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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dark Side of the Moon: Sanctions, Security, and Nuclear Decision-Making in Iran

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Abstract

Although the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons does not explicitly mention it, the idea that sanctions can be used as a tool to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons is not new. The earliest mention of it appears in the 1946 Baruch Plan, which suggested imposing a penalty on potential violators. Since the 1970s, sanctions have been used to discourage states from building nuclear weapons. Such sanctions were imposed at both bilateral and multilateral levels. The proposed paper aims to analyse the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool for disarmament and non-proliferation. While examining this broader point, this paper argues that an important yet often overlooked point in the sanctions literature is the end point of the sanctions. How would those who comply and end their programs to get out of sanctions be treated by the US and other actors imposing sanctions on them? How would they be treated post-sanctions? Would they be treated differently once they accept the conditions, alter their policy, and refrain from proliferating to avoid sanctions? What if the sanctioned state realizes that whatever it does, the sanctions will not be lifted? How would this realization affect their behaviour and resolve? In such cases, can sanctions be taken as an effective non-proliferation tool? President Donald Trump's decision to pull out of the JCPOA and impose new and stricter sanctions against Iran in 2018, which the Biden administration maintains is a case in point. How did the Iranians view the JCPOA? And the American withdrawal? Did it reinforce the belief that only a nuclear weapon would guarantee Iran's security? Using data collected through interviews and surveys, supplemented by data from the Toronto-based Iran Poll, this paper aims to answer these questions.

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Introduction

Sanctions as a policy instrument have been in vogue throughout history. Thucydides mentions the Athenian trade boycott of Megara, an ally of Sparta, in 432 BCE, which was one of, if not the, reasons for the Peloponnesian War. In a more recent example, the American steel and fuel embargo of Japan resulted in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The use of sanctions as a tool to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons is not new either. The earliest mention of it could be found in the 1946 Baruch Plan, which hinted at imposing a penalty on potential violators. Since the 1970s, sanctions have been used to discourage states from building nuclear weapons. Such sanctions were imposed at both bilateral and multilateral levels. Sanctions are commonly understood as coercive measures, usually imposed by several nations in concert, to compel a state alleged to have violated international law to desist or submit to adjudication. Since the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) was opened for signature in 1968, sanctions have been the primary non-military instrument used to persuade, pressure, and punish states that seek to join the nuclear club. Applied bilaterally by powerful states or multilaterally through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), these measures are underpinned by a compellingly simple logic of rational coercion. By imposing severe economic and political costs, a sanctioning coalition can fundamentally alter a target state's cost-benefit analysis, making the pursuit of nuclear weapons an intolerably damaging endeavour.[1]

Despite their widespread use in recent times, scholars and analysts on the effectiveness of sanctions remain divided on whether sanctions are

[1] Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007).

effective as a non-proliferation tool. In arguably one of the most contentious debates in international relations, several questions and points are hotly contested. Prime amongst these questions is the effectiveness of sanctions as a means of stopping proliferation and encouraging disarmament. How can sanctions be incorporated into comprehensive plans to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons? The data regarding sanctions provided a fragmented picture. Based on the data, a clear answer about the effectiveness of sanctions is not possible, as the historical record is a mix of contested successes, glaring failures, and ambiguous outcomes. The debate on sanctions is divided into three primary schools. It revolves around the stick or pain imposed, how sanctions are imposed, whether the actors imposing sanctions act as a unitary actor, and the target state's vulnerability. All of these points are indubitably important, yet another aspect deserves greater attention: *the endgame of sanctions*. According to the literature, coercion, at its essence, is a communicative act involving both a stick and a carrot. For it to succeed, while a credible threat of continued pain is paramount, it is also essential to offer a pledge or guarantee of improved relations, relief, and normalization if and when the target state complies. In other words, the reward for good behaviour is compliance. This is an important aspect that has not received enough attention among sanction scholars as it should. Questions such as how a country that has complied and changed its course is to be or should be treated primarily by the sanctioners in the aftermath? And how does that treatment affect the calculations of other potential proliferators observing from the sidelines? Need more focus.

This paper, albeit brief, attempts to address these questions. This paper argues that the effectiveness of sanctions as a non-proliferation tool is critically reliant on the credibility of the sanctioner’s commitment to a pre-

defined and durable endgame. Once the sanctioned or target state develops a sense that the goalposts will be moved or that compliance, instead of relief, would result in a new list of demands, the entire logic of sanctions as an instrument to stop proliferation collapses. With this, sanctions cease to be a tool to modify a state's behaviour and act in accordance with global norms, but would be viewed as an instrument of continuous hostility and (in most cases) regime change. In such circumstances, the resolve of the target states to build nuclear weapons gets further strengthened as it is taken as the only deterrent that can guarantee national security, sovereignty, and survival.

To test this hypothesis, this paper starts with a conceptual overview of sanctions and their effectiveness, examining the viewpoints of the three major schools of thought. This section would also situate the "endgame problem" within the prevailing discourse on sanctions, highlighting how issues of trust, political reliability, and shifting demands undermine the effectiveness of sanctions. The Iranian case, especially the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is arguably the most relevant case study to test this argument. At the time, when President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran was making considerable adjustments as per the JCPOA that were globally recognized and appreciated within the nonproliferation circles. Furthermore, not only did Trump withdraw from the JCPOA without any legal justification, but Washington intensified its campaign against Iran. For Tehran and the Iranian people, Trump's withdrawal was nothing but duplicity and the dual face of Washington. It further strengthened the hardliners and sidelined the moderates who advocated greater engagement with the West. The frustration resulting from this unilateral withdrawal led Tehran to question its compliance with global nonproliferation demands. In keeping with

these points, the paper demonstrates how the failure to honour the sanctioner's promise not only renders sanctions ineffective but also counterproductive, as it would incentivise, rather than prevent, proliferation.

Sanctions as a Tool of Nonproliferation: A Conceptual Overview

The literal meaning of sanction is to enforce something by attaching a penalty to it, as a law. Sanctions are commonly understood as coercive measures, usually imposed by several nations in concert, to compel a state alleged to have violated international law to desist or submit to adjudication. These sanctions aim to prevent prospective proliferators from eroding the effectiveness of the safeguards system and to reinforce international political norms against proliferation.[2] As per Solingen, "A working definition of sanctions (which might also be labelled negative inducements) refers to international instruments of statecraft that punish or deny benefits to leaders, rulers, coalitions, or broader constituencies in a given state, in an effort to dissuade those targets from pursuing or supporting the acquisition of nuclear weapons."[3]

According to the literature on sanctions, these could be imposed for several reasons and purposes, such as demonstrating resolve both domestically and internationally; shaping current policies in the target country; punishing and condemning behaviour; and deterring the behaviour of the target country or other countries. Furthermore, sanctions

[2] David Leyton Brown, *The Utility of International Economic Sanctions,* ed., (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Kim Richard Nossal, "International Sanctions as International Punishment," *International Organization,* Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1989), pp. 301–322.
[3] Etel Solingen, *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

are not only aimed at changing the existing policy behaviour of the target states but also at deterring any future transgression. At the same time, sanctions also serve as a signal to other potential proliferators. It is precisely because of this multipurpose functioning of sanctions that, according to one view, "the effects of sanctions extend far beyond the realm of punishment for current misdeeds and into the realm of deterrence of future misdeeds.[4] " The dominant theoretical framework for understanding sanctions is rooted in rational choice. This approach models states as unitary actors that make decisions based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits. Sanctions are designed to be a direct input into this calculation. As Richard Nephew outlines in his practitioner's view, the goal is to inflict pain on a target regime to a degree that forces a choice: either continue the proscribed policy and suffer mounting economic and political ruin, or abandon the policy and receive the reward of sanctions relief.[5] The success of this model depends on several key variables: the degree of pain inflicted, the target state's ability to withstand that pain (its economic resilience and political stability), and the presence of sanctions-busting alternatives. Nicholas Miller holds the view that "rational leaders assess the risk of sanctions before initiating a nuclear weapons program, which produces a selection effect whereby states highly vulnerable to sanctions are deterred from starting nuclear programs in the first place, so long as the threat is credible."[6]

[4] Etel Solingen, *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[5] Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
[6] Nicholas L. Miller, "The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions" *International Organization*, Vol 68, No 4, (Fall 2014), pp. 913 – 944: DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818314000216.

The Grand Debate: How Do Sanctions Work?

While the jury is still out on how effective sanctions are in discouraging states from pursuing nuclearization. The Sanction Works School often cites the study "Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy" by Gary Hufbauer, Jeffrey Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliot as the foremost evidence of the effectiveness of sanctions. According to this study, of the 115 cases of sanction implementation from 1914 to 1990, 40 were success stories. However, Robert Pape challenged the study's findings. Pape held the view that the study was inaccurate, as out of the 40 so-called success stories, 18 involved the use of force, and in 8 cases, there is no verifiable evidence that the target states mended their course. Furthermore, according to Pape, only 5 of the 115 case studies examined by Hufbauer et al. are appropriately considered successes.[7] In 2007, Hufbauer further expanded their dataset to more than 200 cases and contended that 34% of cases were sanction successes. Responding to the criticism, they stated: "…we believe a careful analysis of the factors contributing to the success of coercive sanctions is important and can provide insights to guide the use of sanctions in other circumstances as well." And that presidents and publics should not count on sanctions alone to achieve the declared objectives. Andrew Futter is of the view: … while sanctions represent a valuable tool for enforcing global non-proliferation norms, the approach is not without its critics. We can think of three main problems with sanctions. First, they often worsen public opinion, and most affect the public. Indeed, according to John and Karl Mueller, "economic sanctions … may have contributed to more deaths during the post-Cold War era than all weapons of mass destruction throughout history. Second,

[7] Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Jeffrey J. Schott, *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1985).

sanctions only work if the country in question is willing to give up its nuclear programme. North Korea is the classic example of this, having been under international sanctions for decades. The same might also be true for Iran. …And third, sanctions require widespread international support to be credible …As a result, sanctions have a mixed record in nuclear non-proliferation.[8]

Libya under Muammar Gaddafi is arguably the most-cited success story for non-proliferation sanctions. In 2003, after decades of international isolation, Muammar Gaddafi announced that Libya would verifiably dismantle its WMD program. This announcement, which came in the wake of an extensive and almost secret negotiation between Libya, the United States, and the United Kingdom, was presented as a clear victory for coercive diplomacy.[9] While the prospect of sanctions relief and economic reintegration was undoubtedly a powerful incentive for Gaddafi, who sought foreign investment to modernize Libya's oil industry, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, resulting in the toppling of Saddam Hussein on the false pretext of Iraq acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD), must also have been a factor in Gaddafi's decision-making. Therefore, the fear that Libya could be next, along with economic incentives once sanctions are lifted, together provided the impetus for Gaddafi to opt for this policy decision. In keeping with this, claiming that the Libyan case is a prime example of sanctions success might not be correct, as it is more a case of coercive diplomacy backed by the credible threat of overwhelming military force.

[8] John Mueller and Karl Mueller, "Sanctions of Mass Destruction," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 78, No. 3 (1999), pp. 43–59.
[9] Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock, "Who 'Won' Libya? The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Theory and Policy," *International Security,* Vol. 30, No. 3 (2005), pp. 47–86.

No country in modern history has been subjected to a more comprehensive and long-standing sanctions regime by the UN, the US, and their allies than the Democratic Republic of North Korea (DPRK). Despite this, in the last three decades, North Korea has evolved from a nascent nuclear to a full-fledged nuclear power with an advanced and sophisticated missile program. For Pyongyang, its engagement with the West, from the 1994 Agreed Framework to the Six-Party talks, was a long tale of breakdowns and let-downs, convincing it of Washington's duplicity and further deepening its distrust of the US. In such circumstances, each sanction imposed further strengthened Pyongyang's resolve to move ahead with its plan. Sanctions served to impel proliferation. Pyongyang projects these sanctions as an act of war by a hostile imperialist power: The United States of America. North Korea projects these sanctions as justification for the immense sacrifice required to build a nuclear deterrent, which the Kim dynasty frames as the "treasured sword" of national survival.[10] In a similar vein, proponents of sanctions argue that they do not work. Robert Pape argues that Saddam Hussein utilised the sanctions imposed on Iraq as a decisive rallying-around-the-flag factor.[11] The catastrophic humanitarian cost suffered by the Iraqi people due to Saddam Hussein used the sanctions as a rallying point to strengthen his regime by blaming the West for the suffering.

[10] Victor D. Cha and Katrin J. Katz, "The Right Way to Sanction North Korea," *Foreign Affairs,* Vol. 97, No. 3 (2018), pp. 66–75.
[11] Robert A. Pape, "Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work," *International Security,* Vol. 22, No. 2 (1997), pp. 90–136.

The Dark Side of the Moon: The Endgame Problem: Trust, Credibility, and the Sanctioner's Dilemma

The conventional debate on sanctions, focused on the application of pressure, often neglects or overlooks the equally critical phase: *the termination of pressure*. The entire logic of sanctions and its intended outcome rests on the target's belief that an acceptable "off-ramp" exists. However, if this belief is eroded, the entire edifice on which sanctions are rationalized collapses. Once the target state concludes that compliance would result in more demands, it would be within its rights to reconsider compliance. If the endgame of sanctions in the shape of compliance by the sanctioned or target state is not termination of pressure, then the target state would have no motivation to be compliant and would rather pursue a nuclear weapon.

The Original Sin: Moving the Goalposts

Arguably, the most common way the sanctions can undermine the credibility of the endgame or compliance incentives is by changing or moving the goalposts. As per the literature and available data, this occurs when the target state meets the demands set at the time sanctions are imposed. Despite this, the target state is instead confronted with a new set of demands. Consider a situation where state "A" is put under sanctions so that it halts its nuclear activities, such as uranium enrichment. Upon its compliance, the sanctioner now demands a change in its foreign or defence policy orientation and outlook, or sets demands and conditions on its missile program. While the sanctioners might see this as a golden opportunity to get as much as they can from the targeted state, the state under sanctions would view it as a clear sign of bad faith. It would be

prudent to conclude that the sanctioning state is using sanctions only as a tool to achieve its broader strategic policy objectives, such as weakening the state and/or regime change, and not to resolve a specific issue, such as nuclear proliferation. Once the target state reaches this conclusion, it would have no incentive to continue complying with the original set of demands. Instead, the rational option would be to accept the pain and pursue the prescribed program, which, under such circumstances, would become vital for safeguarding national sovereignty and security. Another essential factor to be taken into account is the commitment problem of the sanctioning states, for instance, with a change of president in the US, Washington's policies change. This has implications for states that are sanctioned by one administration and are compliant, as the incoming president might not share the same understanding and policy orientation towards the sanctions and their endgame. In such a situation, there is no assurance that the incoming administration would honour international agreements, including those endorsed by the UN Security Council. More so, they might opt to rescind them. This situation generates a significant commitment problem.

Muammar Gaddafi's Libya is a prime example of this. In 2003, he agreed to dismantle his WMD program in exchange for admission and reintegration into the international community and sanction relief. This decision by Gaddafi was celebrated as a triumph for non-proliferation. Yet, in 2011, amid an insurgency with active external support allegedly by the US, UK, and France, the Gaddafi regime fell as these countries, who, half a decade ago, negotiated a deal with the Gaddafi regime, now, using the pretext of the so-called Responsibility to Protect (R2P), spearheaded a NATO military intervention in Libya. This intervention played a pivotal role in his overthrow and Gaddafi's extrajudicial and gruesome murder by

the NATO-supported rebels, which was recorded and broadcast. It does not take a rocket scientist to gauge the implications of this event as viewed from capitals such as Pyongyang and Tehran. For them, the writing on the wall was: giving up your ultimate deterrent leaves you vulnerable, and the security guarantees from your former adversaries are worthless when their interests shift. The Libya case, which was taken as a success story and that sanctions work, turned into a powerful cautionary tale, convincing other sanctioned states, including those taunted as the axis of evil, that voluntary disarmament is a political trap akin to signing your own death warrant. Furthermore, it reinforced the view that, regardless of the economic cost, a nuclear deterrent is the only ironclad insurance against foreign intervention and potential regime change.[12] This one event had a greater adverse effect on and caused greater damage to the credibility of the justification for sanctions and Western non-proliferation promises than decades of failed negotiations combined.

The Persian Puzzle: The JCPOA and the Challenge of a Credible Endgame

The JCPOA was formally agreed upon and announced in July 2015. The JCPOA was the result of several years of complex, high-stakes diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the ongoing Iranian-Western nuclear impasse. The JCPOA mapped out a detailed, multi-phased roadmap to resolve the issue through measures that could be verified by the concerned parties at each stage. As per the JCPOA, Tehran was to get relief from the sanctions imposed on it in exchange for limiting its nuclear activities. However, when President Trump took office, he unilaterally withdrew from the

[12] Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

JCPOA. Washington's abandonment of JCPOA became the most glaring example of the credibility issue with the endgame of sanctions and the sanctioner state's commitment problem.

The Road to JCPOA: The Historicity of Iran-US Relations

One can truly understand the significance of the JCPOA only if one is aware of the background, the historical context of the problem, and the ever-widening mistrust between Washington and Tehran. Once the strategic ally of Israel and the US in the Middle East and described by President Carter as an island of stability in an ocean of instability, Iran transformed the Islamic revolution in 1979. The bilateral relations between Iran and the US deteriorated post the revolution and the ensuing US embassy hostage crisis. Since then, the two nations have been locked in a bitter and hostile relationship. The bilateral hostility was further exacerbated due to the overt support provided by the Americans to Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. Another leaf was added to the hostile relationship when President George W. Bush grouped Iran with Iraq and North Korea in his so-called "Axis of Evil" in 2002. Subsequently, the discovery of Iran's secret nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak fuelled a decade of escalating crisis. American and Western sources alleged that Iran had rapidly expanded its uranium enrichment program, leading to increasingly castigatory sanctions imposed by the US and its allies. These sanctions resulted in a paralysis of the Iranian banking and oil sectors between 2011 and 2012. Parallel to these sanctions, the US also waged a covert war against Iran, such as the Stuxnet cyberattack that successfully sabotaged Iranian centrifuges and the targeted killing of several of Iran's top nuclear scientists. By 2013, Iran installed approximately 20,000 centrifuges and accumulated a substantial reserve of 20% enriched

uranium. According to the alarmists, this development brought Tehran worryingly close to achieving a potential nuclear breakthrough, with the threat of preventive military action from Israel or the US growing louder.

It was against this critical backdrop that Hassan Rouhani, who was elected in 2013, vowed to resolve the nuclear standoff and end Iran's international isolation. For Rouhani and his Western-educated Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the diplomatic effort had reached an impasse. According to them, Tehran needed to find a way out of this stalemate as it is hurting Iranian national interests and security. Their diplomatic philosophy was rooted in a "win-win" model. They averred that, instead of being a nuclear pariah, Iran's long-term security interests would be better served by economic integration with the global financial system, technological advancement, and international legitimacy. They were willing to accept significant nuclear limitations in exchange for the promised benefit of economic normalization. This position, however, was contrary to the hardcore ideological position held by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the office of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. For the hardliners, Washington was untrustworthy and was working day in and day out to topple and overthrow the Islamic Republic. For the hardliners, any understanding reached with Washington would be ill-fated and dangerous for Iran, as Washington and its cronies cannot be trusted. They argued in favour of a resistance economy designed to withstand sanctions. Later, although the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, gave his reluctant approval for the negotiations, he repeatedly warned that the Americans were not to be trusted, viewing the whole process as merely an exercise to test US intentions.

Revisiting the JCPOA

The JCPOA between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the UK, the US., and Germany) was agreed upon in 2015. As per the JCPOA, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The final agreement was a remarkably detailed, 159-page document that meticulously balanced competing interests. Iran agreed to a raft of stringent and verifiable restrictions, far exceeding the requirements of the standard NPT safeguards agreement. These included: A) Reducing the number of installed centrifuges by two-thirds, from over 19,000 to just over 6,000 of its oldest models. B) Reducing the stockpile of low-enriched uranium by 98%, from over 10,000 kg to just 300 kg. C) Capping uranium enrichment at 3.67% purity, far below the 90% required for a weapon. D) Converting the underground Fordow facility into a research center and prohibiting any enrichment there for 15 years. E) Redesigning the heavy-water reactor at Arak so it could not produce weapons-grade plutonium and shipping out all spent fuel. F) Submitting to the most intrusive verification regime in history, including 24/7 surveillance at declared sites, comprehensive "cradle-to-grave" tracking of all nuclear material, and a mechanism for the IAEA to request access to undeclared sites.

These measures collectively extended Iran's "breakout time," the time needed to produce enough fissile material for one bomb, from a few months to at least a year, providing ample time for the international community to detect and respond to any attempt to cheat. Commenting on the JCPOA, Joe Cirincione, who was once called the high priest of US arms control by the former US National Security Advisor Johan Bolton, stated that by concluding the JCPOA, "we just stopped Iran from getting

the bomb."[13] In exchange, the P5+1 agreed to the comprehensive lifting of all nuclear-related sanctions, including the crippling US secondary sanctions. This was to be done in phases, tied to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verification of Iranian compliance. The deal promised to unfreeze tens of billions of dollars in Iranian assets, reconnect Iranian banks to the global financial system (including SWIFT), and allow Iran to once again freely sell its oil on the international market. The endgame was clear, specific, and multilaterally endorsed through the UN Security Council Resolution 2231.

Trump's Unilateral Withdrawal from the JCPOA

From its implementation in January 2016 until May 2018, the JCPOA worked as designed. In over a dozen consecutive reports, the IAEA certified that Iran was in full compliance with its commitments. Despite this, President Trump, who considered the JCPOA the "worst deal ever negotiated," withdrew from it unilaterally on 8 May 2018. This withdrawal by Trump is a classic case of what, in the literature, is termed moving the goalposts. Trump withdrew from the JCPOA not because Tehran was noncompliant with its terms. Still, he withdrew, arguing that the agreement does not address Iran's regional activities, its growing ballistic missile program and that few of the clauses of the contract (the so-called sunset clauses) would expire after 10 to 15 years and Washington and its allies would not have any control on what Tehran might do once those clauses and the conditions they set, expire. Following up on the withdrawal, the Trump administration re-imposed all nuclear sanctions on Iran and launched a maximum pressure campaign against Iran afresh. Furthermore,

[13] Joseph Cirincione, *Nuclear Nightmares: Securing the World Before It Is Too Late*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), reviewed online 2016.

Washington warned global entities to choose between doing business with the US and Iran. The European signatories of the deal were rendered powerless to deliver the promised economic benefits.

Iran was hard struck by this. Not only did it add to its economic worries, as its economy contracted sharply and severe shortages of essential goods emerged. The COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the problem for Tehran.[14] On the domestic front, this withdrawal further weakened the moderates, as the hardliners were proven correct: Trump did precisely what the hardliners claimed the US would do throughout this period. Moderates who sought to engage with the world and believed that such engagement would be mutually beneficial were sidelined, feeling humiliated and discredited. President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA pushed the moderate narrative in Tehran that diplomacy with the West was a path to prosperity to the back burner, as the hardliners reclaimed their position, arguing that their view that the imperialist West, especially the US, cannot be trusted has once again been vindicated. With this, they brought to the fore their old, familiar narrative of resistance against an implacable enemy.

Despite this setback, Tehran demonstrated diplomatic prudence and strategic patience, hoping that the European power centers might play a role in salvaging the deal. However, it soon became clear that that would not be the case. In a demonstration of its frustration over what Trump did, Tehran took several actions: it raised its enrichment level from 4.5% to 20%, and eventually to 60%; and increased its enriched uranium stockpile. According to some reports, it also installed advanced, more efficient

[14] Suzanne Maloney, "The Logic of Maximum Pressure: How the U.S. Should and Should Not Confront Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020.

centrifuges and curtailed the IAEA's access to its nuclear infrastructure. Regardless of what the alarmists in the Trump administration and elsewhere claimed that Tehran was doing this to indicate its inching towards building a weapon, the fact was that Tehran was doing all this to signal its frustration with the unilateral and unjustifiable abandonment of JCPOA by Washington and its allies. Each step or action Tehran has taken since 2019 has been a direct, reciprocal response to the ongoing US economic warfare waged against it. Through these actions, Tehran was conveying to the world that there were costs to the deal's collapse and that the result of Trump's more pressure on Iran policy would not be a better deal but in fact would result in a hostile Tehran, a more advanced yet less monitored Iranian nuclear program and a less inclined leadership in Tehran for any future openings or possibilities in future.

Conclusion

Can sanctions be an effective non-proliferation tool? The available data, the historical record, especially cases like the failure of the JCPOA due to Washington's unwarranted, unjustifiable, and unilateral withdrawal, suggest that the answer cannot be a simple yes or no. While there is ample evidence that sanctions can create the leverage necessary to bring a recalcitrant state to the negotiating table, the economic pain they inflict can provide a powerful incentive for a regime to reconsider its strategic priorities. However, this is only part of the equation. For sanctions to be considered an effective non-proliferation tool, they must also include the endgame, reward, or incentives for improvement for compliant states. The target state must believe that compliance is a viable path out of isolation and that the sanctioner will honour its commitments. At this time, this is not part of the sanctions; sanctions cannot be considered an effective non-

proliferation tool. As this paper, albeit briefly, demonstrates, the unilateral US withdrawal from the JCPOA, despite Tehran's full compliance with its terms and conditions, clearly illustrates this point. It not only destroyed a successful arms control agreement but also highlighted to the world that, as the predominant global power, America cannot be trusted, that its commitments are as ephemeral as its election cycles, and that compliance with its demands offers no guarantee of security or relief. As regards Iran, it validated the hardliners in Tehran, further eroding the space for the moderates, already in a minority. Moreover, it provided impetus to the prevailing strategic argument that a nuclear weapon is the only actual insurance policy against American aggression.

The implications of the American withdrawal from the JCPOA are a much more insecure world. The Iranian nuclear program is way more advanced today than it would have been under the JCPOA. In any future negotiation with Iran or any other country, the JCPOA and its fate would be a factor for all parties. In short, one could infer one clear lesson from the fate of JCPOA about the utility of sanctions as a non-proliferation tool. Sanctions wielded without a credible endgame are not a tool of diplomacy but an act of brute force. In such cases, sanctions might inflict pain, but they would fail to change behaviours. When sanctions are taken as a tool to keep target states fulfilling demands without providing them off-ramps, sanctions, instead of being a tool meant to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, create powerful incentives for their acquisition, pushing the world closer to the very nightmare it seeks to avoid.