

France, Nuclear Iran, and the United States

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When it comes to the Iranian nuclear issue, the French are wary of the Americans. It is one of the subjects on which the two countries often find themselves at odds. Faced with major international crises, Washington and Paris have sometimes clashed forcefully. The American military intervention in Iraq in 2003, which the France of Jacques Chirac had firmly opposed, left scars for several years on both sides of the Atlantic. Deeply attached to President Barack Obama and reassured by the election of Joe Biden, French diplomats often admit a penchant for Democratic presidents. But when it comes to Iran's nuclear program, the hawks often are in Paris, not in Washington. As the final talks are taking place in Vienna, French Middle East specialists are worried about the "weakness from the Biden administration," as says a diplomatic source.¹ They fear that Washington will grant Iran too many concessions. Like in 2015.

While the international community was negotiating hard for an agreement to limit and supervise Iran's nuclear activity for ten years, if not to stop the nuclear program outright, the French minister for foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, refused to sign the compromise pushed by the Americans. The election of a moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, in Tehran had encouraged Barack Obama to carry out his policy of "extended hand" to Iran. After the terrible years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the ultraconservative president who led the country between 2005 and 2013 by turning it against Westerners and threatening Israel, the prospect of a possible rapprochement with Iran had encouraged the American president and his secretary of state, John Kerry, in their wish not to intervene militarily in the Middle East.

The French took a different approach. In 2013, the head of their diplomatic efforts opposed the American negotiators head-on, on the shores of Lake Geneva, at the InterContinental hotel. After ten years of deadlock, the P5+1 group (the five members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom—plus Germany) was preparing to conclude an agreement with Iran exchanging the lifting of economic sanctions for a strict framework for the Iranian nuclear program. Exasperated by the secret negotiations carried out between the Americans and Iranians and believing that their compromise had given rise to a "very bad agreement," according to Fabius in press declarations, who slammed the door on the negotiations, castigated the fool's game, and forced the parties into new talks. France protested the American decision to grant Iran the



right to enrich uranium on its territory (as well as to keep a certain quantity of uranium enriched at 20 percent) under the control of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the world's nuclear watchdog.

Instead, France argued, Iran should relinquish its uranium stocks entirely, even those enriched to 3.5 percent. For Fabius, the interim agreement prepared between Tehran and Washington would have enabled Tehran to complete in six months the work of the Arak reactor, in which Iran could produce heavy plutonium. The French negotiator also demanded access to military sites for inspectors from the IAEA. He remained implacable against the Americans and the Iranians. The fact that the sanctions and oil revenue freeze were maintained in November 2013 owes much to his insistence. The stubbornness of the minister who, alone against all, embodied the resistance of France made it possible to strengthen the version of the Iranian nuclear agreement, the JCPOA, that was finally imposed on Iran in July 2015.

At the time, France was closer to the Israelis and the American Republicans than to the Democrats of Barack Obama. "On the Iranian issue, our two countries have been defending common positions for many years, regardless of the majority in power," declared former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in an interview with *Le Figaro* at the end of 2013.² Fabius had never ruled out using force, as a last resort, to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Between the Iranian bomb and an intervention against the Iranian nuclear infrastructures, Iranian conservatives—not sure that the French wouldn't have chosen the former—characterized France's role during the negotiations as "harmful," while Fabius, in particular, was nicknamed "the little Satan" and "the Israeli poodle."

Is history repeating itself today? In 2015, French negotiators regretted—in private—that the agreement signed with Iran in Vienna was, despite the conditions obtained by Fabius, not more robust, solid, and durable. But in 2018, when President Donald Trump, calling the JCPOA a "very bad agreement," withdrew unilaterally from it, leading to a violation by Iran of all its provisions, the French made enormous efforts, helped by the British and the Germans, to save the compromise—it was their belief that with such an American president, an imperfect agreement was better than no agreement at all.³ In Biarritz in August 2019 during the G7, then in New York in September on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, French president Emmanuel Macron made every effort to bring together American and Iranian officials to force, if not a reconciliation, at least a handshake and a return of both parties to their international obligations. Even after the UN General Assembly, France continued to work on a text in compliance with the one that Rouhani had approved in September. But President Trump refused it when the chief French diplomat, Jean-Yves Le Drian, went to see him in November 2019 in Washington. Macron's efforts were in vain. "On both sides, the machines have regained power and prevent rapprochement," explained Macron in an interview with the author.⁴

Failing to resuscitate the JCPOA, the Europeans have held on to it since 2018 and throughout the term of Trump's presidency, to prevent it from dying. It has been a challenge, because since the election of an ultraconservative president, Ebrahim Raisi, in June 2021, Tehran has left the negotiations and systematically violated all the provisions of the JCPOA. Enrichment has been pushed to levels prohibited by the international community, from 20 to 60 percent. New centrifuge cascades were built to produce 90 percent enriched uranium. Iran has also embarked on the production of uranium metal, intended to make a weapon shell, while it closed itself to IAEA inspectors, blinding the international community to its illicit activities. However, the Iranians returned to Vienna on November 29, 2021, having scrapped 90 percent of the progress attained during spring negotiations, to come back to the agreement of 2015.

Depending on who occupies the Oval Office, the French defend or criticize the Iranian nuclear agreement, to keep it afloat no matter what and to maintain its basic elements. President Biden has expressed his desire since arriving at the White House to rejoin the JCPOA of 2015, and Paris is once again concerned about a tendency toward appeasement on the part of the new administration. This concern was reignited in late 2021 when three members of the US negotiating team voiced their disagreement and frustration with their country's approach in Vienna. The team of Robert Malley, the Biden administration's special envoy for Iran, is divided on several issues, including sanctions and whether or not to walk away from the negotiating table if Tehran continues to resist the international community and go down the nuclear path. The resignation of Richard Nephew, Malley's deputy, on December 6, 2021, according to Israeli sources due to a "profound difference of opinion" with the administration's policy, was noted in Paris. Nephew had deep differences with his boss, whom he considered too conciliatory toward Iran. Paris has also taken note of the request of the hard-line wing of the Republicans to President Biden to withdraw from the "vain" discussions in Vienna, as an American source says. A letter sent on February 7, 2022, signed by thirty-two Republican senators to President Biden, warned that any agreement that was not approved by Congress would meet the same fate as the JCPOA.

Since the resumption of negotiations, the French side has been worried—not always officially—about a lack of resoluteness on the part of the Americans, many of whom previously belonged to President Obama's team that made the original concessions to Tehran. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman all were involved in the negotiation of the 2015 nuclear agreement. France lives with the "heavy liabilities," according to a French diplomat, inherited from the "complacency" of Barack Obama and with the "unpleasant legacy" bequeathed by the "untimely" Donald Trump. "We have the impression that the Americans want the JCPOA back so badly that they are going to let the Iranians drag out the talks indefinitely so as not to break off the negotiations," commented a French diplomat familiar with the matter recently. In fact, after so many meetings and efforts, Americans



and Europeans almost agreed, as the negotiations come to their end on the content of the agreement. The main difference between them, says one of the European negotiators, is the timing. “The Europeans believe they have to signal the end of the game. Not the Americans,” says a French source familiar with the negotiations. The Iranians are rubbing their hands: they are now so close to their goal that it is hard to see why they would rush to return to their commitments, since they consider nuclear weapons to be the ultimate security guarantee of the Islamic Republic.

Joe Biden wants to disassociate himself from Donald Trump at all costs, in particular on the Iranian issue, where his predecessor caused a crisis with the Europeans. He promised a break with the counterproductive “maximum pressure” of Donald Trump and a new Iranian policy. “But when Joe Biden came to Europe in June 2021, the mention of Iran had to be scrutinized,” explains a French diplomat familiar with the matter. “It’s troubling. The crisis has never been so serious, and one has the impression that it is considered in Washington as a second-class subject, whereas for the French, it is still just as important.” President Biden has said it again and again, and in this he is the worthy heir of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump: he does not want to open a new conflict in the Middle East. A senior French diplomat laments, “The United States, which wants to focus on China and only China, is closing one window after another in the greater Middle East. In Afghanistan, in Iraq, in Lebanon. They sign with all those who present themselves, whatever their respectability: the Turks, the Russians . . .” President Biden would like, he continues, to “lock Iranian nuclear activity in a box to focus on the Indo-Pacific.”

Some European diplomats, who are negotiating hard, suspect the American administration of desperately seeking an agreement at a time when the Democrats are struggling in the United States, even if it means settling on a reduced JCPOA: a compromise that would give the international community only a few months of additional security before the Iranians developed a bomb, since experts generally consider that the “breakout time”—the time Iran will have enough fissile materials to make a bomb if it decides to—has shrunk to less than four months, compared with more than a year at the time of the JCPOA. “Even a weaker agreement than the initial JCPOA would give time to the international community to think,” a European negotiator stated.

In the course of a few months, the French have seen President Biden abandon a “longer and stronger” agreement and to reduce the goal. He has backed away from discussing the Islamic Republic’s missile program and its destabilizing behavior in the Middle East. Some suspect him of being willing to make concessions to achieve success in foreign policy and distract from failure in Afghanistan. Today, some French diplomats, who disagree with the official position of Paris in Vienna, also fear that the Biden administration is about to lift more sanctions in exchange for fewer concessions from Tehran. If so, it would allow the Iranian economy to recover and increase Tehran’s weight and influence in the region. “Biden is too weak to undertake the lifting of sanctions, but he does not want

to bear the consequences of the failure either,” summarizes a diplomat familiar with the matter. The French negotiators in Vienna don’t think this way anymore. “Again,” says one, “the difference is now much more a difference of rhythm.” Joe Biden is considered in Europe as a parenthesis, probably too old to be reelected. What will happen to the nuclear deal if Donald Trump returns to office?

Of all the European countries, France is the most worried. Officially, the West still clings to the illusion that a united P5 front will exert enough pressure for the Iranians to fall into line and freeze their nuclear program again. But in Paris, strategy specialists no longer believe this. During the last—indirect—negotiations in Vienna, when EU representatives shuttled for weeks between Americans and Iranians, it was the French foreign minister who most often voiced regret that progress in the talks was, according to his words, “partial, timid, and slow.” Jean-Yves Le Drian warned that “the negotiations cannot continue at such a slow pace,” lest the agreement be emptied of its substance. On February 19, President Macron warned Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi in a ninety-minute telephone exchange of the “imperative need” to conclude an agreement while there was still time. He called on Iran to “seize this opportunity” and make the political decisions that would preserve the Vienna agreement.⁵ On the European continent, it is France that plays the role of policeman of nonproliferation, utilizing some of the best specialists in the world, including young diplomats specializing in strategy who have followed the entire history of the Iranian nuclear developments and led the negotiations since 2003.

As one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the only one in the European Union since Brexit, France has always been the country most involved in the Iran issue. It has also maintained special relations with Iran. The firmness shown by Minister of Foreign Affairs Laurent Fabius in 2013 was also based on a mistrust of Tehran, acquired when he was prime minister under François Mitterrand in the 1980s. Paris and Tehran faced off against each other for years after Ayatollah Khomeini broke the shah’s nuclear cooperation agreement with France. It was a time marked by attacks in France attributed to Iran and the taking of French hostages in Lebanon by Hezbollah, Iran’s armed wing in the region—not to mention the support given by France to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq during its war against Iran (1980–88).

Since the start of negotiations with President Obama in 2013, French diplomats specializing in the matter have lost count of the sleepless nights strung together, one after the other, in the corridors of major hotels. Then the endless months followed, spent picking up the pieces while waiting for President Trump to leave office, as well as the emergency trips to Vienna or Geneva and the moments of desperation and tantrums at Iran’s lies and cover-ups. “Since the beginning of the last negotiations, we have spent more than 110 nights in Vienna,” says a French negotiator. Of the three E3 countries—France, Germany, the United Kingdom—that have been negotiating since 2003 to limit the Iranian nuclear program, it has been the United Kingdom that has always firmly supported France. On this subject, since Brexit,



London has maintained a robust and demanding position, while the pacifist Germans have shown more softness, even if they have recently strengthened their position. Like the French and British diplomats, they now imagine the consequences of an Iran equipped with atomic weapons: a new nuclear proliferation crisis with the Sunni powers in the region—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey—which would in turn embark on the nuclear race, jeopardizing the international impetus for the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction and turning the Middle East into a “nuclear lake.” The region would thus fall even further under the control of Iranian militias, which, protected by Tehran’s nuclear umbrella, would no longer face any limits.

If the French are worried about the passivity that they detect in Joe Biden, it is because they have experienced years of disappointment with American foreign policy. Barack Obama’s last-minute decision not to strike at the Syrian regime in August 2013, after another chemical massacre committed in the suburbs of Damascus, came as a shock to French officials at the time. It is remembered to this day. Not only had the American president given up on enforcing a red line that he himself had drawn, but he had abandoned his French allies just as the engines of the bombers were turned on. This renunciation opened the door to Russian intervention, to the great benefit of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. It also undermined the allies’ confidence in the United States. The disappointments with Donald Trump were of a different kind, when he caused confusion among Europeans by claiming that NATO was “obsolete” and by casting doubt on the reliability of Article 5 of the alliance, which provides the basis for collective defense. The extraterritorial sanctions taken by the United States against European companies trading with Iran have also been seen as a particularly unfriendly gesture toward allies.

President Biden had promised to fix foreign policy after Donald Trump. But he has failed to dispel the unease. The calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan, carried out by the American president without consultation with his allies, greatly disappointed the Europeans, especially the Germans, who, normally hesitant to engage abroad, had invested heavily in the Afghan commitment. The French, whose special forces, in particular, had stood with their American counterparts felt betrayed. The withdrawal also emboldened America’s adversaries, casting doubt on the competence of the president and his administration. As seen through France’s lens, the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which resulted in the handing over of the keys, unconditionally, to the Taliban and the abandonment of those in Kabul who believed in democracy, leaving them at the mercy of Islamist fighters and their al-Qaeda allies, has weakened Washington’s position on the nuclear issue. And it has also brought the Gulf countries, whose confidence in the Americans has waned, closer to Israel. A month after taking office, President Biden also withdrew the designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization in Yemen. A senior French diplomat says, “We have the impression that the Middle East has become a blind spot in American policy. And that’s not good news for anyone.” In Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Libya, on the edges of the Mediterranean, the revisionist powers are

filling in where the Americans withdraw. Turkey, Russia, Iran, and China are slipping into the interstices deserted by the first world power, trying to replace Western powers wherever they can.

More generally, the French regard the Iran policy of the United States with skepticism. The 2003 US intervention in Iraq had the effect of amplifying the Iranian threat, offering two major gifts to Tehran. It rid Iran of its main enemy, the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, and in the name of democracy it handed power to the Shia majority, many of whose leaders had close ties to Iran, where they had spent their years in exile. Seizing the opportunities offered by Washington, Tehran has extended its influence in Lebanon; in Syria, with the Quds force and the financed and armed militias; and in Yemen, where it supports the Houthi rebels. Some French diplomats believe that it is partly thanks to the United States that Iran has become a major player in the Middle East, where it has now extended its presence to the edge of the Mediterranean. The Syrian renunciation from Barack Obama in 2013, by strengthening Bashar al-Assad, only comforted the authorities in Tehran.

Later, President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and the failure of maximum pressure brought the regime's toughest voice back in Tehran. The withdrawal from Afghanistan and the American disengagement in the Middle East, undertaken without qualms by the White House and with often brutal pragmatism, have undoubtedly also reinforced Tehran's desire to see its nuclear project through to the end, without fear of American military intervention. But the biggest shock for France was AUKUS, the new alliance between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom of September 2021, which torpedoed the submarine contract between Paris and Canberra. Arriving at the White House, Joe Biden had promised to restore relations with his European allies that had been degraded by Donald Trump. With France, the greatest military power in the European Union since Brexit, he wanted to relaunch strategic and geopolitical cooperation. "This principle has been trampled on. Joe Biden has proven that he is no more interested than Donald Trump in a reorganization of the Atlantic Alliance on sounder bases," asserts Jean-Louis Bourlanges, former MEP and chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly.⁶ He continues: "At the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Americans were outraged by our attitude and we were right. Today, we are outraged by AUKUS, and our reactions are not taken at their fair measure."

The behavior of the American authorities vis-à-vis the Ukrainian crisis has also fueled the doubts of Europeans. By implying, at the end of January 2022, that the international community could put up with a "minor incursion" by Russia into Ukraine before backpedaling and promising a "severe" response to any Russian intrusion into Ukraine, Biden sowed doubt among European leaders. He also fueled confusion among his allies by warning in advance that he would not send any soldiers to Ukraine in the event of Russian intervention, not even to evacuate American nationals. "In one sentence, he frustrated deterrence and he lost any chance of making Vladimir Putin back down," comments a senior French



diplomat, annoyed. Emmanuel Macron, who since the start of the crisis has tried to introduce a European voice to break the American-Russian confrontation imposed by Vladimir Putin, has not always felt supported by the American president. “I don’t know where the Americans are on the Ukrainian subject, militarily. And I don’t know if they are clear on what they want or not to do with the Europeans,” comments a source at the Élysée, speaking on Macron’s behalf.

Two questions are on everyone’s mind, no matter how much responsible figures try to evade them. After being so demanding on the subject for twenty years, will France accept a cut-rate agreement that fails to prevent the continuation of the Iranian nuclear program or its progression toward a threshold state? Or will the French negotiators resist and repeat the experience of 2013, forcing the Americans to toughen the new compromise? And if the negotiations were to fail, or the attenuate agreement to fall apart, would France follow the Israelis if they decided to strike against Iranian military installations? Israel has repeatedly declared itself ready to go it alone in carrying out cyberattacks and sabotage, should the need arise. A shadow war with Iran is already taking place in Syria, where Israel regularly attacks Iranian targets. But could France join a military operation against Iran? The question of a possible military role in this regard is today a taboo subject in all French strategic sectors. At the Élysée as at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or that of Defense, the answer is always the same: “We are not there yet. The question does not arise for the moment.”

As for diplomatically tightening the terms of the new agreement, the temptation exists among nuclear and nonproliferation specialists, as in 2013, to hold a hard line against the Americans. Because if a bad agreement—that is to say, an agreement at a discount, which would be even less solid than that of 2015—emerges from the negotiations in Vienna, it is likely that it will be criticized, or even refused, in certain capitals. In Washington, the Republicans have already predicted that they will not allow this to happen. Paris and London might want to follow suit. Anticipating an imminent agreement, Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett said it “would be more fragile than the previous one” and that Israel was preparing “for the day after the agreement at all levels.”⁷ But is what was possible in 2013 still possible today? French specialists know that time is running out, since Iran is only a few steps away from nuclear status. The progress made by Iran since 2018 is such, in terms of knowledge and enrichment capabilities in particular, that the interests in a return to the JCPOA have eroded. Even if they wanted to, the French proliferation specialists would probably not have the necessary time, this time, to toughen up the new agreement. But it’s also a question of reality. What is better? No agreement, as thinks Donald Trump? Or an agreement that respects the major interest of the Europeans, the nonproliferation? The French negotiator’s conclusion: “Of course, the new agreement won’t be as good as the JCPOA, because we all pay the price of the Trump years.”

NOTES

- 1 This paper contains quotations from unnamed diplomatic sources who spoke on the condition of anonymity.
- 2 “Nétanyahou: ‘La France ne doit pas fléchir face à l’Iran,’” *Le Figaro*, November 16, 2013.
- 3 Donald Trump’s quotation derives from his speech on the Iran Nuclear Deal, delivered from the White House May 8, 2018.
- 4 Emmanuel Macron, conversation with the author June 2021 at Élysée.
- 5 Élysée press statement, February 19, 2022.
- 6 Conference for the Strategic Chair of the Sorbonne University, January 17, 2022.
- 7 Press statement in Jerusalem, February 20, 2022.





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