

The Risks of Maximising Pressure on Iran

By Ali Vaez

Abstract

The dangerous standoff between the US and Iran is akin to watching what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. Left to their own devices, Washington and Tehran have placed themselves on a collision course — unless third-party mediation can bring them to the negotiation table and avert a war that both sides claim they do not seek.

More than a century after World War I, the Middle East is experiencing its own 1914 moment. Then, the assassin's bullet that killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria put the entire European continent on fire. Today, a single attack by rocket, drone or limpet mine could set off a military escalation between the United States and Iran and their respective regional allies and proxies that could prove impossible to contain. Left to their own devices — and determined not to lose face amid the legacy of 40 years of enmity — Washington and Tehran have placed themselves on a collision course. In the absence of direct communication channels, third-party mediation seems the most likely avenue to avert a war that both sides claim they do not seek. Now is the time for international and regional diplomacy to escalate in turn: to persuade the US and Iran to step back from the brink and point the way toward a regional process of communication and dialogue that might set the stage for a mutual accommodation.

The dangerous standoff between the US and Iran calls to mind the question of what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. The force is the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, which seems willing to stop at nothing — whether it be sanctioning Iran's senior political and military leadership or forcing the country's oil exports down to zero — to bring Tehran to its knees. The object is Iran's resolve not to yield but to resist — whether by restarting its nuclear program or targeting the US and its regional allies. The increasingly likely result is a military confrontation, a predictable scenario since the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018.

The contours of a future conflict are already apparent. Iran has warned that it will gradually accelerate its breaches of the nuclear agreement if unilateral US sanctions continue to deny it the economic dividends promised by the deal and instead drive the Iranian economy into the ground. Should Tehran act on its threat, the accord will unravel, triggering broader international sanctions and raising the possibility of US and/or Israeli military strikes against a nuclear programme that is currently contained. The more immediate risk, underscored by a spate of limited military incidents since early May, is that the standoff will draw regional actors, aligned with either side, into an escalatory spiral.

Iraq, long an arena of US-Iran competition, may increasingly find itself a battleground, even as its central government desperately tries not to be dragged into a fight it does not consider its own. In Yemen, Houthi cross-border strikes on Saudi Arabia or attacks on Red Sea traffic could start an escalatory cycle that draws in the US. In the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, a key energy chokepoint, further incidents could bring military intervention aimed at protecting the oil trade and, thus, the world economy. In Syria, a cat-and-mouse game between Iran and Israel could spin out of control and undo the mutual deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah that has kept the Israel-Lebanon border quiet since 2006.

The best hope for lessening tensions may well lie in third-party mediation. President Emmanuel Macron of France seemed to seize the moment in July when he sent a senior emissary to Tehran and engaged his Iranian and US counterparts personally in an effort to persuade both sides to pull back from the brink. Successful mediation would be no mean feat, given the two adversaries' accumulated hostility and what, for now, appear to be incompatible objectives: Tehran, deeming surrender to maximum pressure more dangerous than suffering from sanctions, seeks a loosening of restrictions on its oil exports and repatriation of revenues in return for making symbolic adjustments to the nuclear deal and showing restraint in the region. For its part, Washington remains loath to loosen the noose of sanctions it believes are working absent significant concessions from Iran on its nuclear, missile and regional policies.

A possible first step toward de-escalation might be a mutual defusing of tensions. The US would agree to partially reinstate its sanctions waivers regarding Iranian oil exports (which have caused Tehran the most damage) and in return, Tehran would resume full compliance with the nuclear agreement and refrain from endangering shipping in the Gulf. Negotiators could also make progress toward the release of at least some of the dual nationals Iran has imprisoned on dubious charges. In other words, the parties could revert to an enhanced version of the pre-May 2019 status quo, with a commitment to resume broader negotiations in a format to be determined. Such a freeze would not bring peace and stability to the Middle East, but it could at least prevent one scenario the world now faces: an all-out war triggered by a lighted match tossed carelessly onto the region's accumulated tinder.

About the Author

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