

From Donald Trump to Joe Biden: The Adjustment and Continuation of U.S. Policy on Iran's Nuclear Program

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Abstract: This paper is targeted at the policies and adjustments of the United States against the nuclear program of Iran during the administration of Donald Trump and Joe Biden and attempts to analyze the reasons and motivations. After the Trump administration took office, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and implemented an all-round suppression of Iran. On the contrary, President Biden has shown a strong willingness to rejoin the deal and released goodwill to Iran frequently. Biden's policy seems to be significantly different from that of Trump, but it does not deviate from the framework of the Trump administration. This paper explores the foreign policies of the two governments towards Iran through three levels of analysis and uses cognitive psychology to analyze the influence of Trump's personal factors on his policies. It concludes that Trump's policies on Iran nuclear issue during his administration are mainly affected by his political personality and national security environment, while Biden's strategic adjustment to the foreign policy is more influenced by political pressure at home and abroad besides national security.

Keywords: U.S. foreign policy toward Iran, Iran nuclear issue, foreign policy

1. Introduction

The nuclear program of Iran has an important impact on the global political structure and the nuclear non-proliferation regime, the United States' policy towards which is of great importance. After Donald Trump took office, he announced unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and subsequently strengthened a series of economic sanctions against Iran, including the cancellation of "exemptions" for Iran's oil exports and precise economic sanctions on individuals and economic entities related to Iran. After taking office, the Biden administration rejected the previous administration's policy on the Iranian nuclear issue and intends to restart negotiations. The confrontation between the United States and Iran has gradually eased, and the parties involved in the JCPOA are also making new efforts to restart negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue. This paper will analyze the motivations and behavioral logic behind the Trump and Biden administrations' policies towards Iran from the perspective of foreign policy. Based on the background of this issue, this paper analyzes the motives and influences of Trump's policy at different levels and clarifies Biden's current policy towards Iran, in order to explore the main reasons for the changes in the US policy.

2. Review of Iran Nuclear Crisis

The Iranian nuclear program has been turbulent since 2002 and has gradually become an international hotspot. As the conflict of interests between the United States and Iran intensifies, the Iranian nuclear issue has gradually developed into a nuclear crisis. In 2002, Iran's then-President Mohammad Khatami publicly announced that Iran had discovered and refined uranium that could fuel its nuclear power plants, which aroused the attention of the international community, because the uranium enrichment technology is a prerequisite for the manufacture of nuclear weapons. In 2004, Iran's concealment of its nuclear activities caused dissatisfaction with the United States, and Western countries led by the United States demanded that Iran stop all nuclear research. In November 2004, Iran reached the Paris Agreement with the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, promising to voluntarily suspend all plans and interactions related to uranium enrichment in exchange for European countries' support for its entry into the WTO. In 2006, Iran restarted its nuclear program without authorization, prompting strong protests from the United States and other Western countries. Iran's nuclear talks with the EU also collapsed. When then-Iranian President Hassan Rouhani came to power in 2013, as a "pro-Western faction", he gradually retreated on the nuclear issue. In 2015, Iran and six countries, including China, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, reached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which postponed this international crisis. After Donald Trump took office in 2017, he announced the unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA, which once again brought the Iranian nuclear issue into the international focus. His tough attitude and vigorous sanctions made the US-Iran relations deteriorate for a time. After Joe Biden took office in 2021, his attitude towards the Iranian nuclear program has softened, and has repeatedly expressed his inclination to rejoin JCPOA. By now, the eighth round of negotiations on the Iran nuclear deal is underway in Vienna and is expected to reach an agreement.

3. U.S. Policy Priorities on Iranian Nuclear Issue since 2017

In 2017, after President Trump took office, he immediately rejected the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by the Obama administration in 2015, arguing that the agreement not only failed to curb Iran's nuclear research and development, but also increased its regional expansion. On May 8, 2018, Trump announced his unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal [1].

The Trump administration has imposed sanctions on Iran in three aspects – import and export, financial and banking, and individuals and entities, causing severe damage to Iran's energy-oriented economic system and isolating Iran from the global economic system. In addition, while promulgating the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which is claimed to be the most powerful counterterrorism strategy since 2011, Trump actively whipped up international public opinion and tagged Iran as a "terrorist" country to reinforce the military deterrence and diplomatic pressure against Iran. The Trump administration has also actively courted military allies in the Middle East and established an Iran Action Group to implement extreme suppression against Iran in multiple fields and dimensions.

In contrast, the Biden administration regards the Iran issue as the focus of US Middle East policy, and is eager to cut away from the leftover of Trump's policy [2]. While increasing sanctions on Iran, it has used various means to force Iran to return to JCPOA. For example, when the sixth round of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue in Vienna in June 2021 was suspended, the Biden administration has increased sanctions on Iran, intensified its crackdown on Iran's oil export, and identified Iran as the one behind the attack on a merchant ship in the Arabian Sea. In addition, it has also united with its allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region to put pressure on Iran, trying to force Iran to accept the conditions of the United States through various means and reopen the Iran nuclear talk as soon as possible. The game between the two sides over the Iranian nuclear issue has shifted

from pure conflict and confrontation to the search for a new multilateral dispute settlement mechanism.

4. Factors Behind Trump's Policy Towards Iranian Nuclear Issue

The reasons behind Trump's aggressive sanctions against Iran can be summed up as his personality, the US domestic factors and the foreign security consideration. President Trump's personal style has played an important role in the formulation of foreign policy, as he has often flouted domestic and international conventions and rules. Powerful leaders often dominate the entire process of foreign policy decision-making, from formulation to implementation, and can appoint core members of decision-making groups, thereby affecting the entire bureaucratic organizational culture [3]. The policy propositions and values of Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State, John Bolton, National Security Adviser, and Jared Kushner, Senior Adviser appointed by Trump are highly consistent with him. Affected by cognitive consistency, Trump's entire decision-making group is highly unified, which causes it to either ignore and reject information that conflicts with his opinions or rely on political preferences to make decisions.

In the United States, since the September 11 attacks, the Americans themselves have been full of resistance and distrust of Islamic culture. The National Security Strategy released by the Trump administration in 2017 clearly identified Iran as a threat [4]. The National Defense Strategy issued in 2018 once again emphasized that Iran's incitement to violence had caused regional unrest in the Middle East [5]. In addition, Jewish lobbyists in Israel have played a critical role in U.S. government decision-making and thus fueled U.S. society's hostility toward Iran. The Israel lobby has a huge influence on the U.S. Middle East policy and will make it take effective sanctions against Iran [6]. In addition, as for the political environment in the United States, the frequent imposition of sanctions helps to shape the image of a tough and decisive president, which is conducive to attracting more supporters for his re-election.

Finally, with the development of Iran and the expansion of armed groups with its support, Middle East countries tend to become more independent. Trump was in urgent need to resume U.S. dominance in the Middle East [7]. Suppressing Iran is not only conducive to keeping the Middle East under control and ensuring the balance of power among all parties, but also maintaining the stable oil supply in Western countries, which is in line with the "America First" principle pursued by Trump. In addition, the Astana talks held by Russia in 2017 showed that Russia intends to intervene in Middle East affairs and cooperate with Iran [8], which is obviously intolerable for the United States. At the same time, the United States' Middle East allies, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries regard the Iranian regime as their major enemy, and have been lobbying the United States to increase sanctions and suppression against Iran.

5. Biden's Adjustments to the Iranian Nuclear Issue and Underlying Reasons

One of the important diplomatic goals set by the Biden administration is to lead the United States back to JCPOA and incorporate it as an important part into its Middle East policy. In April 2021, JCPOA-related countries had negotiations in Vienna. Although the United States participated indirectly, it still reflects the urgency of the Biden administration to return to the deal. Biden first showed goodwill during the negotiations, such as thawing the Iranian assets previously frozen by Japan and South Korea, uniting European allies to show goodwill to Iran, and lifting sanctions on five Iran-related economic entities [9]. Then in February 2022, he announced the sanctions waiver for Iranian civilian nuclear facilities [10]. Even so, it made no concessions to the content of the agreement and even asked for a series of clauses that go far beyond the 2015 agreement. Although Biden has set a new goal of rejoining the deal, his intentions still follow the Trump administration's sanction

strategy. For example, to force Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to accept US conditions and return to Vienna for negotiations during the suspension in June 2021, the United States once again tightened sanctions on Iran's oil and foreign exchange and united European and Asia-Pacific allies to put pressure on Iran. They also identified Iran as the mastermind of the attack against a ship in the Arabian Sea in July 2021 [11] to unite the gulf countries for diplomatic pressure. The Iranian side asked the United States to first lift the sanctions on Iran and make a commitment to "never withdraw from JCPOA and not re-sanction Iran". It can be seen that the Iranian nuclear issue has already changed from whether the United States will rejoin the agreement to who will make concessions first.

So far, the main concerns of the United States lie in three aspects. First, Iran will have the materials and meet the conditions for making nuclear weapons within a few weeks, so its nuclear activities need to be stopped immediately from further development. Second, the United States needs to ease relations with Iran to prevent it from reaching a substantial alliance with China and Russia. Finally, Biden is eager to restore the diplomatic achievements of the Democratic Party destroyed by Trump administration. He is not just satisfied with rejoining JCPOA, but to further expand the scope of countries involved, enlarge the areas covered by the agreement, and build a longer-term and stronger framework covering other fields on the basis of the agreement [12]. Based on this, re-signing the agreement is of great importance and urgency for the United States to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, improve relations with Iran, and even resolve disputes in the Middle East.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, the policy on the Iranian nuclear issue made by the Trump administration is inseparable from the president's strong personality, the domestic political environment and regional security factors. The purpose of its tough foreign policy on Iran is to stabilize domestic political security and thus safeguard the national interests of the United States, which reflects the zero-sum thinking and is in accord with Trump's diplomatic principle of "America first". However, Biden has shown a positive tendency to return to JCPOA due to the progress of Iran's nuclear program and the pressure from domestic political parties, but his emphasis on the national security has maintained the consistent principles of the US foreign policy. Therefore, compared with Trump's, the policy on Iranian nuclear issues formulated by the Biden administration is adjusted in terms of strategic goals but continued in terms of practical means.

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