



Trump is all talk on Iran — meanwhile Putin's Middle East strategy is working

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Nothing better illustrates the breakdown of U.S. policy in the Middle East than juxtaposing President Trump's threats to abandon the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Agreement With Iran (JCPOA) and the first-ever visit of Saudi King Salman to Russia. Let's not forget the breakdown of U.S. policy began with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or if you prefer with President Obama's unceremonious retreat over Syria in 2013. Now Trump's raging and hollow threats — which our allies and probably Congress will not respect — stand in stark contrast to the solid record of achievements of Russia and Saudi Arabia and will accelerate that breakdown.

Trump's threats are hollow for many reasons. If the U.S. decertifies Iran's observance of the JCPOA — even though no evidence indicates that Tehran has violated it — no possibility of an agreement to curb North Korean nuclearization is conceivable let alone negotiable.

No North Korean government or any of the other interlocutors concerned with Korea can then have any confidence in the continuity or durability of U.S. assurances to North Korea. Second, our allies have already made clear they will not support decertification absent evidence of Iran's violation of the JCPOA. Therefore Iran can then play them off against us and profit both materially and politically from the ensuing disarray with the allies. Third, Iran will then be free to leave the accord and resume its secret program that probably is only under temporary "suspension" in earnest.

Fourth, Russia, who now appears to support Iran's regional ambitions, would also support Iran and forge even closer economic-political and military ties with it. Russia already has supported Iran's ambitions and factions in Syria and Yemen and is also prevailing in Libya so its Syrian and Libyan clients, Bashear Assad and Khalifa Haftar are also consolidating power.

Fifth, Russia is steadily making gains at our expense as King Salman's visit demonstrates. As a result of this visit the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding that will introduce Russian weapons (the S-400 anti-air missile) into Saudi Arabia, and lead to the construction of a factory for making Kalashnikovs in Saudi Arabia. So, if this deal moves forward, Russia's armed forces will have direct access to the first time to Saudi defense forces. Saudi Arabia has also pledged \$3 billion to various energy, technology and other projects in Russia. These funds plus other Arab funds — many of which move through Dubai and other conduits for unrecorded transfers — help Moscow circumvent the sanctions we and our allies have imposed due to its aggression in Ukraine.

Saudi Arabia has evidently acknowledged that Bashear Assad will rule Syria and since Moscow has rebuffed Saudi and Israeli demands that it moderate its support for or restrain Iran's ambitions to dominate Syria and Lebanon, this means that Moscow has prevailed at no visible cost over both of them and thus the U.S. In addition, Russia and Saudi Arabia continue to collaborate to reduce energy supplies and jack up the price of oil and gas. Yet Saudi Arabia cannot stop Moscow from making energy deals with Iraq, Syria, the Kurdish Revolutionary Government (KRG), Iran, Turkey and presumably with Libya in the future if not also Cyprus — a notorious haven for Russian money laundering. This allows Moscos to gain access to and leverage not only local supplies and pipelines but energy flows to Europe as well. Saudi Arabia has also announced that it will cooperate with Moscow against terrorism, suggesting an increased visibility for prominent Russian Muslim elites like Chechnya's strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, and possibly more Russian support for anti-Qatar policies.

Not surprisingly, Russian politicians chortled that this visit signified the end of the U.S. monopoly over Saudi foreign interactions. They also celebrated the clear conclusion that Riyadh now acknowledged Moscow's increasing role as an arbiter of many Middle Eastern disputes. Meanwhile, there appears to be no U.S. strategy other than beating ISIS although that is not actually a strategy.

Consequently calling it one indicates our own confusion as to what strategy is. There seems to be no discussion as to what comes next and how we will help Iraq and/or Syria recover even a semblance of stability. Neither is there any consideration of the threat that Iran poses right now even without its nuclear program. Consequently, there appears to be no thinking as to what will happen once Iran repudiates the JCPOA because of our own policy decisions made on the basis of uninformed pique.

In other words, Moscow has a strategy, is executing it through timely and well-considered policies that have successfully strengthened its position not only with Iran but also with our allies and across the entire Middle East. This strategy coordinates diplomacy, information and information warfare, military power shrewdly deployed and economic capability even more deftly demonstrated.

Meanwhile, despite our immense material superiority, we seem to have no strategy for any of the region's challenges. U.S. involvement has degenerated into a series of spasmodic and at best tactical moves and at worst unfocused rage against notional threats even as we resolutely fail to deal with the actual threats to our position and influence. This bipartisan failure will become worse unless someone in a power of authority actually formulates a viable strategy that both makes sense and that can be executed to advance U.S. interests. Unfortunately, at present there is nobody able, willing and ready to do that. Therefore we should fasten our seat belts for it's going to be a bumpy ride.

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