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5 on 45: Why Trump's decertification of the Iran deal matters

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

Maloney: Hi I'm Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of the Foreign Policy program at Brookings, and a senior fellow in our Center for Middle East policy.

I work on Iran and I'm here today to discuss the speech by President Trump on the issue of Iran, and specifically, announcing his decision on a broader Iran policy and his approach to the Iran nuclear agreement which has been an issue of significant focus for the Trump administration since the president was on the campaign trail.

As expected, President Trump announced that he would in fact de-certify Iranian compliance with the Iran nuclear deal. This is a domestic political maneuver that effectively kicks the issue of sanctions waivers under the nuclear deal back to the U.S. Congress. The president and his secretary of state have apparently begun discussions with the Congress over amendments to a law that was put in place at the time of the negotiation of the deal and these amendments would effectively create an automaticity to the re-imposition of U.S. nuclear related sanctions on the basis of specific actions that Iran may take, both actions related to the deal and covered by the deal, but also potentially actions such as testing of ballistic missiles that were not in fact included in the deal.

The reaction to this element of the president's announcement today has been fairly unanimous from around the world. All of America's partners to the negotiations with Iran over the nuclear crisis have recommitted to their support of the deal and of its terms and their disinterest in opening up any changes to that arrangement. The Iranians themselves have also been very clear that they intend to continue to abide by the deal irrespective of what the president may or may not do.

It's an interesting gesture on the part of the Trump administration to essentially put the issue of American compliance with the Iran nuclear agreement back in the hands of the U.S. Congress. It likely means no changes in the immediate future but it

really does introduce an element of unpredictability which could cause the United States to come into breach with its own obligations under the agreement. And as a result it does certainly, I think, detract from the credibility of U.S. commitments to all of our obligations and all of the negotiations that we undertake around the world. And this is going to be I think a long term question for the Trump administration in terms of American credibility.

The other aspect of the president's speech which is eliciting a great deal of attention is the announcement that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a branch of the Iranian military which has been heavily involved in its activities in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere across the region, would be designated under an executive order that was put forward after the 9/11 attacks to try to curtail financial support to terrorist organizations. This was a maneuver that had been anticipated because it was part of legislation signed by the president in August. But some of the pre speech discussions by administration officials were suggesting that in fact it might not move forward.

This designation is effectively redundant to existing sanctions on elements of the Revolutionary Guard, but it is likely to have a significant psychological effect within Iran. Leaders of the revolutionary guard corps were quite vociferous earlier in the week in insisting that they would see any attempt to equate them with a terrorist organization as an invitation for direct attacks on American forces in the region. I think it's quite likely that we will see some retaliation by the Revolutionary Guard and by the Iranian regime as a whole to this specific element of the new Trump approach to Iran.

What is also interesting about the speech is the sense of the tone. The president was hostile even belligerent. He was deliberately provocative in the way that he spoke about the Iranian government, and he emphasized the suffering of the Iranian people in a way that is almost certain to be interpreted as a slippery slope toward regime change on the part of many Iranians.

He gave a long recitation of Iran's historic misdeeds which included acts of violence against U.S. presence in the region and U.S. allies and interests in the region. And he made repeated reference to the Iranian government is a rogue regime or a dictatorship.

Again, this kind of rhetoric is going to intensify the level of hostility between the United States and Iran in a way that is likely to have unpredictable implications for our own security interests across the region. Thank you.

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