

As relations with North Korea thaw, Iran poses a bigger threat

By Colin Rubenstein

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Comments made by US President Donald Trump about the sacking of his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson highlighted the fact that while the threat to world peace posed by North Korea has dominated the headlines in recent months, Mr Trump is determinedly focussed at least as much on another rogue state, which probably poses an even greater threat in the longer term – Iran. Mr Trump stated, “When you look at the Iran deal, I thought it was terrible, he thought it was okay. I wanted to either break it or do something. He felt a little differently.” In fact, Trump had already set a deadline of May 12 to have new international arrangements in place to deal with Iranian rogue behaviour in terms of nuclear and missile proliferation, regional aggression, terrorism and other problems.

The reality is that while North Korea threatens violence, Iran is already instigating or provoking it on considerable scale – in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and, recently, by flying a drone into Israel from Syria, prompting Israeli reprisals. In fact, most of Israel’s top military analysts now say it is only matter of time before further violence, probably on a much larger scale, develops between Israel and Iran.

Iran appears ever more confident it will achieve its hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East now that it not only controls four capitals – Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad and Sana’a – but is very close to completing its long-sought land corridor, across Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean, facilitating its threat to Israel.

There seems little question the current situation is directly linked to the Iranian nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015 between Iran and the “P5+1” world powers. That agreement was portrayed as stopping Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. Today, not only is it clear that the JCPOA has deep flaws that will likely prevent it achieving that goal, it has actually clearly helped facilitate other Iranian bad behaviours.

Meanwhile, the JCPOA has not stopped Iran from working full steam ahead on advanced centrifuges, which will essentially bring Iran’s nuclear breakout time to just weeks, and also launching no fewer than 23 ballistic missile tests. The latter violates the UN Security Council Resolution that implemented the JCPOA, if not the agreement itself. Yet by year eight of the JCPOA, Iran is free to buy and sell ballistic missiles – the key nuclear weapons delivery system, and by year 10 to 12 of the deal, (2025-27), all major restrictions on Iran fade away, giving Iran a green light to build all the nuclear infrastructure it needs for a complete nuclear weapons arsenal.

The JCPOA provided Iran with a huge influx of funds – up to US\$150 billion. It is

becoming clear that, rather than improving the lives of Iran's civilians, that money has been used to bolster Iran's military; fund the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) responsible for spreading the revolution through the region by destabilising neighbours and directing terrorism and militias; and directly funding terror groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. This follows several years of the Obama Administration tolerating Iran's rogue actions for fear of jeopardising the JCPOA.

Both the money and the free hand granted over this period were likely essential to the dangerous entrenchment of Iran's position in Syria – and the strong risk of war with Israel this entails.

President Trump has announced he will refuse to re-certify the national security value of the JCPOA to Congress in May. This means the US Congress has until May 12 to reassess, reform and re-issue the terms of the deal. If nothing happens by then, the likelihood is that the US will simply withdraw, with unpredictable results.

Until then, the US is seeking partners from among its allies, likely including Australia, to address the problems with the JCPOA – especially the sunset clauses and Iran's defiant missile tests – and to also put in place comprehensive measures to begin to address Iranian regional aggression and other rogue behaviour. This may well entail major new non-nuclear sanctions regarding Iranian terrorism, cyber attacks and human rights abuses, as well as international agreement on how to effectively deter further missile tests.

Iran's aggression and the possibility of the US withdrawing from the deal, and thus potentially placing sanctions on any companies dealing with it, are not the only issue that should concern Iran's potential trading partners. Corruption and illicit finance, including widespread counterfeiting, and funding of terrorism, are so prevalent in Iran's economy that they could potentially infect any country that invests in the Islamic Republic.

These issues almost certainly will have been raised with allies including Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull during his late February US visit. It is in Australia's core national interests to review our stance to ensure we are constructive and proactive in tackling the extremely serious Iranian problem.

After North Korea thaw, Iran is a bigger threat

Colin Rubenstein



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IMAGE: APTI

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Today, not only is it clear that the JCPOA has deep flaws that will likely prevent it achieving that goal, it has actually clearly helped facilitate other Iranian bad behaviours.

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Yet by year eight of the JCPOA, Iran is free to buy and sell ballistic missiles and by year 10 to 12 of the deal (2025-27), all major restrictions on Iran fade away, giving Iran a green light to build all the nuclear infrastructure it needs for a nuclear weapons arsenal.

The JCPOA provided Iran with a huge influx of funds – up to \$US150 billion. It is becoming clear that, rather than improving the lives of Iran’s civilians, the money has been used to bolster Iran’s military; fund the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps responsible for spreading the revolution through the region by destabilising neighbours and directing terrorism and militias; and directly funding terror groups.

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Colin Rubenstein is executive director of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council.