

Blowing Up the Iran Deal Brings Eurasia Closer to Integration

By [Federico Pieraccini](#)

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The annulment of the Iran nuclear deal framework could not be fended off by the visits or entreaties of Merkel, Macron or May. Donald Trump has refused to renew the agreement formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), removing the United States from the deal. In reality, it changes little for Washington, as the US never really removed any sanctions against Iran in 2015, and mutual trust has never risen above minimal levels. The American move, which was never surprising, arises from four fundamental factors, namely: the link (especially vis-à-vis electoral financing) between the Trump administration and the Israeli government of Netanyahu; the agreement between Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) and Donald Trump to acquire hundreds of billions of dollars worth of arms as well as investments in the United States; directly targeting European allies like Germany, France and England; and, finally, the wish to please the anti-Iranian hawks Trump surrounded himself with in his administration.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman are united against Iran and are now publicly cementing their alliance that has hitherto been shrouded in secrecy. The political rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel has been constant over the last 12 months, converging over anti-Iranian interests. Trump's anti-Iran tilt enjoys support from the Netanyahu and bin Salman clans, representing a 180-degree change in US policy direction away from the one forged through the nuclear agreements reached by the previous administration.

Saudi money and Israel's political support (and neoconservative pressure within the United States) are factors important to the Trump administration, particularly as it is besieged by domestic politics and has to deal with the Mueller investigation that buzzes annoyingly around the president of the United States.

Trump's need to surround himself with the likes of Pompeo, Haspel and Bolton betrays an acquiescing desire to appease the deep state rather than fight it. Whatever fight might have been present in Donald Trump upon assuming his office has given way to a fruitful collaboration with the deep state. Donald Trump seems to have concluded that it is better to negotiate and find agreements with the deep state than to try, as he promised during his election campaign, to drain the swamp.

The decision on the JCPOA follows in the wake of other incendiary policies that can be labeled anti-Obama or pro-Israeli and pro-Saudi Arabia, and even anti-European. Washington has been struggling over several years with its medium-term strategic thinking, with decisions often being made suddenly on the basis of emotions or against the backdrop of a constant internal struggle between more or less conflicting elites.

The most recent example concerns the JCPOA, which seems to confirm a fairly evident trend over the last two years. Washington is starting to think first and foremost about America, focusing more on domestic matters rather than worrying about maintaining the liberal world order and sustaining the global status quo. Trump seems not to operate according to any particular logic or strategy — here renewing sanctions on Russia, there imposing trade tariffs on China, now breaking the agreement on the JCPOA, then bombing Syria, or even seeking an unprecedented rapprochement with North Korea. It is useless to search for any logical train of thought in all this, even less a grand strategy explaining Washington's ultimate objectives. Policymakers in the US capital act on the basis of very short-term objective, namely: seeking to please Netanyahu and the moneybags that is MBS; punishing Russia; waving the specter of a trade war; asking allies to pay more for defense (NATO); or preventing European companies from working with important partners in Iran and even Russia (Nord Stream 2).

All this leads to a rifts even amongst European allies themselves, with France and England ready to bomb Syria and threaten Iran, while Germany and Italy oppose such moves on the basis of international law and the need for diplomacy.

With the undoing of the JCPOA and renewed sanctions on Russia, it seems that European countries finally intend to assert their own sovereignty by legislating against these harmful American actions. The European Parliament intends to adopt a new law that blocks the payment of fines to US authorities by any European company sanctioned for its relations with Tehran. Washington wants to force its European allies to choose between working with Tehran or Washington. It is mafia-like blackmail which even Brussels seems to have had a gutful of and intends to push back against with concrete actions. A similar situation in 1996 involving Brussels led Bill Clinton to suspend such destructive actions among allies in favor of diplomacy.

Trump seems to worry little about the medium- and long-term effects of his actions, seeming not to have any interest in harmonizing relations with allies, especially Merkel's Germany, against which Washington has a negative trade balance only exceeded by Beijing. The only point of continuity between Obama and Trump concerns the objection to sabotaging Nord Stream 2 (the pipeline connecting Russia and Germany).

If the strategic thinking on Trump's part is non-existent and concerns only very short-term objectives linked to the image that he likes to project of himself (of a tough guy who keeps his electoral promises, such as that regarding the Iranian agreement), the practical effect is that of a strategy that makes little sense from an American point of view. Policy-makers in American think-tanks have seeded many of Trump's resulting actions, and the blame for the last fifteen years of failed policies can be laid at their feet. They are the true, if unintended, architects of the emerging multipolar world, and have inadvertently served to accelerate the ending of the American unipolar moment.

Once again, these policy-makers delude themselves into thinking that Trump's moves — placing sanctions on Russia, a reanimated and bellicose presence and attitude in the Middle East, and the breaking up of the JCPOA — are a great opportunity to achieve some strategic objectives that have been lost over the last few years.

The calculation of these strategists is wrong and the consequences are quite the opposite to those intended, yet these self-proclaimed experts, blinded by money from dozens of lobbies

(the Israel-based lobbyists, for example), become the victims of their own propaganda, insisting on many strategies that directly harm US interests globally and in the Middle Eastern region in particular.

The policy-makers belonging to such think-tanks as the Brookings Institute or the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) are more than convinced that strong pressure placed on Iran will arrest the expansion of the Shia Crescent over the Middle East and Iran's general influence over the region (from Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus). The sanctions on Russia and Iran serve, in their mind, to block European energy independence that would otherwise be achieved through cooperating with both countries. The rediscovered bellicosity in the region tends to counter the Russian presence, even if only psychologically, and reaffirms Washington's willingness to remain committed to the region and defend its interests there (the Saudi dictatorship, above all, thanks to its pricing of oil in US dollars).

This last point is of enormous importance in terms of global strategy, and Saudi Arabia is a key partner in this regard, the American presence in the region, together with anti-Iranian policies, also serving to reassure the valuable Saudi ally, increasingly courted by Beijing through its petro-yuan convertible into gold.

Washington finds itself increasingly isolated in its economic and military policies. Merkel's visit to Russia reaffirms the desire to create an alternative axis to the one between Brussels and Washington. The victory in Italy of two parties strongly opposed to new wars and the annulment of the JCPOA, and especially the sanctions against Russia, serves to form a new alliance, accentuating internal divisions within Europe. Macron, Merkel and May are all grappling with a strong crisis of popularity at home, which does not aid them in their decision-making.

Exactly the same problems affect MbS, Trump, and Netanyahu in their respective countries. These leaders find themselves adopting aggressive policies in order to alleviate internal problems. They also struggle to find a common strategy, often displaying schizophrenic behavior that belies the fact that they are meant to be on the same side of the barricades in terms of the desired world order.

In direct contrast, China, Russia, Iran, and now India, are trying to respond to Western madness in a rational, moderate, and mutually beneficial way. And as a result, Europeans may perhaps begin to understand that the future lies not in piggybacking on Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States. Trump seems to have offered the perfect occasion for European leaders to assert their sovereignty and start to move away from their traditional servility shown towards Washington.

While it is difficult to imagine a schism taking place overnight, the chances that Europe's capitals will clash with Washington are no longer so remote, much to the pleasure of Moscow and Beijing, who aim to incorporate Europe into their mega-Eurasian project as the fourth major component after Asia, the Eurasian Union and the Middle East/Persian Gulf.

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Federico Pieraccini is an independent freelance writer specialized in international affairs, conflicts, politics and strategies. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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