

Weakness, Low Cunning and Stupidity: Trump's Iran Deal Calculus

by Riccardo Alcaro

US President Donald Trump has publicly disavowed the Iran nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration in 2015.¹ While he has not formally withdrawn from the agreement, the president has effectively put US participation in it on life support. The consequences of a withdrawal would be bleak: the Gulf will become more insecure and the nuclear non-proliferation regime weaker. Trump does not care, as his calculus stems from vanity, opportunism and a cynical disdain for the geopolitical consequences of his actions.

Listening to the US president's grotesquely partial, when not patently false, litany of Iranian misdeeds,² one would be shocked to know that, in

fact, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),³ as the nuclear deal is formally known, has been working fairly well since its inception. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN nuclear watchdog, has found just two minor infringements during its regular on site inspections, which Iran has swiftly corrected. The other signatories of the deal – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the EU – have all said repeatedly that Iran is in compliance.⁴ Critically, key figures in the Trump administration itself share this view. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has conceded that Iran is respecting its commitments. Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, a known Iran hawk, has told the Senate that staying

¹ The White House, *Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/13/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy>.

² Eugene Kiely, "Fact Check: Trump on Iran's 'Multiple Violations'", in *USA Today*, 14 October 2017, <https://usat.ly/2wVB02n>.

³ The text of the JCPOA can be found on the website of the US Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa>.

⁴ See, for instance, European External Action Service (EEAS), *Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini following the Ministerial Meeting of the E3/EU + 3 and Iran*, 21 September 2017, <http://europa.eu/!Kv66Hf>.

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

in the deal is in America's national interest.⁵

Undeterred, Trump has refused to give formal certification that the sanctions relief the US is providing Iran is commensurate with the benefits of continued US participation in the JCPOA. The president has accused Iran of hiding behind the deal to pursue destabilizing policies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Trump has also pointed to Iran's development of ballistic missile capabilities as evidence that it has never truly given up on the ambition to build nuclear weapons. This latter point is critical because it touches upon a controversial element of the JCPOA, the so-called "sunset clauses": the limits to Iran's nuclear programme imposed by the deal will be phased out between 2025 and 2030. Thereafter, Iran will be entitled to develop a civilian nuclear industrial base.

There is some truth to Trump's claims, but these are hardly good reasons for a US withdrawal from the deal. Iran's regional policies were deliberately kept out of the JCPOA negotiations, whose only objective was that of keeping the Islamic Republic away from developing a nuclear weapons capability. Iran's ballistic activities are definitely an issue of concern, and the JCPOA does contain an eight-year embargo on the sale of ballistic-related materials

and technology to Iran, yet it does not forbid missile testing. As for the "sunset clauses", Trump failed to mention that Iran will remain under an obligation never to pursue nuclear weapons due to its being a non-nuclear party of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The JCPOA has ensured that Iran will be subjected to highly intrusive inspections until 2040, and after that IAEA inspectors will continue to have greater access to Iran's nuclear facilities than they did before the JCPOA. This is evidently not an ideal scenario for a country seeking to go nuclear after the "sunset clauses" expire.

Things would look dimmer in the absence of the JCPOA, unless you believe Trump's alternative fact that the Obama administration struck the deal when Iran was on the brink of collapse under the weight of sanctions (an allegation unsubstantiated by macroeconomic data as well as Iran's record of enduring much greater pain during the war with Iraq⁶). The US would be in a stronger position to exert pressure on Iran if it stuck to the deal and worked with its JCPOA partners to extend the "sunset clauses" or address Iran's ballistic capabilities and regional policies. This was in part what Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, was referring to when he publicly said that abandoning the JCPOA was not in the US national interest because it would make striking agreements with other countries much more difficult.⁷

⁵ US Department of State, *Remarks at a Press Availability*, 20 September 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/09/274327.htm>; James N. Mattis, *Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services on Political and Security Situation in Afghanistan*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/17-10-03-political-and-security-situation-in-afghanistan>.

⁶ World Economics, *Iran: Gross Domestic Product (PPP in 2011 prices)*, <https://www.worldeconomics.com/GrossDomesticProduct/Iran.gdp>.

⁷ Joseph F. Dunford, *Statement before the Senate Committee on Armed Services: Advance*

So why has Trump ignored these common sense arguments? One reason is vanity – that is, a weak ego. It is true that Trump has viscerally criticized the deal since before his election, so he might be thinking he is just fulfilling a campaign promise. With 60 percent of Americans, including 48 percent of Republicans, favouring continued participation in the JCPOA,⁸ however, it is difficult to see the deal as such a fundamental issue for Trump's political fortunes. Yet, if there has been a consistent pattern in this rocky presidency, it is Trump's obsessive attempts to destroy all of Obama's achievements: from the Trans-Pacific Partnership to climate and energy regulations, from migration policies to healthcare and now the Iran nuclear deal. It is as if Trump can only feel superior to his predecessor by erasing his legacy entirely.

Along with vanity comes a degree of low cunning that would be the envy of Cersei Lannister, the hateful queen of the Seven Kingdoms in George R.R. Martin's book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO's hit show, *Game of Thrones*. In spite of all the fuss, Trump has refrained from recommending the re-imposition of sanctions. Instead, he has urged the US Congress to come out with creative ideas that address his concerns. This is apparently intended to give US lawmakers a middle-ground option between re-imposing US

sanctions lifted under the JCPOA or leaving the president's calls unheeded. Congress has sixty days to take a decision.

Trump thinks he has put himself in a win-win situation. Basically, he wants to change the terms of the deal unilaterally by way of US legislation. If Iran refuses to abide by longer "sunset clauses" set out by the US, to limit its ballistic activities or "moderate" its regional policies, Trump will pull out of the JCPOA and put the blame on Iran. If the Europeans fail to play along and continue to stick to the deal, Trump will say that it is because of Europe, not himself, that such a terrible deal is still in place. If Congress fails to muster the necessary votes for the middle-ground option and nonetheless refuses to re-impose sanctions out of fear of breaching US commitments, Trump will blame Congress (the Democrats in particular) for not providing him with better alternatives.

Who knows what will happen when, come January, Trump will be required by the JCPOA to waive sanctions again. He might determine that Congress or Europe have gained full ownership of the deal, and just let it be. Alternatively, persuaded by his own arguments that put the blame squarely on others, he may well opt to pull the US out entirely.

Either way, Trump will be happy. The rest of the world, and much of America, will not. Even if the JCPOA stands, US credibility – an absolutely essential feature of hegemonic powers – will be damaged. America's rivals, including nuclear proliferator North Korea, will see no incentive in talking to a country that does not keep its word. The Europeans

Policy Questions, 26 September 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/17-09-26-nomination_--dunford.

⁸ Craig Kafura and James Dingwall, *Americans Support Continued US Participation in Iran Deal*, Chicago, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 2017, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/node/4859>.

will fume over the total neglect Trump has shown towards their own security concerns. Meanwhile, the prospect of eventually stabilizing the Gulf will become more distant, as the enmity between the US and Iran will be further entrenched. For a president who boasts about wanting to make America great again, there is no geopolitical genius behind this calculus. Just stupidity.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

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