

‘We’re not on the verge of war’: Armitage says of rising US and Iran tensions

Keynote Speech by the Honourable Richard L Armitage, former US deputy secretary of state

By Lim Wei Chean

Take a deep breath — the United States and Iran are not on the verge of war. That, in short, was the message former US Deputy Secretary of State Richard L Armitage had for the audience at a conference on America-Iran tensions in the Persian Gulf, which was held at the Orchard Hotel on 13 August.

Mr Armitage, the first of three keynote speakers at the conference organised by National University of Singapore’s Middle East Institute, called on all parties to “calm down”, adding that the US and Iran had been on a collision course since 1953. However, both sides have been able to restrain themselves and overcome all the problems.

The current situation is similar, he said. US President Donald Trump and American military commanders do not want a war, and the Pentagon leadership will do what is needed to keep the peace.

Nonetheless, Mr Armitage was highly critical of the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which is commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal.

There were two reasons for the withdrawal, he said. The first is that the deal was negotiated by Mr Trump’s predecessor, Mr Barack Obama. “Anything Mr Obama touches, the President cannot stand,” Mr Armitage said.

The second reason is that the United States has, “to some extent, sub-contracted its Middle East policy to Saudi Arabia”. Elaborating on this, he said it was a constant refrain in Saudi Arabia that the US “must do something” about Iran.

Calling Mr Trump a “deal-breaker, not a deal-maker”, he said the withdrawal was ironic, given that the President had professed that he did not want nuclear bombs — the very reason for the JCPOA.

“The US had very little to do in the JCPOA, we just had to lift sanctions. Iran, on the other hand, had several difficult things to do to live up to the bargain,” he said.

Although he said he supported the nuclear deal, Mr Armitage agreed that it was a flawed one. But, he added: “Diplomacy is not getting all your goals at the same time ... an imperfect deal is better than no agreement.”

He cautioned however, that US-Iran tensions should not be viewed without the context of other issues in the Middle East. Iraq, Yemen, Syria — all these issues emanate from the Arabian side of the Gulf, and have contributed to the tensions in the Strait, he said.

The US does have grievances with Iran, he said. These include its unrelenting hostility towards the US and Israel, its ability to exploit fissures in the Arab world, and terrorism, among others. But, he said: “Any and all of these can be worked on by clear-minded, clear-thinking individuals”.

For its part, the US should be smarter about how it deals with these issues. Instead of blaming an entire nation, Washington should call out those it has problems with, whether it is an individual or the country’s leadership, Mr Armitage said.

The US should also take time to reflect on what its next step is. “What’s the end game? No one has thought it through,” he said. Mr Trump, he said, has gone down a path that he does not know how to back away from.

Ending his speech with a call to action, he said: “I think all of us have a responsibility here, whether you’re Singaporean, US, Iranian, we all have an opportunity to make sure that we seize opportunities to make sure that this whole situation ends not with a bang, but with a whimper.”