

To Save the Iran Deal, the EU Should Adjust Its Strategy

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*With the May 12 deadline set by U.S. **President Donald Trump** to “fix” the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA) approaching, European Union foreign ministers [failed](#) to agree on new sanctions against Iran at their [meeting](#) in Luxembourg on Monday April 16. The plan, hatched by the so-called EU3—France, Germany, United Kingdom—was to slap new sanctions on Iran for “destabilizing regional policies” such as its support for **Bashar Assad** in Syria.*

The proposed sanctions were meant to send a message to Trump that Europeans, who are very keen to safeguard the JCPOA, take his concerns on Iran seriously. However, other EU member states, like Italy and Austria, sensibly judged that punishing Iran on non-JCPOA matters would do nothing to temper Trump’s hostility toward the agreement. The timing of the sanctions would have also lent credence to Tehran’s suspicions that the EU was desperate to “appease” Trump, even at the cost of punishing Iran in spite of the fact that it has lived up to its commitments under the JCPOA. Thus the EU risked finding itself in the worst of all worlds: failing to satisfy the U.S. and undermining hard-built trust in its relations with Iran.

At the [press conference](#) following the foreign ministers’ meeting, **Federica Mogherini**, the EU foreign policy chief, repeated the EU’s position that concerns about Iran’s regional activities and its missile program should be addressed outside the scope of the JCPOA. She reiterated that the EU already has sanctions in place covering these behaviors, and that more could be adopted any time if EU members agree. But she made it clear that this had nothing to do with Trump’s May 12 deadline.

Despite this obvious truth, the EU3 is expected to ratchet up pressure on the rest of their European partners as May 12 draws closer. However, instead of doubling-down on a failed approach that will not only fall far short of the minimum Washington demands, but also risk undermining the unified EU position, the EU3—and the EU as a whole—should adopt an alternative, and much more robust, strategy to safeguard the JCPOA.

Elements of such a strategy were proposed at the European Parliament [hearing](#) on April 12 by [Ellie Geranmayeh](#) from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) and [Cornelius Adebahr](#) from the Research Institute of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), two leading European think-tanks.

Geranmayeh noted that the recent appointments of **Mike Pompeo** and **John Bolton**, two hard-line opponents of the JCPOA, to senior positions in the Trump administration require an adjustment on the European side. The EU3 negotiated with the Rex Tillerson-led State

Department on the assumption that Washington really wanted to just “fix” the deal, and that if the right “fixes” were found the U.S. would stay committed to the deal. This was always a leap of faith, since the Trump administration has never signaled an intention to honor the deal by allowing Iran to enjoy its full economic benefits. The appointments of Bolton and Pompeo only highlight an uncomfortable truth: early signals from the EU about its readiness to make concessions encouraged the Trump administration to raise the bar ever higher, to the point where the only acceptable solution, from Washington’s perspective, would be for the EU to join the U.S. in violating the deal. The EU should therefore sequence its steps much more carefully, and only on the basis of clear reciprocal commitments from U.S.

It is also time for serious contingency planning in case the U.S. decides to withdraw from the JCPOA. Reviving the EU [Blocking Regulation](#), which prohibits EU companies from complying with U.S. secondary sanctions, is one option. Another would be to set up non-dollar denominated mechanisms for EU companies to do business in Iran, possibly using the European Investment Bank as one such vehicle. Communicating the EU’s seriousness on contingency measures would gain more leverage in negotiations with the U.S. than the EU3’s attempts to appease Trump have gained.

Geranmayeh also suggested the need for the EU to build a global coalition to protect the JCPOA. Such a coalition would include not only the deal’s other two signatories, Russia and China, but also big Asian economies, like Japan, South Korea, and India. All of these actors are worried about the risks the derailment of the JCPOA would pose to the global non-proliferation regime, and also about the long-term impact of U.S. secondary sanctions.

At the same time, Geranmayeh warned that the EU should also think carefully about what kind of package could be offered to Iran to sustain its commitment to the JCPOA after May 12. Although the Iranians, so far, have shown a degree of strategic patience, there are signs of increasing rhetorical defiance from Tehran. **Ali Akbar Salehi**, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, [has said](#) that, should the U.S. withdraw from the JCPOA, Iran could easily begin enriching uranium to 20%—the JCPOA caps Iran’s uranium enrichment at 3.67%. In any case, since the Iranians insist that their nuclear program was always civilian in nature, they see the JCPOA as a voluntary agreement, from which they can exit if they assess that it no longer serves their national interest.

As far as dealing with Iran’s activities in the Middle East, Mogherini herself [suggested](#) that sanctions are not the only tool at the EU’s disposal. Dialogue is equally important. In this context, it is worth heeding the advice of Cornelius Adebahr that the EU look seriously into [proposals](#) made by Iran’s foreign minister, **Javad Zarif**, at the Munich security conference on the regional security in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. Fostering regional understanding is something that the EU is good at, reflecting its own historical experience. As Adebahr pointed out, it is, in fact, Saudi Arabia that is reluctant to enter into some kind of regional security dialogue, not Iran. Instead of focusing narrowly on Iran’s “destabilizing activities,” the EU3 should nudge the Saudis and their allies toward some sort of accommodation with Iran. If the Saudis could be brought into negotiations with Iran it would do far more for Middle Eastern stability than piling more sanctions on Tehran ever could.

EU leaders should follow the advice of experts like Geranmayeh and Adebahr and abandon the futile attempts to satisfy the Trump administration. They should stand their ground to secure the survival of an agreement to which they contributed so much. Failing to do so will not only derail a working non-proliferation agreement, but also create a dangerous

precedent whereby the EU collapses under Trump's pressure.

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