

Iran and the Hanoi debacle: The threat to Israel

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The summit in Vietnam's capital between President Trump and Chairman Kim in February ended in a resounding failure. The two leaders didn't even bother to complete the summit's program, having quickly realized that the gaps between them are too wide, and that further talks would be futile at this point.

From an Israeli perspective, the US-North Korea negotiations taught several disconcerting lessons.

The ayatollahs in Tehran have observed the inability of the Trump administration to dismantle nuclear weapons and missile systems that directly threaten the American homeland. This reinforces the Iranian leaders' assumption that when they will acquire nuclear weapons, the United States won't have the determination or the power to compel Iran to relinquish these capabilities. Thus, Iran may be emboldened to procure nuclear weapons, which it considers a guarantee to regime survivability, like Kim's North Korea.

Even before the summit, Iran could have concluded – based on the Gaddafi case – that if you possess nuclear capabilities and are determined to hold on to them, you'll gain the respect of the United States, regardless of whether you brutally crush human rights at home and pursue a malignant foreign policy. Trump went from bold threats against North Korea to praising its leader, drawing a clear line between his "good relations" with Kim and the president's determination to take on the corrupt and terrorist regime in Tehran.

In the run-up to the meeting in Hanoi – in contrast to the confrontational statements of National Security Adviser John Bolton after the summit – American policy toward North Korea was hesitant and wilting. Washington refrained from expressing a clear and straightforward demand that North Korea agree to comprehensive, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization before any sanctions relief. Trump even refused at the summary press conference to declare that this was the objective of negotiations. Instead, Trump's envoy Stephen Biegun indicated willingness to agree to a partial relaxation



IRAN WAS watching. (Reuters)

of sanctions in exchange for Kim's commitment to give up assets (even if more substantial than the aging nuclear plant in Yongbyon).

In addition, the administration agreed to defer the demand for full North Korean disclosure of its nuclear program, including all weapons and missiles systems. Against this backdrop, Iran can draw two important and troubling conclusions that one can expect will strengthen its recalcitrance in any future international negotiation. First, America's "maximum pressure" policy is ineffective and vulnerable to offers of phased progress – one step at a time, in return for partial sanctions relief. Second, as an upshot, Secretary of State Pompeo's 12 maximalist demands, including those regarding the nuclear file, are on the table.

Such a reading of America's posture might encourage Iran to violate the JCPOA, assuming this step can provide effective and powerful leverage vis-

à-vis Washington. The future course of US-North Korea negotiations might reinforce this assumption. For instance, if the Trump administration continues negotiations with Pyongyang as it keeps amassing its missiles and nuclear materials, the US position will further weaken. North Korea will leverage its growing arsenals to pressure America, and Iran will follow suit.

BEYOND THE aspects specifically related to Iran, the Hanoi summit carries several adverse lessons for the Middle East as a whole.

Absent from the US-North Korean negotiations is the threat of proliferation. Proliferation is a long-standing North Korean strategy and an important source of revenue for Pyongyang. For years, North Korea has been transferring nuclear and missile technologies, know-how, and systems to the Middle East. The country was instrumental in Iran's missile program, especially at its early phases.

Pyongyang built a military nuclear facility in Syria which, luckily, was exposed and destroyed at the last minute before becoming operational.

If the United States fails to include in its negotiations with North Korea effective mechanisms to deter and prevent proliferation, Kim might interpret this as carte blanche to continue transferring capabilities to the Middle East that will directly threaten Israel. As the Syrian case shows, Pyongyang might also try to take some of the capabilities it will allegedly renounce, and simply develop them in this already volatile region.

From a broader perspective, attempts to appease North Korea despite its intransigence – by canceling the large-scale joint exercises with South Korea, for instance – are liable to undermine the perceived robustness of American guarantees to regional security in Asia and the Middle East.

This dynamic would be particularly damaging to America's position in the Middle

East, where American resolve is already being questioned following the decisions to exit Syria and to draw down forces in Afghanistan, thus encouraging radical players such as Iran, Turkey and Russia to test its resolve across the region.

At this stage, the US does not appear able to muster sufficient power to force Pyongyang to commit to denuclearization. As long as this trend continues, and particularly if there is further erosion in America's posture, it will offer a problematic example for Iran to follow. The regime in Tehran will easily detect American weakness and double down on its efforts to realize its ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems, and feel confident enough to ramp up its policy of terrorism, subversion and destabilization in the region.

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