

A Comparative Analysis of Approaches toward JCPOA Between the Obama and Trump Administration

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1. Introduction

The United States has pursued nuclear nonproliferation policies to prevent the proliferation of sensitive technology such as enrichment and reprocessing, which can be diverted into a nuclear weapons program. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act of 1978 provides for more effective control over the transfer and use of nuclear materials and equipment and nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

In 2002, covert nuclear activities in the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter Iran) were revealed and it became one of the most important nonproliferation issues. President Barack Obama endeavored to reach a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and a group of world powers: China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, referred to as the P5+1. However, President Donald Trump withdrew the deal in May 2018 and it becomes unclear whether Iran would comply with the JCPOA after the reinstatement of the U.S. sanctions.

This paper aims to analyze two different approaches of the Obama and Trump administration toward the JCPOA in terms of perspective on international relations, technical judgement and international environment changes, while they share common ground on nonproliferation policy.

2. Differences in Approaches toward JCPOA Between the Obama and Trump Administration

In regard to the JCPOA, the Obama and Trump administration have taken the opposite approaches to each other – one signed it and the other withdrew it – under the same ultimate goal to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons by limiting or banning its uranium enrichment capability.

2.1 Obama Administration

Perspective on International Relations

The Obama administration intended to place Iran under the international nonproliferation regime with enhanced monitoring and inspection, while accepting Iran's enrichment program for peaceful purposes with several restrictions. Regarding Iran's enrichment capacity, all parties agreed to decrease the number of operating centrifuges by one third and reduce the

stockpile of enriched uranium in terms of amount and level of concentration.

The Obama administration determined that the U.S. nonproliferation goal can be met by closing Iran's every possible path to divert nuclear materials and equipment, including IAEA inspection to any sites anytime, for ten to fifteen years under international verification.

The approach of the Obama administration toward the Iran nuclear deal places more weight on a liberalism perspective on international relations. Liberalists believe in progressivism and the possibility of achieving peace through setting common principles and rules in the international anarchy. President Obama directly expressed such thoughts in his remarks on the JCPOA where he mentioned President Kennedy's notion of "attainable peace" through "gradual evolution in human institutions", and his "clear preference for a peaceful, diplomatic resolution" [1]. He believed that Iran's nuclear weapon development could be contained through the establishment of an effective, verifiable and collective nonproliferation system on Iran.

Technical Judgement

The Obama administration ensured that any attempt to divert nuclear material would be quickly detected under the monitoring provisions of the JCPOA and the extended twelve-month breakout timeline would last over ten years. The administration also assured that Iran's commitment to modifying core design of the Arak reactor and to shipping out its existing spent fuels could eliminate the pathway to develop nuclear weapons using plutonium [2].

International Environment Changes

After the eight-year term of the hardline Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the moderate Hassan Rouhani became the next president in August 2013. This contributed to creating a favorable environment for the negotiation between Iran and the P5+1 [3].

Regarding North Korea's nuclear issue, the US focused more on negotiating with Iran rather than North Korea. Because the Obama administration pursued the "strategic patience" policy, but North Korea had no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons prior to any incentives [4].

2.2 Trump Administration

Perspective on International Relations

The Trump administration decided to withdraw the JCPOA pointing out that the deal allows Iran to continue enriching uranium and that many limitations on Iran's nuclear program lapse after ten to fifteen years with its sunset provisions. Thereafter, the administration reinstated the U.S. nuclear sanctions on the Iranian regime to permanently block all the potential pathways to acquire nuclear weapons, which could spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, with a realism perspective on international relations [5,6].

Realists argue that conflicts arise inevitably in the international anarchy and every country focuses on national security and state survival as its top priority. This perspective is skeptical about progress and the possibility of cooperation among countries. President Trump directly expressed such thoughts in his remarks on the withdrawal from JCPOA. He affirmed that the deal was based on the fiction that Iran could desire a peaceful nuclear energy program. He basically did not trust "Iran's peaceful purpose" and believed that it would be impossible to defeat Iran's ambition without putting Iran's nuclear program under permanent control. From his point of view, Iran, a "murderous" "sponsor of terror", is a country that can develop nuclear weapons in its pursuit of national security, and it would not be possible to stop Iran through the framework of international cooperation [5].

Technical Judgement

The Trump administration called for correcting the flaws of JCPOA by requiring Iran to keep its one-year breakout time at least and to accept short-notice and wider inspections to any clandestine site in Iran. The current IAEA managed access takes up to 24 days to grant access to the site under the verification provision of the JCPOA [7]. Some experts point out that the breakout timeline is expected to decrease as Iran would expand its centrifuge program beyond the phased expiration dates of various limitations [8]. The experts also insisted that the 24-day inspection delay might enable Iran to escape detection on small-scale or non-nuclear activities [9].

International Environment Changes

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has an uneasy relationship with Iran, seeks to develop nuclear energy program and is in negotiation with the US to sign bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement [10]. However, Saudi shows opposition to the U.S. demand that the Kingdom agree to forswear enrichment and

reprocessing technology (the so-called "gold standard") while pointing out Iran's enrichment program [11].

In addition, the nuclear threat by North Korea to the continental US become clear through the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) launch in July 2017 and the sixth nuclear test in September. This changing environment arouses people's attention in the US to international nonproliferation issues including North Korean one. Therefore, the Trump administration made the decision to withdraw the deal with strong nonproliferation policy based on the realism perspective.

3. Conclusions

This paper examined two different ways of dealing with international nonproliferation issues during the Obama and Trump presidency. Although two administrations pursue similar nonproliferation policy to prevent proliferation of sensitive technology, their decisions are different depending on three factors: perspective on international relations, technical judgement and international environment changes.

The Obama administration places higher priority on preventing Iran's further proliferation by the JCPOA frame, with the liberalism perspective to dealing with international issues by diplomatic negotiation. The Trump administration takes the realism perspective to maintain international peace and security by eliminating the threats related to Iran's enrichment program; otherwise it could raise uncertainties in nonproliferation regime. The result shows how these factors surrounding the administrations affect their decisions directly or indirectly.

This method of comparative analysis can be applied for further studies to analyze different approaches of administrations on other nuclear nonproliferation issues including North Korea's nuclear threat.

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