

The Wars to Come

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As agreements and alliances are endangered on the international stage, the global community could be heading for the biggest shift since the Cold War – with ‘normalisation’ replaced by a far more suspicious and defensive state of affairs.

Donald Trump’s week got worse last week when President Rouhani of Iran announced that he is willing to walk away from the 2013 nuclear deal in the face of ever-increasing sanctions from the United States.



This is something of a startling move by Rouhani, long viewed as a moderate force within Iran, and certainly there is ‘no better deal’ than that agreed in 2013 – essentially putting relations back to square one and raising concerns about the long-term future for the two states. Rouhani’s concerns seem to stem exclusively from Trump’s administration, citing alleged breaking of promises in the JCPOA agreement and casting the US as ‘*neither a good partner nor a reliable negotiating party*’. These are blunt words, particularly for an Iran which seemed to be approaching an understanding with the West, and speak to the culture of uncertainty and fear that has been incumbent in international relations ever since Trump took office.

Trump’s distaste towards Iran is not new. Back in July it was reported that he had established a working group within the White House to work on undermining the JCPOA accords against the express objections of the Departments of State and Defence. Trump is also arguably guilty of viewing Iran through a single-issue prism (that of its nuclear ambitions) and largely ignoring its role in funding regional militant/terror groups, as well as Iran’s political jockeying for power and influence (from both internal and external perspectives) within the Middle East. Both of these actions indicate a fundamental misunderstanding of the best way to work with, rather than against, countries with whom you cannot afford to start a war.

But Iran is far from the only region where Trump’s attitude is causing concern. The allegations of Russian interference in his electoral campaigns are well known but it is worth repeating that Trump has taken a much more conciliatory approach to Russian relations, even beyond the ‘reset’ of his predecessor – the Trump way is not so much doctrine than supine: refusing to condemn Russia for its ongoing rights abuses and political controversies, demanding that enquiries into his own staff be dropped lest they reveal just how cosy the Trump-Putin friendship is, and describing any allegations that Russia attempted to sway the election as a ‘witch-hunt’. Of course, the corollary to this is that a further round of sanctions has just been enforced against Russian business and investment. But this causes its own problems – Russia is ever more likely to align itself with China in a shared goal of reducing US influence, even while the nature of the Trump-Putin relationship remains chequered.

He views NATO as little more than a mafia protection business – the little states have to pay up or ‘*it would be a shame if something happened to them*’, in effect. It is not beyond the ultimate realms of possibility that a Baltic state may eventually turn to Russia as a guarantor of economic or military security, on the grounds that it is no longer in their interests to expect any assistance from the US. This would in turn question the whole point of NATO: if the principle ‘*an attack on one is an attack on all*’ is disregarded by the biggest, wealthiest and most powerful member, would this not invalidate at a stroke the entire purpose of the organisation?

The legacy of this most American of Presidents, then, could be to break apart the post-war defence pact, to drive allies into the arms of Russia, to jeopardise the Middle East process for a generation or more and to render impotent any agreement or organisation which relies on the backing of the US (which to be fair is most of them). What we have then is not so much personal condemnation of the President but astonishment at the degree to which he invites and institutes change and uncertainty on a global scale, not realising (or not caring) that it was only through breaking out of the isolationist stance of the 1940s did America even become the pre-eminent superpower that it is today, and that forcing your international partners into alliances against you is not quite the level of diplomacy that is needed.

For better or worse, this is the biggest shake-up in international affairs since the collapse of the Soviet Union and perhaps even since World War Two. Trump is unlikely to provide the negotiation and diplomacy required so it is to be hoped that the rest of the international community can collectively maintain their sanity – although asking a Russia/China/Iran axis to act in something other than self-interest is a tough ask. Whichever way you look at it, these are interesting times.

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