

Trump's Iran Statement: A View From Europe

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Featured image: The European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini (Source: LobeLog)

*It is with some reluctance that I write about **President Donald Trump's** latest statement on Iran, because the statement is so full of half-truths, untruths, and logical fallacies that it is bad for one's blood pressure to have to dwell on it for any length of time.*

I will try to limit damage to my constitution by focussing on just a few of the statement's most disturbing features.

The statement reveals a shocking attitude towards the European allies of the United States. For months these allies have been telling the Trump administration that the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is a satisfactory and useful nuclear non-proliferation instrument, and that they attach the highest importance to preserving it.

President Trump's statement does not just ignore what his European allies have been saying. It threatens these allies with the very outcome they want to avoid—the demise of the JCPOA—if they decline or fail to bend to the President's will:

Today, I am waiving the application of certain nuclear sanctions, but only in order to secure our European allies' agreement to fix the terrible flaws of the Iran nuclear deal. This is a last chance. In the absence of such an agreement, the United States will not again waive sanctions in order to stay in the Iran nuclear deal. And if at any time I judge that such an agreement is not within reach, I will withdraw from the deal immediately.

This is an extraordinary way to treat long-standing allies. It amounts to putting a metaphorical gun to their heads. If the criminal underworld is paying attention, it will surely elect President Trump gangster-of-the-month. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was right: the time has come for Europe to wean itself from the United States.

Equally shocking, but less surprising because, alas, we have grown accustomed to this tendency, is a disregard for the sovereign rights of states and for the legally binding international treaties and UN resolutions that limit those rights.

Iran has a sovereign right to possess the means to enrich uranium. Currently that right is limited in two ways. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) binds Iran to using enrichment technology solely for peaceful purposes and in conformity with a nuclear safeguards agreement. UN Security Council resolution 2231 endorses tight limits on Iran's

enrichment capacity, and production of enriched uranium, until the start of 2031.

Iran also has a sovereign right to develop and possess missiles for the purpose of delivering conventional (non-nuclear) warheads. There are no international treaty restrictions on this right. UNSC resolution 2231 “calls upon” Iran not to develop missiles that would be capable of delivering nuclear pay-loads but does not legally bind Iran in this respect. (So, contrary to President Trump’s claim, Iran’s missile tests and related activities are not “illicit” or violations of any UN resolution.)

It follows that President Trump has no right to dictate limits or restrictions over and beyond those just described. Instead, if he and his advisers believe that the sunset clauses of the JCPOA (certain restrictions on Iran’s enrichment right lapse between 2026 and 2031) and Iranian missiles threaten international peace and security, they must convene the UN Security Council and submit for the Council’s consideration a resolution that would give legally binding effect to the restrictions and prohibitions they consider necessary.

That is how the Trump administration ought to proceed. The probability of it doing so is close to zero, however. Even this administration is capable of perceiving that the Council would decline to adopt any such resolution.

Why? In 2018 there is no evidence that an expansion of Iran’s enrichment capacity after 2030 (if it takes place) will threaten international peace and security—or that Iranian possession of short- and medium-range missiles poses any more of a threat than their possession by Saudi Arabia, Israel, Pakistan, India, South Korea, and Brazil, to name but a few. Only after the International Atomic Energy Agency has concluded a root-and-branch investigation into the totality of Iran’s nuclear program, and produced findings, can the Council reasonably form a view on whether some kind of successor to the JCPOA (and/or missile restrictions) is needed to head off a threat to peace and security.

A third feature of the statement is the damage that it will do to the international standing of the United States.

Many states will be worried about the statement’s implications for the law-based international order to which they are attached. The last thing they want is a world in which the president of the United States feels entitled to form a posse and go after whomever he chooses.

They will also be worried that this statement suggests that President Trump is a man possessed by demons. One of those demons is his hatred of President Barack Obama. Trump’s desire to destroy one of Obama’s achievements is obvious from the statement.

Less obvious is President Trump’s faith in what he hears from those he has chosen to befriend. Anyone looking for a summary of the anti-Iranian propaganda churned out in recent years by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and associated Washington think-tanks need look no further than this statement. To the rest of the world this suggests that it is idle to look to the current White House for balanced, objective, rational analyses of international situations. That is disquieting.

The hope now must be that Europe, Russia, and China, with the backing of most of the world, can persuade Iran to scorn the US provocation that now seems inevitable: US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-introduction of US nuclear-related sanctions.

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