

# Transatlantic antagonisms deepen after Trump threatens withdrawal from Iran deal

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President Donald Trump's declaration Friday that he stands ready to pull the plug on the Iran nuclear deal if it is not renegotiated to Washington's liking has aggravated tensions between Washington and its ostensible European allies, and also been met with domestic criticism.

The sharp differences underscore the deepening polarization of Transatlantic relations, which have deteriorated throughout 2017 as Trump has resorted to "America First" nationalism and the major European powers, above all Germany, have intensified their efforts to advance their own independent imperialist ambitions.

In his White House speech, Trump refused to certify Iran's compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), even though Teheran has repeatedly been found to be meeting its obligations under the deal. Trump imposed sanctions on Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps, and vowed that if Congress fails to pass tougher sanctions against Teheran within 60 days, or the JCPOA cannot be renegotiated, he will blow up the deal.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May reaffirmed in a phone call Sunday their commitment to the JCPOA. The announcement followed a rare joint statement Friday evening in which Merkel, May and French President Emanuel Macron defended the Iranian deal against Trump's attacks, saying it was the "culmination" of 13 years of diplomacy. "We encourage the U.S. administration and Congress to consider the implications to the security of the U.S. and its allies before taking any steps that might undermine the accord," the three leaders stated.

This was accompanied by a terse statement from European Union Foreign Policy High Representative Federica Mogherini, who remarked that the US has no right to cancel the JCPOA since it is a multi-lateral agreement.

Macron spoke by phone with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani Friday, insisting Paris is committed to retaining the deal and, according to AFP, raising the prospect of a trip to Teheran—which would be the first by a French president since 1979.

Iranian leaders responded by appealing to the European powers to stand up to the US. After Rouhani pledged Friday that his regime intends to stick by the JCPOA, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif appealed to Europe for support. "The nuclear deal is a test for Europeans, whether they can play a role in the international scene without the support of the US," he stated. "Europe's resistance will show whether the nuclear deal can be carried on or not."

Speaking to AFP late Saturday, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian urged Washington not to terminate a "good agreement," warning that to do so would provoke an "infernal and very dangerous" situation.

The European powers, with France and Germany taking the lead, have substantially expanded their business activities with Teheran since the 2015 deal. Earlier this year, France's oil and gas conglomerate Total sealed a multi-billion dollar investment in an Iranian gas field which is jointly operated with Qatar. German business groups have projected a quadrupling of the country's trade with Iran by 2020 if the agreement holds.

However, contrary to Trump's comments and Twitter posts, the European powers are not solely motivated by immediate business interests. The abrogation of the deal would have major geostrategic, economic and political implications for European imperialism, including the further destabilization of the Middle East, a new flow of refugees to Europe, and the hampering of the European powers' efforts to advance their own independent interests in the region.

Europe also relies on the Middle East for some 15-25 percent of its oil imports. If these were to dry up, the economic and social convulsions triggered would be dramatic, especially under conditions where social opposition to the right-wing militarist and anti-worker policies pursued by governments across the continent is close to boiling point.

The German press was almost universal in its rejection of Trump's course. *Die Welt* scorned his "me first" policy and blamed Trump for undermining the international community, while an opinion piece by Klaus-Dieter

Frankenburger in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* accused Trump of increasing tensions. Trump's proposal contained "new fuel for the conflict in the Transatlantic relationship," and could "thrust the Middle East into a new and even more dangerous maelstrom than the one it already is stuck in."

Within the United States, opinion on Trump's proposal is divided. While the military establishment and political elite are unanimous in their support for maintaining pressure on Iran as part of Washington's agenda of cementing its control over the energy-rich Middle East, the main fear being expressed is that Trump's vow to jettison the deal will isolate and weaken Washington's hand.

Anthony Blinken, a deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration, warned in the *New York Times* against Trump's attempt to extend the prohibitions on Iran's nuclear program indefinitely and attach conditions that go beyond the scope of the original deal, such as restricting its ballistic missile program. "That would put the United States, not Iran, in violation of the agreement, and isolate Washington, not Teheran, around the world. It would allow Iran to resume its pursuit of nuclear weapons or to stick with the deal for its economic benefits, forcing the United States to sanction its closest allies for doing business with Teheran. It would provide a 'we told you so' gift to Iranian hardliners in their struggle with pragmatists. It would shackle, not advance, Mr. Trump's ability to sign others on to his broader strategy to confront Iranian aggression. More broadly, it would undermine American credibility..." he wrote.

A *Washington Post* editorial struck a similar tone. Opening by denouncing Trump's Iran policy as "an act of political vanity and geopolitical folly," the paper based its opposition on Trump's alleged failure to develop a comprehensive military plan to push back Iranian influence: "Mr. Trump promised additional action to address the non-nuclear threats posed by Iran, including its interventions in Iraq and Syria. The administration is justified in imposing sanctions on Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps. But it appears to have no clear plan to address Iran's military entrenchment in Syria, which is threatening to touch off a new conflict with Israel."

In other words, the *Post* wants US imperialism to focus its attention on the impending clash in Syria between Washington and Iranian-backed militias, which are attempting to establish a land bridge from Teheran to Lebanon by seizing territory formerly controlled by ISIS. With the presence of US military personnel and forces from the European imperialist powers, as well as Russian troops, this conflict has the potential to rapidly escalate.

Former Democratic presidential nominee and secretary of state Hillary Clinton complained that Trump was

"undermining the validity of US promises to other nations," and "upending the kind of trust and credibility of the United States' position and negotiation that is imperative to maintain."

Trump's course was endorsed by several leading Republicans, including Senators Lindsey Graham and Bob Corker, who declared that Congress would not adopt legislation that would result in the US violating the JCPOA.

The divisions within the US ruling elite and the Trump administration itself only heighten the danger of an escalation of the situation in the Middle East. While taking Trump to task over his tactical approach, leading Democrats, together with major newspapers like the *Times* and *Post*, are fully on board with the fraudulent presentation of Iran as the "aggressor" in the current situation. In truth, the overwhelming responsibility for the catastrophic situation in the Middle East and the mounting antagonisms between the imperialist powers lies with Washington, which has waged over a quarter-century of war, laying waste to entire societies, in a desperate bid to retain its global hegemony. US-led wars of aggression in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Somalia, and the conflicts incited in Syria and Yemen, have killed millions and forced millions more from their homes.

The appeals for Trump to stick with the deal therefore have nothing in common with a more peaceful or conciliatory policy, but are rather bound up with the desire to focus US efforts on dealing more broadly on a global scale with its chief rivals, Russia and China. If a compromise solution is reached between Trump and his critics, it will be on the basis of intensifying pressure on Teheran and bullying the European powers to toe the line, escalating conflicts throughout the Middle East and across the Atlantic.

On the other hand, if Congress fails to agree on a common approach within the next two months, Trump would be in a position to cancel the deal, throwing Washington's relations with not only Teheran, but also its European allies, onto a collision course that could rapidly result in military conflagration.



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