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Trump's misguided rush to scrap the Iran deal

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It's beyond clear now: President Trump is intent on wrecking the nuclear deal with Iran.

Last month, his administration certified Tehran's compliance with the accord, an arms control agreement Iran inked with the United States and other world powers after months of negotiations. Both U.S. allies and international inspectors agree Iran is abiding by the terms of the deal, which put strict curbs on Iran's nuclear program and allows for a tough regime of inspections.

But Trump signed off on Iran's compliance with profound reluctance, and he has since signaled that when Iran's certification comes up again — as it will every 90 days, per a mandate from Congress — he intends to declare Iran not in compliance, possibly even if there is evidence to the contrary.

Critics of the nuclear agreement in the administration, as well as hawks in Washington's foreign policy establishment, have long insisted the deal has done nothing to curb Iran's other bad behavior. The deal's defenders counter that it should be examined for what it is, an internationally brokered pact over the limits of Iran's nuclear program. They argue that Iranian actions such as supporting regional proxy wars or a recent rocket launch are provocative but not actually violations of the deal.

According to the New York Times, "American officials have already told allies they should be prepared to join in reopening negotiations with Iran or expect that the United States may abandon the agreement, as it did the Paris climate accord."

This is a concern for Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has been at odds with Trump over the matter. He has warned that walking away from the agreement would alienate key U.S. allies, who are unlikely willing to renegotiate terms. "The greatest pressure we can put to bear on Iran to change the behavior is a collective pressure," said Tillerson this week.

Trump, though, seems undeterred. "It's easier to say [the Iranians] comply," he told the Wall Street Journal. "It's a lot easier ... But, yeah, I would be surprised if they were in compliance."

Elements of the Iranian regime, whose hardliners long opposed the deal, have already argued that a new package of U.S. sanctions violates the agreement. The Trump administration could also attempt to force Iran's hand — perhaps by persuading international inspectors to demand access to military non-nuclear sites, a move that would raise hackles in Tehran.

"The problem is there is no clear evidence Iran is doing any illicit enrichment or development," wrote John Glaser of the libertarian Cato Institute. "So, Iran quite reasonably can be expected to refuse access, at which point the Trump administration can try to falsely depict Iran as violating the deal."

In the event that Trump walks away, officials in Europe, Russia and China could pretend that nothing had changed, continuing to expand investments and business ties in Iran. But without American support for the agreement, "it's hard to imagine the Iranians wouldn't resume their enrichment," said Aaron David Miller, a distinguished scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center and a former Middle East negotiator in both Republican and Democratic administrations, to Today's WorldView.

A Simorgh rocket launching from an undisclosed location in Iran on July 26. (Iranian Defense Ministry via Agence France-Presse)

The regime in Tehran sees nuclear weapons as a deterrent. Given Trump's tough talk and the prospect of preemptive Israeli strikes, they may judge that possessing a credible nuclear threat is all the more necessary in the absence of an arms control pact. Abandoning the deal, Miller argued, would thus only increase the prospect of military escalation.

Trump's insistence on scrapping the deal seems mostly born out of a desire to dismantle the work of his predecessor, who staked his foreign policy legacy on the deal with Iran. But there is precedent for this — and not a great one: in 2001, when President George W. Bush came to power, he reexamined the diplomatic framework President Bill Clinton had built to contain North Korea's budding nuclear threat.

"Then as now, a neophyte president was determined to chart a new course in foreign policy to distinguish himself from his predecessor," wrote Amir Handjani of the Atlantic Council. "At the time, the Bush administration claimed to have evidence of a covert uranium enrichment program, which would have violated the deal. Rather than building an international coalition to force Pyongyang to strictly adhere to the terms of the Agreed Framework, the Bush administration chose to abandon diplomacy."

It didn't work. In 2006, North Korea fired its first nuclear weapon. Now the world — and Trump — faces an all-the-more dangerous predicament in Northeast Asia.

A tougher line with Iran — rather than further diplomacy — is something a number of American allies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, desperately want. Trump's single visit to the region saw him embrace both Saudi and Israeli talking points about the Islamic Republic.

"Granted, Tehran has capitalized on regional unrest to extend its influence," wrote Steve Andreasen and Steve Simon, former officials under the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations. "But decertifying Iran would almost certainly increase the already considerable suspicion and hostility between Tehran and Washington — and this time, America will not be able to count on Europe, Russia, China and the rest of the world as a diplomatic partner. This

would be a high price to pay for aligning the United States with our Gulf allies in a Saudi-inspired attempt to settle scores with Tehran."

The ultimate question that emerges is, simply, why? What does the Trump administration gain by antagonizing the other parties to the agreement? What does it imagine Iran will do once its nuclear program gets unshackled? Miller said he had a hard time seeing "what advantage accrues to the United States" by unwinding the deal.

"What I cannot comprehend is what is their thinking with respect to a Plan B" after Iran is declared to be non-compliant, Miller said. Nevertheless, he reckons that the pressures of the moment and "the laws of political gravity would suggest that this is going to unravel" under Trump's watch. And, he concluded, "I don't see how this ends happily."