

Opinion Trump and Israel Must Not Conflate North Korea Nuclear Threat With Iran

Deterring the proliferation of nuclear weapons is a noble goal – one that America and Israel ostensibly share. How to go about doing so is another story

“How can dictatorships be deterred from developing operational nuclear arsenals?” This is a good question posed in an August 10 Haaretz op-ed about North Korea and its potential lessons for Iran. The subsequent answers, however, demonstrate either misdirection or a misunderstanding. Assertions to the contrary are less than honest. Israeli concerns regarding Iran’s nuclear program are straight-forward: Tehran is a geopolitical adversary, and maintaining Tel Aviv’s qualitative military edge has been a top priority dating back to David Ben-Gurion. However, these concerns should not cause Israelis to draw the wrong lessons from failed nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. Here’s why.

First, conflating Pyongyang and Tehran is troublesome for an obvious reason: One has the bomb, and the other does not. Israel’s possession of nuclear weapons makes it fully aware of the geopolitical differences between haves and have-nots: North Korea has nuclear retaliatory capabilities when its survival is threatened; Iran does not. Weakness did not prevent Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama from threatening to attack Pyongyang over its nuclear program. Rather, it was the bipartisan consensus that existed until Donald Trump: Nuclear war is insane, so best to avoid writing checks that you cannot and should not cash.

Furthermore, the lessons learned by most of the world from America’s handling of authoritarian governments with nuclear programs are quite different than prevailing assumptions in Israel. Attacking Saddam was deeply unpopular and arguably motivated more Iranian officials to maintain some iteration of their nuclear program. Overthrowing Gadhafi after he relinquished his program likely reinforced that consideration. And today, much like in the early 2000s when Washington made the globally unpopular decision to torpedo the Agreed Framework, Tehran’s takeaway has not been “our nuclear program threatens regime survival,” but rather greater skepticism regarding Washington’s ability to

sustain complex diplomatic deals.

Iran's skepticism is increasingly shared globally. Europe, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea – essentially every country not named Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – is watching in horror as America threatens to kill another popular nuclear deal. Combined with Washington pulling out of the Paris climate change agreement, killing the TPP trade deal, and wavering on its Article 5 NATO treaty obligations, this erodes U.S. power and sows global doubt regarding its credibility far more than failing to threaten a war with North Korea that all of its regional neighbors actively oppose.

Second, the domino affect damaging U.S. credibility is not negotiating with North Korea or failing to attack it, but rather the precedent set by unraveling the 1994 Agreed Framework. Washington's handling of Pyongyang's nuclear program is indeed an important learning opportunity to prevent an Iranian bomb, but many Israelis appear to be learning the wrong lesson. Simply put: America was never going to allow North Korea or Iran to have an unfettered nuclear program.

One of the driving forces behind the North Korea deal was the political space that it provided. With the technical aspects of its program frozen underneath a firm ceiling – and the threat of war and weaponization eliminated – it allowed Washington to test the proposition of whether improved bilateral relations over time could facilitate peaceful, indigenous political change in Pyongyang. In my conversations with former U.S. government colleagues, many have privately conceded that if such change did not occur, the plan was to pull out of the deal or renegotiate it. Accepting an unrestrained nuclear North Korea was never an option.

Fast forward to 2017, and the exact same paradigm applies to Iran – and Israeli officials know it. Their fear is not only an Iranian bomb, but also the potential for improved U.S.-Iran relations that the JCPOA provides. That is why Israeli protests over Iran nuclear restrictions being lifted years from now ring hollow: Tel Aviv wants Tehran to remain in the penalty box, regardless of whether Iran has a nuclear program or what its construct looks like.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, advocating a military confrontation with North Korea over its bomb as a way of deterring Iran from building one highlights the very reason why nuclear deals with both countries are so important.

Pyongyang did not have nuclear weapons until after Washington torpedoed their agreement. Had the Bush administration simply continued fulfilling America's commitments, we likely would not be talking about a North Korean nuclear crisis today.

Again, the same principle applies to Iran. If Trump corrects course and fully implements Washington's JCPOA obligations, the risk of Tehran pursuing Pyongyang's path is slim to none. The longer he continues violating the terms of the deal, the more likely it becomes that Iran resumes systemically advancing the technical aspects of its nuclear program - without the unprecedented, state-of-the-art monitoring and verification regime currently in place. Given the chorus of Israeli voices calling for this disastrous latter outcome, one can be forgiven for thinking that they want to fight a war with Iran down to the last American.

Deterring the proliferation of nuclear weapons is a noble goal - one that America and Israel ostensibly share. How to go about doing so is another story. Short of being the change it seeks in the world and relinquishing its own nuclear weapons, Tel Aviv can still support Washington's non-proliferation efforts elsewhere. Doing so, however, will require correcting its perceptions and right-sizing its expectations. Most American officials agree that war should be a last resort, if an option at all. Israel can enhance its own security by following America's lead rather than trying to wag the dog.

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