ABSTRACT

Iran relations with the west over a decade have been characterized by multiple sanctions over its nuclear program. This study focuses on the sanctions imposed on Iran to compel the state to discontinue with suspected weaponisation of its nuclear program. It interrogated some of the available literature on the subject and the historical method of analysis was deployed. The paper argues that although the current sanctions pressure have negatively impacted the Iranian economy, it is no longer a viable strategy in dealing with the Iranian nuclear program because it is most likely not to achieve the desired result of a complete abandonment of the nuclear program. It reveals that the US snapback of sanctions on Iran is not only threatening transatlantic solidarity but further creates a deep divide between the US on one hand and China and Russia on the other hand that is opposed to such unilateral actions of the US. The paper concluded that the west particularly the US must resolve differences with China and Russia to achieve broad international cooperation needed to push Iran to the round table to negotiate in a multilateral format all the contentious issues bothering on its nuclear program including accepting restraints.

KEYWORDS: Iran, the West, Analysis, Sanctions Pressure, Nuclear Programme
INTRODUCTION

More than any other issue in international politics, nuclear programme, especially the potentials of building atomic and hydrogen bombs by ambitious lesser powers perceived as threats to international peace and security has attracted sanctions at the global stage. Sanctions are punitive measures such as ban, embargo, prohibition, restriction, boycott and barrier in political, economic, military, or diplomatic terms against any given country or institution to gain favorable responses by influencing its course of action. Sanction results from a background circumstance and is designed for the desired outcome through a directional and tackle approach. In sanction, the pathway is the effect, usually adverse which results in a change of course of action to the expected. Sanction can be total or specific, targeting certain areas. Hence, as an instrument of international relations, it remains a measure for the worst case scenario.

Iran is one of the countries at loggerheads with the west over its nuclear program. The state has been reeling under severe and varied sanctions pressure imposed by the United Nations (UN) and western nations led by the US and supported by its Middle East allies for over a decade following the suspicion that it is covertly weaponising its nuclear program that will gradually produce Weapons of Mass Destruction (Cordesman, 2008). The west and its Middle East allies view this not only as inimical to Iran’s real security but also dangerous to the region already weighed down by insecurity, instability and conflict arising from terrorism, inter-ethnic confrontations and separatist tendencies. Iran has also been perceived by the west particularly the US as a rogue state largely because of alleged sponsorship of or connection with international terrorism (Cordesman and Seitz, 2008, pp. 22-23).

The essence of the sanctions pressure is to constrain Iran’s future nuclear capabilities and to prevent it from the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Einhorn and Nephew, 2019) and to forestall international disaster that may arise from their indiscriminate uses after the maiden experimentation of the “Little Boy” and the “Fat Man” by the US on the soil of Japan which ended the second world war in 1945. Although Freedman (1994, p.36) declared that “acquiring nuclear capability is a statement of lack of confidence in all alternative security arrangements,” the motivation lies in the leverage nuclear power offers militarily and diplomatically in international politics. Hence, the Iranian state has vigorously pursued the policy for the acquisition of nuclear power with its status remaining unclear, controversial and contentious.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Iranian nuclear program has attracted considerable scholarship from the international community. One aspect of it that has drawn greater attention is the international sanctions imposed against Iran in a bid to constrain the state from future nuclear capabilities. The various sanctions meted on Iran from 1979 have been highlighted (Perkovich, 2003; Samore, 2015). These studies show the impact of the sanctions on the Iranian economy especially its targeted oil export which is the highest revenue earner for the country. Perkovich (2003) believes that no matter the international pressure, Iran is unlikely to discontinue its nuclear programme because of the huge monetary commitment to it, national pride, and scientific-technical talent in building the nuclear infrastructure. Samore (2015) maintains that the sanctions against Iran are the most comprehensive sanctions ever imposed by the international community. The study observes that the sanctions were
carefully organised by different countries with different priorities, with different tools to compel Iran to accept initial restraints on its nuclear program, and negotiate its future within the framework of the international community. It, however, admits the complexity of international sanctions, which has considerably isolated Iran from the west and severely damaged its economy, and which on the other hand, poses a difficult challenge to today’s nuclear negotiations. It further argues that even if all sanctions against Iran were lifted, US sanctions of Listing Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism will almost certainly remain.

The nuclear club members, through various mediums such as the Security Council of the UN, had to impose sanctions against some countries such as North Korea and Iran to prevent them from acquiring and consolidating nuclear armaments. But to what extent have the sanctions imposed on Iran deterred the state from continuing with the nuclear program? The consensus is that the nuclear program is a state policy in Iran and has attracted reactions in the Middle East and Western hemisphere, underlined by sanction imposition. However, none of the works attempted to show whether the sanction pressure is still a viable option to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue. This will be a major contribution of this present study to knowledge in that the conclusion offers a more realistic approach that would potentially resolve the lingering Iranian nuclear issue that has sapped much energy from the international community.

Iranian Nuclear Program

The Iranian nuclear program began in the late 1950s (Bahgat, 2006). Around 1967 the programme received a boost following the US and Germany supplies of enriched uranium fuel for Tehran Research Reactor and construction of the Bushehr reactor respectively (Cordesman and Seitz, 2008, 22-23). Also, the French Framatome firm was contracted to install nuclear reactors at Bandar Abbas in 1974 and the country agreed to supply reactors, enriched uranium and nuclear research facilities to Iran alongside Germany (Cordesman and Seitz, 2008, pp. 22-23). This was done overtly as an alternative source of energy under the monarchical rulership of Shah Mohammad Reza who granted concessions to American, British and German firms to explore Iranian oil (Yergin, 1978, pp. 179-181). However, these countries stopped their support for the nuclear programme following the Iranian 1979 revolution and the accusation that Iran was supporting terrorism in the Middle East (Cordesman and Seitz, 2008, pp. 22-23).

Iran has been struggling to convince the world that the country’s nuclear programme is mainly for civilian and peaceful purposes, especially in electricity generation which is a right and an entitlement for any country. However, there is near consensus about future possibilities of Iran possessing nuclear weapons. The political leadership of Israel in April 2018 presented some classified files, alleging that Iran developed nuclear weapons between 1999 and 2003 (Davenport, 2019). The files are believed to be in the knowledge of the US intelligence community and formed the basis of Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu’s address to the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2018. He called on the Director-General of IAEA, Yukiya Amano, to expedite actions for the inspection of the Iranian secret nuclear weapon program. This was dismissed by Amano as instigation against Iran as the said files “lacked evidence of nuclear equipment” (Davenport, 2019, p. 19). The dismissal was in tandem with a popular position among nuclear experts, strategists, analysts and commentators across the world, even within the US intelligence
and analytical communities, maintaining that it was unclear if Iran was set to build a nuclear weapon.

Nuclear technology and weapons for defense are desirable for Iranian military institutions owing to their deficiency in the possession of conventional weapons in a neighborhood that is militarily unfriendly (Nader, 2013, pp. 4 & 17). Iran for long depended on foreign supply of its military needs in terms of personal training and armament from the US with attendant financial cost effect. But the realisation that a stronger Iran with sophisticated military hardware will unduly tip the scale in favour of Iran and alter the balance of military power in the Middle East led to the US refusal to continue with the training of Iranian air and naval forces in the post-1979 revolutionary era. As a result, Iran turned to Russia, China, North Korea and others for military supplies. Nuclear weapons become desirable among other reasons to address the handicap of Iranian military reliance on conventional weapons, even though, it has been argued that nuclear weapons cannot make up for conventional weapons deficiency in any military (Chubin, 2001, p. 20). Thus, through foreign supports and indigenous inputs, Iran has successfully built nuclear power plants in Bushehr, Isfahan, and various uranium and plutonium enrichment and encirclement mines and sites. The country’s nuclear activities in some of the centers such as Isfahan are attributed to strategic military calculations.

Western sponsored International Sanctions on Iran

Preventing a successful weaponisation of the Iranian nuclear program has necessitated series of diplomatic talks and measures as well as slamming the country with both multilateral and unilateral sanctions. The argument is that a nuclear weapon Iran will constitute a security threat to the neighboring countries in particular and the international system at large. A security threat envisaged to manifest in belligerent actions against countries such as Israel, Saudi-Arabia, and others with the possibility of equal nuclear reaction against Iran cannot be ruled out (Kemp, 2001, pp. 1-5). Even though this projection runs contrary to the national security justification of a nuclear Iran, it remains central in the moves to staunch the country’s nuclear program. In October 1992 for instance, the US political leadership promulgated the Iran-Iraq Arms Nonproliferation Act, restricting the transfer of weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and advanced conventional weapons to the two countries. This was followed by the country’s enactment of the law in August 1996 prohibiting and penalizing foreign investment of more than $20 million in the Iranian and Libyan energy sector which was called “Iran-Libyan Sanction Act” (Samore, 2015, p. 5; Davenport, 2019, p. 3).

However, the legislative restrictions became directional towards the Iranian nuclear program, manifesting in both multilateral actions and usual America’s unilateral sanctions following the 2002 revelations on the weaponisation of the Iranian nuclear programme. In September 2003, IAEA adopted a resolution, suspending all nuclear enrichment and reprocessing activities by Iran which it was required to adhere to on or before the end of October 2003. The failure of the country to adhere to the suspension amid diplomatic talks made the Board of Governors of the IAEA to refer Iran to the Security Council of the United Nations on February 4, 2006 (Davenport, 2019, p. 4). The U.N. Security Council in reaction, adopted series of resolutions 1696 of July 31, 2006, 1737 of December 23, 2006, 1747 of March 24, 2007, 1803 of March 3, 2008, and 1929 of June 9, 2010, which in various degree called for the suspension of uranium
enrichment activities by Iran and imposed various sanctions against the country (Davenport, 2019, pp. 4-5; Samore, 2015, p.7). For example, resolution 1737 banned the export and import of nuclear weapon-related materials and technology to and from Iran, and also “froze the assets of individuals and companies involved in Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile programs” (Samore, 2015, p. 7). Resolution 1929 retained and expanded the restriction of Iranian foreign trade and investment, financial and technical services that can help the country’s nuclear program and also “expanded the list of sanctioned individuals and companies” (Samore, 2015, p. 7).

The European Union (EU) through its Council of Heads of State and Foreign Ministers reached decisions, adopting and enforcing sanctions against the Iranian nuclear program. There were council resolutions 140/CFSP of February 2007, 413/CFSP of July 2010, 235/CFSP of April 2011, 35/CFSP of January 2012, 152/CFSP of March 2012, and 635/CFSP of October 2012 (Samore, 2015, p. 9). The sanctions had related compositions and effects, intent to strangulate Iran and halt its nuclear program by disconnecting the country from the outside world “in the areas of trade, financial services, energy and transport” (Davenport, 2019, p. 5). This was particularly reflected on July 26, 2010, EU Council of Foreign Affairs punitive package against Tehran. The body through its Foreign Policy Chief, Catherine Ashton engaged Iran diplomatically, demanding the clarification of issues of concern over its nuclear program (Davenport 2019, p. 6).

The perceived persistent state of Irania n non-conformity became the basis for the January, March and October 2012 Acts which blacklisted the various sectors of the Iranian economy, namely crude oil and gas sales, financial and insurance prohibition against Iranian banks and firms and ban on trade in precious products such as gold, diamond and other metals (Samore, 2015, p. 9; Davenport, 2019, pp. 5-6). The sanctions no doubt had severe consequences on Iran. Between 2007 and 2008 for instance, “the total assets frozen in Britain under the EU and UN sanctions against Iran are approximately £976,110,000 ($1.64 billion)” (Samore, 2015, p. 9 – 10.) but could not yield the expected results of compelling Iran to abandon its nuclear program. In June 2011 and February 2012 Iran made announcements to the effect that it had increased uranium nuclear activities having produced the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) fuel plate domestically (Davenport, 2019, p. 6).

However, more than the multilateral sanctions, the US made the Iran nuclear program contentious and precarious by its unilateral sanctions. The successive political leadership of the country vowed never to allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and had to follow up on the policy statements with actions, culminating in unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran. Though in February 2004, the US through its Department of the Treasury adopted a restriction against editing and publishing of manuscript to scientific researches of Iran despite the OFAC guidelines, the June 2005 president Bush Executive Order 13382 became the first explicitly articulated American national legislation against Iranian nuclear program. The order targeted individuals connected with Iran’s nuclear program by freezing their assets. This was followed by the September 2006 sanctions against agencies such as Bank Saderat implicated with aiding Iranian unworthy military indulgence, advanced weaponry acquisition in particular, and terrorism backing (Samore, 2015, p. 10). Also, banks such as Arian Bank, Bank Sepah, Bank Kargoshaee and Bank Melli in addition to Bank Saderat were blacklisted from US banking and financial institutions from November 2007. Monetary transactions between Iranian and American banks as well as those of third parties became prohibited by this legislation, so much that the US Treasury ordered Citigroup
Inc. (an American multinational investment bank and financial services corporation) to freeze over $2 billion held for Iran in Citigroup accounts in 2008.

Between June and July 2010, American political leadership intensified the pressure against Iran through the passage of legislation which became known as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act. This made investment and dealings in Iranian energy and oil sectors sanctionable, affecting both American and third parties’ companies and was expected to last until 2016 (Davenport, 2019, p. 5; Samore, 2015, p. 10). There were further executive orders that defined and gave impetus to the US sanctions regime against Iran. These include “Executive Order 13590 of November 2011, Executive Order 13599 of February 2012, Executive Order 13608 of May 2012, Executive Order 13622 of July 2012, Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of December 2012 and January 2013 and Executive Order 13645 of June 2013” (Samore, 2015, pp. 10-11). These orders embodied various but related sanctions that undermined the stability of the Iranian state. In varying degree, they sanctioned dealings in Iranian energy and oil sectors, financial sector, especially restricting the accessibility of Rial (Iranian currency) which facilitates petroleum sales while denying Iranian economy access to American dollar with its much influence on the global economy, restricted “involvement in Iranian shipping firms and automotive industry and also sanctioned evaders of sanctions” (Samore, 2015, pp. 10-11).

**Diplomatic Breakthrough and US Later Reactions**

Some observers have maintained that the sanctions on Iran were designed to compel negotiations and renegotiations with regime change in the long run. But while the sanctions are in place, diplomacy is still not abandoned in a bid to make Iran turn from intransigence in the nuclear negotiations. On July 20, 2015, the UN Security Council endorsed a nuclear deal- the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which resulted from about nine years of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 negotiating countries, comprising China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States (Nephew, 2017, p. 3; Nephew, 2016, pp. 4-5; Cortright, 2019, p. 2). The JCPOA was described as the height of diplomatic efforts with promising measures to address the case of Iranian nuclear armament. This is given that the deal required Iran to halt its nuclear activities, particularly uranium enrichment and encirclement with assured supports of the country’s civil nuclear projects in return for the lifting of the existing multilateral and unilateral sanctions against the country. The deal offered Iran some economic reliefs and the country accepted to open its nuclear activities to negotiation and inspection despite the national security implications of such inspections. The IAEA’s quarterly report continued to present Iran to be abiding by the JCPOA (Davenport, 2019, pp. 8-12; Thompson and Thranert, 2017, pp. 1-2). The report tended to exonerate Iran of any wrongdoing in contradiction to accusations from the US, Israeli and other Iran’s estranged Arabian neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The reports of August and November 2017, February 2018 up to June 2019, all confirmed Iran’s implementation of the JCPOA nuclear.

However, the deal was criticized in some quarters of the US society, so much that during his political campaign, Donald Trump resolved to pull the US out of the deal, an action described as “Maximum Pressure Campaign” (Nephew, 2017, pp. 1-3, Thompson and Thranert, 2017, pp. 1-2; Einhorn and Nephew, 2019, pp. 2-4). It was considered to have given too much leverage to Iran as it could not contain its ballistic missile testing; its influence in the Middle East, especially in
Syria and Iraq considered destabilizing, terrorism sponsorship and providing the country with economic clout to continue pursuing nuclear weapon clandestinely. As a result, on an assumption of office as president, Donald Trump in May 2018 pulled America out of the multilateral deal and re-imposed the lifted America’s unilateral sanctions against Iran. Although this was intended to force a renegotiation of the deal, to arrive at a more comprehensive deal that will guarantee international security concerning the security of the US and those of the allies, the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the deal set the progress made by the P5+1 and the international community on the Iranian nuclear program back. Other partners to the deal such as Germany, UK and France frowned at the action and sought to undermine the reinforced sanctions. They established the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchange (INSTEX) as “a mechanism designed to facilitate trade with Iran without running afoul of U.S. sanctions” (Einhorn and Nephew, 2019, pp. 2-3).

Iran also remained committed to the deal, trying to avoid the snap-back of the multilateral sanctions which was a provision of the JCPOA. However, the inability of the countries to protect Iran from the devastating effect of the U.S sanctions which drastically reduced the trade in Iranian oil which sustains its economy, devaluation of the country’s currency, Rial and overall halt in Iranian import trade, automotive sector, pharmaceutical products and precious metals, cast shadow on Iran’s commitment to the deal. The various sanctions on Iranian banks made external trade difficult. In April 2019, the US declared an end to the waivers granted to Iranian oil-importing countries such as China, Japan, Greece, Turkey, Italy, Taiwan, India and South Korea. The waivers were designed to enable the countries scout for an alternative supplier of oil outside Iran (Adekunle, 2019, pp. 1-2; Atumah, 2019, pp. 2-3). The essence was to avoid the backlash of the sanctions. In reaction, Iran in May 2019, declared a move to suspend its commitment to the deal, giving other signatory countries a “60-day deadline to protect it from the U.S sanctions” (BBConlinenews, June 2019, p. 6). There was also an official announcement by the country over its massive increase in uranium enrichment though not exceeding the 3.67 percent JCPOA limit (Daveport, 2019, p. 21; El-Ghobashy and Sly, 2019, p. 4). This notwithstanding, Iran and other signatories remained committed to the deal to the discomfort of the US which sought the complete abandonment of the deal.

On June 24, 2019, the U.S. Treasury Secretary, Steven Muchin, declared America’s move to blacklist the property and interests of Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif in the U.S. He was denied a U.S visa to attend the U.N Security Council meeting slated for July, for his criticism of the US sanctions against Iran even though Washington explained the denial on the grounds of security, terrorism and foreign policy. This followed the downing of the US spy drone on June 20 by Iran and the consequent destruction of the Iranian drone by a US warship on July 18, in the Strait of Hormuz, as a mid-action to the canceled retaliatory airstrike against Iran in June. Although Zarif was eventually granted the visa due to international criticism, his movement was restricted and under close surveillance while in New York.

The US under President Donald Trump called for the renegotiation of the nuclear program which Iranian leaders, especially President Hassan Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javadzari and even Diplomat Kazem Gharib Abadi accepted but demanded that the imposed sanctions be lifted first. Rather than exhaust the diplomatic channel underway, President Trump on July 10, 2019, threatened increased sanctions on Iran. Between July and August 2019, the US
sanctioned some third parties’ companies for their continued importation of Iranian Oil. These included a “Chinese State-owned oil trading company, Zhuhai Zhenrong” (Atumah, 2019, pp. 1-2; Davenport 2019, p. 5 - 6). This was considered too punitive as was the case with the 2014 fine imposed on BNP Paribas (a French Bank) to the tune of $8.9 billion and Deutsche Bank of Germany to the tune $258 million in 2015 for violating the US sanctions against Iran (Atumah, 2019, pp. 1-2). This showed the US determination to continue with its unilateral sanctions in pursuance of the maximum pressure campaign against Iran, all in a bid to actualize its desire for complete abandonment of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal. So, the US is to seize every opportunity to impose, sanctions on Iran.

Following the September 14, 2019 drone attacks on Saudi Arabia’s oil facilities alleged as Iranian handiwork, the US on September 20 2019 slammed Iran with new sanctions. The country’s central bank was blacklisted, and so were entities and institutions such as “Iranian-based Company, Etemad Tejarat Pars” linked with transactions that had the effect of improving Iranian military purchase and nuclear program. The sanctions were considered the “stiffest penalties and highest sanctions ever imposed on a country as they cut off all source of funds to Iran” (Sobowale, 2019b, pp. 1-2). This happened even when Iran had denied involvement in the attacks and a Yemen-based Houthi rebel group, claiming responsibility for the attacks (Bankole, 2019, p. 2). The US also threatened to adopt military option against Iran in the event of the country’s continued future destabilizing actions in the region as the Houthi rebels were linked with Iranian support (Sobowale, 2019b, p.3).

However, during the September 2019 UN General Assembly annual meeting in New York, America offered to lift all sanctions imposed on Iran for negotiation on the latter’s nuclear programme and the security of the Middle East. This followed from a fruitful discussion between President Trump and his Iranian counterpart, President Rouhani as contained in their separate addresses on Tuesday, September 24 2019 and Wednesday, September 25 2019 respectively (Amoye, 2019, pp. 1-2). This became an offer made for the sake of it as the sanctions remain enforced and coincided with September 25, 2019, U.S Treasury slamming of five Chinese individuals and six entities, two Cosco Shipping Subsidiaries for violating Iran-related sanctions on oil transactions, violating the extant sanctions against the country (Sobowale, 2019c, p.2).

The tension existing between Iran and U.S took a different dimension when on January 3 2020 American drone had the commander of the Iranian Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major General Qasem Soleimani killed while on an official visit in Baghdad, Iraq. The action was termed defensive from the US circle, aimed at protecting American personnel abroad which is supported by the U.S. foreign policy objective of protecting its citizens in any part of the world even at the cost of war. Major General Soleimani was allegedly linked with masterminding major attacks against the US forces in different parts of the Middle East, especially the December 27, 2019 attack in Kirkuk military base, Iraq, leading to the death of an American contractor (Anaba 2020a, p. 1). Although the US military campaign against terrorism especially since 9/11 is public, the killing of Soleimani appeared a strategy of provocation to compel the complete abandonment of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal. Considering the action as state terrorism, Iranian president Rouhani on January 5, declared Iran’s intention to withdraw from the remnant of the deal which will no longer be binding on the country. Following the announcement, America’s president Trump on January 7, “called for world powers to follow his lead in withdrawing in May
2018 from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran” (Anaba, 2020b, p. 1). This came hours after Iran launched a wave of missile attacks against American military bases at Al-Assad and Irbil in Iraq.

The other parties to the P5+1 expressed worries and reservations over the military operations, especially the killing of Iranian military leader, General Soleimani. They variously cautioned against military action that could lead to a Third World War (Nwachukwu, 2020, p. 1-2). However, they were more concerned about Iran’s position on the nuclear deal. The European states led by the UK complained about the complaints and non-complaints mechanism of the P5+1 body about Iran’s move to increase uranium enrichment beyond the dictates of the 2015 nuclear deal which meant that the country could no longer expect others to stand by the deal. This was dismissed by the Iranian foreign minister, Zarif, stating that the European countries had stopped buying oil from Iran following the US threat to impose a 25 percent tariff on imports of European cars if EU governments continued to back the nuclear deal” (Anaba, 2020a, pp. 1-2). During the security conference at Munich, Zarif called on Germany, France, UK, China and Russia to return to the deal and protect the economic benefits of Iran as provided in the deal (Anaba, 2020b, pp. 1-2).

It seems that the P5 countries continue to keep fate in the Iranian nuclear deal which set in motion the expiration of the Iranian arms embargo in October 2020. The US is determined not to see this happen, and attempting to snapback sanctions on Iran through the international community. But the question is whether the US has the right to deconstruct the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal it voluntarily left in 2018? This question was unanimously answered at the UN Security Council on Thursday, August 17 2020 where the US suffered a resounding defeat of its intention to extend the Iranian arms embargo indefinitely. The result of the voting indicates that only the Dominican Republic voted in favour of the US. China and Russia voted against, while fellow JCPOA signatories, that is, France, Germany, the UK and eight other nations abstained. The consensus is that the US no longer has the legal and moral standi to snapback sanctions on Iran using the JCPOA mechanisms reserved for participants when it unilaterally withdrew in May 2018 and had not participated in any JCPOA since then.

Besides the security threat posed by Iran’s nuclear programme in the region, it would appear that the US wants to have an unchallenged military activity in the Persian Gulf, which has been a flashpoint for tension between the two countries over who controls it. This has prompted Iran to work towards developing nuclear- powered submarines to deter the US from military activity there. This is the crux of the Iran-US diplomatic dispute, others are secondary. A nuclear strong Iran will dispatch the US and other western nations’ activities in the Persian Gulf into oblivion. The US would not see this happen; hence the attempt to snapback the UN arms embargo on Iran after re-imposing already lifted sanctions against Iran.

**Counting the Cost of Sanction Pressure**

Iranian government source estimated that the state lost $150 billion of revenue since the US withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) and re-imposed sanctions on its economy. The US re-imposed sanctions are also hindering supplies of medical and food items that directly affect the citizens of Iran. No doubt, Iran’s economy has shrunk over the past two years with a corresponding rise in inflation and unemployment. This is worsened by the fact that “crude exports
that the country largely depends on for most of it foreign exchange are less than 10% of their level before the US withdrawal from the multilateral agreement in May 2018” (Shahia, 2020).

However, western sanctions are yet to yield the expected results. The Iranian national economy has not collapsed as expected in the west to provoke local discontentment that would consume the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) regime. This is partly due to the resilience of Iran’s leadership and partly to the support from some sympathetic nations. In conventional terms, no country, especially in this dispensation can survive collective sanctions. But this has been difficult to achieve because most times, sanctions are generated from unilateral policy action rather than collective appraisal and negotiations, often hindering the possibility of complete and effective implementation which require monitoring against leakage and violation. Also, the monistic and dualistic dispositions of states as both national and international entities, pursuing individual and collective interests help to compound the difficulty associated with the application and implementation of sanctions in the international system. This results from a situation referred to as a crisis of “interpenetration of international and domestic politics” Yergin (1978, p. 98).

This is largely why Iran is surviving despite the US and the allied sanctions against the state. Under sanction pressure from the west, “China and Russia offer a counterweight of historically strong business ties with Europe” (Gafarli, 2020), suggesting that Iran is not alone. For this reason, Iran has departed from its foreign policy since 1979 of “Neither East Nor West; only the Islamic Republic” to tactically embrace bilateral cooperation with China and Russia. At the moment, Iran is working with China on a $400 billion 25 year trade deal that will transform the Iranian economy seriously pressured by the western sanctions and make Iran an important strategic partner with China (Gafarli, 2020; https://en.radiofarda, 2020). This is coming at a time China is increasingly being isolated by the western world over corona virus origin and handling. For both countries, it’s a win-win situation. In the area of military, Iran and Russia are cooperating and it is suggested that Tehran will soon purchase the Russian-made Air Defense System, the S4000 to cover the country’s skies, having already sold a pair to Erdogan’s Turkey. This will pose a serious threat to US and NATO air operations in the region. Thus, the US has threatened China and Russia with sanctions for aiding Iran.

Amid all the western sanctions, Iran has gone on to record milestones in the military-technological industry. It is probable that Iran has amassed the “largest and most advanced conventional missile arsenal in the Middle East and has particularly focused on building up its naval and anti-aircraft capabilities in the event of a conflict” (https://dnyuz.com/2020/08/18/iran). Also, in 2021 the Iranian state surprised the world with the launch into orbit of its first military satellite dubbed Nour (light) on the 41st anniversary of IRGC establishment “amid the US and Israeli admonitions” (www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/20). It is no longer an issue whether Iran has developed nuclear capability or not. The issue is how the state would use it soon.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing has shown that sanction pressure is no longer a viable strategy in dealing with Iran. It is, therefore, fundamentally imperative for the US and other western powers to adopt a new strategy rather than continue with sanction pressure against Iran, which has equally elicited belligerent and cantankerous posture from the Iranian leadership. First the US must resolve
differences with China and Russia to achieve broad international cooperation needed to push Iran to the round table to negotiate in a multilateral format all the contentious issues bothering on its nuclear program including accepting restraints. Iran must be convinced that nuclear weapons are dangerous to their real national security. The US in particular must be ready to extend goodwill towards Iran by lifting all existing sanctions and be seen to be supporting investments in Iran. By so doing, the west, in no time will build confidence in the Iranians as partners in progress rather than enemies, which in the long run will help to reframe their mindset on the nuclear program. As soon as this is established, it will be much easier to ask Iran for restraints in their nuclear program or outright abandonment in return for sustained support in economic development and defense without prejudice to its growing military technology and capability in the region. Once support from the west becomes evident, internal pressures will mount against weaponisation of nuclear program and will present an easy choice for the Iranian leadership to make in the interest of sustained economic development and national stability, failing which the days of the Iranian regime will be numbered no matter how coercive it may be for the now.

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