The U.S. Abandonment of the JCPOA: How Coercive Diplomacy Backfired

Anna O'Sullivan, *Tufts University*

Introduction

In July 2015, Iran, the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany), and the EU reached a landmark agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that promised to relieve sanctions against Iran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program.[1] After the JCPOA went into effect, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regularly verified that Iran was fully compliant with its terms, and the agreement achieved its goal of curtailing Iran's nuclear activities.[2] However, in May 2018, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and instate a "maximum pressure" strategy of sanctions against Iran—both reimposing the U.S. sanctions that the JCPOA had lifted and adding new ones aimed at Iran's oil and banking sectors.[3] The Trump administration aimed to coerce Iran into negotiating a stricter nuclear deal on U.S. terms, but President Trump's intended negotiation never happened. In the years since the U.S. exit, Iran has incrementally abandoned its commitments under the JCPOA and escalated its nuclear activities, reaching unprecedented proximity to weaponization capability.[4]

This paper will address the question: *How has the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA impacted Iran's nuclear proliferation?* I argue that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA served as a decisive catalyst for Iran's decision to escalate its nuclear activities beyond JCPOA compliance. Specifically, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, compounded by the subsequent imposition of "maximum pressure" sanctions, undermined U.S. credibility as a negotiating partner, empowering Iranian nuclear hardliners and reframing proliferation as a necessity to resist Western coercion. Therefore, the attempt to wield coercive diplomacy by leaving the JCPOA not only failed but actively backfired, driving Iran to unprecedented levels of nuclear activity. I identify Iran's nuclear weapons proliferation as the dependent variable and the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA as the independent variable. The key intervening variables are Iran's decreased willingness to cooperate with the United States and the increase in the power of hardline factions in Iran.

Some argue that Iran's nuclear escalation has been driven by broader regional dynamics like Iran's conflict with Israel, not U.S. coercive diplomacy. This suggests that the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA simply removed an external constraint, enabling Iran to pursue a preexisting goal of nuclear armament. While external threats are a large driver for Iran's proliferation, this argument ignores the backfire effect: the way support for nuclear weapons can change as a direct result of facing coercive diplomacy.

By demonstrating how coercive diplomacy backfired in this context, this paper contributes to existing scholarship on the limitations of coercive diplomacy, particularly when applied to authoritarian regimes. Iran is edging closer to nuclear weapons capability and has escalated its rhetoric around its intent to weaponize its nuclear arsenal.[5] As the United States crafts its next diplomatic steps toward Iran, policymakers must be aware of the inherent risks of coercive diplomacy.

This paper employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on theories of coercive diplomacy and regime behavior to analyze evidence, including Iran's post-JCPOA nuclear activities, domestic political shifts in Iran, and rhetoric coming out of Tehran. The remainder of this paper is organized into three parts. First, I outline a framework for analyzing the efficacy of coercive diplomacy and give a theoretical background for its tendency to backfire when used against strong authoritarian regimes. Next, I apply this theoretical basis to the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA, demonstrating how it failed as a coercive strategy and then how it actively catalyzed Iran's nuclear escalation. Finally, I discuss the implications this has--both theoretically and practically—for our understanding of coercive diplomacy and the future of U.S.-Iran relations.

Theoretical

This section situates the research question within the broader literature on coercive diplomacy and authoritarian resilience. It grounds the preferred hypothesis in these theories and introduces the "demand-threat" model and the backfire effect as the primary theoretical tools on which the argument will rely.

Theory

Coercive diplomacy is a strategy that uses threats to compel a target state to change its behavior.[6] The coercer's goal is to make noncompliance appear costly to the target while offering compliance as an opportunity to de-escalate and avoid further consequences.[7] By balancing pressure with a pathway to resolution, coercers seek to achieve their objectives without reaching full-scale conflict.

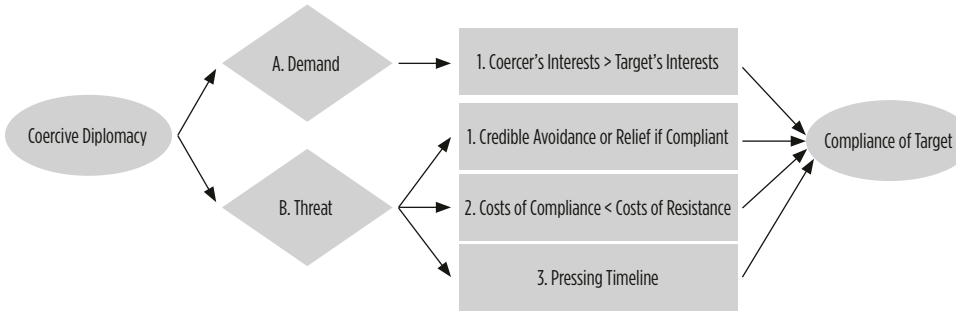
Political scientist Alexander L. George, renowned author of texts on coercive diplomacy, defines it specifically as a defensive strategy—one that is a response to an adversary attempting to "change a status quo . . . in his own

favor."[8] He argues that the offensive use of the same measures must also be analyzed as a form of blackmail strategy. Since this paper focuses on the offensive use of coercive diplomacy, I considered this argument. However, modern scholarship uses the term coercive diplomacy in both offensive and defensive cases. While I continue to use the concept of coercive diplomacy throughout this paper, I am informed by George's argument that offensive coercive diplomacy may have a different nature, and I use it to develop a more nuanced understanding of how the offensive nature of coercive diplomacy in the case of the U.S. exit from the JCPOA may have impacted Tehran's reaction.

George explains three factors to evaluate coercive diplomacy's efficacy. First, the coercer must convincingly communicate to the target state that the costs of noncompliance outweigh the benefits. Second, the target must also believe that acquiescing to the coercer's demands would avoid or relieve the threatened consequences and potentially yield benefits. Finally, the strategy will be more effective if it operates under either an implied or explicit time frame, signaling urgency and reducing the target's ability to delay or deflect consequences.

Building on George's influential framework for coercive diplomacy, this paper introduces a refined model by organizing its key components under the two parts of coercive diplomacy they relate to: demands and threats. This organization aims to make it easier to identify where failures in coercive diplomacy originate and to show the necessity of both demands and threats succeeding in tandem in a coercive strategy. This approach does not seek to replace George's model but rather to enhance its analytical utility.

Figure 1: My Adjusted Model of Efficacious Coercive Diplomacy—The "Demand-Threat" Model



Proposed Demand Threat Model

When analyzing the demand of the target state, which forms the first part of this model, it is important to examine how much the coercer demands and how willing the coerced state is to comply with those demands. George explains the concept of an *asymmetry of interests,* which is when either the coercer or the target has a much greater stake in the issue. If the coercer has a greater stake in the *asymmetry of interests*, they are more likely to succeed in their coercive diplomacy. However, if the coercer goes "beyond its own vital or

important interests, and its demands infringe on the vital or important interests of" the target state, then coercive diplomacy is far less likely to succeed.[9] In short, the more excessive the coercive state's demands are, the less likely the target is to acquiesce.

Circumstances can warp each party's perception of their own stake in the issue. Wallace J. Thies hypothesizes that "the longer the bureaucratic battles involved . . . the greater the stake each participant will have in ensuring that his preferred course of action is adopted."[10] Therefore, if there is a history of coercive diplomacy between the two parties, both will perceive their interests as heightened when a novel instance of coercive diplomacy arises. Additionally, Drury and Li explain that the public nature of coercive diplomacy can raise both sides' interests. Both parties feel the need to put on a show of strength in both the imposition of (for the coercer) and resistance to (for the target) coercion when they are exposed on the international stage.[11] All of these factors contribute to the balance described in A1.

Turning to a theoretical examination of the second prong of my framework—threats—B1 emphasizes the critical role of credibility. For a coercive threat to be effective, the target state must believe that compliance will lead to tangible relief or avoidance of the threatened consequences. Compliance will appear futile if the target perceives that coercive measures serve ulterior motives, such as signaling strength to the coercer's domestic audience or achieving unrelated strategic objectives. Reid Pauly explains that if a target does not feel it has credible assurances, it is unlikely to acquiesce to a coercive demand.[12] Therefore, for a threat to be effective, a coercer must have credibility in their promises to remove the imposed consequence upon compliance.

Moving to B2, the costs associated with complying versus resisting coercive diplomacy can vary. One factor that can influence said costs is the method by which coercive diplomacy occurs. In particular, coercive diplomacy is less likely to be successful when conducted through sanctions, especially when used against an authoritarian regime. As Kirshner explains, sanctions are most effective when they target the government or the populations it relies on for its power, such as a key voting demographic.[13] Authoritarian regimes do not rely on citizens for elected power, meaning to be effective, sanctions would have to target the political elite themselves.[14] However, sanctions often affect the civilian population of a state, not its political elite who can insulate themselves from their effects.[15]

There can still be political costs for authoritarian leaders when sanctions create civil unrest among the populace. However, authoritarian leaders often suppress dissent and political competition and deflect blame for economic or social hardships onto external powers.[16] Hellmeier explains that since authoritarian leaders have influence over the media and public discourse, they can shape narratives that foster nationalism and an "us versus them" mentality, portraying foreign pressure as a threat to national integrity. This narrative is particularly effective in the case of Western pressure against authoritarian regimes.[17] Therefore, though sanctions can impact a nation's economy, their

efficacy in driving acquiescence to coercive diplomacy is severely undermined when they are imposed on authoritarian regimes.

Finally, B3 is crucial to the efficacy of threats. A well-structured timeline helps raise the stakes of noncompliance by tying immediate consequences to a failure to act within the specified period. If the timeline is perceived as overly flexible or indefinite, it undermines the coercer's threat and gives the target state opportunities to strategize around the coercion or even leverage it to rally domestic or international support.[18]

For a coercive effort to succeed, both the demand and threat prongs of this model must be fulfilled. A failure in one prong undermines the other. If the demand is perceived as infringing on the target's vital interests, compliance is unlikely, regardless of the credibility of the threat. On the other hand, even a reasonable demand will not succeed if it is matched with a threat that lacks credibility.

The Backfire Effect

However, focusing solely on the "success" or "failure" of coercive diplomacy overlooks a part of its impact. A "failed" instance of coercive diplomacy can involve far more than simply a failure to comply; it can actively drive outcomes that are counter to the interests of the coercer, creating a backfire effect. It is important to distinguish this effect from a lack of compliance, as the two are very different outcomes.

One factor that drives the backfire effect is the "us versus them" mechanism. Not only does this mechanism allow authoritarian leaders to avoid the costs of sanctions, but it also fuels anger that can lead to the "emergence of rally[-around-the-flag] effects," which is when support for a leader, government, or aggressive strategy rises in times of conflict.[19] Snow and Benford reveal that this effect is particularly strong when leaders offer a "solution" or a counter to the outside attack.[20] In the case of U.S. sanctions on Iran, the counter would be revitalizing the nuclear program. Therefore, in trying to weaken a regime, a coercive policy can end up catalyzing its militarization.[21]

Another major factor driving the backfire effect is the potential impact of coercive diplomacy on domestic politics in the target state. Kaempfer et al. established that "sanctions can alter the alignment of domestic interests and thereby generate a change in policy."[22] However, much of the literature on this subject focuses on opposition groups and how they can be mobilized by sanctions and simultaneously weakened as authoritarian leaders ratchet up repression in the face of criticism. This scholarship is important, but it presupposes the existence of a somewhat cohesive opposition group.[23] Therefore, it is important to establish how sanctions affect domestic politics in authoritarian regimes where opposition groups are fractured like Iran's.[24] Beyond opposition dynamics, RezaeeDaryakenari et al. show that domestic priorities within a regime can shift in the face of sanctions to support more militant, anti-coercer ideologies.[25] This can bring individuals and parties into power who stand in direct opposition to the interest of the coercing regime.

Empirical

This section demonstrates that U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA undermined previous diplomatic gains, decreased Iran's willingness to cooperate with the United States, and strengthened hardliners in Tehran, thereby catalyzing Iran's nuclear escalation.

Background

Prior to the JCPOA, U.S. policy toward Iran overwhelmingly relied on coercive diplomacy.[26] Iran's nuclear program became the target of U.S. coercive diplomacy around 2002, marking the beginning of U.S. efforts to prevent Iranian nuclear proliferation through sanctions and threats.[27] However, Iran continuously showed resilience and an ability to adapt its strategies despite decades of economic and political pressure.[28]

The 2015 JCPOA was a rare deviation from coercion, yielding benefits for both Iran and the United States.[29] Iran received major sanctions relief, and the United States secured Tehran's agreement to stringent restrictions on its nuclear program. Importantly, by addressing Iranian concerns through negotiation rather than coercion, the agreement succeeded in reducing proliferation risks in ways that coercive measures had been unable to achieve over the previous decade.[30]

However, the JCPOA did not radically improve U.S.-Iran relations, nor was it intended to. It was a deal targeted specifically at reducing Iran's nuclear behavior, and U.S. sanctions on Iran over "rogue behavior" and human rights violations remained in place.[31] Nevertheless, a worldwide attitude of celebration surrounded this newfound diplomacy between Iran and the United States on nuclear matters, which was viewed as a major victory for nuclear governance.[32] Specifically, there were massive celebrations in Iran, fueled by the prospect of a post-sanction era.[33]

Importantly, the JCPOA worked to fulfill the West's goal of limiting Iran's proliferation activity. From 2015 until U.S. withdrawal in 2018, Iran complied with the agreement's terms, as confirmed by regular IAEA reports detailing compliance with restrictions on uranium enrichment and the dismantling of advanced centrifuges.[34] Tehran's compliance with the deal significantly lengthened the time it would have taken them to develop a nuclear weapon.

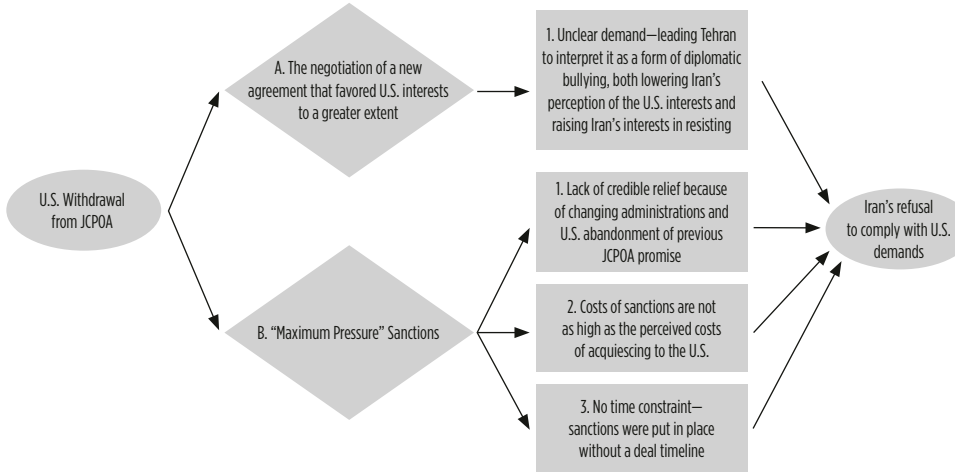
However, the JCPOA's fundamental weakness is that it was not a treaty. The Obama administration chose not to submit it to the U.S. Senate, recognizing that it would have failed to get the votes needed to secure formal treaty status.[35] Therefore, the JCPOA was not binding for the United States, allowing any future president to exit the agreement. When Trump, who had openly expressed his intention to adopt an aggressive stance toward Iran during his 2016 campaign, was elected president, it became increasingly likely that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA, despite Iran's compliance with all the terms of the agreement.

Early in the Trump administration, frequent threats to abandon the deal created significant economic and diplomatic repercussions. Specifically, international businesses were wary of the potential imposition of U.S. sanctions and avoided engaging with Iran.[36] This curtailed the economic benefits Iran had been promised in the JCPOA. Therefore, despite the United States still being an official signatory of the JCPOA, Tehran realized they would not receive all that they had been promised.

When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and imposed intensified sanctions, it marked a full return to coercive diplomacy in U.S.-Iran relations. The administration's "maximum pressure" campaign aimed to force Iran into renegotiating on U.S. terms by inflicting severe economic hardship.

The Failure of Coercive Diplomacy

Figure 2: An Analysis of the Failure of Coercive Diplomacy Using the Demand-Threat Model



According to A1 of the demand-threat model, the U.S. demand created much higher stakes for Iran relative to the United States, because Trump's vague demand of a "better deal" for the United States was interpreted by Iranian leaders as evidence of the United States attempting to undermine Iran's sovereignty. For example, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that focusing on the nuclear issue was "just an excuse" for the United States to take hostile action against Iran.[37] Additionally, following the imposition of sanctions, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif posted on X, "Economic terrorism and genocidal taunts won't end Iran."[38] These two leaders' responses reflect the view that the sanctions were meant to pose an existential threat to Iran. Therefore, because Tehran saw U.S. demands as a threat to the regime's survival, Iran's stake in the issue—maintaining their sovereignty—was far greater than any stake the United States could claim.

Furthermore, because the Trump administration simply demanded a "better deal for the U.S.," the U.S. stake in pursuing coercive diplomacy was unclear. But even if there had been more clarity in the Trump administration's particular demands, there still would not have been justification for the United States to pursue coercive diplomacy. Under the JCPOA, Iran already faced stricter restrictions than other Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signatory states and had been complying with them. The U.S. demand had been fulfilled: the nuclear weaponization threat Iran posed had been effectively neutralized. Therefore, in comparing Tehran's perception of an existential threat and the lack of a clear goal from the United States it is evident there is an asymmetry of stakes with Iran having a greater one.

There are additional factors that raise the stakes for Iran. Since Iran had already complied with strict restrictions on its nuclear program, agreeing to a stringent deal proposed by the Trump administration would likely mean accepting a far more degraded status than other NPT signatories. Publicly neutering its nuclear program, or even coming to the bargaining table after the aggressive nature of U.S. demands could have great implications for Iran. Tehran positions itself as the leader of the "axis of resistance," a coalition based on defending against Western imperialism.[39] This status characterizes Iran as a steadfast power that refuses to capitulate to U.S. demands, even under extreme economic or political pressure. Iran's allies had celebrated the JCPOA,[40] a deal that benefitted both parties. However, Iran feared that if it publicly acquiesced to U.S. pressure on the "maximum pressure" sanctions, its regional power would be undermined.

According to B1 of the demand-threat model, a threat's efficacy depends on the coercer's ability to convince the target that compliance will lead to relief of the threat. To Tehran, the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA demonstrated that the United States was an unreliable negotiating partner and incapable of honoring agreements, regardless of Iran's compliance. Then Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani lamented U.S. withdrawal: "The U.S. has announced that it doesn't respect its commitments."[41] Iran had no reason to believe that the United States would follow through on relieving the "maximum pressure" sanctions if Iran entered negotiations. Therefore, Iran determined that there would be no point in acquiescing.

Furthermore, despite the substantial costs of economic sanctions on crucial industries like oil and banking in Iran, they did not outweigh the costs of compliance, thus failing B2. This is partially because the economic hardship does not significantly affect Iran's political elite. The political elite involved in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a military force that reports directly to Khamenei, are observed to "benefit irrespective of sanctions increasing or decreasing due to [their] monopoly on the Iranian economy."[42] Additionally, the Iranian government was able to lower the possibility of public unrest due to sanctions by framing these hardships as a consequence of U.S. hostility toward the nation rather than any governmental failures.[43] Therefore, public support for the government and anti-Western sentiment

increased among Iranian citizens across ideologies following the imposition of "maximum pressure" sanctions.[44]

Addressing B3, the U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign lacked a coherent timeline. It did not include dates by which Iran was to meet certain demands or risk being sanctioned. Sanctions were emplaced incrementally following the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA without Tehran being told how to avoid them besides giving the United States a "better deal." This allowed Iranian leaders to view the sanctions as a long-term possibility rather than a short-term crisis and reduced the urgency Tehran felt to respond. In turn, Tehran deemed they had the space to establish their own timeline for counter-threats. On May 8, 2019, President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran would begin to abandon some of the JCPOA's limitations—including enriched uranium limits and restricted nuclear reactor construction—unless the other JCPOA signatories attempted to protect the Iranian oil and banking sectors.[45] The Iranian parliament took action on this threat in December 2020, and voted for a law "that demanded an acceleration of the production of enriched uranium, the renewal of the heavy water reactor at Arak, the suspen[sion] of the IAEA Additional Protocol, [and the] reduc[tion] [of] cooperation with the IAEA inspectors" if sanctions on the oil and banking sectors were not removed within a few weeks of Biden's inauguration.[46] By forcing the United States and its allies to react to Iran's actions rather than allowing the United States to control the timelines, Iran was able to shift the dynamic of coercion.

The Backfire Effect in Action

Iran did not simply resist the U.S. demand for a new deal, but actively began to scale up its own proliferation. This is a clear example of the backfire effect of coercive diplomacy.

When the sanctions were not lifted on its timeline, Iran fully abandoned its JCPOA commitments and began to proliferate at an unregulated rate. Tehran explicitly linked this choice to U.S. coercion. An official Iranian government statement read, "if the sanctions are lifted and Iran benefits from its interests enshrined in the JCPOA, the Islamic Republic is ready to return to its commitments."[47]

Domestically, the "maximum pressure" campaign strengthened nationalist sentiment and consolidated support for Iran's hardline leadership. Across all ideological groups, including those that usually criticized the regime, there was a rise in anti-Western and pro-government rhetoric.[48] After this "rally-around the flag" effect occurred, pro-diplomacy voices were discredited as naive or ineffective, while hardliners who favored nuclear expansion as a means of ensuring national security gained prominence.[49]

This sentiment was expressed by the overwhelming election of hardliners to Iran's parliament, to 230 out of 290 seats,[50] as well as by the election of conservative President Ebrahim Raisi in the 2021 election.[51] Raisi was openly anti-Western and stated his refusal to engage with the Biden administration on nuclear matters. His campaign was "bolstered by prevailing negative

sentiments toward Washington,"[52] which clearly gained traction as a result of U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the "maximum pressure" sanctions.[53] As President, Raisi stated, Iran "cannot trust the Americans because of the behavior that we have already seen from them."[54]

This sentiment became the guiding principle of Iran's U.S. policy. Even as Trump left office, the general sentiment toward the United States remained. Tehran was resistant to engaging in JCPOA restoration talks with the Biden administration, saying they would only do so if all sanctions were lifted and they were given financial compensation.[55] Nascent talks were "dead" by November 2022.[56] First Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli, explained that Iranian leaders believe nuclear talks were useless because Iran could not rely on foreigners.[57] Having experienced the U.S. abandonment of the JCPOA, Iranian leaders viewed any new agreement as inherently volatile and vulnerable to the whims of future U.S. administrations. The use of coercive diplomacy backfired, as it eliminated the possibility for the United States to negotiate any nuclear deal with Tehran, ending the dialogue that had previously existed under the JCPOA.

Other Factors

When considering the alternative hypothesis—Iran's nuclear proliferation would have occurred regardless of U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA—we should consider that, for over a decade leading up to the JCPOA's collapse, Israel and Iran were engaged in a shadow war, one that continues today with increasing escalation into more overt military confrontations.[58] Key events coincided with the U.S. exit from the JCPOA, including Iran blaming Israel for a cyberattack and Israel exposing Iranian nuclear secrets.[59] Additionally, both nations were engaged in proxy conflicts in Syria, which served as a theater for their rivalry. Iran had engaged in escalatory nuclear rhetoric after many military encounters with Israel.[60] Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that Iran pursued nuclear capabilities as a counterbalance to regional adversaries like Israel.

However, it is illogical to attribute Iran's abandonment of the JCPOA's terms and its nuclear proliferation solely to its regional conflicts. The shadow conflict has been going on since the 1979 Iranian revolution, and Iran had still chosen to enter the JCPOA. Therefore, it does not appear that the conflict with Israel was the catalyst for Iran's sudden nuclear proliferation. Instead, we can understand these regional pressures as further inflammation that affected Iran's strategic calculus in favor of proliferation.

Conclusion

U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the implementation of a "maximum pressure" strategy not only failed to achieve its intended outcomes, but also backfired, catalyzing Iran's nuclear proliferation. Some may argue that what this paper attributes to the backfire effect was the result of Iran's conflict with Israel, but this explanation falls short in accounting for the radical change in

Iran's rhetoric and actions around the JCPOA terms before and after the U.S. exit. Instead, the increase in Iran's nuclear proliferation is largely a result of U.S. coercive diplomacy that failed to achieve its intended outcomes.

This is an important case study to highlight as the United States considers its next steps in approaching Iran's prospective nuclear arsenal. When former Iranian president and conservative hardliner Raisi was killed in a helicopter crash, reformist Masoud Pezeshkian assumed office after defeating another hard-line conservative candidate.[61] Pezeshkian's victory offers a possible glimmer of hope for negotiations, as he has expressed that he would engage in nuclear talks with the West, provided there are good faith efforts to address the significant harms caused by its abandonment of the JCPOA.[62] However, the Iranian president has very limited power compared to the Supreme Leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, and arguably even the IRGC–the latter two have shown reluctance to re-enter negotiations with the West.[63] Furthermore, negotiations have become even less likely following Trump's full reimposition of the "maximum pressure" campaign upon returning to the White House, making it unlikely that President Pezeshkian's condition for good faith efforts will be met. Given these circumstances, Iran has reaffirmed its unwillingness to engage in any negotiations.[64]

The findings of this paper hold significance beyond the U.S.-Iran case study, offering both theoretical and practical lessons regarding coercive diplomacy. Theoretically, it introduces the demand-threat model by recasting previous scholarly work on coercive diplomacy through a structural analysis of why strategies succeed, fail, or backfire. Furthermore, the paper expands the literature around how failed coercive diplomacy can have a backfire effect and distinguishes this effect from a mere failure to compel a target to comply. This theoretical distinction can make a major difference in the way we label the outcomes of coercive policies.

These theoretical insights can have practical implications for policymakers. The demand-threat framework can be used when designing and evaluating coercive strategies. Additionally, understanding the backfire effect is critical if a state is engaging in coercive diplomacy. Backfire is an inherent risk in coercive diplomacy—particularly when targeting resilient authoritarian regimes—and understanding it should act as a further incentive to carefully assess instances of coercive diplomacy through the demand-threat framework.

While this paper presents a strong case for the backfire effect, the theory is applied to a singular case. Further research is necessary regarding the broader conditions under which coercive diplomacy backfires. This should include exploring previous cases of the backfire effect, further examining the impact of the factors I have identified in this paper on the backfire effect, and identifying additional factors that could contribute to the backfire effect. More research should be done on how coercive diplomacy influences domestic politics within authoritarian target states, such as the strengthening of hardline factions.

The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA reveals many grounds on which a demand or threat made by way of coercive diplomacy might fail, as well as the

substantial risks associated with its failure. As the United States and other countries craft strategies to confront high-stakes matters like nuclear proliferation, they must take a careful approach if they intend to use coercive diplomacy, utilizing tools like the demand-threat framework to design strategies that balance pressure with realistic incentives. Ultimately, however, reducing the use of coercive tactics and committing to cooperative engagement may prove more effective, as it will avoid the perils of backfire altogether.

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