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Trump Risks New Conflagration in Middle East Playing with Fire

Susanne Koelbl, Juliane von Mittelstaedt, Peter Müller, Christoph Scheuermann and Christoph Schult

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U.S. President Donald Trump made it clear last week that he is close to withdrawing from the Iran accord unless Iran agrees to make changes. His chances for success are slim - and his blustering risks a dangerous escalation.

It helps to imagine Bob Corker as an incurable optimist. The Republican Senator from Tennessee is chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and thought for eight long months that he would be able to transform U.S. President Donald Trump into a responsible politician. In particular, he had hoped that he could rein in the president's capricious foreign policy through a combination of personal attention and gentle pressure. But now, even Bob Corker has given up.

Last week, Corker referred in a tweet to the White House as an "adult day care center" and said in an interview with the *New York Times* that the president runs the White House like "a reality show." In the same interview, he also said that Trump could be in the process of setting the country "on the path to World War III." It would be difficult to imagine a more scathing critique coming from a nominal party ally.

Corker is particularly driven by the fear of a military escalation of the kind that could even end in a nuclear exchange. North Korea, which has been a target of steady threats from Trump, is the most obvious possible theater. But the U.S. president now seems to be in the process of heating up an additional conflict that could be much more dangerous: the confrontation with Iran. Ever since the campaign, Trump has repeatedly said that the U.S. nuclear deal with Iran is "the worst deal ever negotiated" and has promised to back out of it.

After 12 years of difficult negotiations, the deal was finally agreed to in July 2015 by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council together with Germany and the European Union. Iran agreed to mothball its nuclear weapons program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. Since then, almost all of the country's stockpile of enriched uranium has been taken out of the country, two-thirds of the centrifuges, used to enrich uranium, dismantled and 400 inspections performed. "It is a durable agreement that is achieving its target of preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons," says a high-ranking EU diplomat.

Trump, though, is unimpressed. He needs to show some sort of progress to his voters and with things going poorly on the domestic front, he has focused his efforts on destroying the foreign policy successes achieved by his predecessors. The U.S. looks set to back out of the NAFTA free-trade deal while the country is in the process of withdrawing from the Paris climate deal and UNESCO. Now, the fate of the nuclear treaty is at stake. In a speech on Friday, Trump took an aggressive line on Iran and threatened to cancel the accord - only for the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, to say on Sunday that Washington would remain party to the agreement for the time being.

Searching for Proof

Every 90 days, the president must certify that the Iranians are adhering to the requirements laid out by the deal and that the suspension of the sanctions are justified by the agreement's contribution to U.S. national security. Trump has twice before grudgingly certified the deal, including in July when it was reported that he was enraged at the prospect of having to approve it. Why, he asked an adviser, should he sign on to a deal that he felt was a disaster? He also threatened that he wouldn't certify it again.

For months, Trump's team has thus been searching for a way out of the deal, issuing threats against Tehran and collecting arguments to justify allowing the agreement to fail. Trump has reportedly even pressured U.S. intelligence to find proof that Iran is violating the nuclear agreement. His government is likewise eager to label Iran as a supporter of terrorism. In early October, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center issued a surprise warning of possible attacks in the U.S. perpetrated by the Iran-sponsored militia Hezbollah.

Simply withdrawing from the treaty is not a simple matter, but a Trump refusal to recertify would almost certainly mark the beginning of the end. Furthermore, Congress would then have the possibility of slapping new sanctions on Iran's nuclear program within 60 days - an opening that many Republicans would no doubt seek to take advantage of. That, though, would almost certainly be interpreted by the Iranians as a violation of the treaty, leading to their own withdrawal.

Iranian Vice President Ali Akbar Salehi recently threatened that Iran has the ability to resume enriching uranium to the 20-percent level within just five days. From there, it's not terribly far to constructing a bomb. And that is something that Israel would like to prevent at all costs, even militarily if need be. Ben Rhodes, formerly Barack Obama's deputy national security adviser, warned in a September interview with U.S. radio station NPR of a "second nuclear crisis" in the Middle East, one that could leave the U.S. facing the decision "as to whether to allow Iran to go forward with its nuclear program or to start another war in the Middle East."

Yet instead of new sanctions, a renegotiation of the deal is likewise a possibility - and that appears to be the plan being pursued by moderates in the Trump administration, a trio made up of the national security adviser, the secretary of state and the secretary of defense, all of whom are in favor of keeping the deal. They are trying to walk the fine line of allowing Trump to symbolically distance himself from the deal while at the same time keeping the agreement alive.

The 'Spirit' of the Deal

The strategy will be that of portraying Iran's Revolutionary Guard as the villains who are spreading terror and destabilizing the region as a way of pressuring Europe into tightening the treaty and adding requirements. U.S. Congress could even decide to list the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization.

The primary criticism Trump and his hardliner allies level at Iran is that the country is violating the "spirit" of the deal - by testing missiles, for example, or by supporting terror groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and sending fighters into Iraq and Syria to expand its influence in the region.

Virtually everybody agrees that such behavior by Iran is extremely problematic, including those who support the nuclear deal with Tehran. But the deal has no "spirit," it is nothing but a sober, extremely technical agreement. And it doesn't focus at all on Iranian foreign policy or even on its missile program - something that Trump and many other Republicans would like to change.

Trump and his team would also like to tighten certain clauses in the accord, such as those pertaining to where and how often inspections are carried out. Or the fact that Iran will be able to resume enriching uranium once the treaty expires in 2025, if only within the framework of a nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Iran experts like Ray Takeyh from the independent think tank Council on Foreign Relations, agrees with the Trump administration that the treaty is far from perfect. Takeyh, too, is critical of the fact that the accord automatically expires after 10 years and that Iran is even now allowed to partially enrich uranium, albeit to a low level. Furthermore, Iranian researchers are allowed to continue developing centrifuges, with which they can produce fissile material.

But what the Trump administration is planning goes far beyond a few minor adjustments to the nuclear treaty. It marks an attempt to isolate Iran in the region and to stop its expansionary policies and its financing of terrorist organizations. Those are all understandable goals - but there is one thing standing in the way: reality.

William Burns, one of the negotiators of the treaty and deputy secretary of state in the Obama administration, wrote recently in the *New York Times* that in a perfect world, we could delete Iran's knowledge of the nuclear fuel cycle, eliminate its missiles and transform it into a more docile regional power. "But we don't live in an ideal world. Diplomacy requires difficult compromises. And the nuclear deal achieved the best of the available alternatives."

A Danger of War

The other alternative would be yet another confrontation with Iran.

"There is a danger of war. Not right now, but perhaps in the future," says Foad Izadi, a professor of international relations in Tehran, adding that Iran is not taking the threats coming from Washington lightly. "We don't believe that Trump has a problem with Iran, rather he has a problem with what his predecessors have left for him," Izadi says. The Iranians, the professor continues, are primarily concerned by Trump's close relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia and believe that both of them are a negative influence when it comes to Iran.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has consistently said that the Iranians still want to remain in the deal despite the fact that the country's economy has not benefited to the degree expected from the lifting of sanctions. One reason is that it remains difficult to do business with Iran, with the U.S. government continuing to pressure banks to refuse to carry out money transfers to or from Iran. Almost all financial institutions adhere to these informal instructions out of concern that they might otherwise be slapped with painful penalties. The result is that it is almost impossible to find banks willing to finance large projects in Iran, meaning that necessary investments in aging infrastructure have not yet been made.

If the Americans were to reimpose sanctions or seek to renegotiate elements of the deal, Tehran would presumably try to isolate Washington by working together with the Europeans, Russia and China. But Iran likely wouldn't accept any limitations to its missile program or on its involvement in the region. At his first press conference following his re-election in spring, Rouhani announced that he would be carrying out additional missile tests. "American officials should know that whenever we need to technically test a missile, we will do so and we will not wait for their permission," he said.

Were the U.S. to list the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a terror organization, it would bring trade relations with Iran to a virtual standstill, says former U.S. diplomat Wendy Sherman, who was the Obama administration's lead negotiator for the Iran nuclear deal. Experts believe that the Revolutionary Guard directly or indirectly controls up to 40 percent of the Iranian economy. As such, Sherman warns against taking this step. "Sanctions on the Revolutionary Guards already exist. We would be setting a far-reaching precedent were we to label a part of a state as a terrorist organization."

Domestic Debates in Iran

The head of the Revolutionary Guards has threatened that such a step would be met with attacks on U.S. bases in the region. Though the threat is likely little more than aggressive posturing, it serves to demonstrate the potential for conflict.

Ultimately, the chances for making significant changes to the deal are thus extremely slim. Indeed, any attempt to reopen elements of the deal could result in the collapse of the entire accord, even if it could be months before that happens. That would strengthen the radicals in Tehran who feed off anti-American animosity and who were against the deal from the beginning.

That helps explain why Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Sharif recently told his European counterparts that it was imperative to take into account the domestic political debates in Iran. Were the U.S. to list the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization, he said, it could increase hardliner pressure on the government to such a degree that Rouhani would have no other choice but to withdraw from the nuclear deal. During a debate in Iranian parliament last Wednesday, for example, the government was forced to defend the agreement from vicious attacks. "We went through hell," an Iranian source said in describing the debate.

The path forward also depends on the Europeans. An end of the nuclear deal would be particularly painful for Europe given that it is widely seen on the Continent as a showpiece of EU diplomacy. Helga Schmid, general secretary of the European External Action Service, is seen as the architect of the agreement and on the sidelines of the recent UN General Assembly, she led discussions aimed at saving it. Furthermore, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have spoken with Trump to argue against withdrawal. German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has spoken on the phone several times with his U.S. counterpart Rex Tillerson.

Last Tuesday, though, Tillerson told Gabriel that he can't do any more than he already has, indicating that the Europeans would have to approach Trump directly. "We will continue to work to keep the U.S. in the agreement," Gabriel says diplomatically.

On Monday, EU foreign ministers met in Luxembourg and discussed the Iran deal, among other issues. In the statement released following the meeting, they reaffirmed that "the EU is committed to the full and effective implementation of all parts of the JCPOA," referring to the accord's formal name, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

European diplomats are also concerned about the effects of a collapsed Iran accord might have on the conflict with North Korea. The Iran deal, after all, is the only blueprint available for how talks with the regime in Pyongyang might be initiated. "The worst thing you can do is try to dismantle it," the EU high representative for foreign affairs, Federica Mogherini, told PBS in an interview last Wednesday. "The message that America would send to the rest of the world is that America cannot be trusted, because a deal that American voted for just two years ago in the UN Security Council, ... a deal that American helped to shape enormously, would be rejected by the same country."