

# *Trump's Iran Reversal Raises Allies' Doubts Over His Tactics, and U.S. Power*

By **Patrick Kingsley**

June 23, 2019

BERLIN — Some framed it as another empty threat from a leader whose bark is consistently worse than his bite. Some saw a method to the perceived madness — a potentially shrewd act of brinkmanship.

And others considered it simply the latest act of an America that, long before President Trump, has often oscillated from isolation to intervention, and back.

Mr. Trump's order to attack Iran on Thursday in retaliation for its downing of a spy drone, and his abrupt reversal minutes before American forces carried it out, have intensified global doubts about the president's judgment and the power wielded by the United States.

The appearance of erratic decision-making “adds to the confusion of his allies and adversaries,” said Nigel Sheinwald, a former British ambassador to Washington who once conducted hostage negotiations with the Iranian government.

But it is also part of “a continuing picture of American uncertainty about the use of power,” Mr. Sheinwald said. “It is the leitmotif that runs throughout U.S. history.”

If leaders of Britain, France and Germany — America's main European allies — saw Mr. Trump's aborted attack as a point of no return for his own reputation, or for the United States' global standing, they did their best to hide it.

Since Thursday night, the public response of Western politicians has been largely cautious, sometimes confused — but only implicitly critical.



Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, right, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' aerospace division, speaking to the news media next to debris from a downed American drone on Friday.

Meghdad Madadi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

President Emmanuel Macron of France, who earlier in the week had sent an envoy to negotiate with Iran, on Friday invited both the United States and Iran “to reason, to de-escalation and now to discussion.”

On Saturday, the British government called for dialogue and sent a junior minister to Tehran to meet with Iranian officials. A spokeswoman for the European Union talked of the need for de-escalation by “exclusively diplomatic routes.”

There was even praise for Mr. Trump’s decision to back out of an airstrike that others might have been too proud to cancel.

“Trump’s rather unconventional decision-making style may have saved the day,” said Crispin Blunt, a senior Conservative lawmaker in Britain who is a former head of Parliament’s foreign affairs committee.

“I suspect other presidents, having approved the mission, would not have aborted for fear of having to give a public explanation that plainly suggests inadequate consideration in the first place,” added Mr. Blunt, who — like the British government itself — opposes Mr. Trump’s policy on Iran. “The strength of the war lobby with a line to him should not be underestimated, and I’m relieved he faced them down, if dangerously late in the day.”

Explicit condemnation came mostly from analysts and lawmakers without formal positions in government.

“What President Trump says or does is certainly what he thinks is good for the United States,” said Mireille Clapot, the vice president of the French Parliament’s foreign affairs committee. “I cannot certify it’s good for the entire world.”

Thomas Gomart, the president of the French Institute of International Relations, a Paris-based research group, said that “what’s going on now is decisive in terms of the evolution of American leadership.”



Foreign ministers from the signatories to the Iran nuclear deal at the United Nations building in Vienna when the pact was agreed in July 2015. Leonhard Foeger/Reuters

“The consequences are incalculable,” Mr. Gomart added. “They give the impression of a loss of control that is tied to President Trump and his entourage.”

But more widely, Mr. Trump’s about-face was portrayed as the continuation of a familiar pattern of unreliable behavior.

“It fits a pattern of unpredictability, but I think the rest of the world will be pleased and surprised by this decision,” said a senior European diplomat involved in negotiations with Iran. “On this particular issue, I think his decision was a very good one.”

The president formally broke with the United States' European allies — and with previous American policy — on the question of Iranian containment in May 2018, when his administration pulled out of a deal with Iran.

The deal was made in 2015 in coordination with Britain, France, Germany, the European Union, Russia and China, and lifted sanctions on Tehran in exchange for a promise from the Iranian government to limit its nuclear ambitions.

Mr. Trump and his advisers said the deal did not do enough to curb Iranian influence in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

Relations between Iran and the United States unraveled further last month when Mr. Trump imposed restrictions aimed at stopping Iranian oil exports. This prompted Iran to announce that it would stop honoring some provisions of the nuclear accord.

Then last week, Iran downed an unmanned American drone. And the United States government also blamed Iran for recent damage to six oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, accusations that Iran denied.





Fire and smoke billowing from one of the tankers damaged in the Gulf of Oman this month, for which the United States blamed Iran. ISNA, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Despite repeated calls for dialogue from other Western governments, and a visit to Tehran by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, the two sides could not agree to negotiations, leading to ever louder hints of war from the White House.

Yet Mr. Trump's tactical somersault on Thursday night was nevertheless seen in some European capitals as predictable in its unpredictability. Despite talking an aggressive game on Iran, the president has also long expressed doubt about embarking on a new and expensive conflict.

"The last 48 hours have reminded us that he doesn't want to get the U.S. sucked into another Middle Eastern war," the senior European diplomat said.

If Mr. Trump's sudden de-escalation nevertheless surprised those who had taken his threats seriously, it was greeted with a shrug among South Koreans. They have seen this act before.

In 2017, Mr. Trump threatened North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, with "fire and fury like the world has never seen" if it endangered the United States. But Mr. Trump ultimately made a dramatic shift to diplomacy, going so far as to say that he and North Korean leader were "in love."

In Seoul this weekend, officials and analysts said they had grown inured to the back flips in Mr. Trump's attitude to Korean geopolitics.

There were no official reactions from the South Korean government, nor newspaper editorials or commentaries. Foreign news pages were instead dominated by President Xi Jinping of China's visit to North Korea.

In Israel, where the government has long advocated a tougher stance on Iran, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised Mr. Trump's decision to pull out of the nuclear accord and place tougher sanctions on Iran. Regarding the aborted strike, two former Israeli generals even praised Mr. Trump for a change of heart that they said could prove strategically shrewd.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, right, and President Trump's national security adviser, John R. Bolton, in Jerusalem on Sunday. Pool photo by Tsafrir Abayov

“Israel understands very well that the U.S. is not eager to go for another war in the Middle East,” said Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence and a onetime military attaché in Washington. “If Trump wants to have a bit more legitimacy and show that he is not rushing to war, I don’t see it as a negative.”

But the real test of Mr. Trump’s decision will be in the Iranian response, Mr. Yadlin said.



“My concern is that the Iranians will interpret it as much more reluctance from the Americans to act — and they may cross more red lines as a result,” he said.

In Britain, the aborted strike revealed as much about Britain's weakened influence on American policy as it did about American unpredictability, said Mr. Blunt, the senior Conservative lawmaker.

Distracted by domestic disagreements over Brexit, and by a race to replace the lame-duck prime minister, Theresa May, the British government currently has a reduced ability to influence international crises.

“It's an indication of how irrelevant we are, or appear to be, to U.S. decision-making that this course of action got so far down the runway (literally) in the first place,” Mr. Blunt said in a text message.

Perhaps counterintuitively, analysts in China said the country's government might also have felt somewhat relieved by Mr. Trump's reversal — but for less flattering reasons.

Mr. Trump wants European governments to block China's involvement in the rollout of new mobile-phone technology in Europe by the Chinese technology giant Huawei, citing security risks. But his unreliability over Iran might reinforce distrust of the American insistence on keeping Huawei out of Europe, said Yan Xuetong, the dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

“The uncertainty about Trump means no one trusts him, and it means China will benefit,” Mr. Yan said. “The U.S. will no longer be able to get the allies to make collective action against China.”

Reporting was contributed by Adam Nossiter and Aurelien Breeden from Paris; Choe Sang-Hun from Seoul, South Korea; Jane Perlez from Beijing; Jason Horowitz from Rome; David M. Halbfinger from Jerusalem; Katrin Bennhold and Christopher F. Schuetze from Berlin; Dan Bilefsky from Montreal; and Makiko Inoue from

Tokyo.

A version of this article appears in print on June 23, 2019, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: U.S. Reversal On Iran Strike Confuses Allies

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