

Negociar con Irán: Una nueva mano en una vieja partida

Resumen:

Recientemente se han reanudado conversaciones, auspiciadas por la Unión Europea, para la vuelta de EE. UU. al Plan de Acción Integral Conjunto en materia nuclear (PAIC), que abandonó en 2018. Desde 2019 los iraníes han ido incumpliendo sistemáticamente los términos del acuerdo hasta colocarse en una postura en la que reclaman el levantamiento de las sanciones estadounidenses para revertir su posición. En las negociaciones se vislumbra el enfrentamiento de las grandes potencias globales a las que se suma la pugna por el poder y la seguridad regional de los países de la zona. Encontrar posturas comunes parece una tarea ardua pero no imposible. No obstante, es muy probable que el resultado final no sea igual al acuerdo anterior debido a las condiciones cambiantes de la multipolaridad del orden global.

Palabras clave:

Nuclear, Irán, EE. UU., Unión Europea, PAIC, conversaciones

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Introduction

Since the discovery in 2002 of Iran's undeclared nuclear programme, there has been a succession of negotiations, sanctions and agreements by the international community. The most tense period came during the Iranian presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but the coming to power of Hassan Rohani in 2013 and the predisposition of the US administration under President Obama led to an unprecedented agreement in late 2015 in which the Iranians seemed to feel comfortable to rejoin the international circuits.

Negotiations with Iran were conducted by the P5+1 Group (also known as the EU3+3)¹ and resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The broad outline of the agreement was that the Iranians would eliminate their plutonium production capacity and limit their stockpile of enriched uranium for 15 years, while not producing plutonium for another 10 years². While the agreement was welcomed by all participants and especially the Europeans, the frustration of the Saudis and Israelis was more than manifest³. In addition, then White House hopeful Donald Trump had in his election manifesto the withdrawal of what had already been agreed⁴. For Trump, the mistake of the deal was twofold, as it did not prevent the medium-term nuclear threat while failing to address Iranian missiles as possible delivery vehicles.

When Trump became president he proceeded to fulfil his election promise from 2018 by not only exiting the pact, but through a policy of "maximum pressure" that would result in progressively increasing sanctions and isolating Iranians⁵. During the first months of

¹ This group consisted of Germany, France and the UK, when the latter was a member of the EU, and was joined by China, Russia and the US.

² Arms Control Association. "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance". <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance> (accessed on 22/04/2021)

³ Al Jazeera. "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel oppose Iran nuclear deal" <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/14/why-saudi-arabia-and-israel-oppose-iran-nuclear-deal> (accessed on 22/04/2021)

⁴ ALTMAN, Alex. "Donald Trump and Ted Cruz Rally Against Iran Deal in Washington". Time, 9 September 2015. <https://time.com/4027123/donald-trump-ted-cruz-rally/> (accessed on 22/04/2021)

⁵ For a more detailed account of developments and the impact of US sanctions on Iran, we recommend reading CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Las negociaciones con Irán después del 4 de noviembre: Nuevas cartas para una vieja partida*. IEEE Analysis Paper 36/2018. http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2018/DIEEEA36-2018_Negociar_con_Iran_despues_del_04NOV_JICT.pdf

2019, the Iranians stuck to the deal, while the Europeans tried to establish a mechanism for doing business with Iran, called INSTEX^{6,7}.

As events were not going to work out for the Iranians, they decided to diverge from the JCPOA framework, seek a position of strength vis-à-vis the US and build an environment of support and alliances in the international arena. In the meantime, they would try to wait for the presidential elections at the White House and see if a new tenant would be more amenable to the treaty negotiations.

The Iranian response could be seen as a recovery of the initiative in the face of a US strategy that had counted on Iran yielding to “maximum pressure”. However, the Iranians were no longer financially compensated to remain within the JCPOA, so they would begin a path of non-compliance, escalating the conflict. This escalation would be supported by a raising of its regional military profile, even to the point of an encounter with the Americans.

Meanwhile, the global revisionist powers have seen the Iranian nuclear issue as an opportunity to use leverage to take power away from the Americans in the Greater Middle East. At the same time, regional powers, led by Saudi Arabia and Israel, are watching with genuine trepidation as the rift could lead to Iran acquiring a military nuclear capability⁸.

The victory of maximum resistance against maximum pressure.

Despite European efforts to keep Iran within the agreement, Iranian foreign representative Javad Zarif declared in the summer of 2019 that Iran would enrich uranium slightly above the agreed limits in response to “US economic terrorism”⁹. As tensions

⁶ IAEA. Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015). GOV/2019/10. Date: 22 February 2019.

<https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/19/03/gov2019-10.pdf> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

⁷ STEVIS-GRIDNEFF, Matina. “E.U. Ministers, Scrambling to Save Iran Nuclear Deal, Play Down Breaches” <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/15/world/europe/iran-eu-nuclear-deal.html> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

⁸ The US considers China and Russia to be “revisionist powers” because they want to change the established global order. To expand on this concept, we suggest reading: US Department of Defense. National Defence Strategy 2018. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed on 26/04/2021)

⁹ Deutsche Welle. “Iran announces second breach of 2015 nuclear deal”. <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-announces-second-breach-of-2015-nuclear-deal/a-49501718> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

rose, French President Emmanuel Macron tried to bring Iran back to the terms of the agreement through an economic credit, but to no avail¹⁰.

By the end of the year, the Iranians were already enriching uranium with advanced centrifuges not permitted under the JCPOA. The European countries of the P5+1 group tried to avoid this by issuing a serious warning to the Iranians that they could trigger the agreement's "dispute mechanism", whereby sanctions can be reapplied if a permanent member of the UN Security Council does not consider that they should be lifted¹¹.



Iranian President Hassan Rohani and Iranian Atomic Energy Agency Chairman Ali Akbar Salehi next to uranium centrifuges. Source: BBC. "Iran nuclear deal: Why do the limits on uranium enrichment matter?" 14 January 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48776695> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

It should be noted that, in parallel to the nuclear issue, US-Iranian hostility in the Gulf region was taking a very worrying path. To the Iranian threat to cut off the Strait of Hormuz, the Americans had responded by sending the *Abraham Lincoln* Carrier Group plus a fighter wing to the region. After several incidents and the capture of oil tankers by

¹⁰ SANGER, David E.; ERLANGER, Steven; NOSSITER, Adam. "France Dangles \$15 Billion Bailout for Iran in Effort to Save Nuclear Deal" The New York Times, 2 Sept 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/02/world/middleeast/iran-france-nuclear-deal.html> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

¹¹ Ministère D L'Europe Et Des Affaires Étrangères. "Iran - Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the EU High Representative (11 November 2019)" <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/joint-statement-by-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-germany-the-united-kingdom> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

Iran, an extraordinary unattributed aggression against the Saudi facilities of the Aramco company took place in September 2019, which temporarily decreased the amount of crude oil on the global oil market¹². Tensions would reach a peak in early 2020 with the death of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad due to a US attack¹³.

After Soleimani's death, the Iranians no longer felt bound by the uranium enrichment restrictions of the JCPOA, although Minister Zarif pointed out that they could return to them if there was reciprocity in the US obligations. The Europeans tried hard to bring Iran back into compliance with the treaty, but when they failed to do so, they set up the 'disputes mechanism'. However, the EU3 group made it clear that they did not join the Americans' "maximum pressure" campaign¹⁴.

However, Chinese and Russian dissent at the European announcement made the Iranians feel supported by the revisionist powers. This may be why Zarif dared to declare that, if the mechanism were triggered, Iran would withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)¹⁵. In response, the Europeans did not want to see further escalation, so the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, announced that the EU3 countries had agreed to "continually postpone dates and time limits"¹⁶.

The Iranians had an additional trump card to play in determining their chances, as they launched their first military satellite from a rocket in April 2020: *el Qased*. Faced with the

¹² For a detailed study of the situation in the Persian Gulf, we suggest reading the chapter The Persian Gulf: a cold war in overheated waters, in the VV.AA. publication Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2020. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies. Madrid. 2021. pp. 127-133.

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/panoramas/panorama_geopolitico_conflictos_2020.pdf (accessed on 23/04/2021)

¹³ With reference to the biography and circumstances of General Soleimani's death, we suggest reading the following articles: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Qassem Soleimani: El liderazgo desde el otro lado de la colina*. IEEE Analysis Paper 33/2019.

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA33_2019CASTRO_Soleimani.pdf

CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Qassem Soleimani: Una muerte que abre la caja de Pandora*. IEEE Briefing Paper 01/2020.

http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_informativos/2020/DIEEEI01_2020CASTRO_SoleimaniMuerte.pdf

¹⁴ MERRICK, Rob; DARAGAH, Borzou. "UK, France and Germany trigger Iran nuclear deal dispute action, paving way for possible UN sanctions" The independent, 14 January 2020.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-nuclear-deal-uk-france-germany-un-sanctions-a9282916.html> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

¹⁵ DEGHANPISHEH, Babak. "Iran says it will quit global nuclear treaty if case goes to U.N." 20 JANUARY, Reuters, 20 January 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear/iran-says-it-will-quit-global-nuclear-treaty-if-case-goes-to-un-idUSKBN1ZJ0ML> (accessed on 23/04/2021)

¹⁶ DAVENPORT, Kelsey. "Europe Seeks to Avoid UN Iran Sanctions" Arms Control Association, March 2020. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-03/news/europe-seeks-avoid-un-iran-sanctions> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

possibility that Iran could develop technologies “identical and interchangeable with ballistic missile technologies”, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on other countries to join the US¹⁷.

However, both the Russians and Chinese continued their global tussle with the US overlapping with the Iranian issue, as both the Chinese diplomatic mission and the Russian ambassador to the UN, Vassily Nebenzia, claimed that, having opted out of the JCPOA, the Americans had no right to apply the dispute mechanism or sanctions to Iran's weapons programme¹⁸.

While Trump's “maximum pressure” policy slipped through the loopholes opened up by Russia and China, Iran continued to take advantage of the situation to grab more power to bargain with. In the summer of 2020 the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that the Iranians were no longer cooperating in cases of non-regular inspections. Although the body issued a resolution against Iran, both the Chinese and Russians opposed it¹⁹.

At that point Iranian President Hassan Rohani felt sufficiently backed up to argue that Iran could agree to talks as long as the Americans apologised for abandoning the JCPOA and compensated for the damage caused²⁰. This milestone would mark the veteran negotiator's willingness to return to the table, where he sensed that perhaps the Trump era was nearing its end.

Following Rohani's statements, it was the Iranians who activated the JCPOA dispute settlement mechanism, as they considered that the Europeans were not complying with the agreement because they had given in to US “bullying”.²¹ Subsequently, the Iranian

¹⁷ ERWIN, Sandra. “Pompeo blasts Iran's space program in wake of military satellite launch”. Space News, 26 April 2020. <https://spacenews.com/pompeo-blasts-irans-space-program-in-wake-of-military-satellite-launch/> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

¹⁸ Mehr News Agency. “China says US has no right to extend Iran arms embargo”. 15 May 2020. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/158717/China-says-US-has-no-right-to-extend-Iran-arms-embargo> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

¹⁹ International Atomic Energy Agency. “IAEA Board Calls on Iran to Fully Implement its Safeguards Obligations”. 19 June 2020. <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/iaea-board-calls-on-iran-to-fully-implement-its-safeguards-obligations> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²⁰ Reuters. “Iran says it's ready for talks if U.S. apologises over nuclear pact”. 24 June 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-nuclear/iran-says-its-ready-for-talks-if-u-s-apologises-over-nuclear-pact-idUSKBN23V0WC> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²¹ SCHAART, Eline. “EU says Iran has triggered nuclear deal dispute mechanism” Politico, 07/04/2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/04/eu-says-iran-has-triggered-nuclear-deal-dispute-mechanism-348680> (accessed on 24/04/2021).

parliament condemned the IAEA resolution and approved the halting of the additional protocol measures allowing for non-regular inspections²².

Although the “maximum pressure” continued to be exerted by the Americans, the truth is that international support was shifting to the Iranian side. Despite US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s request to the Indonesian presidency of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to implement sanctions, these failed to materialise. This was also the case when Niger took over the presidency of the UNSC in early September 2020^{23,24}. Support for Iran within the UN was confirmed when UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres called on the UNSC not to take steps to re-impose sanctions on Iranians²⁵.

The permanent missions to the UN of the EU3 countries acted likewise, and were in favour of lifting the sanctions, sending a letter to this effect to the Secretary General²⁶. The group’s foreign ministers, coordinated by Josep Borrell, subsequently did the same, emphasising their commitment to the pact and urging the US to rejoin it²⁷.

November 2020 saw the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, which was attributed to Israel by the Iranians. The physics professor was considered to be the leader of Iran’s nuclear programme, as noted by Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu. This may have been done to make the Iranians react and widen the gap between them and the Americans. Thus, should Biden win the White House election, he would find himself in a very distant position vis-à-vis Iran’s positions.

²² Tehran Times. “Parliament prepares plan to stop Additional Protocol in Iran”. 11 July 2020.

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/449878/Parliament-prepares-plan-to-stop-Additional-Protocol-in-Iran> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²³ Sputnik News. “UNSC Head Says 'Not in Position to Take Further Action' on US Move to Trigger Sanctions on Iran”. 25.08.2020. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202008251080275315-UNSC-head-says-not-in-position-to-take-further-action-on-us-move-to-trigger-sanctions-on-iran/> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²⁴ Al Monitor. “Niger's envoy reaffirms rejection of Iran snapback sanctions as UN Security Council president”. 1 September 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/09/niger-un-security-council-president-sanctions-us-iran.html#ixzz6syamDEf6> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²⁵ LEDERER, Edith M. “UN chief: No UN support for reimposing Iran sanctions now”. AP News, 20 September 2020. <https://apnews.com/article/iran-iran-nuclear-antonio-guterres-united-nations-mike-pompeo-d90c333f9161c2043d733f462c07c7e7> (accessed on 24/04/2020)

²⁶ Theran Times. “Show must go on: E3 will not stand against U.S.”. 23 September 2020. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/452801/Show-must-go-on-E3-will-not-stand-against-U-S> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²⁷ Ministère D L'Europe Et Des Affaires Étrangères. “Iran - JCPoA - Joint Ministerial Statement by France, Germany and United Kingdom (6 January 2021)” <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/iran/news/article/iran-jcpoa-joint-ministerial-statement-by-france-germany-and-united-kingdom-6> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

Preparing the arduous road to negotiations

The above predictions would be fulfilled and Iran has stepped up its position of maximum resistance to the US. It might be asked whether both actors were looking for extreme positions for future negotiations from which to yield until an acceptable limit was reached. In this regard, it is worth noting that Iran has always stated that all ruptures made can be reversible.

President Rohani announced in early 2021 that he would proceed with uranium enrichment above 20 percent, while not allowing certain additional protocol inspections. This statement was later confirmed by the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Akbar Salehi, who added that enrichment would be carried out as soon as possible²⁸. This uranium is reportedly to be used as fuel in metallic form in Tehran's research reactor, which would be a further violation of the JCPOA, as Iran is not supposed to use uranium metal for 15 years. For this reason, the E3 countries issued a condemnatory statement²⁹.

The new US president, Joe Biden, had shown his inclination to resolve disputes with the Iranians within the limits of the comprehensive agreement. This was logical, as he had been Vice President of the US when this pact was reached during the Obama Administration³⁰. His inauguration on 20 January would open a new phase that Iranians could take advantage of, but which started from very conflicting positions.

In early February 2021, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif urged negotiations, noting that there was a "limited window of opportunity" for the Americans to return to the agreement. To this end, they could count on the intermediation of the EU through Borrell³¹. This approach was also in line with the US approach, with Biden's security adviser Jake Sullivan asserting that his administration was engaged with the EU to seek a common position on Iran³². To this end, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held a

²⁸ ZAFAR MEHDI, Syed. "Iran confirms plan to enrich uranium up to 20 percent". Anadolu Agency, 02.01.2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-confirms-plan-to-enrich-uranium-up-to-20-percent/2096191> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

²⁹ Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). "AEOI issues statement in response to E3". 16 Jan 2021. <https://en.irna.ir/news/84187943/AEOI-issues-statement-in-response-to-E3> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

³⁰ BENSADOUN, Emerald. "Biden wants the U.S. back in the Iran nuclear deal. Here's what you need to know" Global News, 13 December 2020. <https://globalnews.ca/news/7519307/iran-nuclear-deal-biden/> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

³¹ Theran Times. "Zarif: U.S. has 'limited window of opportunity' to return to nuclear deal" 2 February 2021. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/457670/Zarif-U-S-has-limited-window-of-opportunity-to-return-to> (accessed on 24/04/2021)

³² The White House. Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, 4 February 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/02/04/press->

meeting with his counterparts from the E3 group³³. In addition, the US government sent a letter to the UNSC requesting former President Trump's reversal to reimpose sanctions on Iranians³⁴.



Image of European leaders with President Biden to save the nuclear deal. Source: Republicworld.com. "Iran Nuclear Deal: UK, France, Germany, US Diplomats To Hold Talks On JCPOA Revival". 18 February, 2021. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/iran-nuclear-deal-uk-france-germany-us-diplomats-to-hold-talks-on-jcpoa-revival.html> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

The new US guidance constitutes a major uncertainty for Israel, where it is seen as pointless to try to return to a failed agreement in the false hope of a better outcome. For Netanyahu, the only solution is to maintain a policy of intransigence towards nuclear weapons, in addition to sharing with the Gulf States the need to maintain sanctions against the Iranians. However, the Israeli and Gulf agendas are not exactly the same. For its part, Saudi Arabia is going through turbulent times that have weakened its status and fears a situation of open conflict³⁵.

[briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-february-4-2021/](#) (accessed on 25/04/2021)

³³ US Department of State. Joint Statement by the Secretary of State of the United States of America and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. 18 February 2021. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-by-the-secretary-of-state-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-foreign-ministers-of-france-germany-the-united-kingdom/> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

³⁴ LEDERER, Edith M. "Biden withdraws Trump's restoration of UN sanctions on Iran". AP News, 19 February 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-donald-trump-iran-united-states-united-nations-aa8f38fa3bf7de3c09a469ec91664a3c> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

³⁵ SHAVIT, Eldad; SHINE, Sima. INSS Insight No. 1423, 11 January 2021 Returning to the Nuclear Agreement: Implications for Israel.

In the midst of these initial contacts, on 11 April, an attack was made on an underground electrical substation that supplies power to the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz. The attack was blamed on the Israelis by Iran and caused significant damage to the centrifuges³⁶. A week after this action and in response to it, Iran began enriching uranium above 60 percent, approaching the limit needed to obtain useful material for a nuclear weapon³⁷. Regardless of who carried out this and other attacks, the attacks disrupt the chances of reaching an agreement.

For their part, the Iranians seem to suffer from internal debates over the talks, although the theocratic position of leader Khamenei is decisive. In this regard, President Rohani declared that he was confronted with a “small minority” that was obstructing a return to the negotiating table and, most importantly, an “end to sanctions”. On a more distant note, leader Khamenei added that if the Americans lifted the sanctions, the Iranians would honour their commitments. This seems to mark a definite path, regardless of the outcome of the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June³⁸.

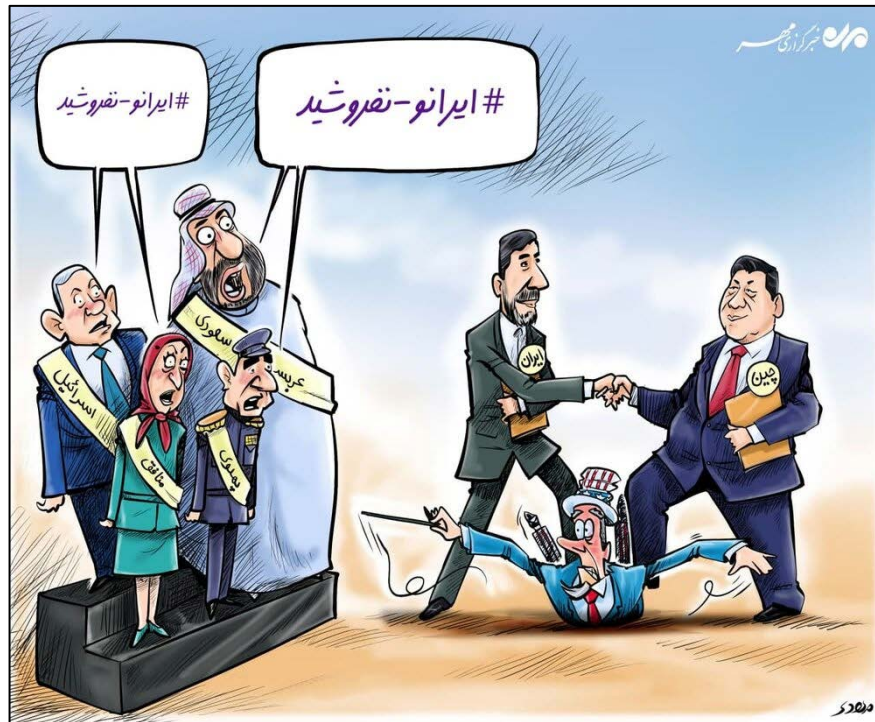
Admittedly, despite resisting the ‘maximum pressure’ policies of President Trump’s era, the Iranians have not emerged unscathed from the fray. The country’s economic degradation has led to many social tensions and the decline of its external action in the region. Similarly, Iran’s independence has suffered as a result of having to place itself in the hands of the Chinese following the signing of a 25-year cooperation programme. However, the “non-binding” nature of the programme could reverse the situation towards greater autonomy in the event that the Iranians could be freed from US sanctions³⁹.

³⁶ The Jerusalem Post. “Natanz nuclear site blast: Iranian State TV identifies man behind attack” 17 April 2021. <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/natanz-nuclear-site-blast-iranian-state-tv-identifies-man-behind-attack-665416> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

³⁷ GAMBRELL, Jon. “Iran starts enriching uranium to 60%, its highest level ever”. AP News, 17 April 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/iran-uranium-enrichment-60-percent-ed89e322595004fddc65fd4e31c1131b> (accessed on 26/04/2021)

³⁸ DAVENPORT, Kelsey. “Efforts to Restore Iran Deal Remain Stalled”. Arms Control Today. April 2021. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-04/news/efforts-restore-iran-deal-remain-stalled> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

³⁹ FIGUEROA, William. “China-Iran Relations: The Myth of Massive Investment”. The Diplomat, 6 April 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-iran-relations-the-myth-of-massive-investment/> (accessed on 25/04/2021)



Caricature on the Sino-Iranian cooperation project. Source: Merh News Agency. Iran China agreement. <https://en.mehrnews.com/photo/172458/Iran-China-agreement> (accessed on 25/04/2021). The drawing highlights that in the face of the Chinese-Iranian pact that crushes the United States, Israelis and Saudis, together with the internal opposition constituted by the monarchists and the National Council of Iranian Resistance, are at loggerheads.

In this context it seems that both the Americans and Iranians would be interested in returning to a future negotiating table. As a preliminary step, a series of proximity talks were held in Vienna in early April. Two working groups dealt with the lifting of US sanctions and their return to the JCPOA in one of them. Meanwhile, the other discussed Iran's return to uranium enrichment and stockpiling levels. The point of disagreement centred on who would take the first step, so the groups have proposed the creation of a timeline of actions to be carried out, in order to minimise the existing climate of mistrust. On the other hand, the Americans' interest is focused on extending the timeframe of the agreement, while they also want to include missiles, such as launch vehicles, and Iranian support for its allies and Shiite groups in the region⁴⁰.

The last meeting of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA was chaired on 20 April by the Political Director of the European External Action Service, Enrique Mora, and it was

⁴⁰ ERLANGER, Steven. "Iran and US agree on path back to nuclear deal". The New York Times, 6 April 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/06/world/europe/iran-nuclear-deal.html> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

agreed to set up a third expert group to start studying the sequencing of the respective measures⁴¹.

Conclusions

The global and regional situation has been reconfigured since the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. The world order is moving towards a multipolarity in which China continues to rise as the US retreats to positions from which it can control other actors without becoming so directly involved. Meanwhile Russia, in line with China, is trying to maintain its status with the tools of political and military power, while being aware of its weaknesses in the economic sphere.

By shifting this struggle to the Greater Middle East region, the gaps in power left by the great powers are being exploited by regional actors, who are also jostling for space in shaping the new order. Within this, Iran's position as a geopolitical pivot will always place it as a pivot around which other actors align or confront each other.

The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy has not achieved the results it had hoped for. This has been partly because Iranians are used to resisting periods of sanctions and are often united with a strong government in the face of an external enemy. Moreover, Chinese and Russian support has helped make the resistance a success, which has not come without cost to the Iranians.

The support of the revisionist great powers has cost the Iranians the strengthening of the alliance of convenience with the Russians and the creation of dependency ties with the Chinese. This situation is not to the liking of the Iranians who, as Ayatollah Khomeini once said, are supporters neither of the East nor of the West but of their Islamic republic. The lifting of US sanctions is therefore particularly in their interest if they are to regain some of the independence they have had to give up in order to resist during President Trump's term in office.

Regardless of who wins the Iranian presidential elections next June, it seems that a line of continuity from extreme positions will be maintained in order to get the most out of the

⁴¹ European External Action Service. JCPOA: Chair's Statement following the meeting of the Joint Commission Brussels, 20/04/2021. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/96928/JCPOA:%20Chair's%20Statement%20following%20the%20meeting%20of%20the%20Joint%20Commission (accessed on 25/04/2021)

upcoming nuclear negotiations. Iran has been particularly adept at diplomacy, especially given that President Rohani was once one of the nuclear negotiators during Khatami's presidency. Moreover, Minister Zarif has more than demonstrated his great deal-making skills and his understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Europeans and Americans, given his university education in North America.

For his part, President Biden has begun his international career as a strong leader, who in the short time he has been in office has been able to move the nuclear spectrum away from the US by extending the New START treaty with Russia, but who has directly confronted President Putin, making serious accusations against him⁴². He has also been resolute with China, establishing a common front with Japan against Chinese expansion⁴³.

Biden also has special knowledge on negotiating with the Iranians, as it was during his vice-presidency that the comprehensive nuclear deal with the Iranians was reached. In addition, he has the experience of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who during the JCPOA negotiations was the department's deputy secretary of state.

The US foreign team is very experienced and will also start from positions of strength in future negotiations. The expected withdrawal, not withdrawal, of US forces in the Middle East will have to be accompanied by a series of security guarantees that reassure the Americans. They should also reduce the tension felt by other actors with whom the US has important relations, such as the Gulf States or Israel.

The Europeans have an important role to play as interlocutors in the negotiations, since given the current confrontational positions between the major powers and Iran, it seems difficult to maintain a fluid dialogue from the outset. The EU's interest could be threefold if negotiations are successful. In the security field, the danger of nuclear proliferation in a territory close to the Union could be at least temporarily averted. On the diplomatic front, Europeans could regain some of their status on the international stage and demonstrate that multilateralism can still be effective in a world of conflicting positions. Moreover, from an economic point of view, lifting sanctions on the Iranians would open up Europe to a

⁴² Deutsche Welle. "Biden says Putin is a killer and 'will pay a price' for election interference" 17.03.2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/biden-says-putin-is-a-killer-and-will-pay-a-price-for-election-interference/a-56901310> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

⁴³ The Guardian. "Swipes at China as Biden and Japanese PM seek united front in Asia Pacific". 17 Apr 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/17/swipes-at-china-as-joe-biden-and-japanese-pm-seek-united-front-in-asia-pacific> (accessed on 25/04/2021)

market of more than 80 million inhabitants and a territory that possesses significant wealth, apart from gas and oil.

As a final reflection, it can be concluded that the negotiations that have been set in motion will be arduous and complex, and that they will most likely not end on the same terms as the JCPOA, but will lead to a different type of agreement, in accordance with the new situation. However, if Iranians, Americans and Europeans are willing to reach an understanding, it is possible that converging positions can eventually be reached.

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