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Published on October 6th, 2017 | by Guest

4

## Trump's Choice: Iran Deal Model or North Korean Bomb?



by *Seyed Hossein Mousavian*

After a White House meeting with U.S. military leaders on Thursday where he discussed the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues, President Trump cryptically told the press that it was the “calm before the storm.” Trump also reportedly told his military officials to provide him with “a broad range of military options ... at a much faster pace.”

In his address before the U.N. General Assembly in September, Trump also declared that he was ready to “totally destroy” North Korea and disparaged the Iran nuclear deal as “one of the worst and most one-sided transactions.” Days later U.S. bombers flew close to North Korean airspace, leading the North Korean foreign minister to proclaim that the United States had “declared war”.

For years it was Iran's nuclear program that was under scrutiny by the United States and its allies, until negotiations led to the “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA), an agreement that implemented the most comprehensive nuclear transparency and verification regime in the history of nuclear non-proliferation.

With tensions on the Korean peninsula at dangerous levels and loose talk of nuclear war, can the JCPOA serve as a model for averting further escalation with North Korea or will Trump's pressure tactics push Iran to go down North Korea's path to deter the United States.

#### Comparing Iran and North Korea

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has endorsed the idea of using the JCPOA as a model for North Korea, stating that the “format” of the Iran nuclear negotiations can be “used to end the North Korea conflict.” At the same time, EU Foreign Policy chief Federica Mogherini has importantly added that there are many differences between the North Korean and Iranian cases and that their “political systems are very different; the histories are very different.”

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The nuclear files of Iran and North Korea are indeed drastically different. Despite all the pressure and sanctions it has been subject to for decades over its nuclear program, Iran remained committed to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), never built nuclear weapons, never directed its nuclear program toward weaponization, opened itself up to the most comprehensive inspections in the history of International Atomic Energy Agency, is party to all major international treaties prohibiting the production and use of weapons of mass destruction, has further outlawed the production of weapons of mass destruction at the highest religious level, and did not even retaliate in kind when it was under chemical weapons attack by Saddam Hussein's Iraq due to the Iranian leadership's religious beliefs.

On the other hand, North Korea has withdrawn from the NPT, built nuclear weapons, developed missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, and has no opposition—whether religious or secular—to using nuclear weapons against its enemies. As such, Mogherini is correct in stating that the nuclear cases of these two states are not comparable. However, Chancellor Merkel is right that the model that resolved the Iranian nuclear crisis can be applied to reaching a diplomatic resolution of the North Korean crisis.

After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the United States adopted a policy of “zero nuclear technology” in Iran and even refused to refuel the Tehran Research Reactor, which the United States itself built in 1967. U.S. sanctions and pressure against other countries left Iran with no choice but to develop its own nuclear-fuel program, which led Iran to develop indigenous mastery of the uranium process by 2003. Afterwards, U.S. policy on Iran receded to one of “zero enrichment” in Iran and accepting Iranian power reactors.

From 2006-2013, the United States gradually imposed harsher sanctions on Iran, leading Iran to increase the size and scope of its nuclear program. By 2013, according to [estimates](#), Iran had reached a two-month breakout window—the amount of time it would need to amass enough fissile material for a single nuclear bomb should it decide to do so.

Concern over a short Iranian breakout window was the underlying reason for the United States to shift to a “zero nuclear bomb” policy on Iran and reach a win-win deal in which Iran preserved its enrichment program, got sanctions relief, and committed to measures that would lengthen its breakout period.

### Applying the Lessons of the JCPOA

The decades-long U.S. pursuit of maximalist demands on Iran proved counterproductive and delayed the peaceful resolution of the Iranian nuclear dispute. Today, the same mistake is being repeated with North Korea. As the United States increased sanctions and issued threats, North Korea responded by improving its missile capabilities and developing more destructive nuclear weapons. If this trend continues, so will the likelihood of a disastrous conflict. As it did with Iran, the United States must change paths and replace its policy of sanctions and pressure with pragmatic diplomacy.

Another key lesson from the Iran nuclear talks is for the United States to accommodate multilateral diplomacy with North Korea. Although the United States played a decisive role in the negotiations that led to the JCPOA, the talks also included the rest of the five members of the U.N. Security Council (Russia, China, Great Britain, and France) as well as Germany—in a grouping known as the P5+1.

The third major lesson of the Iran nuclear negotiations for the North Korean case is the fact that the end-state for each side was made clear up front. Iran wanted sanctions lifted and its NPT right to uranium enrichment recognized. The United States wanted Iran to accept verifiable commitments and transparency measures that would block off its potential pathways to nuclear weapons.

Since an immediate denuclearization of North Korea is a fantasy, the principles for a realistic end-state to the North Korean crisis could be for North Korea to: stop nuclear weapons tests, freeze development of its nuclear-capable ballistic missile and nuclear weapon programs, sign the nuclear test ban treaty, and engage in negotiations with South Korea and Japan to establish a security cooperation system—potentially modelled after the [OSCE](#)—that would start disarmament negotiations with its neighbors and remove the shadow of war from northeast Asia. Furthermore, although North Korea cannot return to the NPT given its status as a nuclear-weapons state, it can ease international concerns by voluntarily abiding by NPT stipulations regarding inspections and transparency, just as the five recognized nuclear-weapons powers do.

On the other side, the global powers should lift nuclear-related sanctions and provide North Korea with security guarantees that would safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Similar to the JCPOA, any final agreement with North Korea should also be endorsed by a U.N. Security Council resolution, securing its implementation with support from the highest political-security body in the international system.

However, if the Trump administration undoes the JCPOA, in line with Donald Trump's stated aims, this would kill the potential for diplomacy resolving the North Korean crisis and leave North Korea and Iran with

no reason to trust the United States or the U.N. Security Council. Iran in fact will be incentivized to follow the North Korean model to resist confrontational U.S. policies.

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