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Back to the Future: Trump's Emerging Iran "Strategy"

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On 13 October 2017 President Donald Trump announced that his administration would not certify the Iran nuclear agreement, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This [announcement](#), he stated, was part of a new "strategy" designed to address "the full range of Iran's destructive actions."

It is hard to know where to begin in addressing this statement's distortions. To take one example, Trump's assertion that the Obama administration lifted sanctions "just before what would have been the total collapse of the Iranian regime" is outlandish. Still, this fantastical claim merits attention, if only because it might suggest that the administration is partly basing its new "strategy" on wishful thinking: namely the belief that Iran's political system will collapse once subject to a renewed onslaught of punishing sanctions or to US military action.

We have been here before. For many decades US policy on Iran was incoherent, ineffective, and self-defeating. The expectation that "regime change" was probable, and even more, that it would be the silver bullet to slay the dragon of Iran's nuclear program, was a tempting fantasy. Reliance on such dubious premises was rooted in many factors, not least of which was the understandable desire of successive White Houses to avoid taking hard decisions that might antagonize Middle East allies, not to mention the US Congress. But if the resulting policy incoherence was partly shaped by domestic and regional constraints, what distinguishes the Trump administration's "strategy" is that *it is largely a function of the efforts of White House aides to shield US foreign policy from Trump's rage*. As the *Washington Post* [reported](#), "White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster and other senior advisers came up with a plan—one aimed at accommodating Trump's loathing of the Iran deal... without killing it outright... To get Trump, in other words, to compromise."

This "compromise"—which would involve passing the decision of whether to certify the nuclear deal to the US Senate—could turn out to be disastrous. If the Senate imposes new sanctions or conditions that are not spelled out in the JCPOA, it will kill the deal. Such an outcome might momentarily pacify Trump, but it will also undermine US credibility and worse, US security.

The credibility issue concerns not the content of the JCPOA but rather the fact of this international agreement itself. In this particular and crucial instance, reneging on a major international deal that is barely one and a half years old, and one that retains the backing of Western European States, and of Russia and China as well, could isolate the US. This is not an outcome Trump's advisers want. Indeed, [their advice is clear](#). Asked during his Senate testimony whether it is in the US interest to stay with the agreement, Secretary of Defense James Mattis insisted that "if we can confirm that Iran is living by the agreement...we should stay with it."

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Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford stated that “Iran is not in material breach of the agreement, and I do believe the agreement to date has delayed the development of a nuclear capability by Iran.”

The agreement’s opponents know that it is difficult to make a convincing case that Iran has explicitly and clearly violated the agreement. Thus, they have proposed an alternative: rather than jettison the JCPOA, the administration should use the threat of decertification to push the Europeans to endorse renegotiating the deal. But this is a smokescreen. Mark Dubowitz, chief of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, [insists](#) that Trump’s “walkaway” is “already shifting the European positions from ‘keep it’ to ‘keep it, but fix it.’” But my guess is that the demand for renegotiating the agreement is a tactical maneuver designed to kill rather than save the patient. More importantly, the Europeans know this. Ultimately, they will not play along.

And why should they given that all other options would prove costly to Western and US interests? When it comes to Iran’s nuclear program, the challenge facing US policy makers has always been to choose between a short list of far from perfect options: war, containment, or negotiation. For many decades successive administrations struggled to make a clear choice or decide how to balance these three objectives. In a 2010 [study group report](#) that I and Barry Blechman helped to prepare for the United States Institute of Peace and the Stimson Center, we held that the key strategic challenge for the US was to decide whether to sustain a policy premised on the idea that military force or punishing sanctions would compel Iran to abandon the quest for a domestic nuclear fuel cycle. The answer, we suggested, was a clear “no.” Thus the US’s best option was abandon US insistence on “zero enrichment” and instead pursue a deal that would impose severe, long-term limits on Iran’s capacity to enrich and stockpile uranium in return for a gradual reduction of all US and multilateral nuclear-related sanctions.

At the time the Obama White House preferred to “keep the pressure on” by revving up sanctions. But by 2012 Iran had some 19,000 centrifuges—the majority of which [had been built](#) during the “Axis of Evil” administration of George W. Bush! President Obama’s ensuing effort to secure a nuclear deal was impelled not so much by any kind of “[Obama Doctrine](#),” but rather by the weak hand that Obama was dealt. Short of war, there was no alternative to a negotiated agreement.

Trump’s 13 October [speech](#) effectively argues that those alternatives have reemerged—or had been obscured by—a very bad deal. Selectively citing from the text of the agreement, Trump asserted that one measure of the deal’s shortcomings was that it was supposed to contribute to “regional and international peace and security.” But the JCPOA was always exclusively focused on the nuclear issue: it was not meant to embrace the full range of Iran’s actions in the Middle East or beyond. Had negotiators tried to link all of these issues, Iran would have quit the negotiations, leaving its centrifuges spinning, thus confronting the US with the same old bad choices: war or containment.

Trump also argued that the JCPOA was flawed because “in just a few years, as key restrictions disappear, Iran can sprint towards a rapid nuclear weapons breakout.” But far from disappearing in “a few years,” some of the agreement’s most intrusive restrictions will remain for 10 to 25 years. Moreover, assuming—as the deal requires—that Iran signs the International Atomic Energy’s Agency’s (IAEA) “Additional Protocol” in 2023, its nuclear energy program will be subject *in perpetuity* to many constraints. As Ali Vaez [has noted](#), “to date, no country on earth has developed nuclear weapons under the watchful eyes of the IAEA’s inspectors who are empowered by the access that the Additional Protocol affords them.”

Apart from his critique of the nuclear deal, Trump argues that Iran’s actions have “spread death, destruction and chaos all around the globe.” Whatever one’s judgment of these expansive assessments, Iran’s actions outside of the JCPOA provide no legal basis for abrogating the agreement. We [may bemoan](#) the fact that those who negotiated the JCPOA did not address Iran’s ballistic missile program. But scrapping a nuclear agreement that might make it almost impossible for Iran to accumulate enough enriched uranium for even one bomb would be a foolish step, particularly if the international community fails to forge a diplomatic solution to Iran’s ballistic missile program.

In making this observation, I am not minimizing the serious strategic challenges that Iran poses to the US and its friends in the region. But what precisely is the Trump administration's strategy? Is it ready to muster the will, means and domestic political support to forge such a cogent approach, especially if it may require war with Iran? I do not see it, and the same can be said for many other well informed experts, some of which sit well to the right of the political spectrum.

Take Trump's position on Syria. He rightly asserts that the "Iranian regime has supported the atrocities of Bashar al-Assad's regime." Tehran's leaders believe that Assad's survival is fundamental to Iran's security and that the destruction of ISIS is a strategic imperative because from Iran's perspective, Sunni jihadists pose a severe threat to the region and to Iran itself. In point of fact, the US shares many of Tehran's assumptions. Thus in Syria, the US has made the destruction of ISIS its top priority: in this sense, the US and Iran are "objective" allies. As to the US position on Assad, by sin of commission or omission, the US has effectively endorsed Tehran's position. When it comes to ISIS and Assad, the difference between the US and Iran is this: Iran has a coherent vision of its strategic interests and has used whatever means it deems necessary to advance them. By contrast, the US position has been mostly tactical and improvised. It has no cogent strategic vision of the future of Syria save the destruction of ISIS.

Then there is Yemen. I will not enter into the debate regarding the nature of Iranian support for the Houthis. But one thing is clear: Yemen's 2013-14 National Dialogue produced an agreement drafted by a "Constitutional Drafting Committee" that [excluded the Houthis](#). The committee's proposal for a "federal system" divided Yemen in a manner that was weighted against the Houthis. When the latter balked UN representative Jamal Benomar responded by inviting the Houthis to join a new round of talks. These talks made progress, opening up the possibility of a new power sharing arrangement with the Houthis. The Saudi response was to launch a bombing campaign that not only killed 1500 people but also led to the collapse of the talks. Benomar [asserted](#)—with much justification—that that actual purpose of the bombing was to kill the talks. The Saudis then repaid the complement by pressuring the UN to dismiss him. Ever since, the Saudi military campaign has helped to create what UNICEF [has called](#) the "world's worst humanitarian disaster." There is [much consternation](#) in the US Congress on this issue but not much in the Trump administration.

That the president condemns Iran for the "vicious civil wars in Syria and Yemen" is not surprising. What he fails to mention is that the US is ensnared in a diplomatic trap partly of its own making. A key part of this snare is Washington's long-standing relationship with a country that has played a vanguard role in inspiring and funding jihadist movements and ideas. As one [observer notes](#), "out of the 61 groups that are designated as [terrorist organizations](#) by the US State Department, the overwhelming majority are Wahhabi-inspired and Saudi-funded groups." Thus, Trump's cleverly worded claim that Iran "remains the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism" is open to serious dispute, particularly when we consider that non-state actors, such as Saudi religious charities, are closely linked to the Saudi state.

Of course, many of our key Middle East allies have pursued policies that are not always in the US interest. This doesn't mean that we should ignore their concerns, much less walk away from our friends. But it does mean that the US must wrestle with how to manage these various tensions—and their legacies—rather than take the easy route by lashing out at the Iranians. Temper tantrums do not make for good strategic thinking.

The costs to US security interests that may flow from this return to such strategic incoherence are bound to accelerate. To revisit to the case of Yemen, consider a [recent report](#) by Jay Solomon. He notes that, "concerned about Tehran gaining the ability to choke off shipping lanes in the Red Sea," the White House has expanded its support for Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen by providing precision-guided weapons. But as Solomon himself suggests:

Stepping up support for the Saudi coalition is also tricky. U.S. and Arab officials acknowledge that only a political solution can end the war. Although greater American involvement could pressure the Houthis to embrace diplomacy, it might also lessen Riyadh's desire for a halt to military operations, particularly if it begins seeing major advances.

Tricky indeed. Proxy-war escalation cuts both ways, and as the lesson of Vietnam and other cases suggests, it could create a self-fulfilling prophecy by, in this case, giving Iran more incentive to expand its support of the Houthis. The humanitarian disaster in Yemen will continue with the possibility of millions of lives imperiled and no end to the conflict.

The US decision to expand military support for Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen is at least animated by some kind of strategic rationale. By comparison, and as I have noted, US policy in Syria lacks strategic coherence. The possibility of armed conflict between the US and Iran could ensue from this policy vacuum. But such an outcome is probably of little concern to those who are now pushing to kill the nuclear agreement, whether in one fell swoop or through the pretext of "nix or fix." What they seek is what they always wanted: military action. The leaders of Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia were the chief advocates of such action. Their view was shared by some US policy makers, diplomats, and strategic thinkers, some of whom are now back in the lime light. Among them is the former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton. Although in 2015 he again called for bombing Iran, in the past few months Bolton has not mentioned the words "bombing" or "war." But at least had the relative integrity not to indulge the fiction of "fixing" the JCPOA. Instead [he has called](#) for its total "repeal."

It may well be that war with Iran is not the outcome that Trump administration wants. But as Philip Gordon has [noted](#), the growing media campaign against the nuclear agreement is creating a war drumbeat not unlike that which led to the 2003 US Iraq invasion. This is all the more reason to recognize the dangers that could ensue from an anger-driven, a-strategic Iran policy.

These dangers also apply to Iran's own domestic political arena. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, foreign and domestic politics are tightly interwoven. This was amply demonstrated by the reaction of hardline forces to the nuclear agreement: they saw the efforts of President Hasan Rouhani and his allies to secure the deal as a bid to back away from the policy of "resistance" and pursue instead a policy of wider diplomatic and especially economic engagement with the global community. They also saw it as portending a concerted bid by a new alliance of reformist politicians and pragmatic conservatives to pry open a political arena that had been tightly closed under former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Thus, the hardline backlash is not so much against the agreement but against Rouhani and his allies. As Farideh Farhi and I have noted in the introduction to our co-edited volume, [Power and Political Change in Iran](#), prospects for political change in Iran depend in part on easing the country's long-standing regional and global conflicts, particularly with the US. This is one reason why Iranian opponents of political and economic liberalization view any kind of *rapprochement* with the US as a near existential threat: their own domestic clout depends on sustaining conflict with the "Great Satan."

By itself, this fact does not mean that the US should always avoid conflict with Iran or, alternatively, assume that engagement will magically and quickly transform Iran's domestic scene. But we must recognize that a policy that leads to military confrontation will only reward hardliners. President Trump has declared that "the regime violently suppresses its own citizens." But he does not understand that his effort to sabotage the JCPOA is undercutting those forces trying to foster political detente and decompression in Iran. In the coming few years their struggle will intensify, particularly when the crucial question of who will succeed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as *Rahbar* gathers steam. The last thing Iran's reformists want, or need, is another "Axis of Evil" US policy, one that could produce a proxy or direct US-Iran war at a pivotal period in the evolution of Islamic Republic.

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