

# Second Session: The View from Iran

## The US & Iran: On a Collision Course?

By Joshua Ong

*In the second session of The US & Iran: On a Collision Course? conference, three panellists discussed the domestic political situation in Iran as well as the probability of regime change.*

### Mr Ali Vaez, Iran project director, Crisis Group

Iran's initial strategy towards the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Cooperative Plan of Action (JCPOA) was one of patience — a hope that US sanctions would be neutralised without the backing of the international community, said Mr Vaez. This patience also extended to the realm of military action.

However, it did not last due to the worsening economic situation in Iran, caused by the effective economic sanctions placed by the Trump administration on the Islamic Republic's main export, oil. Therefore, Iran decided to push back by breaking JCPOA commitments, but in a manner that could be reversed easily. Mr Vaez added that Tehran's fear of the long-term impact of US sanctions and belief that its strategy of pushing back was succeeding would likely see it continuing on this path.

Still, he said, a clash is “not inevitable”, as there are ways to control and de-escalate the tensions. Due to the level of mistrust on both sides, a “grand bargain” is not likely. However, a no-deal situation is also not sustainable, given the level of friction and escalation that both sides have locked into.

Given that Iran signed the JCPOA with former President Barack Obama in the final 1½ years of his administration, he does not think a new deal with Mr Donald Trump, who is similarly close to the end of his first term in office, is likely. Mr Vaez said the best, but not most likely scenario, would be for some kind of tactical mutual freeze of the cycle of escalation through mediation.

### Dr Julia Roknifard, director of Foreign Policy, EMIR Research, Kuala Lumpur

Drawing attention to political pressure against the Islamic Republic, Dr Roknifard said US actions, such as designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group, banning Iranian diplomats and, most prominently, sanctioning Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, have resulted in an erosion of the political borders between reformists and hardliners within the country.

The reformists face public pressure at home as JCPOA failed to deliver the promised economic benefits. Worse, the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the deal led them to lose faith in negotiations with the US. This resulted in some reformists favouring a more hardline approach.

In fact, Dr Roknifard added, America's “maximum pressure” campaign is unlikely to bring about regime change — Tehran is likely to continue pushing back instead. Regime change is also unlikely because of the lack of a shared ideology within the opposition ranks against the current regime. Furthermore, the bitter memory of the Islamic Revolution, which failed to live up to Iranians' expectations, serves to dissuade revolutionary tendencies.

## **Mr Kevjn Lim, PhD candidate, School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs, Tel Aviv University**

Even though Tehran appears to be moving towards a more hardline approach with the blurring of political boundaries between the hardliners and reformists, Mr Lim was quick to point out that reformists such as President Hassan Rouhani are still open to negotiations with the US, albeit with rigid demands such as the removal of re-imposed sanctions prior to negotiations taking place.

What Mr Lim suggests could happen is that Tehran would continue to push back through non-kinetic forms, such as cyber-based attacks against financial and government institutions.

At the same time, he believes tensions between the US and Iran would continue to escalate as both states act reactively to the other's provocations, highlighting how President Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" is unlikely to bring about the desired results in the near future.