

## CHAPTER 6

# DIALOGUE ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM: LESSONS LEARNED AND IGNORED (1992–2020)<sup>1</sup>

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Iran's nuclear program has been extensively debated over the past few decades and has incited so much controversy among several nations. However, there are hardly any countries like the United States and Russia whose bilateral agenda consistently featured this matter. This chapter is not in any degree diminishing the contribution of other actors to resolving the crisis over Iran's nuclear program but aimed at highlighting the role that the two countries played in this process.

The timeline of this research stretches from 1992, when Russia and Iran signed a memorandum on cooperation in the nuclear field<sup>2</sup>, to 2020, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)<sup>3</sup> concluded by the P5+1 and Iran in 2015 was at risk of collapse. It is divided into five stages based on the development of Iran's nuclear program, U.S. and Russian approaches to dealing with Iran, and the pattern of the interface between the two countries. At each stage, it discusses the results of U.S. and Russian policies on this issue as well

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<sup>2</sup> The Government of The Russian Federation (1992) Decree 'On Signing Agreements Between the Government of The Russian Federation and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful Use of Atomic Energy and Construction of a Nuclear Power Plant in Iran,' available at [http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody&nd=102017974&rdk&link\\_id=19](http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody&nd=102017974&rdk&link_id=19) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> European Union External Action (2015) Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/8710/joint-comprehensive-plan-action\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/8710/joint-comprehensive-plan-action_en) (17 May, 2021).

as the lessons that the leadership of the countries could learn from this experience and consider when formulating their strategies on the Iranian nuclear program and issues alike.

## Policy Foundations

The United States and Russia have historically disagreed over their policies on the Iranian nuclear program. The reason for that lies in the broader context of their relationship with Iran. The United States, whose grave diplomatic conflict with Iran dates back to the Islamic Revolution and the hostage crisis, has perceived Iran as a threat to U.S. interests and its allies in the Middle East<sup>4</sup> — hence its intent and attempts are to confront, suppress, and isolate Iran. On the contrary, Russia views Iran as a neighbor in three regions: the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia, and the key objective of Russia's Iran policy is to ensure peace and stability across its vast borders.<sup>5</sup>

The general perception of Iran heavily influenced U.S. and Russian attitudes towards Iran's nuclear program. The United States has been concerned about Iran achieving a capacity to develop a nuclear weapon because in that case, Iran could use it as leverage against Israel, Saudi Arabia as well as other U.S. allies in the region. Even though Iran could not immediately pose a direct threat to the U.S. mainland, Iran's means of delivery could target U.S. forces and counterbalance the U.S. interests in the region. Hence the United States preferred to impose rigid limits on Iran's nuclear program as well as interpreted any uncertainty with respect to and lack of transparency of the Iranian nuclear program, e.g. undeclared activities, as part of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program.

Not that Russia would welcome a nuclear-armed Iran, but Moscow championed Iran's right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy since this country complied with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and largely with the Safeguards Agreement concluded

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<sup>4</sup> Jordet, Nils (2000) Explaining the Long-term Hostility between the United States and Iran: A Historical, Theoretical and Methodological Framework. The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 2000. P. 9-11, available at <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/jordet.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Trenin, Dmitry (2016) *Rossiya i Iran: Nedoveriye v Proshlom i Sotrudnichestvo v Nastoyashchem* [Russia and Iran: Mistrust in the Past and Current Cooperation]. Carnegie Moscow Center, available at <http://carnegie.ru/2016/09/08/ru-pub-64508> (17 May, 2021).

with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Russia believed the United States politicized the issue of the Iranian nuclear program to put pressure on Iran. Not having clear evidence that Iran was pursuing a military nuclear program<sup>6</sup>, Russia did not accuse Iran of pursuing a nuclear weapons program; however, the scale of its cooperation with Iran depended on the level of Iran's transparency in its cooperation with the IAEA.<sup>7</sup> Before the IAEA clarified certain aspects of Iran's nuclear program following the 2002 revelations, Moscow was hardly motivated to accelerate the slow pace of the Bushehr nuclear power plant (NPP) construction and to overcome the delays in the construction schedule caused by other factors.<sup>8</sup>

Another factor to consider is the significant potential of Russian-Iranian cooperation on a broad spectrum of areas ranging from oil and gas industries, nuclear energy, and agriculture, to fighting terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as ensuring security in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The motivation to cooperate was strong enough, and Russia always had to consider its economic interests when defining its policy on Iran. These differences should be taken into account to understand the U.S. and Russian stances on the Iranian nuclear program. Nevertheless, U.S. and Russian approaches to this issue would evolve and take a different shape at each of the proposed stages of the bilateral dialogue, which would either provide an incentive for resolving the crisis or block any path to a successful agreement.

## 1992–2000. The United States Adjusts Russian Policy

**Political background.** The 1990s observed a major reconsideration of policy priorities by the Russian Federation. Rethinking the previous ideas and approaches did not necessarily result in a significant

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<sup>6</sup> Foreign Intelligence Service (1995) 'The Treaty of the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The Issues of Prolongations. An Open Report by the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR),' available at <http://svr.gov.ru/material/4-iran.htm> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Regnum (2004) 'Rossiysko-Iranskoye Sotrudnichestvo v Sfere Mirnogo Atoma Budet Zaviset ot MAGATE' [Russian-Iranian Cooperation in Peaceful Atom will Depend on the IAEA], available at <https://regnum.ru/news/361546.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Lutkova, Anna; Khlopkov, Anton (2010) 'Pochemu Tak Dolgo Stroilas Busherskaya AES' [Why Did it Take so Long to Build the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant]. CENESS. P. 12, available at <https://docplayer.ru/141360-Pochemu-tak-dolgo-stroilas-busherskaya-aes.html> (17 May, 2021).

change compared to the policies of the Soviet Union after 1985, but developing a new Russian foreign policy required time and effort.

The 1993 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation was the first document that outlined the new Russian vision of its role in international affairs. Its part on the Islamic Republic of Iran is of special interest: Russia claimed that Iran was a source of uncertainty for the region because after this country ceased to be an ally of the United States, it did not become closer to the Russian Federation. Such uncertainty was deemed dangerous, especially because the region had a direct influence on the conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Russia also maintained that it needed to balance its relations with Israel and the region in general.<sup>9</sup>

However, the major factor that shaped Russian policy on Iran was Russia's large nuclear and military industry: it strongly needed financial support to run the facilities and maintain employment.<sup>10</sup> Iran turned out to be one of the few countries ready to pay money to Russia for constructing the Bushehr NPP, educating its personnel, etc.<sup>11</sup> Even though the domestic discussion in Russia was initially diverse regarding the NPP in Iran, e.g. Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Russian State Duma Vladimir Lukin contemplated the possibility of abandoning the deal for compensation, later the Russian establishment got convinced of the necessity of delivering on the agreement with Iran.<sup>12</sup> Many nuclear industry employees in Russia had to quit their jobs because they were long unpaid and therefore had to move to other countries, often to some threshold states, to sustain their families. From the nonproliferation standpoint, it was far wiser for Russia to employ them legally and channel technical

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<sup>9</sup> Kontseptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (1993). P. 41

<sup>10</sup> This could in part explain why the Ministry of Atomic Energy happened to play the leading role in the interagency process on Iran, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Security Council seemingly being less active, at least in public. See: Melnikov, Yuri; Frolov, Vladimir (1995) 'Moskva i Vashington Mogut Possoritsya iz-za Tegerana' [Moscow and Washington Can Quarrel because of Tehran]. Kommersant, Issue 74, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/107286> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and Iran's nuclear program. August 14, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Tsekhmistrenko, Sergey (1995) 'Russkiye Ne Slushayutsya Amerikantsev', [Russians Disobey Americans]. Kommersant Vlast, Issue 13, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/10986> (17 May, 2021).

support to those countries through the legal framework, involving cooperation with the IAEA.

The United States intended to minimize, if not totally prohibit, Russian-Iranian cooperation in nuclear and military fields.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. administration was unwilling to discuss such cooperation in detail and wanted to stop it altogether. Congress threatened to decrease help for Russia provided under the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program and implicitly link Russian membership in G7 with halting Russia's cooperation with Iran.<sup>14</sup> The Clinton administration was pragmatic and refused to cut funding: without financial support, Russia's nuclear industry would raise even more proliferation and nuclear security-related concerns;<sup>15</sup> but it continued to put pressure on Russia for its cooperation with Iran.

The United States was unwilling yet ready to minimally compromise with Russia. The communication with Russian counterparts was conducted on three levels — between the Presidents, between the respective ministries and departments, and between partnering entities and labs. This kind of approach did not enable the U.S.

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<sup>13</sup> The 1994 and 1995 National Security Strategies of the United States maintained that its leadership would "continue to prevent Iran from advancing its weapons of mass destruction objectives," yet remain "willing to enter into an authoritative dialogue with Iran to discuss the differences" between the two countries. See: 'A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement' (1995), available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=444939> (17 May, 2021).

The 2000 National Security Strategy for a Global Age had more serious claims on the Iran dossier: "We continue efforts to thwart and roll back both Iran's development of NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) weapons and long-range missiles," but still kept the dialogue option open: "If a government-to-government dialogue can be initiated and sustained in a way that addresses the concerns of both sides, then the United States would be willing to develop with the Islamic Republic a road map leading to normal relations. It could be useful to begin a dialogue without preconditions." See: A National Security Strategy for a Global Age, 2000. URL: <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2000.pdf> (17 May, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Orlov, Vladimir; Timerbaev, Roland; Khlopkov, Anton (2001) *Problemy Yadernogo Nerasprostraneniya v Rossiysko-Amerikanskikh Otnosheniyakh: Istoriya, Vozmozhnosti i Perspektivy Dalneyshogo Vzaimodeystviya* [Nuclear Nonproliferation Problems in Russia-U.S. Relations: History, Opportunities, and Prospects for Further Cooperation]. Moscow, PIR Center. P. 131-132, available at <http://pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13464044500.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Khlopkov, Anton (2001) *Iranskaya Yadernaya Programma v Rossiysko-Amerikanskikh Otnosheniyakh* [Iran's Nuclear Program in Russia-U.S. Relations]. PIR Center, Moscow. P. 28 URL: <http://xn----jtbhwghdp7a.xn--p1ai/data/publications/nz18.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

administration to reach some of its unrealistic goals<sup>16</sup>, but it had to admit the United States managed to secure significant progress with Russia.<sup>17</sup>

In the absence of an elaborate foreign policy strategy, Russia took an issue-by-issue approach to its relationships with the United States and Iran. Russian officials were extremely flexible in their decision-making and ready to accept certain U.S. requests with respect to Russia's cooperation with Iran even if they sometimes damaged the Russian interests. However, the 1990s were marked by poor policy coordination among Russian governmental bodies which was of vital importance for export control. In 1995, a protocol on negotiations between the Minister of Atomic Energy Viktor Mikhaylov and his Iranian counterpart Reza Amrollahi was made public before this document was discussed by other departments in Moscow under inter-agency coordination. The sides discussed the possibility of Russia supplying Iran with a centrifuge technology that could potentially produce weapon-grade uranium. This raised a grave suspicion and concern in the U.S. administration, and the United States demanded that Russia stop any further negotiations on this topic with the Iranians. Of notice, even without the U.S. involvement, Russia was unlikely to ship such centrifuges to Iran because other agencies opposed this deal. The Federal Agency of Nuclear and Radiological Security (Gosatomnadzor), the Inter-agency Commission on Ecological Security, as well as a group of governmental experts, recommended that the Russian government not ship any centrifuges to Iran.<sup>18</sup>

In this environment, the exchange of information became a contentious issue. If used properly, Russia was interested in sharing information with the United States to convince the U.S. administration that no threat emanated from the Russian-Iranian cooperation

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<sup>16</sup> Einhorn, Robert; Samore, Gary (2002) 'Neobkhdimost Vozobnovleniya Amerikano-Rossiyskogo Sotrudnichestva s Tselyu Predotvrashcheniya Sozdaniya Iranskoy Bomby' [The Need to Resume Russia-U.S. Cooperation to Prevent the Creation of an Iranian Nuclear Bomb]. *Yaderny Kontrol*, Issue 4. P. 39, available at: <http://pircenter.org/media/content/files/10/13561862720.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Press Briefing by Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin, and National Security Advisor Anthony Lake (1995) *The American Presidency Project*, available at <http://www.presidency.ucs.edu/ws/index.php?pid=59468> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Khlopkov, Anton, Op. cit. P. 25 – 26.

per se in order to continue working with Iran without obstacles.<sup>19</sup> The United States did share intelligence with Russia, but with reluctance. Washington claimed that intelligence sharing could compromise sources and did not trust the Russian authorities who were believed to be hiding their cooperation with Iran in the nuclear field. The Russian leadership found such reasoning ridiculous. General Evstafiev, former Head of the Arms Control Division of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia (SVR), once stated that 'there was no such a price... that would not worth paying for any threshold state to forgo the capacity to produce a nuclear weapon'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it seems more likely that the U.S. reluctance to share information resulted from the fact that it had little impact on Russia's Iran policy: Moscow believed the U.S. intelligence was in many cases inaccurate or unconvincing to declare that Iran was developing technologies to produce nuclear weapons.<sup>21</sup>

**Results.** The set of policies and approaches of both sides in those conditions brought about controversial but also positive results. First, the United States and Russia agreed upon Russia's construction of the Bushehr NPP, and Russian companies involved in that process were not placed under U.S. sanctions.<sup>22</sup> Russia remained Iran's only partner in the field of nuclear energy; all the rest halted their cooperation with Iran in this area under U.S. pressure.<sup>23</sup>

Second, under U.S. pressure and to the detriment of its economic interests, Russia agreed to stop its military trade with Iran which had nothing to do with Iran's nuclear program. In 1995, Russian Prime

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and Iran's nuclear program. August 14, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Zobov, Andrey (2002) 'Nerazprostraneniye Oruzhiya Massovogo Unichtozheniya kak Aktualnaya Problema Nachala tretiego Tysyacheletiya: Regionalnye i Globalnye Aspekty' [WMD Nonproliferation as a Relevant Problem of the Early Third Millennium: Regional and Global Aspects] Moscow, available at [https://www.arm-control.ru/course/lectures02b/aiz\\_021011.htm](https://www.arm-control.ru/course/lectures02b/aiz_021011.htm) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and U.S.-Russian relations. August 3, 2017

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and peaceful use of atomic energy. July 26, 2017

<sup>23</sup> Safranchuk, Ivan (1998), *Yadernye i Raketnye Programmy Irana i Bezopasnost Rossii: Ramki Rossiysko-Iranskogo Sotrudnichestva* [Iran's Nuclear and Missile Programs and Russian Security: Framework for Russian-Iranian Cooperation]. Nauchnye Zapiski, Issue 8. Moscow, PIR Center. P. 8. URL: <http://ns2.pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13464245790.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin promised U.S. Vice President Al Gore that Russia would fulfill all of its obligations under the active military trade contracts with Iran by the end of 1999 and would not conclude any new deals with this country. The agreement was kept secret until it was leaked right before the 2000 U.S. presidential election. This destroyed the Russian image of a reliable partner and caused harm to both Russian-Iranian relations and Russian economic interests. The Russian leadership regretted having signed that deal and following the disclosure of the contents of the agreement informed their American counterparts that Russia was no longer obliged by the terms of the agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Third, the United States imposed sanctions on certain Russian entities, which, due to the relatively poor export control regime in Russia, turned out to be cooperating with Iran in nuclear and missile technology fields. They did so without notifying the Russian government, but in a very limited way which would not help Iran develop a military nuclear program. They did not breach international norms, yet contradicting U.S. expectations about Russian-Iranian cooperation in the sensitive areas. Considering that the United States also had problems with technology leaks contributing to Iran's nuclear and missile programs, this move was generally perceived in Moscow with irritation as an attempt to put pressure on Russia.

However, some of the entities which also received funding through cooperation with U.S. counterparts violated Russian export control regulations. The U.S. sanctions made these entities more selective in their cooperation with the Iranians and improved their discipline.<sup>25</sup> This corresponded with the efforts of the Russian government to improve the efficiency and standards of the Russian export control system, which took nearly 10 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> The measures included the establishment of a comprehensive export control regime that was supposed to block any shipment of materials and technologies that could be used in WMD and missile programs. In 1999, a law on export control was passed by

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<sup>24</sup> Kozyulin, Vadim (2001) *Rossiya-Iran: Chto Stoit za Novym Startom Voenno-Tekhnicheskogo Sotrudnichestva?* [Russia and Iran: What Lies Behind the new Beginning of Military and Technical Cooperation]. *Voprosy Bezopasnosti*, Issue 5 (95), available at <http://pircenter.org/articles/1428-rossiya-iran-chto-stoit-za-novym-startom-voennotekhnicheskogo-sotrudnichestva> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Khlopkov, Anton, *Op. cit.* P. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and U.S.-Russian relations. August 3, 2017.



the State Duma; in 2000–2001, newly elected President Putin reorganized the institutional design of the export control system to make the interagency process in this field more robust and efficient.<sup>27</sup>

Over the decade, the United States and Russia maintained a robust, yet strenuous dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program. For Moscow, the dialogue was difficult because of high demands on the U.S. side regarding Russia's cooperation with Iran. For Washington, engaging Russia was a challenging task because of the differences in threat perception that influenced Russian and U.S. assessments of the development of Iran's nuclear program, and because of poor policy coordination and implementation in Moscow following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Although the interaction between the countries resembled coordination rather than cooperation on Iran, given the differences between them, this experience was overall effective.

**Lessons.** The analysis of the bilateral cooperation suggests four lessons for future U.S.-Russian dialogue on Iran's nuclear program:

1. *Demanding everything from a counterpart is counterproductive. Instead, one should set feasible goals, focus on the main ones, and be ready to invest time and effort to achieve them.*

The Clinton administration put too much effort into trying to discourage Russia from any cooperation with Iran. Why would Moscow forgo cooperation with a neighboring country that did not violate international law? It was naturally impossible to reach that goal, s NPP<sup>28</sup> of such cooperation, as well as in finding ways to benefit from that by exchanging relevant information.

2. *Watchful cooperation is the best leverage against a counterpart.*

Being the most significant partner of Iran in the field of peaceful uses of nuclear energy, in 1995, Russia worked closely with the Iranian delegation at the NPT Review and Extension Conference to secure

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<sup>27</sup> Putin, Vladimir (2001) Vstupitelnoye Slovo na Zasedanii Soveta Bezopasnosti, Posvyashchennom Ukrepleniyyu Sistemy Eksportnogo Kontrolya [Introductory Statement at the Meeting of the Security Council on Strengthening Export Controls]. Kremlin, Moscow, available at <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22322> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Einhorn, Robert; Samore, Gary. Op. cit. P. 47.

Iran's support for the indefinite extension of the Treaty.<sup>29</sup> Some experts even claim that Russia linked the construction of the Bushehr NPP to Iran's acquiescence to the indefinite extension of the NPT.<sup>30</sup> Had Russia abandoned the deal under U.S. pressure, there would have been no such leverage to apply.

3. *Abusing power via imposing sanctions against one's own partners may lead to their irritation and lack of will to cooperate in resolving the problems that both partners face.*

If both sides agree that certain policies should be adjusted, there might be no need to resort to sanctions: the bilateral relationship will be too damaged to provide any foundation for future cooperation. When harsh sanctions are imposed for policies that the other side cannot change, e.g. for strong domestic political reasons, one should not expect to build a partnership on this ground even if they inform the sanctioned country of their own intentions and motivation to act so.

4. *Exchange of information is necessary for cooperation and should be valued by the recipients. Abusing this opportunity may lead to a lack of confidence.*

Despite the concerns about the confidentiality of sources, the United States and Russia exchanged information to a relatively significant degree. However, after 1998, when based on the disclosed information the United States imposed sanctions on Russian entities, Russia became less confident in the United States and more cautious about sharing sensitive intelligence with this country.

## 2001–2010. Russia Balances Out U.S. Policy on Iran

**Political background.** By the early 2000s, Russia had elaborated its general foreign policy strategy and could decidedly place its own interests before any other considerations. For its Iran policy, it

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<sup>29</sup> Orlov, Vladimir (1999) Konferentsia 1995 goda po Rassmotreniyu i Prodleniyu Sroka Deystviya Dogovora o Nerasprostranении Yadernogo Oruzhiya: Osobennosti, Rezultaty, Uroki [1995 NPT Review and Extension Conference: Features, Results, Lessons]. Nauchnye Zapiski, 11. PIR Center. Moscow. P. 10, available at <http://pircenter.org/media/content/files/9/13464238930.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Khlopkov, Anton; Lata, Vasily. Op. cit. P. 12.

meant broader engagement with this country both in economic and political domains.<sup>31</sup> Russia oriented itself towards a more pragmatic and flexible posture. The Russian government continued its nuclear cooperation and military trade with Iran, which was important to Russia; however, by limiting the number of options for this country, Moscow addressed the American concerns. Russia refrained from supplying certain sensitive equipment and technologies to Iran and sold arms in small quantities.<sup>32</sup>

Still, Russia's motivation to cooperate with the Iranians was so strong that Moscow would not even consider abandoning its cooperation with this country, even if compensated for that. The reason for that was a lack of confidence in American conduct and promises to compensate for losses. A case in point, in 1998, the United States convinced a Ukrainian company not to build turbines for the Bushehr NPP and promised to establish cooperation with the facility to recompense for the losses. Four years later Ukraine had to reaffirm its commitments on the NPP because Kyiv had lost more than 5 million dollars and had received no assistance from the United States in exchange.<sup>33</sup>

The U.S. stance on Iran faced a dramatic shift with the election of George W. Bush. In his State of Union Address on January 29, 2002, President Bush announced Iran to be part of an 'axis of evil,'<sup>34</sup> which implied the United States would apply extreme pressure against Iran's leadership and could attempt to change its political regime.

The 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States mentioned Iran only once, but it was clear that this country fell under the category of 'rogue states,' those who 'brutalize their own people,' 'display no regard for international law,' are 'determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction,' 'sponsor terrorism around the globe,' as well as 'reject basic human values and hate the United States and

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<sup>31</sup> The 2000 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation had a small, yet clear paragraph on Iran: "It is important to further develop relations with Iran." See: Kontseptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (2000), available at [http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-07-11/1\\_concept.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-07-11/1_concept.html) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Khlopkov, Anton; Lata, Vasily. Op. cit. P. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Khlopkov, Anton; Lata, Vasily. Op. cit. P. 14.

<sup>34</sup> The President's State of the Union Address (2002) The United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (17 May, 2021).

everything for which it stands'. The key message to rogue states was in the following line: 'The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction — and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act preemptively'.<sup>35</sup> The 2006 version of the document also claimed that the United States 'may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran'.<sup>36</sup>

The new U.S. administration demanded that Russia halt all military trade with Iran, as well as nuclear cooperation, which included the construction of the Bushehr NPP. To address the U.S. concerns regarding the Bushehr NPP, Russian officials even suggested the United States and Russia build the NPP together<sup>37</sup>, but this offer, unsurprisingly, led to no cooperation — neither the United States nor Iran would be interested in seeing that happen.

The United States expected that Russia would by default accept the U.S. policies on Iran and follow its guidance. The United States strongly opposed Iran's obtaining of any uranium enrichment technology. 'In light of the serious unresolved issues posed by Iran's nuclear program, we strongly disagree with Iran's assertion that it has an inherent "right" under Article IV to its program or to receive foreign assistance or cooperation with it,' said the U.S. statement at the 2003 NPT Preparatory Committee Session.<sup>38</sup> Russia, on the other hand, recognized Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program, including enrichment capabilities, provided Iran is an NPT Member-State 'in good standing'.

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<sup>35</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2002), available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2006), available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2006/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Rossiya Predlozhila SShA Vmeste Stroit Atomnuyu Stantsiyu v Irane [Russia suggested building the NPP in Iran Together with the U.S.] (2003). Vesti.Ru, available at <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=27218> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Statement by Dr. Andrew K. Semmel Alternative Representative of the United States of America to the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for The 2005 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2003) Reaching Critical Will, available at [http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom03/2003statements/7May\\_U.S..pdf](http://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/npt/prepcom03/2003statements/7May_U.S..pdf) (17 May, 2021).

In 2008, there seemed to open new opportunities for a dialogue on Iran. There was little change in Russia's position<sup>39</sup>, but the newly-elected President Obama demonstrated his readiness to engage in diplomacy with the Iranians. He congratulated the Iranians on Nowruz (Persian New Year) in 2009, which was an exceptional move by the President and helped him deliver a message of peace and constructive bilateral relations directly to the Iranians.<sup>40</sup> The 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy proved the U.S. desire for diplomacy with Iran.<sup>41</sup> However, the controversial reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the revelation of the Fordow facility made it clear to the Obama administration that they would not be able to move forward with Iran under the Ahmadinejad administration to an extent President Obama had hoped for.<sup>42</sup>

**Results.** Iran's safeguards implementation record was far from being perfect, yet it was in large part due to the U.S. denial of Iran's right to enrichment that made the negotiations futile. Under the 2003 Paris Agreement, the E3 recognized Iran's right to enrich on a small scale; however, under U.S. pressure, the E3 included in its final proposal to

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<sup>39</sup> The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation named Iran among the countries whom Russia was determined to further develop relations with, committed to the resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue through diplomacy and warned against unilateral use of force that could destabilize the Russian neighborhood. See: Kontseptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (2008), available at <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/785> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> "In this season of new beginnings I would like to speak clearly to Iran's leaders. We have serious differences that have grown over time. My administration is now committed to diplomacy that addresses the full range of issues before us, and to pursuing constructive ties among the United States, Iran and the international community. This process will not be advanced by threats. We seek instead engagement that is honest and grounded in mutual respect." See: Videotaped Remarks by The President in Celebration of Nowruz (2009). The White House, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/videotaped-remarks-president-celebration-nowruz> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>41</sup> "The United States seeks a future in which Iran meets its international responsibilities, takes its rightful place in the community of nations, and enjoys the political and economic opportunities that its people deserve. Yet if the Iranian Government continues to refuse to live up to its international obligations, it will face greater isolation." See: The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (2010), available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=24251> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Doran, Michael (2015) 'Obama's Secret Iran Strategy.' Hudson Institute, available at <https://www.hudson.org/research/10989-obama-s-secret-iran-strategy> (17 May, 2021).

Iran a provision that would make it forgo any enrichment capacity for 10 years. This caused significant discord between the parties and undermined the negotiations.<sup>43</sup> Then Director-General of the IAEA Mohamed ElBaradei regretted this decision and blamed the E3 for not offering a reasonable package with concrete benefits to the Iranians because of U.S. opposition.<sup>44</sup>

To overcome this impasse, in October 2005, Russia offered Iran a share in an enrichment facility located in Russian city Angarsk, which would guarantee Tehran a continuous fuel supply. Earlier in September, both Russia and China abstained from referring the Iran dossier to the UN Security Council to buy more time for diplomacy.<sup>45</sup> The painstaking negotiations between Russia and Iran were conducted with delays, and the latter, according to a senior Russian lawmaker, 'did not demonstrate enough goodwill,' which made him think that Iran could follow the North Korean scenario, 'isolate itself, withdraw from the NPT and cut its cooperation with the IAEA'.<sup>46</sup> Although shortly before the Iranian nuclear dossier was raised at the UN Security Council the Iranians demonstrated their willingness to reconsider and accept the Russian proposal, it was quite late. At this stage, resolving the issue was not enough for the overall success of the negotiations<sup>47</sup>. Later the Iranians indicated that the proposal was off the table.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Charbonneau, Louis (2013) 'A Decade of Failure; Missed Opportunities and the Escalating Crisis over Iran's Nuclear Program.' City College of New York. P. 20, available at [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=cc\\_etds\\_theses](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=cc_etds_theses) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> ElBaradei Mohamed (2011) *The Age of Deception*. New York: Picador, pp. 146-147. Cited at: Charbonneau, Louis (2013) *A Decade of Failure...* P. 34, available at [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=cc\\_etds\\_theses](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=cc_etds_theses) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Kerr, Paul (2005) IAEA Unlikely to Refer Iran to Security Council. *Arms Control Today*, available at [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005\\_11/NOV-Iran](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005_11/NOV-Iran) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Polit.Ru (2006) Iran Perenosit Peregovory Na Svoyu Territoriyu [Iran Moves Negotiations to Its Own Territory], available at <http://polit.ru/news/2006/02/21/irantalks/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> Iskenderov, Petr (2006) Obogascheniye Usloviy [The Enrichment of Conditions]. *Vremya*, available at <http://www.vremya.ru/2006/34/5/146447.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> Katz, Mark N. (2006) 'Putin, Ahmadinejad and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis.' Middle East Policy Council, available at <https://mars.gmu.edu/jspui/bitstream/handle/1920/3020/Putin%20Ahmadinejad%20and%20Iranian%20Nuclear%20Crisis.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

The United States advocated for the immediate transfer of Iran's nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council and the imposition of harsh sanctions against Iran, something that Russia and China were opposed to since it would further complicate the situation<sup>49</sup>. However, Tehran's continuous defiance of the IAEA Board of Governors and the consequent UN Security Council resolutions, reluctance to engage in productive negotiations, as well as the rejection of a number of initiatives, including those proposed by Moscow, made the Russian leadership cooperate with the rest of the P5 in imposing of the UN Security Council resolutions on Iran.<sup>50</sup> Still, Russia always called for exercising restraint in the adoption of tough measures and opposed antagonizing of the Iranian leadership. Moscow insisted that the discussion on Iran's nuclear program be held in conjunction with Article 41 of the UN Charter, which excluded the use of military force to compel Iran to fulfill the provisions of the resolution.<sup>51</sup>

When drafting the UN sanctions against Iran, the P5, especially the United States, had to take into account another two issues – (1) they had to allow for certain Russian weapons sale to Iran, and (2) the construction of the Bushehr NPP could not be delegitimized or in any way affected.<sup>52</sup> Russia had a firm intention to complete the project, as long as it was under the IAEA safeguards, and envisaged further plans for nuclear cooperation with Iran.

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<sup>49</sup> Suponina, Elena (2006) 'Sanktsii Protiv Iran Otkladyvayutsya' [Sanctions Against Iran are Postponed]. *Vremya*, available at <http://www.vremya.ru/2006/15/5/144335.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> The 2010 NPT RevCon statement by P5, delivered by the Russian delegation, was in a striking contrast to what the Russian delegation had ever stated on Iran: "The proliferation risks presented by the Iranian nuclear programme remain of serious concern to us. We underscore the importance of Iran's full and immediate compliance with its international obligations. We urge Iran to respond to the concerns of the international community by complying promptly and fully with the relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions and with the requirements of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)." See: Statement by the People's Republic of China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America to the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference (2010). United Nations, available at [http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/statements/pdf/russia5\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2010/statements/pdf/russia5_en.pdf) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> RIA Novosti (2008) 'Rezolyutsiya OON i Zayavleniye "Shesterki" Dolzhny Povliyat na Iran – Churkin' [Churkin: The UN Resolution and the P5+1 Statement Must Influence Iran], available at <https://ria.ru/world/20080304/100550871.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>52</sup> Gornostayev, Dmitry (2007) 'Rossiya Vyshla iz-pod Sanktsiy OON' [Russia is not Sanctioned by the UN Anymore]. *Kommersant*, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/753194> (17 May, 2021).

To that end, in 2001 — even before the crisis around Iran's nuclear program took place and despite the domestic opposition to the bill — Russia adopted a new law allowing for the import of spent nuclear fuel (SNF). The rationale behind this move was two-fold: Russia would manage both to bring back the SNF from the Bushehr NPP to address the long-time U.S. proliferation-related concerns, and to create the legal basis for the construction of an international SNF storage under the auspices of the IAEA, something that could help Russia join a potentially beneficial market.<sup>53</sup> Securing a bilateral agreement with Iran on SNF turned out to be extremely difficult (the Iranians required Russia to pay them for taking the SNF back to Russia)<sup>54</sup>; however, by 2005, the Russian officials completed the negotiations on terms acceptable to Russia<sup>55</sup>. The first delivery of nuclear fuel and the subsequent physical startup of the Bushehr NPP helped restore Iran's confidence in Russia as a reliable partner in the nuclear field that had eroded due to Moscow's support for the UN sanctions against Tehran. This maintained the Russian presence in Iran which, in the Russian view, was critical for further negotiations on Iran's nuclear program.

In 2009, Iran happened to run out of fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor that was shipped to Iran before the Islamic Revolution by the United States and informed the IAEA about this issue. By that time, the election of President Obama instilled hope in many countries, including Russia, that the long-standing deadlock over Iran's nuclear program could be overcome. As Robert Einhorn recalls, the United States came up with the idea that it could cooperate to supply fuel for that reactor and buy some time and space for more comprehensive negotiation. In exchange, the Iranians would ship out of the country enough uranium so that for a substantial period of time they would not have enough enriched uranium required for a single

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<sup>53</sup> Melikova, Natalya; Samarina, Aleksandra; Vaganov, Andrey (2004) 'Moskva i MAGATE Dovolny Drug Drugom' [Moscow and the IAEA are Happy with Each Other]. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, available at [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-06-30/1\\_magate.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-06-30/1_magate.html) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>54</sup> Kornysheva, Alena (2004) 'Aleksandr Rumyantsev ne Poyedet v Iran' [Aleksandr Rumyantsev Will not Go to Iran]. *Kommersant*, available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/449573> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Vesti.Ru (2005) *Rossiya i Iran Podpisali Dokument o Vozvrate OYaT s AES v Bushere* [Russia and Iran Signed a Document on the Return of Spent Nuclear Fuel from the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant], available at <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=60811> (17 May, 2021).



bomb. The U.S. delegation, under his leadership, went to Moscow and agreed to jointly present this proposal to the IAEA. Delivered by the Agency, the Iranians accepted it on October 1, 2009, and less than three weeks later, when the time came to draw up the details in Vienna, they walked away from it.<sup>56</sup>

Even though President Ahmadinejad was believed to be supporting the agreement, the domestic considerations in Iran, which took place against the background of the controversial re-election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad ruined this so-called fuel-swap deal. Conservative officials defended Iran's right to enrich, doubted the necessity of any cooperation with the West, and portrayed the deal as a defeat of Iran.<sup>57</sup> The Tehran declaration adopted later by Brazil, Turkey, and Iran was of no help. Iran possessed more LEU and could produce 20%-enriched uranium, and that declaration was subsequently rejected by the P5+1 negotiators.<sup>58</sup> Further escalation was inevitable – on June 9, 2010, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1929 (2010), which imposed the harshest sanctions, including an embargo on heavy arms sales to Iran.

To sum up, the developments regarding the Iranian nuclear program and the revelations of the undeclared nuclear activities did not change the overall Russian strategy on Iran; however, they exposed the red lines for and limitations to such policy, i.e. the transparency of Tehran's nuclear activities, its full adherence to the IAEA safeguards and cooperation with the Agency. Lack of such cooperation provided for more cooperation between Moscow and Washington on tailoring the UN Security Council sanctions on Iran. Russia was ready to engage in diplomatic efforts that would ease the tensions over the nuclear issue; however, there happened to be no case in which both the U.S. and Iranian leaders were ready to negotiate: Barack Obama and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were a no better match for a successful negotiation than George Bush and Mohammad Khatami.

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<sup>56</sup> Einhorn, Robert (2017) Interview on the margins of the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference. Washington, D.C.

<sup>57</sup> Benari, Elad (2011) 'WikiLeaks: Ahmadinejad Wanted Fuel Swap Deal.' Israel National News, available at <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/141550> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Arms Control Association (2014) History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue, available at [https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran\\_Nuclear\\_Proposals](https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals) (17 May, 2021).

**Lessons.** We can draw four more lessons from the experience of U.S.-Russian dialogue on Iran between 2001 and 2010:

1. *Since international agreements are vulnerable to domestic political pressures, continuity and predictability of national policies are key to confidence*<sup>59</sup>.

U.S., Russian, and Iranian administrations changed at least once over this period. The Bush administration pursued an extremely tough policy on Iran, which made it more difficult for President Khatami to promote open dialogue. Iran also dismissed the 'Bushehr-only' informal agreement with Russia in a way that Russia walked out of the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement. The election of Mahmud Ahmadi-najad had a negative impact on the E3 negotiations with Iran. However, both the U.S. and Iranian administrations were relatively upfront and predictable, while Russia often was not.

On the one hand, Russia repeatedly declared its policy on Iran's nuclear program mostly depended on that country's cooperation with the IAEA, and would not affect other areas. On the other hand, in 2010, the Medvedev government supported the imposition of an arms trade embargo on Iran under UN Security Council Resolution 1929. Furthermore, Russia imposed additional unilateral sanctions on Iran prohibiting the sale of Russian the SA-20 (C-300) surface-to-air missile system to Iran, though the contract had been already signed and was legitimate under international law. Tehran's confidence in Moscow was so low that Iran would rather reach an agreement with the United States than with Russia.<sup>60</sup>

2. *Stigmatizing one's counterpart prevents one from beginning negotiations.*

In 2003, Iran suggested bilateral negotiations with the United States on a variety of issues including its nuclear program.<sup>61</sup> At that time, Iran had as few as 164 centrifuges<sup>62</sup>, and its relatively moderate

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<sup>59</sup> Lavrov, Sergei (2016) Interview for the "V Krug Sveta". Echo Moskvyy Radio Station, available at <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/sorokina/41143/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Benari, Elad. Op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> Roadmap for U.S.-Iranian Negotiations (2003), available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/us\\_iran\\_1roadmap.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/us_iran_1roadmap.pdf) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, Jeffrey (2015) 'Heading off an even bigger problem in Iran.' The Boston Globe, available at <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/07/18/heading-off-even-bigger-problem-iran/JoNSCMQMmuBJUrm8KbxAjM/story.html> (17 May, 2021).

leadership under President Khatami was ready to engage with the country they have officially deemed 'evil' since 1979. Iran might have been either worried about the possibility of an overwhelming U.S. air attack after the display of U.S. airpower during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, or willing to build on the success of its modest cooperation with the United States on Afghanistan. However, the U.S. leadership thought of Iran as part of the notorious 'axis of evil' and rejected any dialogue with the 'rogue' state.

This demonstrated to Iran that the U.S. leadership was not interested in resolving the problems with Iran's nuclear program collaboratively, rather the goal was suppression by any means. Had the United States not pursued such a policy, it would have been easier for the Bush administration to begin negotiations with Iran (at least secretly) at a time, when Iran made the first step. Instead, the United States wasted this opportunity.

### *3. Interpersonal relations matter; the higher the level of communication is, the better.*

Good working relations with one's counterparts help understand each other and address the most important issues in a delicate manner. However, without clear high-level leadership, it is almost impossible to translate ideas into reality. The political environment, to a large extent, depends on functional relations between heads of states; if the heads of state cannot stand each other then diplomats find it hard to resolve the situation.<sup>63</sup>

Then-Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Igor Ivanov claims that in 2006 he paid a visit to Washington and managed to convince President Bush to join the emerging P5+1 format.<sup>64</sup> Just three years after rejecting any negotiations with Iran, the U.S. joined talks structured such as there would be no incentive

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<sup>63</sup> This lesson would have worked in the normal state of the U.S.-Russia dialogue. However, as the experience of the Trump administration has demonstrated, the absence of working-level contacts may undermine the agreements arrived at in the highest spheres. Given that bureaucracies have the agency to sabotage the outcomes of whatever summit, it is advisable that the higher level encounters be preceded by working-level engagements.

<sup>64</sup> Ivanov, Igor (2017) Speech at the Conference "25 Years of U.S.-Russia Relations: From Cold War to New Cold War?" Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjaKkfchV3M> (17 May, 2021).

to move forward. Clearly, that would be nearly impossible to achieve without good communication.

4. *Isolation is not the best strategy to deal with threshold states because it leads to a lack of credible information on those countries. That requires confidence-building and economic cooperation, as well as expert-level knowledge exchange.*

During this period, all the negotiators — the E3, Russia, and the United States, as well as the IAEA, suffered from information shortfalls on Iran's nuclear program. Besides, the Bush administration suspended the practice of occasional consultations with Iran<sup>65</sup>, which aggravated the situation.<sup>66, 67</sup> In the absence of economic interaction or business-like exchanges between the two countries, it should not be surprising that the two countries had a distorted image of each other. One cannot forcefully make a country more transparent, it can become so only voluntarily, which requires confidence-building through expert-level dialogue and economic cooperation.

## 2011–2016. Russia Facilitates Negotiations

**Political background.** The absence of progress with Iran at the very beginning of Obama's presidency maintained the key elements of the U.S. policy on Iran — designating Iranian entities and individuals under the counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism statutes, as well as building an international coalition to support more and more stringent sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially in the energy and banking sectors.<sup>68</sup> Having built "the most comprehensive and biting sanctions regime that the Iranian government has ever faced," the Obama administration made it clear that Iran had an opportunity to avoid sanctions through diplomacy.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Burns, Nicholas (2008) 'We Should Talk to Our Enemies,' Newsweek.

<sup>66</sup> Khlopkov, Anton; Lata, Vasily. Op. cit. P. 13

<sup>67</sup> There is evidence, though, that some factions within the Bush administration wanted to continue Clinton's policy of engaging the Khatami government. See: Slavin, Barbara (2009) *Bitter Friends, Bosom Enemies: Iran, the U.S., and the Twisted Path to Confrontation*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, pp. 197–198.

<sup>68</sup> Maloney, Suzanne (2011) 'Progress of the Obama Administration's Policy Toward Iran.' The Brookings Institution, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/progress-of-the-obama-administrations-policy-toward-iran/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>69</sup> The White House (2012) *On-the-Record Conference Call on Iran Sanctions*, available at <https://www.hsdil.org/?view&did=737829> (17 May, 2021).

Meanwhile, the third term of President Putin observed a gradual improvement of Russia-Iran relations.<sup>70</sup> In part, the shared suspicious outlook on the West, although of a different scale and nature, provided some base for political cooperation. Iran had to diversify its economic activities and partners to compensate for the crippling effect of the U.S. as well as the EU sanctions.<sup>71</sup>

It was clear to the Russian leadership that the P5+1 strategy on Iran yielded hardly any results. Russia believed that UNSC sanctions exhausted their potential, but the U.S. and EU unilateral sanctions could undermine any positive dynamics and threatened to stir political turmoil in Iran. At a certain point, Russia doubted whether the primary goal of its Western counterparts was to bring back Iran to the table or to change the regime by putting as much pressure on it as they could.<sup>72</sup>

Russia wanted to avoid another major crisis in the region, already suffering from the Syrian crisis. As in many other cases, Russia considered a political solution the only acceptable. However, the U.S. approach, which was to a certain extent shared by its European allies, was centered around sanctions. Furthermore, the U.S. leadership initially considered both political and military ways of resolving the crisis; however, later they resorted to negotiations as their main strategy.

As with all the diplomats who negotiated the agreement on Iran's nuclear program, Russians were innovative and strongly oriented on

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<sup>70</sup> The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation mentioned Iran in the context of the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. Russia called for a conducting the dialogue on step-by-step and reciprocity principle. See: 'Kontseptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii' [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (2013), available at [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186) (17 May, 2021).

The 2016 version of the document mentioned "all-encompassing development of Russia's cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran" and the implementation of the JCPOA among its goals. See: 'Kontseptsiya Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii' [The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation] (2016), available at [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>71</sup> Kozhanov Nikolay (2015) Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations. Carnegie Moscow Center, 2015, available at <https://carnegie.ru/2015/06/15/ru-pub-60391> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>72</sup> Ryabkov, Sergei (2012) 'Sanktsii Protiv Irana: Resurs Ischerpan' [Sanctions Against Iran: Resource Depleted]. Index Bezopasnosti (Security Index Journal), available at [http://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/169622](http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/169622) (17 May, 2021).

results. In 2011, while paying a visit to Washington, D.C., Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested a 'step-by-step' plan of reciprocal measures from the P5+1 countries and Iran.<sup>73</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov described the logic behind that plan:

We elaborated this plan based on the fact that the level of trust between the P5+1 and Iran was not even at point zero, it was below that figure. To begin restoring trust and then move towards a mutually acceptable resolution, we had to start from something relatively easy. [...] In our view, the first small step from the Iranian side could be freezing the number of operating centrifuges, refraining from launching new centrifuges within the existing cascades, refraining from developing new cascades, refraining from feeding [UF6 – A.M.] gas into the cascade of already spinning centrifuges, etc. In return, the P5+1 could – after the verification by the IAEA, which is very important, refrain from imposing new sanctions – first, the unilateral ones. Then, while moving towards more complicated measures [...] the international community could even address Iran's concerns in the field of security, including confidence-building measures at sea. Respective steps were put into four stages which shaped the core of our plan. We believe such a scheme could be well efficient.<sup>74</sup>

However, it was difficult for the U.S. diplomats to compromise with the Iranians, considering domestic pressure by Congress, which was inclined to maximize gains and minimize responsibilities of the U.S., with a significant fraction of Congress being ideologically opposed to *any* deal with Iran. Despite the opposition, the Obama administration went as far as to engage in secret bilateral negotiations with Iran in 2012 and did its best to pave the road for an agreement with Iran. Both the U.S. and Iranian leadership displayed a strong willingness to pursue the path of negotiations.

**Results.** The most significant achievement of this period is that it marked two options averted: a nuclear-armed Iran and a war against

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<sup>73</sup> Arms Control Association (2014) History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue, available at [https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran\\_Nuclear\\_Proposals](https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Iran_Nuclear_Proposals) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>74</sup> Ryabkov, Sergei. Op. cit.

Iran.<sup>75</sup> Notably, the framework for the negotiations between P5+1 and Iran was suggested by the Russians. However, the American side believes that the Russian step-by-step initiative had no impact on the course of negotiations. Robert Einhorn opines this initiative was not "terribly helpful" because Moscow "recognized that Iran had a right to an enrichment program before the U.S. was prepared to grant a limited enrichment program to Iran."

However, it is important to underline two facts: (1) Iran would not agree on anything even under sanctions had the United States continued its efforts to deprive Iran of its enrichment program; and (2) in 2013, the P5+1 and Iran each suggested a modified version of the Russian plan, and after the election of President Hassan Rouhani, the parties managed to hammer out the Joint Plan of Action — the first diplomatic document in many years endorsed both in Washington and Tehran. Further negotiations led to the conclusion of the JCPOA, which placed Iran under an unprecedentedly intrusive inspections regime<sup>76</sup> trusted by all parties to the agreement and the international community.

Robert Einhorn highlights the role Moscow played in facilitating the negotiation:

In terms of U.S. engagement in Iran, I don't have any regrets. I think the JCPOA is a good nuclear deal, I think our cooperation with Russia on Iran was very positive. I think Russia played a critical role in getting this agreement. [...] Russia has the influence with Iran to be very helpful. It has the technical expertise, and it has influence by virtue of the commercial relationship. The initial Bushehr reactor, the negotiations for subsequent sales of the VVER reactors — so Russia is in a critical place, and the U.S. found cooperation with Russia critical to a successful negotiation. It's going to remain critical in the future.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Parsi, Trita (2017) 'Behind the Scenes of the Iran Nuclear Deal,' Interview for The Leonard Lopate Show, available at <http://www.wnyc.org/story/inside-story-iran-nuclear-deal/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>76</sup> Amano, Yukiya (2017) Reflections on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Speech at Danish Institute for International Studies, available at <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/statements/reflections-on-the-joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>77</sup> Einhorn, Robert. Op. cit.

Russia is believed to have found the ways to resolve some of the most contentious issues in the JCPOA such as setting the 300-kg threshold for LEU stockpile, inventing the mechanism to snap back sanctions on Iran, and converting the Fordow facility. In the interview with the author, Robert Einhorn called the enriched uranium cap "the biggest breakthrough" and credited the Russian delegation for persuading the Iranians to agree on it: "What was so critical about that was if you reduce the uranium stockpile to a low level, that allows you to increase the number of operating centrifuges while still keeping breakout time to at least one year."<sup>78</sup>

Russia could also be credited for inventing a 'snap-back' sanctions mechanism wherein punitive sanctions against Iran are automatically invoked in case of non-compliance unless the UNSC, subject to its own veto power, votes to cancel.<sup>79</sup> However, Russians do not take pride in these 'so-called achievements' and consider these provisions unnecessary. They believe these provisions derive from American phobias that Iran would all of a sudden walk out of the deal or cheat on the IAEA. However, it is not the break-out potential, but the IAEA verification regime that is of vital importance, and the parties to the JCPOA should therefore ensure that Iran abides by IAEA regulations. Russia had to address these concerns: diplomats formulated the 'snap-back' mechanism according to the UN procedures, and nuclear physicists from Rosatom suggested the 300 kg threshold. What Russians are proud of is the conversion of the Fordow facility to the production of stable isotopes for medical purposes, instead of removing the centrifuges.<sup>80</sup>

Another contentious issue in the negotiations was the imposition of restrictions on conventional arms and missile technology trade with Iran for five and eight years respectively. Russia and China opposed such measures at the very early stage of the JCPOA negotiations; however, the P5+1 and Iran eventually addressed the U.S. concerns regarding arms trade with Iran and managed to reach a compromise on the duration of these restrictions.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Einhorn, Robert. Op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> Sherman, Wendi (2017) 'Top "Iran Deal" Negotiator Sees Limits to U.S.-Russian Cooperation.' *Russia Matters*, available at <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/top-iran-deal-negotiator-sees-limits-us-russian-cooperation> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on nonproliferation and Iran's nuclear program (2017).

<sup>81</sup> Einhorn, Robert (2015) 'Debating the Iran nuclear deal: A former American negotiator outlines the battleground issues.' *The Brookings Institution*, available at



When the JCPOA was concluded, its implementation was yet another challenge. All the excessive enriched uranium and certain types of Iran's equipment had to be transported to the Russian Federation by the end of 2015. Such a limited time-frame imposed logistical difficulties and required collaborative actions, recalls Vladimir Kuchinov, Advisor to the Rosatom Director General:

A close cooperation on this issue with the U.S. colleagues should be noted since in exchange for the uranium products, they delivered, as a guarantee, natural uranium from Kazakhstan to Iran. The day when the plane with uranium landed in Iran, the remaining part of the materials were placed on Mikhail Dudin ship, and on December 28, 2015, the ship left for Saint Petersburg, where it got in February. This helped the IAEA to confirm the implementation of the JCPOA.<sup>82</sup>

Both, Russia and the United States, along with the rest of the JCPOA members, also took other efforts to implement the JCPOA, which involved their cooperation with Iran. Shipping out the excessive heavy water from Iran to Russia and the United States are among such efforts.<sup>83</sup>

All in all, this period of the U.S.-Russian dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program, as much as the broader multilateral effort that brought about the JCPOA, could be called exemplary. Even amid the spiraling tensions between Russia and the United States over Ukraine and Syria could not derail the negotiations, which is indicative of the parties' commitment to diplomacy. The negotiators of both the United States and Russia invested the maximum of their creativity and knowledge to find a balanced agreement rich with technical details that helped the sides to compromise.

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<https://www.brookings.edu/research/debating-the-iran-nuclear-deal-a-former-american-negotiator-outlines-the-battleground-issues/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>82</sup> Kuchinov Vladislav (2017) 'SVPD i Razvitiye Sotrudnichestva s Iranom v Oblasti Mirnogo Ispolzovaniya Atomnoy Energii' [JCPOA and the Development of Cooperation with Iran in Peaceful Atom]. CENESS, available at <http://ceness-russia.org/rus/conf2017/materials/2063/2138/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Sputnik News (2016) 'Iran Delivers 38 Tonnes of Heavy Water to Russia in September,' available at <https://sputniknews.com/business/201609261045699559-iran-russia-heavy-water/> (17 May, 2021).

**Lessons.** Here are a few final lessons that the U.S.-Russian cooperation on Iran yielded over the period concerned:

1. *Pressure and sanctions in themselves cannot resolve an issue, there must be incentives as well.*

U.S. foreign policy is largely associated with sanctions and pressure. However, it seems to yield modest results. By applying too much pressure and offering few incentives, even the most powerful country cannot achieve a reliable, working, and stable agreement. Sanctions can have their effect, but only with corresponding incentives, otherwise one is causing harm to people without offering a way out.

2. *There should be no preconditions to start negotiations on a complex issue. It is more effective to begin from small steps.*

There is value in isolating certain issues and making progress where progress is possible even if all the sources of friction in a relationship cannot be addressed. Although many critics of the JCPOA claimed that the agreement did not address the broader U.S. concerns related to Iran's regional policies, ballistic missile program, among others, it is the separation of the nuclear issue from the rest of the contentious items on agenda that helped to reach the agreement.<sup>84</sup>

3. *Multilateral negotiation could eventually be more successful than bilateral.*

As the IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano believed, 'even complex and challenging issues can be tackled effectively if all parties are committed to dialogue — not dialogue for its own sake, but dialogue aimed at achieving results'.<sup>85</sup> It is politically harder to quit an agreement negotiated multilaterally, and even after one quits, the deal does not immediately cease to exist, which makes multilateral agreements more sustainable.

4. *Nonpolitical technical cooperation is the key to successful negotiations.*

Unbiased, nonpartisan, nonpolitical, and technical — all these adjectives match the description of IAEA activities. The 'twin-track'

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<sup>84</sup> Einhorn, Robert, Op. cit., 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Amano, Yukiya. Op. cit.

approach ensured the political environment of the nuclear talks did not influence the technical dialogue between Iran and the IAEA. 'The IAEA was able to make a vital contribution, and maintain the confidence of all sides, by sticking to its technical mandate and not straying into politics. Virtually every political breakthrough in recent years was preceded by a technical agreement between the IAEA and Iran. This objective and factual approach will continue to characterize our work in the coming years'.<sup>86</sup>

## 2017–2020. The U.S. Unravels the Deal

Since the beginning of his campaign, Donald Trump has called the JCPOA 'the worst deal ever negotiated',<sup>87</sup> but it took the Trump administration more than a year to review the legacy of President Obama. Days after Trump took office, his first National Security Adviser, Michael Flynn, announced that the United States is 'officially putting Iran on notice' in connection with its missile launches.<sup>88</sup>

Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and the second National Security Adviser in the Trump Administration Herbert McMaster had a stabilizing influence on the President for which they were called 'Axis of Adults'. Despite the critical attitude towards Iran in general, the senior officials believed the Iran deal met the U.S. national interests. It was more difficult though to convince President Trump of this.

The need for a so-called certification of the JCPOA was an expected problem. According to the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA), every 90 days the U.S. President should inform Congress that Tehran is fulfilling its obligations and that removing sanctions from this country is in the interests of Washington. During the JCPOA negotiations, although this is a legally-non-binding agreement, the Congress wanted to have leverage and oversight with respect to lifting of the U.S. sanctions against Iran, a power that had been

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<sup>86</sup> Amano, Yukiya. Op. cit.

<sup>87</sup> Torbati, Yeganeh (2016) 'Trump election puts Iran nuclear deal on shaky ground.' Reuters, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-iran/trump-election-puts-iran-nuclear-deal-on-shaky-ground-idUSKBN13427E> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>88</sup> 'Trump White House says it's "putting Iran on notice."' (2017). CNBC, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/01/trump-white-house-says-its-putting-iran-on-notice.html> (17 May, 2021).

delegated to the President.<sup>89</sup> This relic of the relationship between the Republican Congress and the Democratic President during the Obama presidency threatened to derail the JCPOA certification under the new circumstances when the primary threat to the agreement was coming from the White House.

In April 2016, the Trump administration conducted its first certification of the JCPOA; however, the U.S. adopted new sanctions against the Iranian missile program and launched a full review of the U.S. strategy on Iran. Even the declaration on certification of the JCPOA, published on the State Department's website, was entitled 'Iran Continues To Sponsor Terrorism'.<sup>90</sup>

By July's deadline for certification, a new strategy on Iran was not ready, and the President spent an hour telling his advisors how he did not want to confirm the implementation of the agreement.<sup>91</sup> Eventually, Trump agreed to do this but told the Wall Street Journal that the Iranians were not in compliance with the JCPOA: 'They don't comply. And so we'll see what happens. I mean, we'll talk about this subject in 90 days. But, yeah, I would be — I would be surprised if they were in compliance.' Another remark in this interview made his intentions regarding the JCPOA crystal clear: 'We've been extremely nice to them in saying they were compliant, OK? We've given them the benefit of every doubt. But we're doing very detailed studies. And personally, I have great respect for my people. If it was up to me, I would have had them noncompliant 180 days ago'.<sup>92</sup>

In his speech on October 13, 2017, Trump refused to certify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA. He claimed that Iran had committed numerous violations of the agreement but mentioned only three relatively minor issues: the excess of the agreed level of heavy water, disagreement on the use of advanced types of centrifuges

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<sup>89</sup> Goldsmith, Jack L. (2015) Why Congress is effectively powerless to stop the Iran deal. The Brookings Institution, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/07/21/why-congress-is-effectively-powerless-to-stop-the-iran-deal/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>90</sup> Tillerson, Rex W. (2017) Iran Continues To Sponsor Terrorism. Department of State, available at <https://ru.usembassy.gov/iran-continues-sponsor-terrorism-press-statement-rex-w-tillerson-secretary-state/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>91</sup> Baker, Peter (2017) Trump Recertifies Iran Nuclear Deal, but Only Reluctantly. The New York Times, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal-recertify.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Dawsey, Josh; Gold, Hadas (2017) Full transcript: Trump's Wall Street Journal interview. Politico, available at <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/01/trump-wall-street-journal-interview-full-transcript-241214> (17 May, 2021).

which arose because of the vague language of the agreement, and intimidation of international inspectors who allegedly could not fully exercise their mandate, an incident that had never been reflected in public documents.

President Trump referenced the so-called sunset provisions – temporary restrictions under the JCPOA that, once exhausted, were believed to allow for a rapid nuclear break-out of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Another critical point for the administration was the absence of any limitations to Iran's ballistic missile program. However, the President's speech was not about these drawbacks of the JCPOA; it was about the current political regime in Iran that had to be countered through a comprehensive strategy.<sup>93</sup>

Setting the non-nuclear part of the new Iran strategy aside, it is important to mention that President Trump instructed his administration to work closely with Congress and allies to address the flaws of the agreement and threatened to cancel U.S. participation in the JCPOA in case no solution was found. On January 12, 2018, Donald Trump refused to certify Iran's compliance with the JCPOA and made a last warning on his withdraw from the deal if it was not fixed.<sup>94</sup>

Amid the European efforts to negotiate a follow-on agreement or fix the JCPOA, President Trump sent a clear signal on the JCPOA by replacing two of the three top advisors in his administration by those who are believed to share his hawkish outlook on foreign affairs and specifically the Iran deal. On March 13, 2018, Donald Trump fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and referred to the disagreements, mainly over the JCPOA, as the key reason.<sup>95</sup> Tillerson was replaced

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<sup>93</sup> "Our policy is based on a clear-eyed assessment of the Iranian dictatorship, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its continuing aggression in the Middle East and all around the world. Iran is under the control of a fanatical regime that seized power in 1979 and forced a proud people to submit to its extremist rule. This radical regime has raided the wealth of one of the world's oldest and most vibrant nations, and spread death, destruction, and chaos all around the globe," said Trump and mentioned the seizure of the U.S. diplomats in 1979, multiple bombings of American embassies and military objects, support for Hezbollah and al Qaeda, as well as sectarian violence and civil wars across the Middle East, among others. See: The White House (2017) Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy, available at <https://ru.usembassy.gov/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>94</sup> The White House (2018) Statement by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal, available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-iran-nuclear-deal/> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>95</sup> Segarra, Lisa Marie (2018) 'We Disagreed on Things.' Read President Trump's Remarks After Firing Rex Tillerson.' Time, available at <https://time.com/5197334/>

by Mike Pompeo, who fiercely opposed the nuclear accord with Iran as a Republican Representative.<sup>96</sup>

Nearly ten days later, on March 22, 2018, President Trump named John Bolton, former U.S. envoy to the United Nations, an advocate of the invasion of Iran in 2003, as his new National Security Adviser.<sup>97</sup> Needless to recall his op-ed published in the *New York Times* a few months before the JCPOA was concluded that clearly conveyed his message in the title 'To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran'.<sup>98</sup> The appointment of the two individuals left no chance for the survival of the nuclear deal.

Meanwhile, Russia, along with the rest of the JCPOA participants, continued to support the agreement. Russian officials delivered multiple public statements in support of the JCPOA.<sup>99, 100</sup> Moscow made it clear from the very beginning: the JCPOA should be preserved as it is since it was the result of a hard-achieved consensus, also backed by the UN Security Council resolution. In part due to this position, Russian diplomats did not join the EU-U.S. efforts to fix the JCPOA or to develop an add-on agreement so that it could address other issues and concerns related to the Iranian policies.

In May 2018, at the NPT PrepCom in Geneva, Russia and China proposed a joint statement in support of the JCPOA open to all the NPT Member-States.<sup>101</sup> Even though the text was politically

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we-disagreed-on-things-read-president-trumps-remarks-after-firing-rex-tillerson/ (17 May, 2021).

<sup>96</sup> Costello, Ryan (2017) Trump CIA Pick Hyped Facts On Iran, Downplayed Costs Of War. *Huffington Post*, available at [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-costello/trump-cia-pick-hyped-fact\\_b\\_13181260.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-costello/trump-cia-pick-hyped-fact_b_13181260.html) (17 May, 2021).

<sup>97</sup> *Financial Times* (2018) Iran deal at risk due to John Bolton's extremism, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/a89388f8-422f-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>98</sup> Bolton, John R. (2015) To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran. *The New York Times*, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/opinion/to-stop-irans-bomb-bomb-iran.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>99</sup> TASS (2017) Putin vows Russia will keep on backing Iran deal, available at <http://tass.com/politics/968914> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>100</sup> TASS (2018) Lavrov slams U.S. statements on Iran nuclear deal, available at <http://tass.com/politics/985052> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>101</sup> Joint Statement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China at the Second Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (2018), available at [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3209161](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3209161) (17 May, 2021).

neutral and avoided a blame-game, only around 25 countries supported it. Most of the other countries avoided publicly siding with Russia and China as they were concerned that this move would be perceived as one pursued against the United States. However, a vast majority of delegations expressed their support for the JCPOA in their national statements.

Russia continued to implement the JCPOA by redesigning the Fordow enrichment facility so that Iran could produce only stable isotopes useful for medical purposes. When Iran introduced uranium hexafluoride into 1044 centrifuges at Fordo, Rosatom paused the reconfiguration project in December 2019. There were two reasons behind the decision: first, it was technically impossible to enrich uranium and produce stable isotopes at the same facility, second, the United States had revoked the waiver for the Fordo project.<sup>102</sup> However, Moscow remained committed to the project and is willing to continue its implementation once Tehran halts enrichment activities and cleans up the facility.<sup>103</sup> Beyond the JCPOA, Russia moved on with the Bushehr project. In November 2019, Rosatom launched the construction of the second unit of the NPP.<sup>104</sup>

**Results.** As of August 2020, the outcomes of the Trump administration's policies on Iran were purely negative because President Trump ignored the lessons learned by the previous U.S. administrations. First, his administration's foreign policy was inconsistent with the pledges previously made by the United States. Donald Trump was predictable in his approach to Iran and did deliver on his promise to leave the Iran deal, but withdrawing from the hard-achieved agreement ruined the credibility of the U.S. leadership. Against the backdrop of Iran's continued commitment to the JCPOA, it was the United States — not 'just the Trump administration' — that posed as a deal-breaker.

<sup>102</sup> TASS (2019) Ryabkov: RF Vystupayet Protiv Ispolzovaniya Mekhanizma Razresheniya Sporov v Iranskoj Sdelke [Ryabkov: Russia Opposes Triggering Dispute Resolution Mechanism in Iran NuclearDeal], available at <https://tass.ru/politika/7288837> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>103</sup> RBC (2019) 'Rossiya Svernula Proekt na Iranskom Zavode v Fordo iz-za Deystviy Tegerana' [Russia Shut Down the Project at Fordow due to Tehran's Actions], available at <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5dc2a3739a79473c79c891ec> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>104</sup> RIA Novosti (2019) 'Rossiya i Iran Nachali Stroitelstvo Vtorogo Energobloka AES Busher' [Russia and Iran Started Building the Second Unit of the Bushehr NPP], available at <https://ria.ru/20191110/1560774053.html> (17 May, 2021).

Second, the Trump administration was trying to isolate Iran, with maximum pressure eventually leading to maximum resistance. Following several wind-down periods and having granted temporary waivers, President Trump restored sanctions against Iran in full and then introduced tougher measures. Hopeful about the E3 efforts to maintain economic cooperation with Iran, Tehran abstained from reacting to the new U.S. policies for a year. However, the lack of progress with the launching of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) resulted in growing frustration among the Iranian leaders.<sup>105</sup> Multiple incidents that took place in the region after May 2019 led to a military escalation, with Washington and Tehran stopping short of war in January 2020 when, in response to President Trump's order to kill General Qasem Soleimani, Iran attacked two U.S. military bases in Iraq with missiles.

Nevertheless, Iran maintained full cooperation with the IAEA – even the COVID-19 pandemic had no negative impact on the monitoring and verification in Iran.<sup>106</sup> In August 2020, during the visit of the IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi to Tehran, the Iranians committed to providing access to two facilities the IAEA inspectors suspected of having hosted nuclear material and previously undeclared activities carried out in the early 2000s.<sup>107</sup> However, the Iranians took five steps to reduce their commitments under the JCPOA and rejected any technical limitations to the enrichment and R&D program, effectively reducing the so-called break-out time from one year down to about four months.<sup>108</sup> In triggering the Iranians to retaliate in this manner, the Trump administration crossed out one of the key benefits that resulted from the nuclear deal.

Third, the Trump administration refused to compartmentalize the nuclear and non-nuclear issues with Iran, something that had

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<sup>105</sup> Remarks by Abbas Araghchi, Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, Iran (2019). Moscow Nonproliferation Conference, available at <https://youtu.be/49H8oGYLW1M?t=1410> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>106</sup> IAEA (2020) Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015). Report by the Director General. IAEA, available at <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/06/gov2020-26.pdf> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>107</sup> Hafezi, Parisa; Murphy, Francois (2020) Iran relents on IAEA inspections at two sites, ending standoff. Reuters, available at <https://reuters.com/article/world-News/idUSKBN25M1J7> (17 May 2021).

<sup>108</sup> Katzman, Kenneth (2020) What are the alternatives to the Iran nuclear deal? Atlantic Council, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/what-are-the-alternatives-to-the-iran-nuclear-deal/> (17 May, 2021).



made the nuclear deal possible. President Trump wanted a comprehensive deal indefinitely limiting Iran's nuclear program, covering its regional policies and ballistic missile program, an idea abandoned by the Obama administration. President Obama preferred to set relatively achievable goals and address priorities in order, rather than all at once. While Donald Trump made numerous never-accepted proposals on talks, phone calls, and meetings with the Iranian leaders, he used ultimatums to force Iran to agree on all the unachievably high demands Mike Pompeo once voiced.<sup>109</sup> Signing up for such a deal would mean the capitulation of Tehran.

Fourth, by alienating and disregarding its closest partners, the United States isolated itself in the international arena. U.S. allies, partners, and interlocutors — all but Israel and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf — defied the Trump administration's approach to Iran. When Donald Trump pulled the plug on the JCPOA, its administration had not even discussed Plan B with the European allies and counted on President Macron's Twitter post as a demonstration of the European will to work with the United States<sup>110</sup>. The European efforts to find a common ground and address the shared concerns turned out to be futile; President Trump required that all his demands must be met.<sup>111</sup>

By threatening other nations with secondary sanctions, the United States undermined the ability of the remaining participants of the JCPOA to implement the agreement and advance the cause of nonproliferation. Such policies backfired when the United States failed to extend the so-called arms embargo on Iran through the UN Security Council. The attempt to snap-back the UN sanctions against Iran lifted under the JCPOA suffered the same fate.

Regrettably, under the Trump administration the U.S.-Russian framework turned no longer valid for addressing Iran's nuclear issue. Although Russia has better communication with Iran and can be

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<sup>109</sup> Pompeo, Michael R. (2018) Secretary of State. *After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy*. U.S. Department of State, available at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/index.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>110</sup> Department of State (2018) *Background Briefing on President Trump's Decision To Withdraw From the JCPOA*, available at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/background-briefing-on-u-s-withdrawal-from-the-joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action-jcpoa/index.html> (17 May, 2021).

<sup>111</sup> Lederman, Josh (2018) "'Defective at its core': How Trump opted to scrap Iran deal." AP, available at <https://apnews.com/c8553592cda046238d9fa08273b102df> (17 May, 2021).

instrumental in renewing cooperation, Moscow cannot influence the U.S. position on Iran. With the leadership of the two countries holding discording views on Iran, there is little prospect for new achievements, like the JCPOA. If the restoration of the nuclear deal fails, the role of Russia-U.S. dialogue on Iran will be limited to a modest range from contingency diplomacy between Washington and Tehran to avoid a military conflict to a routine exchange of views on the current developments in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

Any way out? Evidently, the Iranian nuclear program and adjacent issues will remain on the international agenda for the foreseeable future. The lessons learned from the Russia-U.S. dialogue suggest a five-stage model for any negotiations with Iran as well as other countries that are engaged in activities raising proliferation concerns.

- Begin dialogue without setting preconditions, threatening, or stigmatizing the other side. Involve interested parties and carefully exchange information on all levels.
- Loosen pressure on and avoid isolating the other side, offer incentives as well.
- Do not demand much in the beginning. Reach the first agreeable, deliverable agreement.
- Adhere to the agreement, be consistent and predictable. Add technical cooperation for verification.
- Work out further agreements on a step-by-step and reciprocal basis. Enhance cooperation in other areas.

Following these recommendations does not guarantee a success. However, the Russia-U.S. dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program has proven this approach effective.