

Restoring the JCPOA to Prevent an Iranian Nuclear Weapon

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The resumption of negotiations aimed at restoring the JCPOA represents an important opportunity to reinstate tight constraints on Iran’s nuclear activities and reduce the risk of another dangerous and costly war in the Middle East. A review of the JCPOA’s accomplishments and the consequences resulting from the Trump administration’s withdrawal presents a clear case for reversing course on the failed “maximum pressure” policy and reimplementing the agreement.

What did the JCPOA accomplish?

- In July 2015, the P5+1 group (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the U.S.) and Iran reached a nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the JCPOA. The accord focused on a single issue — preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear bomb — which was deemed to be critical to U.S. interests and the expressed concern of regional states.
- In exchange for Tehran rolling back its nuclear program through strict limits and unprecedented verification provisions, the U.S. and other world powers agreed to suspend some economic sanctions. Sanctions related to other aspects of Iran’s activities (human rights, terrorist financing, and missiles) remained in place.
- The JCPOA radically reduced Iran’s uranium enrichment capacity, stretched “breakout time” (the time it would take Iran to make one bomb’s worth of weapons useable material) from an estimated 3 to 12 months; eliminated a plutonium path to the bomb; and placed Iran under the most comprehensive and intrusive nuclear inspections system ever negotiated.
- Direct U.S.-Iranian diplomacy established through negotiation of the JCPOA and continuing in the Joint Commission provided a reliable channel of communication between the two governments, which served at times as an effective early warning, de-escalation, and crisis management mechanism.

What happened after the U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA?

• Despite Iran’s full compliance with the JCPOA, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the agreement in May 2018, thereby releasing Iran from its obligations under the accord. One year later, in response to Trump’s maximum pressure campaign, Iran began to ramp up its nuclear activities. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) estimates that Iran has now stockpiled more than 12 times the amount of enriched uranium allowed under the 2015 deal. Moreover, Iran is enriching at 60 percent purity — closer to weapons grade and much higher than the JCPOA limit of 3.67 percent. By some estimates, breakout time has been reduced from 12 months to less than two weeks. Iranian cooperation with the IAEA has significantly decreased, including the removal of critical remote monitoring equipment. In sum, the Trump administration’s withdrawal and its subsequent maximum pressure policy has led to an Iranian nuclear program that is more advanced today than it has ever been.

- Since the Trump administration exited the agreement, attacks by Iran and Iran-backed groups on U.S. forces and on our partners in the Gulf have increased, escalating regional tensions and fueling momentum for a possible new conflict in the Middle East. At the same time, Tehran has deepened economic, political, and military ties with Beijing and Moscow.

How would restoring the JCPOA advance U.S. interests?

- **Put Iran's unbridled nuclear program back in a box:** Left unchecked, Iran's nuclear advancements could soon erase the benefits of the JCPOA. According to nonproliferation experts, this point has not yet been reached, but time is of the essence. A reimplementation of JCPOA's strict constraints on Iran's nuclear activities would pull Tehran back from threshold status.
- **Reimpose strict limits on Iranian enrichment and reinstate extensive monitoring:** A restored JCPOA would ensure that Iran continues to limit enrichment to a level that is consistent with peaceful uses, reinstate IAEA monitoring of Iranian facilities, and extend breakout time from a couple of weeks to about six months. Certain transparency provisions would last until 2030 and 2040, while other important measures, including monitoring and restrictions on activities related to weaponization would be permanent.
- **Restore a direct channel of communication:** A reconstituted JCPOA would revive direct U.S.-Iran engagement through the Joint Commission, reestablishing a basis for de-escalation and crisis prevention communications.
- **Pursue broader U.S. national security interests:** Reviving the deal could help clear a path to pursuing other national security interests, such as negotiating a "longer and stronger" follow-on agreement to the JCPOA, setting the stage for broader regional discussions to address ballistic missiles, and engaging the UN and others in seeking a long-term regional security structure involving the GCC countries and Iran.

Conclusion: Prior to the U.S.'s unilateral withdrawal, the JCPOA was working whereas Trump's maximum pressure policy backfired. For the U.S., its allies and partners, there are no better options on the horizon that would place Iran's nuclear activities under such tight constraints as a reimplemented JCPOA. Facing a growing array of domestic and international challenges and threats, the last thing the United States needs is a nuclear crisis with Iran that could easily escalate to a broader regional conflict.