

Trump's muddle East

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Donald Trump has already cast serious doubts on two signature initiatives taken by the Obama administration: the nuclear deal with Iran and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. While the latter is significant in the Indo-Pacific and mainland Asia, the former has the potential to stir up the Middle East cauldron.

Will he take a leaf out of Barack Obama's foreign policy book or muddle his way through the Middle East?

Obviously, the new administration's strategy towards Iran will not be Tehran-specific, but is likely to be part of a larger approach towards the entire Middle East. If the new administration ends up antagonizing Iran, it will have to see how that plays with the other major American calculus towards Saudi Arabia, Iraq, ISIS, Syria, and even Russia. Any new strategy towards ISIS, Iraq and Syria will have to involve Russia and Saudi Arabia, and it will not be easy for Trump to pursue American interests on his own.

Will Trump scrap the Iran Nuclear Deal?

There have been clear statements from Trump that he would like to revisit the nuclear deal with Iran. Despite the high rhetoric on the deal (that it was "the stupidest"), will Trump scrap it? If he does, will it really affect Iran?

The nuclear deal with Iran signed by the present administration in 2015 was one of the highlights of Obama's foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular. The deal was opposed by a section within the US and had strong opponents from the region as well, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Obama administration still went ahead. There was widespread support for the deal from Europe, Russia, China and elsewhere. Sanctions were lifted and most of the countries have been rushing to re-establish their ties with Iran. Tehran has been filled with diplomatic activities ever since. Outside it, even the big business houses at the global level have been queuing up in Tehran.

This means that even if Trump throws a spanner in the works, it is not clear that the other countries follow suit. Europe and Russia are unlikely to toe a Trump line in scrapping the deal with Iran. China has also been making investments in Iran. This should weigh substantially with the new administration if it attempts to undermine the rapprochement.

How will Tehran respond if Trump decides to pursue his threat? Iran has also been sound with its own rhetoric. Its people are likely to stand behind the regime and be willing to face any US-imposed sanctions. This would strengthen the hand of those who would want to continue with the nuclear weapons programme.

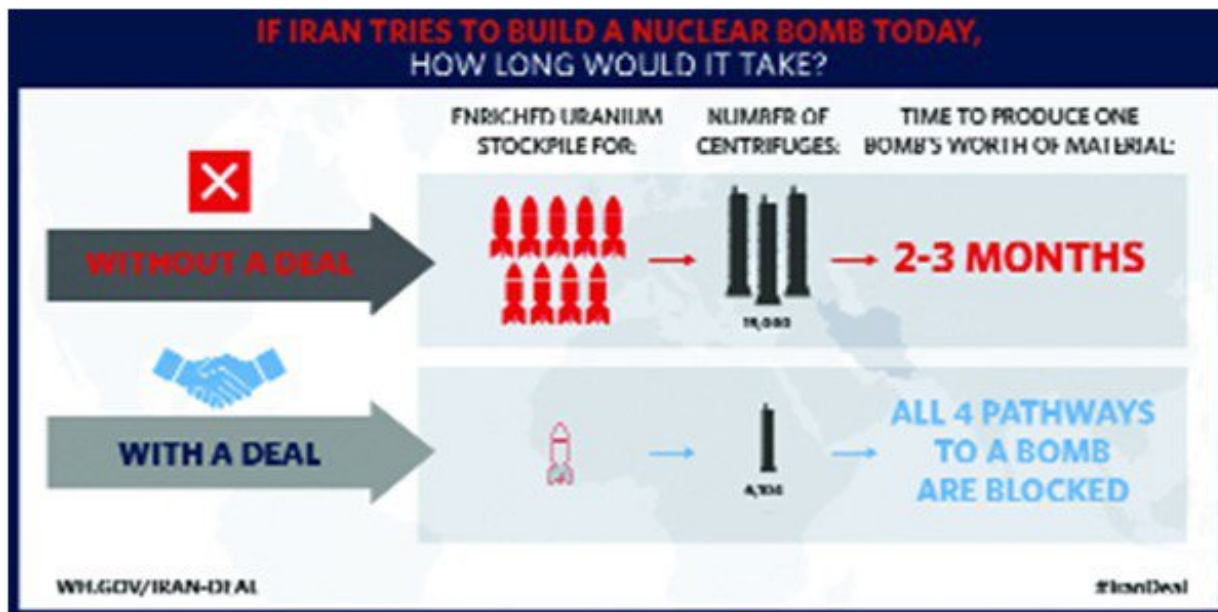
Scrapping the deal will harm the basic American goal of keeping Iran from going nuclear. If North Korea, with all its sanctions, could withstand the pressure and go ahead with its nuclear and missile tests, will Tehran lag behind? But also, since the deal was signed, there has been progress on both sides in terms of opening up and providing access to Iran's nuclear programme, in return for the much-needed international funds and investments.

If the deal is scrapped, such a move would leave Tehran few choices. A section within is likely to push Iran to go nuclear. In short, scrapping the deal will be counterproductive for the US. Instead of that, using the deal as leverage to get more from Iran would be a better strategy.

Besides going nuclear, Iran may also be tempted to take another look at the regional security environment if the deal is scrapped. With an unstable polity in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, an unruly Iran will be a greater danger for regional security. Iran also has a crucial role to play in Afghanistan, which is another security spot in the region. The US and the rest of the international community will benefit more if Iran is kept in, rather than out.

Trump may have his own reasons to pull out from the deal and Europe, Russia and China may not. This means Trump will have to work with and influence the EU, Russia and China if he wants everyone to back off from the deal. What will they demand in return? In short, it is not likely to be an easy decision for Trump. If he does make it, the US will face the consequences, and so would the region.

The Iran Deal at a glance



The deal, which came through in 2015, removes the key elements needed to create a bomb. It also lengthens the breakout time or the time it would have taken for Iran to gather enough fissile material to build a weapon. This used to be two to three months but with the deal it would take 12 months or more. In January 2016, the International Atomic Energy Agency verified that Iran has completed the necessary steps under the Iran deal that will ensure Iran's nuclear program is and remains exclusively peaceful.

Will he engage Syria and Russia to fight ISIS?

There have been hints that the Trump administration is likely to pursue a different strategy in fighting ISIS, especially in terms of building regional partners. The current strategy to keep the Assad regime and Russia away from fighting ISIS in Iraq has not yielded much. There have been a few tactical successes and failures for the Obama administration.

For Trump to succeed in the fight against ISIS and limit its presence only to Iraq and Syria, he is likely to look towards Russia and Syria. Though there is a substantial anti-Assad lobby within the US, the new administration is likely to take a hard look at the options available. The statements from Trump, the choice of his team, especially the National Security Advisor reveals which side he is likely to lean on fighting ISIS.

What will happen if Trump decides to go along with President Assad and Russia? Assad is no angel, as the pro-democratic groups fighting him in Syria will reveal. But that should not limit Trump from joining hands with Assad. In fact, if he decides to totally support democratic forces and bring Assad down for the cause of democracy, it would be a complete change in the American approach towards the Middle East! The post World War II history in the region would reveal how Washington selectively chose the dictators against democratic forces, which in turn has strengthened the hands of the religious Right.

If Trump decides to take a hard look at the role of Assad and Russia in fighting ISIS, such a strategy may perhaps provide few tactical victories. But, strategically ISIS may perhaps shift places, as al Qaeda did earlier. And Russia

may be more interested in fighting the Syrian opposition than ISIS.

Will he address Saudi Arabia and radical ideology?

Much of Trump's strategy towards ISIS will depend on his own endgame for Saudi Arabia and the larger US approach towards radicalism. In recent years, there has been much focus in the US on Saudi Arabia and its (state and individual) linkages with groups and organizations that are channeling radical ideologies all over the region, from Europe to Southeast Asia.

A section within the US has been demanding a renewed American approach towards Saudi Arabia from this perspective. Though the administration and major institutions have been hesitant to completely reorient their approach towards the House of Saud, the same cannot be taken for granted under Trump.

Outside the issue of ideology, there has also been debate on "energy independence" for the US, leading to the debate on going slow on oil imports from the Gulf. How far will Trump walk the talk on energy independence for the US?

Will Trump succeed, where Obama failed?

The above factors are likely to form the Middle East conundrum for Trump and his team. Iran, ISIS and Saudi Arabia pose a challenge to the new administration, if it wants to continue with the present strategy and muddle through in the Middle East. Winning the election within the US with powerful rhetoric may be easier than pursuing a coherent foreign policy outside.

For the new administration the following would be important in the Middle East: addressing the ISIS threat and the radicalism that it espouses, weaning Saudi Arabia from supporting radical groups and ideology, and encouraging Iran to play a positive regional role. All three strategies are not complementary; one does not necessarily augment the other but each has an inherent ability to impinge on the other.

This was the conundrum that Obama faced. Will Trump succeed where Obama failed? Or will he make it worse—and leave us to face it?

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