When Trump’s ego meets Khamenei’s tenacity

written by David M. Weinberg | 15.04.2025

This third installment of my trilogy on Iran examines the minimum threshold for an American nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic, and American and Israeli options in the likely case that such a deal is not achievable.

In previous weeks, we reviewed the treacherous Iranian record (its overarching revolutionary ambitions to dominate the region, its proxy wars, and nuclear and missile programs), and President Donald Trump’s strategic worldview.

I argued that Trump’s plans for winning in the global struggle against China and his hope for a reset in relations with Russia depend on proving his mettle in confrontation with Iran.

I furthermore argued that if Trump’s threats against Iran amount to no more than another Obama-style soft deal that kicks the Iranian nuclear can down the road – then Trump’s presidency will be over, at least in international affairs. He will never be the “transformational” president with “historic” achievements that he so explicitly wants to be.

The key to getting a “good deal” with Iran is to differentiate between arms control and nuclear disarmament. President Barack Obama settled for arms control in 2015, restricting Iran’s nuclear program but leaving it intact, legitimized, and primed to accelerate as soon as temporary restrictions expired. And he freed tens of billions of dollars of frozen funds to fuel Iran’s military march forward.

Obama aimed low and ultimately paved the way for Iran’s emergence as a nuclear threshold state.

South Africa, by contrast, initiated nuclear disarmament in 1990, as Libya did after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. This path leaves no enrichment and weaponization infrastructure hanging around for the regime to change its mind.

That is exactly what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Trump this week: Libya is the model. US National Security Advisor Mike Walz specified that Iran must “hand over and give up” all elements of its nuclear program, including

missiles, weaponization, and uranium enrichment.

In Trump's shorthand: "Supervise, check it, inspect it, and then blow it up or just make sure that there [are] no more nuclear facilities." Last week he said that he is pursuing a deal "that would be just as good as if you won militarily."

Three experts from the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) in Washington DC this week laid out in detail what such a win would be, what complete disarmament must entail. It means "full, permanent, and verifiable dismantlement, export, or in-place destruction" of Iran's uranium and plutonium production assets; "anytime, anywhere" inspections; and an end to nuclear weapons R&D.

It also means termination of Iran's ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drone arsenals; an end to Iran's illicit nuclear and missile imports and exports; and especially to its nuclear, missile, and arms agreements with Russia, China, and North Korea. And oh yeah, also an end to Tehran's longtime support for Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other proxy forces.

All this would require super-invasive American or International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring of Iran's bank accounts, uranium mines, mills, ore processing facilities, military and missile bases, ports and airfields, along with total destruction of Iran's underground bunkers for nuclear activities and weapons storage.

IN MY VIEW, the likelihood that Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei will agree to anything remotely resembling such a dismantlement of Iranian power, such an evisceration of Iranian sovereignty and supremacy – is nil.

I think it more likely that Israeli Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara and General Security Service Director Ronen Bar will vote for Netanyahu in the next Israeli election than Ali Hosseini Khamenei bowing nicely before Trump and presiding over disembowelment of the Islamic Revolution.

Remember: Tehran has spent four decades and hundreds of billions of dollars developing its military power and regional ascendancy, accompanied by considerable suffering ("sacrifice") of the Iranian people to this end. All this, based on deep ideological-religious conviction, on a dark eschatological vision that involves genocide against Israel and West and downright destruction of

enemy civilization.

So, it is much more likely that in this weekend's talks, Iran will do what is does best: – delay, offer reversible concessions, and deflect US power. Previous American administrations have even rewarded Iran with sanctions relief simply for staying at the negotiating table! As FDD director Mark Dubowitz notes, Iran is a master at rope-a-doping American presidents.

The difference – for Trump, Netanyahu, and the West – is that this time, there is no time. Iran is minutes or months away from unveiling its first nuclear bomb.

According to a biennial report published Tuesday by international nuclear watchdogs IAEA and NEA, known as the Red Book, Iran's uranium reserves are much larger than previously estimated, and it is set to increase production of uranium ore from 21 to 71 tons this year. No country in the world has enriched uranium to 60 percent, as Iran has, without building nuclear weapons – so Iran's intentions are clear.

THIS LEAVES the Trump Administration with three choices. The first option is to capitulate; to cut a weak, watered-down, wishy-washy deal with Iran that pretends to check Iranian nuclear and other power while vapidly claiming that it is a "HUGE" victory for Washington.

You have to wonder who will prevail: Trump's ego or Khamenei's tenacity?

I would like to believe that Trump will not fall into this hole, but given his unpredictable nature, self-regard as the greatest global dealmaker, and oft-expressed desire to be recognized as world class peacemaker – this cannot be ruled out.

Israel must do everything in its power to prevent such an American collapse. Selling out to Iran would be ghastlier than bowing to Russia (regarding Ukraine), and far more devastating to Israel's security.

Trump's second option is to bomb Iran to kingdom come – not only its military and oil facilities but also regime loci of power. This would be an attempt to eliminate Iran's military threat for decades, to strip Iran of the economic ability to swiftly rebuild its military, and to decapitate the current leadership and hopefully effect regime change.

Trump’s third option is to let Israel do the job or at least start the job of destroying Iran’s frontline nuclear and missile bases, with Washington kicking-in with auxiliary offensive and defensive moves to back-up Israel and demonstrate to Tehran that its hegemonic gig is up.

If and when Iran is stupid enough to make good on its threats to retaliate by lashing-out at Israel, at US troops and facilities in the Arabian Gulf, and at American allies in the region – Trump will have no choice but unleash America’s military might against Iran too.

In this scenario, nasty wags assuredly will accuse Israel of “dragging” the US into war but so be it. In the absence of Iranian nuclear capitulation to the US, there will be no choice. I think this to be the most responsible and most likely scenario.

After all, twice over the past year Iran assaulted Israel with ballistic missiles, and Iran holds deep responsibility for the 2023 Hamas and 2024 Hezbollah assaults on Israel too. Israelis have learned the hard way to take seriously Iran’s further genocidal threats.

According to the text of the Passover Haggadah read in Jewish homes this weekend, “in every generation enemies arise seeking the elimination of the Jewish People” (*bechol dor vador omdim aleinu lechaloteinu*), “but G-d gives the National of Israel strength to overcome, survive, and thrive” (*veHakadosh Baruch Hu matzileinu miyadam*). It surely will be so in the impending mega-confrontation with Iran, too.

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