



Scrapping Iran Deal Provides A Trump Card With North Korea

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The political left is aghast over President Donald Trump's decision last week to abrogate the Iran nuclear deal. Among proponents of the 2015 agreement with Iran's ayatollahs engineered by the Obama White House, Trump's pullout was condemned as ill-advised for a host of reasons, not least because it complicates America's planned negotiations with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. After all, these critics argue, why would Pyongyang trust a Washington that doesn't honor its international obligations?

That argument, however, is flat wrong. In fact, President Trump's decision to scrap the Iran nuclear deal actually strengthens his bargaining position vis-a-vis Pyongyang, and it increases the pressure on the North Korean regime to make meaningful concessions regarding its strategic arsenal if the two leaders meet next month in Singapore as planned.

To understand why, it's necessary to recognize what the Iran deal was — and what it wasn't.

The nuclear accord negotiated by the Obama administration between 2013 and 2015 may have been popular in assorted European capitals, as well as in Moscow and Beijing. Yet, among the American people, it was anything but. A Gallup poll conducted in February 2015, as negotiations between Tehran and the "P5+1" powers were drawing to a close, found that only 30 percent of Americans approved of the prospective agreement, while nearly two-thirds (57 percent) opposed it. The pushback from Capitol Hill was similarly robust, because of persistent congressional concerns over the exceedingly generous terms that were being proffered to Tehran as part of the deal.

That lack of popularity, in turn, shaped the Obama administration's strategy for successfully securing an agreement with Iran. Facing significant opposition from the American public and Congress, Team Obama chose to structure the deal as an executive agreement rather than making it a formal treaty, which would have required ratification by two-thirds of the U.S. Senate.

Historically, presidents have been accorded broad latitude to pursue precisely this sort of arrangement as part of their conduct of foreign affairs, something that is itself a matter of debate among constitutional lawyers. But the unilateral nature of such agreements — and the lack of congressional approval necessary for formal, lasting codification — means that the next executive has the absolute authority to revoke them. All this made the Iran deal a temporary, rather than a permanent, fixture of American policy, despite the best efforts of the Obama administration to make it binding.

Today, the acrimonious nature of the domestic debate that took place in the United States over the Iran deal three years ago can help strengthen the administration's hand in any dialogue with North Korea.

In his planned discussions with North Korea's leader, President Trump can persuasively argue that the fate of the Iran deal was sealed by the unilateral nature in which it was negotiated; by its failure to adequately address congressional concerns; and because it was deeply unpopular with the American people. The deal's subsequent collapse on those grounds helps the White House make the case that North Korea will need to accede to far more stringent and invasive terms if it hopes to reach a durable deal with the United States.

Anything less, Washington can credibly say, and the arrangement won't pass muster with Congress or the American people — and therefore could end up being just as impermanent as the Iran deal.

In other words, if he plays his cards right, President Trump can successfully leverage last week's decision to improve his bargaining position with regard to Pyongyang.

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