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The Trump-Netanyahu Meeting: An Opportunity for Policy Coordination on Iran in Light of the North Korean Crisis

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with President Donald Trump in New York in late September. With the events in the Korean peninsula in the background, the two leaders will almost certainly discuss this crisis and the lessons for preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Indeed, the parallel between the challenges to the United States posed by North Korea's nuclear program and the Iranian nuclear program is clear. Both regimes regard the United States as a threatening ideological enemy, and both have systematically violated international norms, in part to develop military nuclear capabilities. However, the two cases are not identical, and it is important to understand the limitations of the parallel, particularly in order to focus on what can nevertheless be learned from the case of North Korea and applied to Iran.

The first critical difference between the respective nuclear challenges is that North Korea has nuclear weapons, while Iran does not. Subject to the fulfillment of its obligations under the JCPOA, Iran is 5-15 years away from the point where Pyongyang is now at. For this reason, the military option as a way of preventing Pyongyang from creating a balance of terror with Washington incurs a major, possibly unbearable risk, in comparison with the same option against Iran.

A second difference is the countries' strategic positioning. While North Korea is supported by China, an arch rival of the United States, Iran has no similar international support. The connection between Beijing and Pyongyang complicates the American effort, because cooperation from China is the key to increased economic and political pressure on the Kim Jong Un regime. Despite the aggressive behavior of the regime in Pyongyang, China is not interested in a united Korea under American influence, does not want American forces deployed on its border, and fears the collapse of the regime, which could cause an economic crisis and prompt a stream of refugees to China. American

action against North Korea that has not been coordinated with China is therefore liable to drag China into a conflict, raising the price of escalation.

The third difference is the balance of power between North Korea and the US allies in the region. Pyongyang has succeeded in creating a balance of terror that includes the threat of large scale destruction in Seoul using thousands of artillery pieces and the threat of rockets and missiles, including those capable of bearing nuclear warheads. North Korea has also managed to create deterrence against Japan, based on its rocket capabilities and nuclear weapons. As a result, Washington's allies in the region publicly oppose a military operation against North Korea, in effect serving as a means of deterrence and a restraining element against the United States itself. In the Iranian case, it is Washington's allies – Israel and Saudi Arabia – that are pushing for a determined American policy against Tehran, including the threat of the military option.

Another difference belongs to the realm of intelligence. Part of the difficulty for the United States in posing a credible military threat to North Korea and China to persuade them to change their policy is the intelligence gap surrounding North Korea's nuclear and missile program. Excellent intelligence is essential for causing substantial damage to Pyongyang's nuclear infrastructure, its array of missiles, and its ability to retaliate against United States allies. The absence of intelligence necessary to neutralize North Korean's nuclear capabilities dramatically reduces the effectiveness of the military option, increases the likelihood of a North Korean military response, and in effect renders it irrelevant. It is commonly assumed that in contrast to the North Korean case, the existing intelligence coverage of the Iranian program is good enough to facilitate and accommodate effective military action.

Finally, there are significant social and cultural differences. In the decades it has been in power in North Korea, the Kim family has shaped an obedient and closed society that has withstood heavy pressure from international sanctions, as well as a drought in the 1990s that left millions of people suffering from hunger. The unrelenting dictatorial regime prevents the emergence of any political centers of power that could upset the regime or its policy. In Iranian society, on the other hand, political opposition to the regime is possible, albeit to a limited extent. Iran is not a closed society, and its economy is connected to the world. The protests in 2009 against the attempt to twist the election results in favor of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the election in 2013 and 2017 of pragmatic presidential candidate Hassan Rouhani, and the signing of the nuclear agreement with the major powers indicate weaker resilience than in North Korea.

Iran is almost certainly monitoring American policy toward North Korea and analyzing Washington's responses, in order to assess how to move forward with a military nuclear

capability while reducing the accompanying risks to the state and the regime alike. At the same time, Tehran also presumably understands the difference in military threat capabilities, the strategic situation, and the internal theaters of the two countries, all of which indicate that the North Korean experience does not delineate Iran's future, at least as long as Iran does not possess a nuclear weapon. On the one hand, this conclusion is likely to reinforce the realization in Iran that a nuclear weapon provides a high likelihood of defense against American military action. On the other hand, the difference between the North Korean and Iranian cases exposes the elements of Iranian weakness, and could therefore encourage American determination to prevent Iran from obtaining this strategic weapon.

The intelligence gap against North Korea highlights the importance of broad-based and thorough intelligence regarding Iran. Israel must be sure that in addition to the international inspection of the declared Iranian nuclear program, it has supplementary intelligence coverage of Iranian nuclear activity at undeclared sites, activity in weapons groups, and the missile program. These conditions are essential for maintaining a credible military option at a time when American intelligence attention is focused on East Asia.

Indeed, the attention and resources of the United States military system and political echelon are likely to focus on this challenge in the coming years, because the North Korean threat is more severe and urgent, directly threatens the United States, and has strategic implications for the position of the United States vis-à-vis China. Moreover, as long as Iran remains committed to the nuclear agreement, it will be a long time before Iran develops a nuclear weapon that could pose a direct military threat to the United States. It is therefore important for Jerusalem to realize the limitations in American attention and the consequences of this situation for policy on Iran.

For example, with respect to the current debate in the United States concerning the possibility of abandoning the JCPOA, Prime Minister Netanyahu has declared, "This is a bad deal. Either fix it ☐ or cancel it." However, it is imperative that Israel formulate clear answers or strategic thinking about the consequences and alternatives on the day following an American decision to abandon the agreement. Although Israel regards the JCPOA as highly problematic, an American initiative to abandon the agreement will leave little legitimacy for exerting international levers of pressure, such as economic and diplomatic sanctions, and will probably require military action if Iran resumes full activity in its nuclear program. The Trump administration's ability to provide a comprehensive and legitimate response to such a development is currently very limited as long as the crisis in the Korean peninsula continues. Therefore the JCPOA should be preserved, as long as no suitable strategy for dealing with "the day after" has been formulated.

At the same time, Israel should stress to the Trump administration the importance of delivering a message to Iran that the United States does not accept Tehran's interpretation of the gray areas in the agreement. It is important to underscore the need for action against the threat posed by Iranian activity in non-nuclear areas not included in the agreement – the ballistic missiles, subversion, support for terrorism, and shipments of weapons to organizations operating at the behest of Tehran and under its sponsorship.

Addressing all the threats from Iran is critical, because if Iran decides to “duplicate” Pyongyang's strategy, it will work toward building a conventional military capability that will threaten Israel and Saudi Arabia with widespread destruction as a means of restraining Washington once the JCPOA expires. In effect, Iran is already seeking to develop such a balance, specifically through Hezbollah, whose improved military capabilities □ with the consolidation of Iranian satellite organizations and Shiite militias operating in Syria □ are liable to exact a heavy price of Israel in the event of a military conflict, and through the supply of advanced weapons to Hamas. When the main restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program expire, Israel will face significant conventional threats on two or three fronts. In such an event, the dilemma of accepting an Iranian bomb or taking military action against it, with all the ensuing consequences, will be much more difficult than it is now. This conclusion highlights another aspect of the threat stemming from the Iranian presence in Syria, and emphasizes the need to prevent Tehran from building significant advanced military capabilities there, as it has already done in Lebanon.

When in the United States, Prime Minister Netanyahu will find an administration engrossed in the North Korean crisis and urgent internal issues. Washington faces challenges in Northeast Asia unprecedented over the past 50 years. Damage to Washington's status in this region, which is of supreme importance to the United States, will affect its status and credibility as an ally in other regions in the world. Israel must consider how it can support the United States in the international arena by contributing Israeli knowledge and experience in the campaign against the nuclear program and in active defense against missiles. At the very least, it should avoid creating difficulties for the United States, while maintaining its essential interests against the Iranian threat. An ongoing, intimate dialogue between Jerusalem and Washington is therefore necessary, based on the mutual realization of their respective situations. In this framework, a joint response and mechanism of continued coordination should be formulated, to ensure that the two countries utilize their capabilities against their enemies to the fullest extent possible, helped by the lessons of the Korean crisis to guarantee a different reality with Iran. The Trump-Netanyahu meeting will be an important opportunity for formulating

these understandings and establishing an effective mechanism for ensuing political coordination.