

American Iranian showdown but no resolution

Dr. GLEN SEGELL | Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies, University of Haifa. | September 26, 2018, 9:28 PM

There has been a war of words ongoing between America and Iran as tension between the two nations has increased since US President Donald Trump pulled out of a nuclear deal with Iran that was struck during the Obama administration. Not too different from the war of words with North Korea last year but in my view the result is going to be different.

In July Iranian President Hassan Rouhani cautioned the American leader about pursuing hostile policies against Tehran, saying “War with Iran is the mother of all wars.” Trump responded with a Tweet “Never, ever threaten the United States again or you will suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before. We are no longer a country that will stand for your demented words of violence & death. Be cautious!”

Yesterday, a year after delivering his “fire and fury” speech that threatened to annihilate North Korea and its “little rocket man” leader, President Trump addressed the annual United Nations General Assembly, expanding on his “America First” motto and replacing North Korea with Iran as the major antagonist. I think that Trump believes what worked once will work twice and so by next year I think that he thinks that Iran will be following the path of North Korea.

However, in the case of North Korea the deal is not between the US and North Korea the deal is between two neighboring states whose population is one nation split during the Cold War 68 years ago by political ideology. The peace deal is between North Korea and South Korea. In the case of Iran, the issues are far more complex and diverse. The main adversary of Shia Islamic Iran is Sunni Islamic Saudi Arabia. I don’t believe that Trump will be able to resolve fundamental religious divides through a war of words.

Nevertheless, there is an issue that Trump believes, and I agree with him, that needs to be dealt with by the international community. That issue is the threats and through them the intent of Iran to endanger civilians by its development of military missile ability that is offensive and not defensive in capability. Exacerbating this missile capability is a uranium enrichment program that could lead to these missiles having nuclear warheads.

So, I agree with Trump when he called for Iran's international isolation in a combative and unashamedly boastful speech at the United Nations on Tuesday. Trump denounced the clerical regime in Tehran for sowing “chaos, death and destruction” as he defended his decision to ditch an internationally-brokered nuclear deal. He said, “We cannot allow the world's leading sponsor of terrorism to possess the planet's most dangerous weapons,” Trump said, alluding to Tehran's proven

support for Islamic militant movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Trump added “We ask all nations to isolate Iran's regime as long as its aggression continues.” The Iranians deny development military nuclear capability. The debate on nuclear proliferation will no doubt continue in the UN Security Council.

Indicative of Iran not being North Korea when contemplating the means of conflict resolution, the Iranian response to Trump was not the same as that of North Korea a year ago. So, what worked once will not work twice. Trump’s call prompted accusations from his Iranian counterpart that he was trying to topple his government. This came hours of Trumps UN address when Iran's President Hassan Rouhani had his turn to speak from the same rostrum.

In his address, Rouhani stressed Tehran's continued commitment to the 2015 deal and ridiculed Trump as a preposterous leader who was himself isolated. Rouhani poured cold water on the idea of resuming talks with Washington, saying US claims that it was not seeking regime change fooled no one. “It is ironic that the US government does not even conceal its plan for overthrowing the same government it invites to talks.” No doubt he was referring to the attack on a military parade in southern Iran a few days previously where both soldiers and civilian were killed. Iran has blamed external intervention including the US.

I believe that Trump will not have as easy a ride in the international community in dealing with Iran as he had in dealing with North Korea. This will also make it hard to draw any comparisons in conflict resolution. Lessons learnt from North Korea cannot be applied to Iran. Without international support or indeed with other states not supporting the American view it is likely that the methodology used with North Korea will not work with Iran.

When the US withdrew from the nuclear deal in May, it was to the dismay of the other parties that had invested years in negotiations to keep Iran's nuclear ambitions in check. In a sign of how some allies are unwilling to automatically follow Trump's lead, the five remaining parties to the 2015 agreement (Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia) announced on Monday plans to keep business ties alive with Iran, staring down Washington's move to impose sanctions.

In response Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, addressing an anti-Iran pressure group, said he was “disturbed and indeed deeply disappointed” by the EU announcement. “This is one of the most counterproductive measures imaginable for regional and global peace and security.”

This has not made an impact. At the UN yesterday, French President Emmanuel Macron used his speech to urge “dialogue and multilateralism,” crediting the 2015 accord with curbing Tehran's nuclear program. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, another US ally whose relations with Trump have cooled, did not mention the US president by name but there was little doubt who he had in mind when he said it was “very easy to create chaos but difficult to re-establish order.”

Given the stalemate, lack of support and no progress it was not surprising that US National Security Adviser John Bolton delivered saber-rattling remarks in a no-holds-barred warning to Iran at a major summit in New York after Trumps and Rouhani’s wars of words. He told the Iranian regime in a fiery speech that “we are watching, and we will come after you” and that there will be “hell to pay” if it continues its current course.

Such is indicative of what I believe will be the situation for the short to medium term. America will aim to contain Iran through coercions but knowingly lacks the facility and support to do anything else. Iran will continue to threaten both through rhetoric and support of proxy forces but is intimidated to do any more. In the long term both sides might go over the edge of sanity into the abyss!