leverage, and fewer good options, beyond the use of military force. "There is nothing strategic about the United States as an ally going forward," Bremmer said. "That really hurts. That makes it much harder for allies to work with the United States in anything but a transactional way [and] really undermines American influence globally."