# European-American Relations and Iran Policy under the Biden Administration

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The European Union (EU) as well as individual EU member states are putting a lot of stock into improved relations with the United States under its 46th president, Joe Biden. Combating both the raging COVID-19 pandemic and the less visible, though no less pronounced, effects of climate change are at the top of the agenda. Interestingly – compared to the scale of the challenge – redeveloping a joint approach vis-à-vis Iran is a close runner-up. To do this, both sides intend to build on the 2015 nuclear deal while aiming to include regional security issues in any follow-up agreement.

Importantly, with former vice president Biden returning to the White House on January 20, 2021, an American return to the deal formally known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, is a distinct possibility. On the campaign trail and in statements following the US vote, the president-elect confirmed his intentions to do so if and when Iran goes back into compliance. The fact that the Europeans have fought to keep the nuclear deal (barely) alive against all odds, could thus pay off soon. Also, more generally, a return to the decade of transatlantic cooperation from 2006 to 2016, both in style and substance, will be an enormous relief for Europe.

The problem from a European perspective, however, is not only whether Iran and the US will get the sequencing right. It is, more fundamentally, about three factors: a lack of trust; how the Middle East has changed since 2015; and whether Europe – the E3 of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as the EU and its member states – will have the capacity and reach to drive diplomacy forward as they have done a number of times since talks began back in 2003.

## From "trust but verify" to "distrust and destroy"

The first factor, low trust, runs high among all parties to the JCPOA. There is little love lost between Washington and Beijing after a years-long trade war, and between Moscow and Washington following spats over election interference and harsh sanctions. Increasingly, Europe has also grown wary of Chinese economic investments and political influence, while the EU has kept sanctions in place against Russia since the latter's annexation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014. True, Tehran and Moscow still cooperate in the Syrian theater, yet the recent war over Nagorno-Karabakh with both Russia's and Turkey's direct involvement has threatened the stability of Iran's northern provinces. And while China and Iran signed a 25-year economic and military partnership agreement in the summer, Tehran knows too well that, for Beijing, it is mainly a prop in the wider superpower confrontation with Washington.

The biggest hurdle, however, is open distrust between Tehran and Washington. Following the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 and subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign in clear violation of the deal, Iranians wonder why they should ever again rely on the word or signature of a US president. Despite Biden's clear position and Iran's positive initial reactions, it has become obvious that both sides have little leeway. The new US administration will have to focus on domestic issues ("building back better") and cannot be seen as handing any favors to Iran. Whereas nearly all Senate Democrats supported the JCPOA back in 2015 against the Republicans' blockade, today's Democratic lawmakers – including scores of those who have entered Congress since 2016 – are more critical of the Islamic Republic. Iran, in turn, will want to make few concessions after years of US-inflicted pain, especially in view of the upcoming presidential elections in June 2021. The country is more likely to demand compensation for the harsh US sanctions, which is a no-go in Washington.

Second, there have been significant shifts in power in the Middle East, which make "compartmentalization" – that is, the separate treatment of areas of conflict – increasingly difficult. During the last round of negotiations between 2013 and 2015, it was possible to insulate the talks from factors such as the West's fallout with Russia over Ukraine and Iran's growing presence in regional conflicts such as Syria or Yemen. This will no longer

be the case today with Iran's expanded position on the Persian Gulf, as demonstrated in various proxy wars and with attacks on its neighbors' oil facilities in recent years.

Crucially, Israel has become the regional focal point of responding to Iran's mounting regional clout. Jerusalem does not shy away from bilateral confrontations with Tehran, whether on the Syrian battlefield, in cyberspace or, presumably, by assassinating Iran's most prominent nuclear scientist. Moreover, Israel has even gained new allies in Iran's immediate neighborhood with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, which may no longer have felt adequately protected by the United States against the perceived Iranian threat. Farther afield, two additional Arab countries, Sudan and Morocco, have just recognized the Jewish state, signaling decreasing support for the Palestinian position vis-à-vis Israel in the other long-running, long-thought-to-be dominating conflict in the region.

This volatile situation and the different interests of the great powers make it unlikely that Russia and China will be satisfied with the supporting roles they had at the negotiating table between 2006 and 2015. Quite clearly, there will be no return to the special diplomatic constellation from five years ago. This means that, despite agreeing in principle to reaching another deal with Iran, the Europeans and the Biden administration will still have to haggle over how to get it done. As much as the US' Iran policy of the past four years was contrary to Europe's security interests, it showed just how limited European options for action on Iran are when they run counter to US strongarm policies.

Therefore, looking at the third factor, Europeans will have to not only bank their hope on the next US president but also to invest real diplomatic currency into crafting a common transatlantic approach on Iran. True, they have managed to keep the nuclear agreement alive, contrary to all expectations. They even succeeded in fending off the Trump administration's last-ditch attempts to reinstate all UN sanctions against Iran ("snapback"). On economic issues, however, their dependence on Washington has become abundantly clear. Tehran in particular is disappointed with Europe's lack of independence, even if it will want to continue working with the Continent regardless.

Years of sanctions and bullying have not only hardened positions in capitals around the world, but also created facts on the ground that need to

be overcome through increased diplomacy. Restoring JCPOA compliance on all sides, negotiating a possible follow-on deal (such as more sanctions relief for extended deadlines), and beginning talks on regional security arrangements all fit into the Biden 2021-2024 agenda, despite a potential conservative turn in Iran after the 2021 presidential election.

For this to be possible, the Europeans and the incoming Biden administration will have to quickly agree on a common course. This transatlantic approach provides for intense but limited negotiations to restore the nuclear deal immediately after Biden's inauguration. Here the Europeans have to slip into their classic mediator role between Washington and Tehran in order to sound out the chances of an agreement.

After the election of a new – presumably very conservative – Iranian president, the even more difficult part will follow in the second half of 2021, for which European creativity and holistic views are required. Because then it will be a matter of addressing the regional dimension of proxy wars and mutual threat perceptions through negotiations and confidence-building measures. On the way to get there, first steps to cooperate on fighting the pandemic, on channeling migration, as well as on addressing environmental threats could help to establish reliable channels between the warring states.

There will still be transatlantic divergences, no doubt. Even with a likely new agreement on the nuclear front, the US and Europe will differ on how exactly to deal with Iran's missile program and its growing regional clout. While these threats are more pertinent for Europe because of geographical proximity, the Europeans also appear more inclined to acknowledge that Iran has its own legitimate security concerns. Given an entrenched US sanctions architecture, any future economic benefits for Iran are likely to again come from Europe, not the US (though with the latter's blessing). Still, the EU and US positions are expected to be much closer to one another than over the past four years, and together they hold more sway in getting the likes of China and Russia, Israel, and Saudi Arabia on board.

Lastly, a realignment with the US could help the Europeans overcome their irrelevance vis-à-vis Iran. Because Europe still lacks political and economic independence from the US, it has had few tools available in trying to uphold the nuclear deal in the face of US pressure. Moreover, the trajectory of the past two decades has shown that only when acting in tandem can Europe and the US achieve their own, and their shared, goals.

For as long as mutual enmity remains the defining feature along the Tehran–Washington axis, Europe will have to play a balancing role and approximate its own interests. Should the situation in Iran fundamentally change, however, Europe and the US could become competitors for partnership with the new powers that be, even under a Biden presidency. Still, devising and implementing a broad program for diplomacy together with Washington would also contribute to increased regional security. The latter is key in convincing partners on the ground who are mistrustful of any talks. Yet, now more than ever, such a diplomatic initiative is needed to break the stalemate and pave the way to end the dangerous confrontation.