

First Session: US Actions and Consequences

The US & Iran: On a Collision Course?

By Tan Teen Li

In the first session of the US & Iran: On a Collision Course? conference, two panellists discussed the goals of US policy towards Iran and whether “maximum pressure” would change Iranian behaviour.

Mr Karim Sadjadpour, senior fellow, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

There are three prongs to the US’ Iran policy, said Mr Sadjadpour. Firstly, President Donald Trump’s Iran policy is characterised by “belligerence coupled with incoherence”. Secondly, Mr Trump has by his side National Security Adviser John Bolton, an advocate of military strikes and regime change in Iran. Finally, there is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who tries to reconcile President Trump’s “impulse” with John Bolton’s “strategy”.

Despite the terrible consequences of US sanctions on the Iranian population, Mr Sadjadpour believes Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei now faces a dilemma — being more conciliatory in order to reverse Iran’s economic deterioration might bolster the claim by some in the US administration that “maximum pressure” works.

On top of external pressure, he also suggested that Iran has, above all, been hindered by internal challenges. The Islamic Republic has prioritised revolutionary ideology over national interest, which leaves its potential to become a global economic player unfulfilled.

Dr Michael Singh, managing director and senior fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The United States’ withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was, in essence, an extension of bipartisan domestic debate, pointed out Dr Singh.

The Republicans were the strongest and most vocal critics of the JCPOA, also known as the Iran nuclear deal. Firstly, they charged that it did not restrict Iran’s production of nuclear weapons. Secondly, it was not comprehensive and did not sufficiently address US concerns. Thirdly, it was a temporary measure. Dr Singh said that it thus came as no surprise that when a Republican president came to power, he repudiated JCPOA.

President Trump was motivated by both politics and substance, and conditions conducive to a better deal, he added. Moreover, the “maximum pressure” approach serves the objectives of those wishing to bargain for a better deal and those wishing to implement regime change in Iran. So both camps within the US administration agreed on it. The strategy falls into the standard playbook of the US, and has been employed by the US towards North Korea and China, amongst other countries.

The US finds “maximum pressure” attractive because it limits direct involvement, he elaborated. However, he also laid out two risks. The first is that of military conflict. Knowing that

President Trump does not seek war, Iran has an incentive to escalate the situation. The second risk is that of ineffectiveness. Iran may choose to escalate its nuclear activities while waiting out the tensions.

Dr Singh believes that for US policy towards Iran to succeed, it needs to rely on both diplomacy and deterrence, employ multilateralism, and be sustainable.