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**American Policy vis-à-vis North Korea and Iran:  
Different Approaches to Different Threats**

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**Abstract**

*North Korea and Iran receive central importance on the US Administration's current agenda, as both are perceived as posing substantial threats to American national security, while undermining their respective existing regional order. The US Administration applies maximum pressure vis-à-vis both, striving for a meaningful dialogue to bring about a change in their policies, while clearly delineating redlines and the heavy price that will be forced upon those refusing to reach an agreement with the US.*

*However, in doing so, the US implements different approaches, which stem from a variety of reasons: the difference in the perception of the varied severity of the two threats; the difference in the effective leverages the US Administration calculates it can apply in each case; the difference in threat perceptions among the US' allies in each of the respective regions, as well as the administration's overall preference for employing non-military solutions, favoring instead the "Peace Through Strength" concept.*

## **Introduction**

The American administration is currently conducting two major diplomatic campaigns vis-à-vis North-Korea and Iran simultaneously, endeavoring to bring about policy changes by both regimes, so as to mitigate their threats to American interests and its allies. The nature of these campaigns is directly influenced by the quality and effectiveness of the leverages the administration has, as well as the severity and immediacy of the two threats to the security of the US.

President Trump's interest in North Korea, which was rather limited during the election period, has increased as he became President, and as the magnitude of the strategic threat Pyongyang was posing to the US became evident. North Korea's proven nuclear capabilities, coupled with enhanced ballistic capabilities, as manifested by the frequent missile testing carried out during 2017, alarmed Washington and brought about a realization that handling this threat could not be deferred to the next administration.

Contrary to North Korea, in the case of Iran, President Trump made it clear already during his election campaign, that he would demand a change in the JCPOA with Iran, signed under the previous administration, defining it as basically inconsistent with American interests. The President stressed that he will endeavor to have the agreement renegotiated, in order to achieve a better and more comprehensive agreement. In addition to the effort to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear capabilities, President Trump also holds Iran responsible for the instability in the Middle East, pointing to Iran's sponsoring of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Yemen Houthis. As far as the American administration is concerned, there is no separating between the three destabilizing influences exerted by Iran: its nuclear program; enhancing ballistic missile capabilities, and regional subversion.

President Trump's tackling of the threats to American interests posed by North Korea and Iran, demonstrates the various tools at the disposal of American foreign policy, and the willingness - and ability - of the administration to make full use of them. This paper will attempt to make a comparative outline of the main components of the

American administration's approach towards both Iran and North Korea, pointing to the difference in American threat perception regarding these regimes, in a way that may suggest a future policy for dealing with them:

### **1. The objective of the negotiations**

According to declarations by President Trump, the aim of negotiations with North Korea is full denuclearization. With Iran, the administration aims at a more holistic solution that will address not only the denuclearization issue, but will also aim at stopping Iranian subversive activities throughout the region and its development of ballistic capabilities.

### **2. American strategy**

North Korea already has nuclear capabilities, therefore there is a need for a detailed roadmap for the diplomatic process that will lead to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. It is possible that in the first stage the administration will aim at officially monitoring the actual cessation of ballistic and nuclear testing, as a confidence-building measure (CBM), in a way that will temporarily decrease the level of threat to the US.

Regarding Iran, after the unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, the resumption of American sanctions and the substantial increase of economic pressure on Iran, the administration will have to decide how it will react to an Iranian move to resume nuclear activities. Alternatively, and based on an assessment that economic pressure has already brought about significant change, it will consider how to reopen negotiations with Iran on a new and more comprehensive deal. In any case, this administration vowed that Iran will not be allowed to develop a nuclear military program during its term.

### **3. The nature of the nuclear threats**

North Korea is a state with proven nuclear capabilities that is advancing its ballistic ability to target the US. The risk of a military confrontation with it are therefore very high – both strategically and economically: A full-scale confrontation will endanger American allies, Japan and South Korea, as well as the American military presence in

Asia. Economically, such a confrontation will cause an economic collapse in a region of global economic importance, which might cause an aftershock that will reverberate and hit the world economies, including the US economy, further causing instability. Strategically, in such a scenario, China may be drawn to offer protection to Pyongyang, which will further increase the volatility of a full-scale confrontation.

In contrast to North Korea, Iran does not yet possess full nuclear capabilities and therefore does not yet pose a direct threat to the US. Moreover, while its regional expansionism is a destabilizing factor that is a source of concern for Washington, it has not reached the level of threat to the security of the US that North Korea already presents. However, the American administration does view with concern the threat that Iran already directly poses to some of its allies, including Saudi Arabia, Israel and US forces in Iraq, Syria and the Persian Gulf, which motivates it to address with concern the Iranian threat.

#### **4. Addressing the threats**

With regard to Iran and North Korea, President Trump is interested in reaching an agreed solution, using a "*Peace through Strength*" approach. He hopes to achieve this by pressuring them economically, while simultaneously maintaining the credibility of a viable military threat. In both cases, the main strategy is to exert *maximum pressure*, while clearly defining redlines and the heavy price that will be forced upon those who refuse to reach an agreement with the US.

President Trump attaches great importance to ascertaining the full impact of current US deterrence, and accordingly the US has been projecting its military capabilities, along with direct threats by senior American officials, towards Pyongyang. These threats have been backed by increasing American military budgets and by acts taken on the ground such as the dispatch of aircraft carriers to the region, or the sending of aerial assault patrols over North Korea. At the same time, on the economic front, the US has worked to toughen the sanctions on Pyongyang via the UNSC. However, North Korea's isolated and secluded nature, with its limited exposure to commercial world trade, makes economic pressure less impactful and effective. It further

necessitates the cooperation of China for any such measures to have any significant influence on North Korea, as 90% of all North Korean trade ties are with China.

As for Iran, it is a much more open and involved international trade partner, which renders it more susceptible to US leverages. Thus, the American administration conducts an intensive campaign, both diplomatically and economically, aimed at stifling Iran's economy via strict economic measures, such as American sanctions and the curtailing of oil exports from Iran. Concurrently, the administration is also active against Iranian proxies in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah. Iran's high level of exposure and dependency on world trade, as well as its export of oil, enables the US to hit hard at its economy, also via American (non-UNSC) sanctions, due to their widespread secondary effect.

#### **5. Regime Behavioral Change**

With regard to North Korea, the American President is very clear in his rhetoric that he is not striving for a regime-change, and was quoted<sup>2</sup> as saying that striking a deal with the US will preserve the continuation of the leadership of the current North Korean ruler. According to several reports<sup>3</sup>, this issue is part of the basic agenda of current discussions between the US and North Korea. In addition, Washington's acknowledgement that Chinese engagement is needed for the success of this campaign requires guarantees for the continuation of the rule of the current North Korean regime, as per China's firm expectation.

With regard to Iran, while the American administration does not call for a regime change, it insists on a major policy change. Alongside the economic pressure, the American administration publicly aligns with the Iranian people, addressing them directly, not through their leaders, in an attempt to encourage internal pressure on the Iranian regime to change its belligerent ways. The rhetoric from Washington is construed as calling upon the Iranian people to stand-up against the policies of its regime. Thus, Secretary of State Pompeo emphasized<sup>4</sup> the wide corruption that is rampant among the Iranian leadership - political, judicial and military – while stressing American support for civil demonstrations throughout Iran, granting them

moral support for their just demands for reform. This is another part of the *maximum pressure* approach of this administration towards Iran.

## **6. The "Top-Down" approach**

The Presidential Approach aims at establishing direct and personal contact at the highest level to advance talks in both cases. President Trump wishes to try a different approach than that of his predecessors by employing and projecting his personal business negotiating skills, in line with his worldview of "thinking outside the box", having direct talks with his opponents and employing unexpected maneuvers of great impact. Thus, with North Korea, he voiced satisfaction with his success at establishing personal ties with Kim, and continues to publicly voice his trust in the North Korean ruler. The dialogue with North Korea continues to be conducted by high-level officials after the leaders' summit, thus Secretary of State Pompeo has returned (7-8 July 2018) to Pyongyang to discuss with his counterparts the advancement of North Korean denuclearization.

In the case of Iran on July 30, 2018, President Trump earlier declared his willingness to meet with Iranian President Rouhani, without any preconditions, although expressing his assessment that Iran is not yet ready for such a positive engagement. Indeed, his invitation was completely rejected by Tehran. At this stage, the approach towards Tehran focuses on exerting economic pressure, with no current offer for any American "carrots" alongside the "sticks".

## **7. Implementation**

In the case of North Korea, both sides have agreed in principal on denuclearization. However, the joint declaration signed by President Trump and Chairman Kim in Singapore does not delineate a specific and binding roadmap, and there was no agreed timeframe, nor a clear set of demands that should be adhered to. Both sides employed CBM's, such as President Trump's cancelation of the joint military exercise with South Korea – a CBM important to Pyongyang. North Korea, for its part, reciprocated with the CBM of returning the bodies of American casualties from the Korean War, and by dismantling a nuclear testing site.

As far as Iran is concerned, the position of the American administration is that Iran had blatantly deceived the international community with regard to its nuclear program, and harms US interests in the Middle East. Therefore it created a list of 12 rigid demands prior to reaching a new deal with the US, as specified by Secretary Pompeo on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2018. These demands are varied and wide ranging, and include, on the nuclear issue, a comprehensive disclosure by Iran to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the full extent of its nuclear facilities; the granting of free and full access to IAEA inspectors to these facilities and cessation of enrichment activities<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, the list of demands includes issues besides its nuclear program such as ballistic missiles; regional expansionism; subversive activity; the sponsoring of terrorism and violation of civil liberties.

#### **8. International and regional support**

The campaign against North Korea is based on broad international support, legally based on UNSC resolutions to which China and Russia are also partners. Currently, the US does not act outside the perimeters set by the multilateral arena when implementing its *maximum pressure* approach and President Trump has even suspended, as a CBM, the imposing of any additional sanctions against Pyongyang (while, however, stressing the need to keep enforcing existing sanctions). The key element for effective implementation of the existing sanctions as far as the US administration is concerned, is China, which, as previously mentioned, holds the key to a substantial leverage within the sanction regime.

However, the friendly atmosphere of the summit meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim, and ensuing reciprocal CBM's, make it difficult to maintain a level of high pressure over Pyongyang. Although there is no intent at this stage of cancelling the UNSC sanctions, the North Korean "Charm Offensive" and the positive international atmosphere it has generated towards it, pave the way for North Korea's rapprochement to the international community after years of seclusion. Malaysia, for instance, has since announced the reopening of its Embassy in Pyongyang. Russia, according to American reports<sup>6</sup>, recently issued work permits to North Korean workers. These are two examples of the challenges the American administration will

now be facing, while trying to maintain maximum pressure over North Korea, or if it decides to *up the ante*, in case the talks fail at some point.

Regarding Iran, the US, to a great extent, leads the campaign in light of its unilateral retreat from the JCPOA and the reinstating of its own sanctions, while most of its allies remain entrenched in the perception that the JCPOA has more merits than faults. The objection of its European allies to the withdrawal from the nuclear deal, and their attempt to bypass these sanctions with alternative routes to maintaining commercial ties with Tehran, pose some challenges to the US. Nevertheless, it seems that the effect of the American sanctions is already yielding a substantial setback to the Iranian economy, driving international companies out of its market.

#### **9. Relations with US allies**

The American administration's Asian and Middle Eastern allies are key players in advancing its policies regarding both threats. Thus, for example, South Korea initiated the meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim (amending the ties between the Koreas was in line with the administration's goal to decrease tensions on the Korean Peninsula.).

Japan, which remained skeptic regarding the chances that the North Korean ruler will abandon his nuclear program (which he perceives as vital for the survival of his regime), finds itself in an uncomfortable position, as its major strategic ally is currently negotiating with its strategic nemesis. However, the close relationship between PM Abe and President Trump contributes to the coordination between the two nations, which is of critical importance when the US enters into the Technical Negotiations for the denuclearization of North Korea.

In the Middle East, Israel has never stopped expressing its objection to the JCPOA. Saudi Arabia, for its part, is a key player in applying pressure on Iran by, among other means, increasing its oil output, thus preventing the rise in oil prices as part of the American administration's campaign to reduce Iran's oil exports to naught.

However, The US Administration took some decisions that caused tension with some US allies. Thus, on the Iranian issue, the President's actions are compatible with the interests of its Middle Eastern allies – Israel and the Sunni world led by Saudi Arabia. The same moves, on the other hand, raise tensions with the US' European allies, as signatories to the JCPOA.

Another tension involving allies rose when President Trump decided to suspend the military exercises with South Korea, as a CBM with Pyongyang. This move was portrayed as a mechanism of calming regional tensions while easing the current burden of US taxpayers. The move, however, has drawn some criticism inside and outside the US.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion**

President Trump wishes to leave a worthy legacy by finding solutions to both core threats to American interests. He intends to do so by applying the *maximum pressure* approach, while simultaneously pursuing high-level dialogue. The military option, and the projection of American power, are being used at this stage, primarily as a tool of pressure to encourage US rivals to choose non-military paths.

The nature of each campaign is directly influenced by the effectiveness of the leverages currently at the disposal of the American administration. It also derives from its threat perception as to which of the two threats to American security is more severe and immediate.

Even though the administration has been taking measures against both Iran and North Korea, it is now focused on garnering support for its *maximum pressure* policy against the Iranian regime. This includes, beyond its demands for denuclearization, a strict demand for ending Iran's toxic regional involvement. Whereas the North Korean economy and society are almost entirely disconnected from international influences, in the Iranian case the Administration has several leverages as a result of Iran's dependency on international trade and financial markets, combined with the relative openness of the Iranian society to external public messaging. These unique characteristics of Iran – in comparison to North Korea – enable the Administration to

exert heavy pressure on it, via designated sanctions combined with a campaign to raise public awareness to the nature of the regime (corruption; violation of human rights and denial of basic civil rights). In both cases the objective is to bring about a behavioral change by both regimes, one that will lead them back to the negotiating table.

The policies advanced by the American administration vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea, accentuate US centrality as a leader and motivator of geopolitical initiatives in the international arena, notwithstanding the geopolitical rise of other important international players such as Russia and China.

Despite the US being the world's leading power, and the various tools at its disposal for applying pressure regarding both threats (economic leverages combined with a credible military option), there is a need to engage with allies and regional players to maximize the pressure on both North Korea and Iran. The ability of Trump's administration to garner support and "Burden Sharing" from its allies to continue exerting pressure over both threats, will have an impact on the success of the US to achieve its goals.

## Notes

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This paper reflects only the personal views of its author, and does not represent the positions of any of the bodies he is associated with.

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Talley Ian, Kurmanaev Anatoly, "Thousands of North Korean Workers Enter Russia Despite U.N. Ban", WSJ, Aug. 2, 2018. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-is-issuing-north-korean-work-permits-despite-u-n-ban-1533216752>, accessed on Aug. 5, 2018

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For example, please refer to the below articles.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-military/suspending-korea-exercises-caused-slight-dip-in-readiness-u-s-general-idUSKCN1M5211>;

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/06/19/asia-pacific/u-s-south-korea-suspend-joint-military-exercise-planned-august>