

STATEMENT OF SENATOR BERNARD SANDERS ON JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION

Mr. President, I rise to speak about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the agreement that the U.S. negotiated with China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom and Iran. I support the agreement, and will oppose the resolution of disapproval, as I believe this approach is the best way forward if we are to accomplish what we all want to accomplish—that is making certain that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon – an occurrence which would destabilize the region, lead to a nuclear arms race in the area, and would endanger the existence of Israel.

It is my firm belief that the test of a great nation, with the most powerful military on earth, is not how many wars we can engage in, but how we can use our strength and our capabilities to resolve international conflicts in a peaceful way.

Those who have spoken out against this agreement, including many in this chamber, and those who have made every effort to thwart the diplomatic process, are many of the same people who spoke out forcefully and irresponsibly about the need to go to war with Iraq – one of the worst foreign policy blunders in the modern history of our country.

Sadly, people like former vice president Dick Cheney and many of the other neo-cons who pushed us to war Iraq were not only tragically wrong then, they are wrong now. Unfortunately, these individuals have learned nothing from the results of that disastrous policy and how it destabilized the entire region.

I fear that many of my Republican colleagues do not understand that war must be a last resort, not the first resort. It is easy to go to war, it not so easy to understand the unintended consequences of that war.

As the former Chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I have talked to veterans from WWII to Iraq, and I have learned a little bit about what the cost of war entails. In Iraq and Afghanistan we have lost 6,700 brave men and women, and many others have come home without legs, without arms, without eyesight.

Let us not forget that 500,000 veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan came back to their families with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. The suicide rate of young veterans is appallingly high. The divorce rate is appallingly high, and the impact on children is appallingly high. God knows how many families have been devastated by these wars.

And we should not forget the many hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi men, women, and children who died in that war, and those whose lives who have been completely destabilized, including those who are fleeing their country today with only the clothes on their back as refugees.

Yes, the military option should always be on the table, but it should be the last option. We have got to do everything we can do to reach an agreement to ensure that Iran does not get a nuclear weapon without having to go to war.

I believe we have an obligation to pursue diplomatic solutions before resorting to military engagement – especially after nearly fourteen years of ill-conceived and disastrous military engagements in the region.

The agreement calls for cutting off Iran's pathways to the fissile materials needed for a nuclear weapon by reducing its stockpile of uranium by 98 percent, and restricting the level of enrichment of uranium to well below the level needed for weaponized uranium. The agreement requires Iran to decrease the number of installed centrifuges by two-thirds, dismantle the country's heavy-water nuclear reactor so that it cannot produce any weapons-grade plutonium, and commit to rigorous monitoring, inspection, and verification by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Only after Iran has demonstrated to the international community its compliance with the tenets of the agreement – the U.S. and European Union will lift the sanctions that helped bring Iran to the negotiating table in the first place. The agreement also contains a mechanism for the "snap back" of those sanctions if Iran does not comply with its obligations.

Does the agreement achieve everything I would like? Of course not. But to my mind, it is far better than the path we were on – with Iran developing nuclear weapons capability and the potential for military intervention by the U.S. and Israel growing greater by the day.

Let us not forget that if Iran does not live up to the agreement, sanctions may be reimposed. If Iran moves toward a nuclear weapon, all available options remain on the table. I think it is incumbent upon us, however, to give the negotiated agreement a chance to succeed, and it is for these reasons that I will support the agreement.