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Trump is Pulling a Libya on Iran

By Robert W. Merry
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Word is out that President Trump this week will “decertify” the nuclear deal with Iran, also known as JCPOA, for Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This is the deal struck with Tehran not only by the United States but also by France, Germany, Russia, China, the UK, and the European Union. It’s a nifty word, “decertify.” It hides the real meaning of Trump’s planned action. The correct word is “renege.”

That’s a loaded word in polite society. It characterizes a person or organization or nation that doesn’t care about his or its character sufficiently to live up to his or its commitments and promises. To say someone has reneged on an agreement is to call into question that person’s honesty, self-respect, and sense of honor.

Trump is called upon every 90 days, based on the Iran Nuclear Review Act, to certify whether Iran is living up to the JCPOA deal, which suspended economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic in exchange for Tehran freezing, for 15 years, whatever nuclear weapons development it may have been engaged in. Trump hates the deal, as he has made clear since the beginning of the 2016 election cycle, and he doesn’t want to go on record saying Iran is living up to it.

But it is. That’s the judgment of all the other signatories to the agreement, as well as the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency, which has issued eight separate certifications of compliance since the deal was struck in 2015. According to news reports, when Trump previously certified Iranian compliance, he did so reluctantly and only under pressure from his

three top foreign policy and national security staffers—Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and Defense Secretary James Mattis. This time around, apparently, he doesn't plan to listen to those officials.

But what are the consequences when a nation reneges on a solemn agreement with not just another nation but six other nations and a union of many more—with the entire world watching? How do other nations deal with a country that blithely casts aside the commitments it accepted through what were assumed to be good-faith negotiations?

We have a case in point that's worth noting in the context of what Trump is about to do: Libya. The story of Libya brought shame upon the United States of America, which reneged on a deal it had struck with Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, once one of the Near East region's most obstreperous and violent anti-Western leaders.

The story begins in the late 1990s when Qaddafi, chafing at his country's international isolation and the economic sanctions imposed against it, opened discussions about normalizing relations with the West. Over the course of years-long negotiations, Qaddafi was made to understand that such an outcome would require two big concessions on his part. First, he had to come clean about Libya's role in the downing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988. This would include turning over to Western authorities those involved who were living under Libyan protection, as well as financial restitution for the families of victims. That was done, and UN sanctions were removed.

Second, Libya was told that if it wanted to rid itself of the more onerous U.S. sanctions and have normalized relations with the United States and the West, meaning acceptance in the community of nations, it would have to give up its efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear arms. As Flynt L. Leverett, a well-placed State Department official at the time, wrote in early 2004, "Libya was willing to deal because of credible diplomatic representations by the United States over the years, which convinced the Libyans that doing so was critical to achieving their strategic and domestic goals." Qaddafi gave up his weapons program, ceased his terrorist activities against America and the West, and essentially removed himself from the civilizational clash that ensued after the 9/11 attacks on America. In return, the United States halted sanctions and vowed to leave Libya alone during good behavior.

Then, when Qaddafi came under attack in his own country during the so-called Arab Spring of anti-government fervor in several Middle East nations, the United States promptly joined the effort to unseat him, which inevitably led to his killing, as anyone of sound mind could have predicted.

One remarkable aspect of this was how little any Americans seemed to care about their country entering into an agreement with a foreign leader and then reneging on it. Indeed, *New York Times* reporter David E. Sanger wrote a piece ^[1] in March 2011 extolling America's Libyan deal as having paved the way for the United States to destroy the Qaddafi regime. He quoted a senior administration official named Robert Joseph, who helped craft the Libyan deal, as saying that no one could say with assurance how far Qaddafi's weapons program would have progressed absent the deal, but "there is no question he would have used whatever he felt necessary to stay in

power.” In other words, the deal was salutary because it allowed America to upend Qaddafi contrary to the terms of the deal. That represents a distinctive diplomatic philosophy.

One distinctive commentator at the time who went against the grain of self-congratulations was Paul Pillar, former intelligence operative and now a fellow at Georgetown. He wrote that such actions carry inevitable consequences. He noted the statement of a North Korean official who suggested the Western powers had been playing a big game of bait and switch. “The Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson,” the official said, adding that North Korea will not make Qaddafi’s mistake and would hold on to every weapon it had.

Indeed, as Pillar wrote back then ^[2], “The Iraq War, coupled with U.S. policy toward North Korea itself, taught the lesson that if you’re thinking of getting involved with nuclear weapons, go full steam ahead so you can get at least one bomb in the basement as a deterrent before the United States or someone else uses military force to get rid of you.” Turning to another nation on the other side of the globe, Pillar added, “The rulers in Iran, being no dummies, are almost certainly drawing the same lessons. It will be very difficult, and will take much time and effort, to cause such lessons to be unlearned.”

Just so. That probably explains in part why it took so long, and so much arduous diplomacy, for the JCPOA agreement to come together, to get Iran to agree to even a temporary suspension of activity on behalf of unconventional weapons development. The rulers of Tehran had to be convinced that, if they lived up to the agreement, the other parties would as well.

The Iranians have lived up to it, according to every dispassionate expert on the matter. But now the American president threatens to step away from it. He uses a clever circum-maneuver, since any decertification he issues will trigger a 60-day period for Congress to decide whether to reimpose sanctions. Thus he kicks the final action to lawmakers. If they reimpose sanctions, the United States will be in default on the agreement, and the two countries will be in a stance of friction towards each other that could accelerate to a point of actual hostilities. If they don’t, then Trump’s action will be merely a gratuitous diplomatic insult.

But don’t forget America’s recent history of regime change promiscuity—upending rulers, or helping to do so, or trying to do so. The list includes Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine. That’s a lot of involvement in the affairs of other nations. And that history can’t give other nations much of a sense of any American forbearance in foreign affairs, particularly when coupled with Trump’s forthcoming decision to renege on the Iranian nuclear deal.