



US 2020 Elections and What may Lie Ahead for the Knotty Nuclear Issues of Iran and North Korea



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US presidential elections have always aroused great interest around the world. US foreign policy impacts nearly all nations and nearly all geopolitical, economic and ecological trends across the globe. This includes the nuclear dimension. This paper offers some preliminary thoughts on what the win of either candidate could mean for the Iranian nuclear imbroglio and the North Korean nuclear knot.

Iranian Nuclear Issue and the New Occupant of White House

The future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran deal hangs on the result of the US presidential elections. President Trump had pulled out of the agreement in 2018. Over the last two years, his administration has progressively gone on implementing his maximum pressure policy by increasing sanctions on Iran, taking military actions against the regime and ensuring a realignment of relations between regional states to increase Iran's isolation. Obviously, these measures have brought greater pressure on Iran.

In response, Iran has demonstrated its belligerence at both the military as well as the diplomatic level. After the attack on its high ranking military general, Tehran retaliated with missile strikes against the US troops in Iraq. It has also been reaching out to other nations that are not in agreement with the US policy towards JCPOA to find wiggle room for itself against Washington.

However, rather intelligently, Tehran has chosen to remain largely compliant with the JCPOA. Of course, it did take five progressive steps between May 2019 and Jan 2020 towards breaching some of the JCPOA restrictions, such as on uranium enrichment (from 3.7 to 4.5 percent) or low enriched

uranium stockpile build up limitations. But these were done in a transparent manner and were aimed to put calibrated pressure on other states to get them to find ways of dealing with the issue.

Tehran had pinned its hopes on Europe, Russia and China to bail it out. Of these, while Europe tried to find ways to help, including through crafting some novel mechanisms such as the [special purpose vehicle](#), it was always conscious of not jeopardising its relations with the US. Russia and China, meanwhile, have been able to ignore US pressure. While [Russian help](#) is handy in shoring Iran's military requirements, China, as was in the news recently, has signed a long-term \$400 billion [economic and security deal](#) to include investments in infrastructure, defence and intelligence.

As it stands today, sanctions have certainly made life difficult for Iran and hence it is happy to advance relations with China. The country also continues to pursue nuclear activity and missile testing. In July 2020, Tehran had announced its intention of building, or [re-building, an underground nuclear centrifuge facility](#) that was reportedly destroyed in a sabotage attack last year. Just before the end of October 2020, the IAEA reported that construction work at the site had started.

Iran's focus on its nuclear programme and the insistence to possess uranium enrichment capability has always been very clear. Its intransigence on these issues could only become more pronounced in case the next presidential elections in Iran, due next year, yield a more hard-line government. The reformist, moderate administration of President Rouhani – under whose leadership the JCPOA was concluded – could find itself on a weak wicket for not having anything to show in its favour to its citizens. The case of the moderates would be further weakened in case Donald Trump was to return as the American president.

A hard-line Iranian government along with another Trump administration will spell the death of JCPOA in its current form. While President Trump has vowed to propose another deal to Iran within a month of his re-election, one can expect a hardening of positions on both sides as Trump will insist on bringing in restrictions on missiles and other alleged regional activities of Tehran. Iran will resist and try to find support from a new alignment with Malaysia, Turkey, Pakistan, China and Russia.

Meanwhile, if presidential candidate Joe Biden wins, a return to the JCPOA looks possible. However, he will have to move quickly to reinstate the deal so that some of its effects can be reflected in the Iran elections in June next year. Of course, he might most likely have to contend with hurdles such as Iran's insistence on compensation for economic losses suffered owing to US withdrawal from JCPOA. The current Iranian administration may like to insist on this demand to earn political mileage to show it is

standing up to the US. Help will be needed from the EU, as well as Russia and China, to rebuild bridges. India could play a useful role here.

In case the JCPOA can be reinstated, it would be able to achieve the objectives that it had been set up for, which is to mainstream/normalise Iran into the international community and address its security concerns in order to remove any motivation for acquisition of nuclear weapons.

Denuclearisation of North Korea and the New Occupant of White House

President Trump assumed presidency in 2017 amidst heightened belligerence towards North Korea. Both the leaders were extremely hostile and used ample references to their nuclear weapons to cow the other one down, till, in a turn of events, President Trump set out to make history by becoming the first American president to meet a North Korean leader. [Three meetings](#) between the two took place with much fanfare, but yielded literally nothing in terms of being able to put a stop to Pyongyang's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities.

While the war of rhetoric has toned down for now, North Korea has continued to improve its capabilities. Having lost any hope of being able to strike a deal with this Trump administration, DPRK obviously seems to be pinning its hopes on the next one, even as it continues to strengthen its bargaining position for an engagement, as and when the opportunity arises.

If President Trump comes back to power, Kim might want to have another shot at negotiations. Trump, too, might be better prepared to handle another such experience given his past meetings. While denuclearisation looks impossible, a nuclear and missile freeze on further developments, even a verifiable one, might be a desirable outcome in exchange for lifting of sanctions and progressive engagement with the country. From China's perspective too, this might be the best outcome since it does not want a North Korea with too large an arsenal or open-ended capability expansion at its doorstep. If the country opens up to legitimate outside commerce, China will obviously be best placed to reap the first mover advantage, given its already existing ties with the country.

Meanwhile, Joe Biden is likely to start with a publicly harder position. He has criticised Trump for having legitimised the North Korean dictator with his personal meetings and yet not having been able to stop his nuclear endeavours. Biden has also indicated that he would like to pressurize China into handling the issue. But, whether it would work or not will depend on how nuanced a manner the pressure is mounted to get nuclear commitments while allowing some positive strokes to the country.

Of course, the larger US relationship with China will have a bearing on Chinese willingness to engage on the issue.

So, a lot will depend on that one individual who would sit in the Oval office from January next year. His calendar on these two nuclear issues is going to be busy from the word go because pre-scheduled events are going to start weighing upon him very quickly from 2021 onwards.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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