

THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF THE JCPOA UNDER THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

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A key foreign policy accomplishment the Obama administration achieved in 2015 is hanging on by a thread three years later during the Trump administration. Twenty months of negotiations between the P5+1 (the United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, China, and Germany), the European Union (EU), and Iran culminated in a significant achievement in international diplomacy; nuclear-related economic sanctions that [date back to 2005](#) were lifted on Iran in return for limitations on their controversial nuclear enrichment programs. The result of these negotiations is commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, but is formally known as the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#).

Ideally, these initial diplomatic negotiations were meant to prevent Iran from creating nuclear weapons because its proliferation activities were on the verge of further [destabilizing](#) the Middle East. While there are many [critics of JCPOA](#), particularly within U.S. political circles, it ultimately created potential avenues for further cooperation between the United States and Iran on regional security and future arms control agreements. Most importantly, it established an open dialogue between two states who consider each other adversaries since the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

As part of JCPOA, the U.S. Congress implemented the [Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act \(INARA\)](#); domestic legislation that requires the U.S. President to re-certify Iran as complying with the terms of the JCPOA agreement every ninety days. This re-certification is significant because it grants the waiver of U.S. nuclear-related economic sanctions by verifying that Iran is compliant in discontinuing its nuclear program. President Donald J. Trump, on behalf of the United States, did unilaterally [decertify the agreement in October 2017](#). This did not pull the U.S. out of the agreement internationally but instead sent the decision over to the U.S. Congress on whether to re-implement sanctions or not. Congress [chose not to re-implement sanctions](#), but

this decertification event shows that President Trump is willing to tangibly present how he regards the agreement as against the U.S. national interest. If President Trump chooses to decertify the agreement again, despite proof the Iran is complying with the terms of the agreement, and Congress re-implements sanctions, it would not only sully U.S. credibility internationally but it also increases the risk that Iran can obtain a nuclear weapon.

Since the campaign trail, President Trump has publicly stated his [criticisms of the agreement](#) and [threatens to leave the JCPOA](#) altogether despite [objections from senior officials](#) within his cabinet and the leaders of other [signatory countries](#). Recently, new staff changes within the administration created even more instability in re-certifying the JCPOA. John Bolton, President Trump's new National Security Advisor, is a known Iran hawk and advocates using [military strikes](#) on the country to counter their nuclear program rather than utilizing diplomatic means.

The last re-certification from President Trump [came in January 2018](#), where he begrudgingly authorized to continue the suspension of U.S. nuclear-related sanctions and kept the JCPOA as-is for another ninety days. The next decision on re-certification is quickly approaching in May 2018. The [International Atomic Energy Agency \(IAEA\)](#) is the neutral third-party organization charged with oversight of Iran's compliance. Each inspection it undertook at the Iranian nuclear facilities verified that Iran is [complying](#) with the established agreement. However, this does not placate the president and his concerns regarding the deal.

President Trump [calls](#) the agreement "one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into" because he believes the JCPOA does not do enough to curb the threats that Iran poses. He cites concerns about the [ballistic missile program](#) that Iran continues to develop and test and recent regional destabilizing behaviors that involve [supporting proxies](#) and surrogates in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The president calls for a renegotiation that includes these cited concerns and a permanent halt on the nuclear program itself, despite the [urging](#) of the other signatory countries to respect the original framework and integrity of the JCPOA. Although he previously re-certified the deal in January 2018, this signing came with a [warning](#): "This is the 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." The administration pledged to work with European allies and Congress on ["fixing significant flaws in the deal,"](#) but said that these renegotiation attempts will not include Iran, which is something that European allies [oppose](#).

Proponents argue the president overlooks the benefits the deal brings. The JCPOA forced Iran to [destroy](#) most of its established nuclear equipment and gives the IAEA inspectors [access](#) into nuclear facilities to ensure that Iran is ceasing to develop its nuclear technology. Overall, the JCPOA provides a sense of security by facilitating open communication channels with Iran and

clear guidelines that on what is and is not allowed. This mutually achieved agreement gives all parties incentive to cooperate.

The United States unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA would have major international implications. Iran would see this as an opportunity to refuse to cooperate with the agreement and subsequently [restart](#) its nuclear program. Conversely, Iran may continue cooperation and use U.S. withdrawal as leverage to further [isolate](#) the United States from its allies. Either way, it would provide further examples for hardliners within the Iranian government that working diplomatically with the United States in the future is an option that will [backfire](#) on them.

Robert Litwak, former member of President William (Bill) Clinton's National Security Council, and current Director of International Security Studies at the Wilson Center [explains](#): "If the United States unilaterally withdraws from the nuclear deal it would isolate Washington. It would change the dynamic from the United States and the world versus Iran to Iran and the world versus the United States." The unpredictability of the Trump administration puts the JCPOA in a precarious position and the tenuous balance achieved by the Obama administration at risk. The Iran deal re-certification decision that occurs every ninety days will certainly continue to hold the attention of the international community hostage as the deadline approaches and Trump decides the fate of such a hard-fought agreement.