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**Global Security versus 'America First':
The Geopolitical Significance
of the Transatlantic Divide over the
Iran Nuclear Deal**

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Introduction

- Despite intense diplomatic lobbying by French, German and British leaders to keep the US in the Iran nuclear pact, President Trump withdrew the US from the agreement on 9 May 2018.
- However, the Europeans' continuing commitment to the nuclear deal and the evident limitations of the Trump administration's own 'maximum pressure' strategy towards Iran indicates that an 'America First' approach to security is likely to hurt rather than strengthen US leadership in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Concept of Global Security

- Concept of global security linked to post-Cold War era characterised by the growth of international linkages, an erosion of the autonomy of the state, and a pattern of conflict which moved beyond the protection of the state.
- For much of the post-Cold War period, US approach to international security was largely realist in orientation despite a radically reshaped global security environment.
- But Barack Obama's election seemed to herald a new emphasis on a global security approach, particularly with respect to the problem of countering the proliferation nuclear weapons.

Trump's 'America First' Stance

- Resistance to globalization was arguably the foremost policy theme in Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign and, in office, his administration confirmed it saw the world in starkly realist terms.
- Trump was uncomfortable with the idea of an international rules based order, shared by many of America's allies, and believed that multilateralism had undermined rather than served American interests.
- Convinced that great powers still dictated world politics, Trump believed that, since America was the world's most powerful state, unilateral or bilateral approaches were the best options for enhancing the US's security interests.

The Iran Nuclear Deal: Global Security meets 'America First'

- The signing of the nuclear accord between Iran and the so-called P5+1 group – the US, UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany, along with the EU – in Vienna was an agreement that capped two years of strenuous negotiations.
- This agreement sets limits on Iran's nuclear programme by eliminating pathways to a nuclear weapon in exchange for the gradual removal of economic sanctions against Teheran.
- Many arms control specialists reacted enthusiastically to this agreement and hailed it as one of President Obama's most consequential foreign policy achievements.

The Iran Nuclear Deal: Global Security meets 'America First'

- Opponents of the nuclear deal included the govts of Israel and Saudi Arabia and politicians like Donald Trump who describe it as "a horrible one-sided deal."
- Critics like Trump said Iran would be left with a 'threshold' nuclear weapons capability, and it was claimed that the lifting of sanctions would serve to increase Iran's regional ambitions, including extra funding to proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and allies like the Assad regime in Syria.
- Despite intense diplomatic lobbying by French, German and British leaders, President Trump withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear agreement on 9 May 2018

Assessing the Significance of the Transatlantic Divide over Iran

- While EU leaders regretted America's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, they made it clear they would not be following Trump's example.
- In an effort to preserve the Iran nuclear deal in the face of reinvigorated US sanctions, France, Germany and the UK founded the so called 'Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges' (INSTEX)
- But INSTEX arrangement to date has not worked well and has not able to effectively cushion the substantial impact that US sanctions are having

Assessing the Significance of the Transatlantic Divide over Iran

- At the same time, Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" towards Iran after America's withdrawal from the nuclear deal looks problematic. It is based on the assumption that if the US has the necessary political will it can force Teheran into some sort of bilateral negotiation with Washington. To date, Iran does not look it will bend in the face of US pressure.
- There now appears to be an increased danger of war between the US and Iran, but the Trump administration cannot relish that prospect with the 2020 presidential election looming.

Assessing the Significance of the Transatlantic Divide over Iran

- The diplomatic costs of Trump's 'America First' approach towards Iran have been substantial in Europe (although these may be ameliorated after Brexit!)
- In an increasingly interconnected world, security challenges like nuclear proliferation in Iran require a multilateral diplomatic response.
- And while Trump's 'America First' stance has certainly weakened the Iran nuclear deal, it is an illusion to believe the Trump administration can single-handedly deliver a deal that is better than the one supported by key US allies as well as China and Russia.

Assessing the Significance of Transatlantic Divide over Iran

- Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal highlights the incoherence and contradictions of his 'America First' strategy. Having used bluster and threats of force against Iran, President Trump knew his voters are strongly opposed to more wars, dismissed his National Security adviser, John Bolton, and said he is even prepared to negotiate with the Iranian leadership!
- Recent trends would seem to suggest the Iranian leadership is likely to retaliate against any further escalation of US sanctions. Whether this is through a continued rejuvenation of its nuclear programme or the of military tactics remains to be seen.
- So President Trump's actions have weakened the concept of global security but offers no credible alternative. Trump's threats and no follow through makes the US look like a paper tiger or simply confused.