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The Coming Crisis with Iran



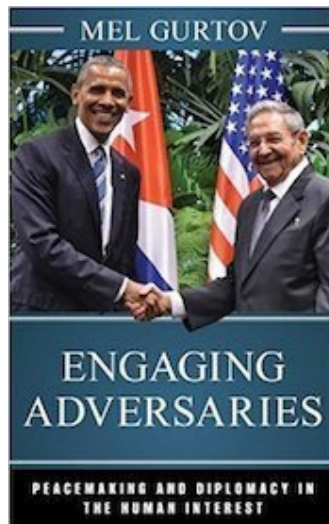
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With the appointments of Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and John Bolton as national security adviser, Donald Trump has signaled his preparedness by the May 12 deadline to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal and ramp up pressure on North Korea if it refuses to denuclearize. The two moves would have interactive consequences: casting aside the Iran nuclear deal is likely to be read in Pyongyang as indicating that the US cannot be trusted

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to keep its commitments. It might also be read as a signal that should nuclear talks with Trump fail, a US attack on North Korea's missile and nuclear sites could be in the offing. The always precarious state of US relations with Iran, and with the Middle East as a whole, will be blown apart should Trump nix the nuclear deal. Iran is likely to immediately resume production of nuclear-weapon grade materials. US relations with its European allies will be deeply unsettled, another bitter pill will be added to relations with



Russia and China (both of which endorsed the nuclear deal), the Israeli far right will be emboldened to join in pressuring (and perhaps attacking) Iran, and the Saudis and others will be encouraged to produce their own nuclear weapons.

Most important of all, ending US participation in the nuclear agreement will bring it closer to war with Iran. In John Bolton we already have a top official who is on record as favoring an attack on Iran's, as well as North Korea's, nuclear facilities. That record is consistently wrong in its predictions about Iran; Bolton made it appear that war was inevitable and negotiations with Iran a fruitless alternative. Especially worrisome is his obliviousness to international law and to the human consequences of belligerent actions. Bolton can therefore be expected to push for a preventive war (not preemptive war, as he maintains) on Iran just as he argued after 9/11 for invading Iraq. To some observers, only defense secretary James Mattis stands between Trump and war with Iran, a slim reed indeed.

We should keep in mind that *the nuclear deal is working*. The International Atomic Energy Agency has several times judged Iran to be in compliance with the agreement. Rex Tillerson and H.R. McMaster apparently agreed and argued for continuing to certify

it—perhaps one reason they are gone. Numerous scientists and military professionals argued during the Obama years that the agreement was a breakthrough in keeping Iran denuclearized. In short, the agreement is in the national security interest of the US. Withdrawing from it would be a gross, and dangerous, disservice to that interest.

In my new book, *Engaging Adversaries*, I suggest that the nuclear deal with Iran *could* be the basis for a normal relationship with Iran that might work in favor of other US policy objectives in the Middle East. These would include resolving the conflict in Yemen, loosening of Iran's ties to Hezbollah and its support of the Syrian regime, and undercutting Israel's and Saudi Arabia's confrontational strategy with Iran.