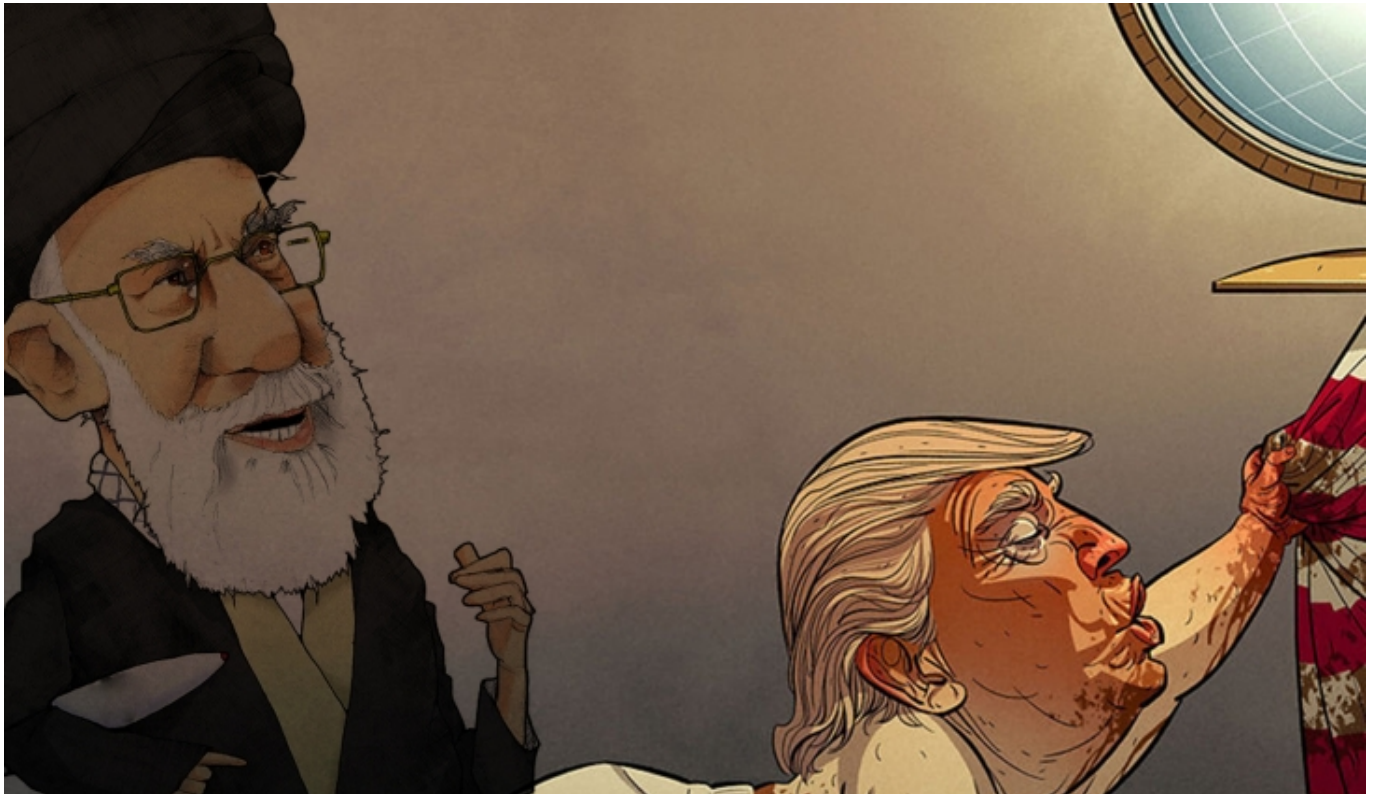


Pandora's box: Trump's decision on the Iran nuclear deal

by Marcel Cartier - 11/05/2018 10:11



Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Tuesday hardly came as a surprise. He has consistently described the JCPOA, better known as the Iran nuclear deal, as the 'worst deal ever made'. He made exiting the deal one of his core campaign promises while running for president in 2016. Unlike his many policy flip-flops on any number of other issues, he has remained steadfast in his determination to scrap the JCPOA.

When he addressed the country on Tuesday, there wasn't really anything new in his speech that he hadn't said back in October when he announced his administration's 'new' strategy toward Iran. His speech was full of lies and half-truths, among the most laughable that the Iranian state is a supporter of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. To anybody even remotely following the region, such comments were blatant distortions of reality.

Perhaps as absurd were his words about the United States standing with the people

of Iran, as if that was truly a driving force of his decision, and especially given the role of the U.S. in opposing Iran's democratic ambitions for over half a century (let us simply remember the U.S. support of the Shah or the CIA overthrow of the government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953 in league with British Petroleum).

Yet for Trump, this was a moment that he hoped he would be able to gloat about for some time to come. After all, he had followed through in honouring one of his key promises, and he didn't hesitate to remind his audience of precisely that when he said, "Today's action sends a critical message: the US no longer makes empty threats. When I make promises, I keep them."

Beyond Trump scoring a feel-good victory, there is a real danger that comes from the U.S. pulling out of the deal. While Trump has recently pursued diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea, he appears to still be on a war-footing with Iran. What, then, does Trump's decision ultimately mean for the deal itself, as well as the prospect for war and peace in Iran and the wider region?

Is the Iran Nuclear Deal Dead?

Given that the JCPOA is not a bilateral deal, but an international framework that was agreed to by the so-called P5+1 (China, Russia, France, United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as Germany and the European Union), this still leaves the agreement intact. There could be no literal 'ripping up' of the deal by Trump, although his decision to pull the U.S. out and re-impose sanctions does make the deal far more fragile.

Iran's response was fairly level headed given the aggressive rhetoric coming from the White House. Although President Hassan Rouhani said that, "I have directed the Atomic Energy Agency to prepare for the next steps, if necessary, to begin our own industrial enrichment without restriction", he also vowed to remain in the deal if possible, saying "If we achieve the deal's goals in cooperation with other members of the deal, it will remain in place... By exiting the deal, America has officially undermined its commitment to an international treaty."

That raises questions about whether the deal can actually be salvaged. European powers were particularly disappointed by Trump's decision to exit the deal, with French President Emmanuel Macron saying in the days before his announcement that doing so "would mean opening Pandora's box, it could mean war", and that it "can work in the short term but it's very insane in the medium to long-term."

France was among the countries that rushed to invest in Iran with the lifting of sanctions against the Islamic Republic in January 2016. Among other deals, a joint

venture was signed between French oil company Total and Iran to engage in offshore oil exploration. This bottom line exemplifies just how important it was to European corporations in particular that sanctions be lifted.

Now that Trump has taken the step of withdrawing, confusion has set in about whether multinational corporations that do business with Iran will be in violation of U.S. sanctions. Major aviation companies Boeing and Airbus have now been barred from honouring their already existing deals with Iran, meaning up to \$39 billion in losses for both companies.

Trump Alienates the Global Community – Again

Ironically, as has been the case with many decisions that Trump has made along the lines of 'making America great again' and asserting the country's independence from international frameworks, such as withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement, the immediate impact of his decision is further isolation of the U.S. from its allies.

In the aftermath of Trump's announcement, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Central Commission, said of the EU, "At this point, we have to replace the United States, which as an international actor has lost vigour, and because of it, in the long term, influence."

This has been a consistent theme within establishment circles in Washington, as well. Although some legislators on the Republican side applauded Trump for his decision on the JCPOA, many also spoke out again after his withdrawal. Democrats have been almost unanimous in their opposition to Trump's decision.

Former President Barack Obama, who flouted the Iran deal as one of his administration's greatest accomplishments, said in recent days, "In a democracy, there will always be changes in policies and priorities from one Administration to the next. But the consistent flouting of agreements that our country is a party to risks eroding America's credibility, and puts us at odds with the world's major powers."

Interestingly, it could be Russia that stands to benefit in large part from Trump's announcement. Vladimir Yermakov, Director General of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control at Russia's Foreign Ministry said days before Trump announcing U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA that such a decision, "might even be easier for us on the economic front because we won't have any limits on economic cooperation with Iran. If the United States breaks an international agreement backed by U.N. Security Council resolutions, it will be the United States that should suffer the consequences. Neither Iran nor China nor Russia nor the European states should lose out."

In other words, if Trump's objective with leaving the JCPOA was to strengthen the position of the United States globally, his decision might have had precisely the opposite effect. Never before has the U.S. been so isolated on the world stage, not only risking its position vis-à-vis its European and NATO counterparts, but providing leverage for Russia, China and Iran to forge ahead with the project of establishing a multipolar world.

The Danger of a Major Conflagration

Perhaps most importantly, Trump's announcement on abandoning the deal amounts to a major escalation in his administration's attempts, in league with Israel, to wave the flag of regime change in Tehran.

It's no coincidence that it took a mere matter of hours after his announcement for Israel to strike at Syrian government targets. As has frequently been the case over the course of the country's seven-year war, Israel has claimed that its attacks against Syria have actually been aimed at countering Iranian forces operating within the country. Many of Washington's actions in the country have been undertaken using the same pretext. That Syria today is the principle proxy ground for low-level third world war is undoubtedly true.

The 'official' Syrian Arab opposition also praised Trump's decision, with Nasr al-Hariri, head of the Syrian Negotiations Committee saying, "This is a step in the right direction. But, on its own, it's not enough to limit the influence of Iran in the area."

Israel has claimed that Iran launched a rocket attack on its forces in the Golan Heights in recent days -- the territory that is internationally recognized as part of Syria but which has been occupied by Israel since the Six-Day War in 1967. In response, Israel launched its most intense bombardment to date of positions inside of Syrian territory.

Israel's far-right government, headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has been massively emboldened by the Trump administration. It is important to view the abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal as inextricably linked to the U.S. decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Both choices are part of a Trump administration foreign policy that aims for hard-power in the region.

The Hawkish Position of the Trump Administration

While Netanyahu's government slaughters civilians in Gaza with impunity and U.S.

backing, are we really supposed to believe the notion that Trump and his administration care for the well-being of Iranians? Such a notion seems to defy reality in all its constructs.

When it comes to the future of talks with Iran, the Trump administration likewise doesn't seem to have a leg to stand on. The Department of State has said that "The ultimate goal is to reach a point where we sit down with the Iranians and negotiate a new deal, but I don't think we're at that point today or will be tomorrow."

It seems far more likely that there is no genuine desire for a 'new' deal. What there is a desire for on behalf of the U.S. administration for is aggression and the possibility of full-fledged war, although the present reality is that of a proxy war in Syria.

While a meeting between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump could theoretically bring about an era of peace on the Korean peninsula, all indications are that the immediate future holds an era of volatility in regards to Syria, and by extension Iran. U.S. ambitions seem to point to nothing short of a desire for regime change in Tehran.