



Europe Needs to Go Forward with the Iran Nuclear Deal, With or Without the United States

By Marcio Boka

Since May 2018, when the Trump administration withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the world has witnessed a rise in tension between the United States and Iran. European countries are trapped in-between and unable to act, making them the biggest losers in this situation. If they fail to take a strong and unified stance on preserving the 2015 nuclear deal that they were instrumental in setting up, they risk the disappearance of their voice and legitimacy to negotiate future deals and agreements with Iran. In order to avoid that, they must go forward with the deal despite U.S. threats. The upcoming meeting on July 15 between France's President Emmanuel Macron and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani could trigger a renewal of the nuclear deal under a European impulse.

European reactions to the recent escalation in U.S.-Iranian tensions have been mainly rhetorical. High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini said in May that the region “[does not need any further elements of destabilization. This is something that we have been saying consistently.](#)” The European signatories to the JCPOA—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—oppose the escalation, probably fearing a second Iraq War. President Macron has said that “further escalation must be avoided at all costs”. Yet, the extent of actual European opposition is minimal.

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France's president has repeatedly made clear that he disagrees with the means adopted by the Trump administration toward Tehran, urging his U.S. counterpart to be “[coherent](#)” on Iran. Moreover, France's Minister of Defense Florence Parly has been advocating [European strategic \(and political\) autonomy](#); that is, for Europe to be able to articulate its interests and policy goals, and to oppose U.S. decisions that contradict them. The Iran nuclear deal could be one of the ways for France to achieve its goal of greater autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.



Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has been less clear on the issue recently than she was one year ago. She urges the United States and Iran to find a “[political solution](#)”, but has not publicly criticized President Donald Trump in this regard. This contrasts with the harsh criticism from Germany toward the United States when the latter withdrew from the JCPOA.

The United Kingdom—struggling with internal turmoil due to Brexit—officially supports the JCPOA, but does not condemn the escalation by the United States. It has instead [called on the international community to stand together](#) “[against Iran's deeply destabilizing activity](#)”. When the possibility of bombing Iran was put on the table by the United States in June, the United Kingdom at first expressed its support, but then reversed course a few days later.

The inability of European countries to coordinate and produce a unified response and a clear position on the current standoff between the United States and Iran weakens them on the world stage. It limits them to being spectators rather than protagonists of the nuclear deal they shaped. While they are broadly on the same page when it comes to the will to continue with the deal, they have not been consistent in their rhetoric on the escalation between the two countries.

Europe's Third Way

The result is the erosion of European countries' legitimacy to conduct and negotiate future deals with Iran. They face a double ultimatum that shows their weakness and diminished power and influence. On the one hand, the Trump administration asks them to choose between doing business in the United States or in Iran, and threatens allies with U.S. extraterritorial sanctions, to which the quasi-totality of major European companies have yielded. On the other hand, Iran is threatening to completely abandon its commitments under the nuclear deal if Europe fails to get it out of the economic and financial isolation caused by U.S. sanctions.

European countries are in a delicate position, one in which they should not take a side but create their own momentum. Since they propelled and made possible the Iran nuclear deal, the best way for them to remain relevant and weigh in on international decisions is to live up to the agreement, even if this means disregarding the United States' threats. Their role is not to defend Iran no matter the cost, but to make sure that the country respects the deal it signed up to.

Alongside Russia and China, which have an interest in not seeing the conflict escalate and Iran complying with the JCPOA, European countries can achieve and lead a new deal. Or the re-affirmation of the current one that has been weak since the U.S. withdrawal. They can run a smooth transition toward an agreement that does not include the United States.

The creation of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) by France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in January is only the first step toward independence from the United States. Continuing to trade with Iran is not giving in to the whims of its regime, but merely allowing the country to remain committed to the JCPOA and reverse its recent decisions to break some of its commitments.

Realistically, the deal can only be maintained if Iran agrees to bring back its levels of enriched uranium to the set standards. This will hopefully be made possible and agreed to with the implementation of INSTEX, and

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Europeans showing their will to stick to the deal. While not fully satisfied with the mechanism (which for now mainly serves to trade in humanitarian goods), Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, said he recognized its 'strategic value' in showing European autonomy from the United States.

Europe is on the right path and should carry out its commitment to the JCPOA without unease regarding the United States. This dissociation is a necessary step, a guarantee for gaining leverage to negotiate future deals, whereas the United States is further isolating itself and reducing its ability to weigh in on further negotiations. Firmly opposing the United States will strengthen European legitimacy to act without it and confront its unilateralism by pursuing multilateral cooperation.

Europe must not be satisfied with a middle position between the United States and Iran, but rather be an actor shaping events. France could be on the frontline and the instigator of a European strategic autonomy around the JCPOA. By meeting President Rouhani on July 15, President Macron hopes to be the architect of de-escalation and of the resumption of dialogue between all parties to the nuclear deal, including the United States. France's leadership is embodied by the visit to Iran last month by diplomatic counselor Emmanuel Bone to prepare the presidential meeting.

France's efforts are a welcome example of a proactive and non-rhetorical European approach to the escalation between Iran and the United States. This will hopefully turn into a collective impulse to bring back Europe as a major actor on the world stage. What is expected from the Macron-Rouhani meeting is the restoration of dialogue between the United States and Iran, something only France—which has distanced itself enough from both countries—can do. If these talks succeed, Europe, through France, would come out as the bridge between them and the cement of the nuclear agreement.

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>