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Iran, Decertification, and the Dangerous Alternatives

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Late on Thursday afternoon, the Washington Post reported that President Trump plans to undermine American involvement in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by “decertifying” Iranian compliance with the deal and kicking the issue to Congress.

This move is hardly unexpected: when he last certified Iranian compliance with the deal 90 days ago, President Trump reportedly told staff “he wants to be in a place to decertify 90 days from now and it’s their job to put him there.” Yet as that quote suggests, the President’s decision is not based on any reality-based assessment of the deal. Iran is in fact complying with the deal, a fact verified repeatedly by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Many of Trump’s own advisors disagree with his decision. On Tuesday, Secretary of Defense James Mattis told Congress that he believed it was in the U.S. national interest to remain in the deal. They are undoubtedly aware that the President’s choice will most likely undermine or end U.S. participation in the nuclear deal, split us from our European allies, reduce the constraints on Iran’s nuclear program, and reduce America’s global credibility and negotiating power.

In a newly published Cato Policy Analysis, my colleague John Glaser and I examine the grounds for retaining the nuclear deal, and explore the alternatives that the Trump administration could decide to pursue. Our analysis suggests that the prospects for a better approach are bleak.

We examine four key alternatives to the JCPOA:

1. **Increased or Renewed Sanctions**: Though the United States possesses an impressive and far-reaching sanctions infrastructure – including so-called ‘secondary sanctions’ – it is highly unlikely that new sanctions will force further concessions from Tehran. European allies will push back strongly against any new sanctions, and neither Russia nor China is likely to cooperate in creating a new sanctions regime when the United States is responsible for destroying the current deal.
2. **Challenging Iranian Influence in the Region**: The United States could instead choose to push back against Iranian proxies across the Middle East, such as Hezbollah. But there are few groups or states that are practical partners for such a strategy, meaning the burden would fall most heavily on U.S. troops. The risk of blowback – endangering the lives of U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere – is a serious concern. This option also does nothing to prevent Iranian proliferation.
3. **Regime Change “from Within”**: A popular idea among some anti-Iran hawks, this strategy would see the United States use sanctions and funding for pro-democracy groups inside Iran to destabilize the regime. The lack of any good group to support is one key problem with this strategy. Yet the bigger problem is simply that research shows that regime change rarely works, and even when it does, it tends to produce worse outcomes.
4. **Direct Military Action**: Targeted strikes on Iranian nuclear or military facilities is perhaps the most extreme option we examine. Put simply, there are no good options for a military strike on Iran; this was a key aspect of the Bush and Obama administration’s decisions to pursue diplomacy. Any military strike would likely escalate to a costly, large-scale war, further destabilizing the region and ironically most likely encouraging other states to seek a nuclear deterrent.

Contrary to the Trump administration’s statements, the nuclear deal with Iran is working. Though it has not solved – and was never intended to solve – every problem in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, the deal has halted Iranian proliferation and opened lines of communication and negotiation which can be exploited to defuse future tensions and improve relations over the long-term.

By decertifying Iran, President Trump is starting down a dangerous road towards a strategy which is far more uncertain, risky, and costly.