



THE FUTURE OF NONPROLIFERATION

Coping with Trump, looking beyond
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by **Pascal Abb**

2018 has been marked by a rapidly changing landscape in the field of nonproliferation efforts, driven primarily by a series of US moves in dealing with Iran and North Korea, the two most important test cases for the viability of global and regional nonproliferation regimes. On May 8, president Trump announced his intention to reimpose US sanctions on Iran,¹ tantamount to a unilateral withdrawal from the landmark 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that offered Iran sanctions relief and the possibility of increased foreign investment in exchange for tight restraints on its uranium enrichment activities and a comprehensive inspections regime. Subsequent comments by the new US foreign minister, Mike Pompeo, established a baseline of new US demands – including the end of Iranian support for militias throughout the region and general “threatening behavior against its neighbours” – that went far beyond the scope of a nuclear deal and were immediately rejected by the Iranian side.²

The US withdrawal, which was not triggered by any specific Iranian violation of the original agreement, now threatens the modest economic gains realized by Iran under its provisions, and leaves it to the other remaining signatories – the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China – to keep the JCPOA alive, which will likely prove to be very difficult under the threat of “secondary” US sanctions against foreign companies doing business in Iran. If these efforts fail, hardliners within Iran may push for a resumption of the

Iranian nuclear program, which would not only wipe out 15 years of efforts to contain it, but increase regional tensions, potentially leading to preemptive attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities or further proliferation on the part of Iran’s regional rivals.

Just weeks before turning its back on the JCPOA, the Trump administration had sent a very different signal in its new approach to dealing with North Korea: having previously reacted to a series of North Korean nuclear and missile tests with increasingly hostile rhetoric, on March 8, president Trump stunned international observers with an announcement that he was willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in person. Originally planned for June 12, cancelled in the interim and now revived, the results of this summit are doubtful and questions remain whether both sides are indeed on the same page despite a shared rhetorical commitment to “denuclearization”. US officials seem to interpret this goal as a complete, verifiable and unilateral nuclear disarmament on the part of North Korea – a demand which, for reasons of regime preservation and international status concerns, it is very unlikely to fulfil – whereas the North Korean side seems mainly interested in an official acknowledgement of its nuclear status and the possibility of obtaining security assurances in exchange for a lasting halt to their nuclear and missile test programs.³

1 “President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal”, *The White House Briefing*, 8 May 2018.

2 Michael Gordon, “U.S. Lays Out Demands for New Iran Deal”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 May 2018.

3 Robert Jervis and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “Perception and Misperception on the Korean Peninsula”, *Foreign Affairs* 97:3, 103-117.



At first glance, these approaches to nonproliferation diplomacy seem puzzling and very hard to reconcile with each other – on the one hand, a working solution that took years to reach is summarily denounced and abandoned; on the other hand, the prestige of the US presidency is staked on a personal negotiation with an interlocutor that has, in the past, often proved very unpredictable and fickle in its commitment to diplomatic agreements. How can we account for these seemingly contradictory outcomes?

First, it is important to note how these cases were shaped by a similarity in the Trump administration's general policymaking approach. There is little that suggests either decision was driven by a concrete strategy, is part of a consciously planned step-by-step process, or indeed pursues clearly delineated aims, and it should not be surprising that this would lead to divergent outcomes.

Additionally, in both instances, Trump did eventually follow through on commitments he had made during his election campaign, when he had consistently denounced the Iran deal as fundamentally flawed, but expressed a willingness to meet with Kim without naming preconditions.⁴ According

⁴ "US Election: Donald Trump Open to Talks with North Korea", *BBC*, 18 May 2016.

to recent news reports, Trump's desire to be seen as consistent on these promises was a key motivation in the abrogation of the Iran deal,⁵ and may well have worked in favour of diplomacy in the North Korean case.

Finally, and most importantly, the dynamics around both the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs are significantly impacted by the role of regional allies. The most recent thawing of inter-Korean relations that eventually led to the Trump-Kim summit proposal has mainly been driven by South Korea's president Moon Jae-In, whose successful "Olympic diplomacy" paved the way for it.⁶ In contrast, the key US allies in the Middle East remain locked in a struggle over regional supremacy with Iran, have consistently opposed the JCPOA and lobbied for its abrogation.

There is one further link between both cases: both the president and senior administration officials have appeared to treat the North Korean invitation to a summit meeting as a concession in itself and proof that their "maximum

⁵ John Hudson and Philip Rucker, "Why Trump Torpedoed Obama's Iran Deal", *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2018.

⁶ Nathan Park, "The Man behind the North Korea Negotiations", *The Atlantic*, 12 March 2018.



pressure" approach is working, which may have emboldened them to seek new terms with Iran that would go far beyond the original JCPOA.⁷ In fact, direct high-level negotiations with the US have been a long-standing North Korean demand that previous US administrations had rejected. While a concession of sorts, the North Korean announcement to halt its and nuclear (and missile) tests is nowhere near the level of Iranian commitments under the JCPOA, and follows significant advances in both programs that have probably already established a long-range nuclear strike capability.⁸

Accordingly, there are reasons to be sceptical about the upsides of the Trump administration's new approach to nuclear diplomacy. Should it fail to meet the very high expectations that have been publicly floated – in the North Korean case, giving up a nuclear capability that took the country decades and enormous resources to build; in the Iranian case, abandoning its aspirations to regional powerhood – the question is if and how the US will make good on the threats which have accompanied its "maximum pressure" campaigns in both cases. Sanctions regimes cannot be reimposed (in the Iranian case) or tightened further (North Korea) without European and Chinese cooperation that is unlikely to be forthcoming if the US pursues unreasonable, maximalist aims that fail to take the interests of other actors into account. Additionally, putting options like military action or regime change back on the table and stoking regional tensions would obviously create potent incentives for further proliferation – not to mention, in the North Korean case, the potential for catastrophic escalation between two nuclear powers.

In their reactions to the JCPOA withdrawal and the on-again-off-again Korean summit, many observers have focused on the idiosyncratic deficiencies of the Trump administration, its zero-sum view of international politics, erratic decision making and lack of substantial policy planning.⁹ These were no doubt contributing factors, but a focus on the president's figure risks raising the questionable hope that the current period of turmoil would end with his term in office. However, it needs to be pointed out that on these issues Trump is very much in tune with his

7 Hudson and Rucker, "Why Trump torpedoed Obama's Iran Deal", *The Washington Post*, 8 May 2018.

8 Eleanor Albert, "North Korea's Military Capabilities", Council on Foreign Relations.

9 E.g. Greg Jaffe and Paul Sonne, "Courting Kim and coming up short highlights the limits of Trump's me-first diplomacy", *The Washington Post*, 24 May 2018.



party's mainstream thinking. For the past two decades, Republicans have treated nuclear proliferation among potentially hostile states not so much as a clearly delineated policy problem, but rather as a particularly egregious defiance of US power. As was on vivid display in the 2016 election cycle, inner-party debates treated the Obama administration's perceived weakness as the root cause of proliferation and called for a much more confrontational approach explicitly including military threats, while a unilateral surrender of the other side was considered the only possible diplomatic outcome. The motivations, security interests and regional environment of proliferating states were never seriously considered, and their defiance of any inspections regime was simply treated as a given.

The Iran deal in particular had been severely criticized by Republican congressional leaders at the time of its signing, and the desire to abolish it without presenting a serious alternative was a position shared by every one of the 2016 Republican candidates for president.¹⁰ Similarly,

10 Nora Kelly, "Where the 2016 Candidates Stand on the Iran Nuclear Deal", *The Atlantic*, 1 September 2016.



Republicans in the US Senate have previously blocked ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) along partisan lines and have, so far, prevented a reconsideration of the issue even under Democratic administrations. And, while the last Republican administration's approach to nuclear diplomacy seems positively conventional in comparison, it also featured challenges to the NPT and complementary arms-control measures through its decisions to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and desired development of low-yield nuclear weapons which blur the line separating them from conventional systems and might be used against non-possessor states.¹¹

When it comes to the future of the global nonproliferation regime, other international actors need to look beyond Trump and account for this enduring ideological strand. Control of the White House tends to alternate between both parties, while Republican strength in sparsely-populated states gives them an in-built advantage in the Senate, whose consent is necessary to ratify international treaties. The former is likely to cause wild swings in the executive's nonproliferation policy every four or eight years, while the latter has often prevented a commitment to a more stable long-term course through formal accessions to global nonproliferation regimes. Since the construction of such regimes is intertwined with very long-term strategic armament and deterrence choices at the national level,

these volatile patterns do not bode well for their future. The challenge, then, is to find smaller-scale solutions that are robust enough to survive eventual defections from some of the parties, even if they include the world's sole superpower and crucial security actor in every world region.

For the EU, trying to keep the JCPOA alive by resisting a renewed US sanctions regime on businesses active in Iran would send a powerful signal. The costs of such a readjustment – both in devising laws and financial institutions that can handle it and in further undermining traditional transatlantic partnerships – may be steep, but should be understood as a necessary, if painful adaptation towards an uncertain future. Hope can also be drawn from president Moon's successes in coaxing North Korea and the US out of the conflict spiral into which they have repeatedly locked themselves, and in reestablishing Seoul as a major actor in a security problem that, after all, concerns it much more directly than Washington. Problems that arise from regional power competitions and security dilemmas can in principle also be solved at the same level, although learning to do so without US stewardship will require a significant change in attitude and ambition from local actors.

11 Jean du Preez, "The Impact of the Nuclear Posture Review on the International Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime", *The Nonproliferation Review* 9:3, 67-81.

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