

# De-escalating U.S-Iran Standoff

By

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## Purpose

Middle East remains a powder keg awaiting bigger explosion because all stakeholders are trying to stabilize the region while hedging their bets and wielding matchsticks. Tehran is seen central to the present crisis and a war with the U.S. remains imminent. This situation has apparently evolved to this point due to alleged military dimension of Iran's nuclear program, which is considered as a major road block to a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East, and a potential threat to Iran's neighborhood.

The current crisis has geostrategic roots that are too fundamental to be easily resolved by the multiple stakeholders. The nuclear dimension of the imbroglio is just a manifestation of a deeper malady. Any crisis involving Tehran can affect South Asian security and a stable environment should be everyone's interest. This assessment offers various dimensions of the issue and a few proactive options for ending the endemic imbroglio.

## Backdrop

The tale of Iran is lengthy and deep rooted in the history of power relations and state-to-state diplomatic expedencies. In 1967, the U.S. built the first nuclear facility – Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) – once their bilateral relations were good. From being among the original signatories of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on July 1, 1968, Iran has transformed into one of the major U.S. adversaries today. The U.S. National Defense Strategy 2018 mentions that “in the Middle East, Iran is competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a growing network of proxies, and its missile program to achieve its objectives.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2015, a 159-page Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was negotiated between Iran and P5+1 – the five permanent members of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Germany. The JCPOA was enshrined in a UNSC resolution that fused it into international law and was unanimously endorsed by the 15 members of the Council. In order to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (NWs), it has been placed under several layers of UN Security

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Council's (UNSC) approvals.<sup>2</sup> Through the deal, Iran accepted monitoring of its nuclear program under the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), while it was reconnected to global markets as all nuclear-based sanctions were lifted in January 2016. The accord capped Iran's stock of low-enriched uranium at 300 kg, 3.67 percent, i.e. much below the weapons-grade level of nearly 90 percent.

The current impasse is embedded in the American decision of withdrawing out of JCPOA in May 2018. President Trump signed an executive order reimposing sanctions on any foreign company that continued doing business with Iran and mentioned Israeli Premier Netanyahu's "new and conclusive proof" of Iran's violations of the agreement, which according to a report published by *The Guardian*, mainly comprised of documents already made public by the IAEA in 2011.

The U.S. completely re-imposed sanctions on Iran on November 5, 2018, that had been waived or lifted under the JCPOA. Being called the "toughest" of all, these sanctions will seriously target critical sectors of Iran's economy such as the energy, shipping and building, and financial sectors.<sup>3</sup> Several bans like the ones on doing business with Iranian companies, all types of imports originated in Iran, and on selling aircraft as well as repair parts were already intact. Despite being an oil rich country, Iran's economy has been adversely affected due to sanctions.

Iran claimed that the American sanctions violated a bilateral treaty of 1955 that regulated trade and commerce between the two countries, and took the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in August, 2018. Finding its case as "credible and urgent," the ICJ ordered the U.S. to "remove, by means of its choosing, any impediments arising from the measures announced on May 8," and allowed medicines, foodstuff, medical devices, and agricultural goods into Iran along with equipment necessary for the safety of civil aviation. The decision was said to be a first when ICJ ruled on an "economic warfare" case. The U.S. however terminated the 1955 Treaty of Amity with Iran, following the ICJ ruling.<sup>4</sup>

## **Current Situation**

A possible trajectory of all these political developments remained quite evident all through. Finally, during April and May 2019, President Trump threatened war. Termed as "one of the most direct threats yet to Tehran," the President's tweet on May 19 warned, "if Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran, [and it should] never threaten the United States

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<sup>2</sup> The UNSC Resolution 2231, passed on July 20, 2015, endorsed JCPOA and set out a process and schedule of inspection alongside preparations for removal of UN sanctions against Iran.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Iran Sanctions*, <https://www.treasury.gov/resourcecenter/sanctions/programs/pages/iran.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> UN News, *Top UN judicial body orders US to ease Iran sanctions*, October 3, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022142>.

again!" and re-imposed severe economic sanctions on Iran on June 7, 2019. His advisors on the issue attracted considerable limelight, mostly for their hawkish Iran policy. The National Security Advisor, John Bolton, was one of them, given his previous role in President George Bush administration's decision of going to Iraq.

In his 2015 article published in *The New York Times*, Bolton had proposed "stopping Iran's bomb by bombing Iran." He criticized President Obama for "fostering a nuclear Iran," and never believed in claims of Iran halting its nuclear weapons program as acknowledged in the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate. While keeping a soft hand on Israel's NWs, which in his opinion had "not triggered an arms race," as its "nukes were intended as a deterrent, not as an offensive measure," he viewed Iran as "a different story" whose plans and progress in plutonium processing and uranium enrichment were ambitious and were further empowered by Obama's policy.

Bolton posited that "Iran will not negotiate away its nuclear program. Nor will sanctions block its building a broad and deep weapons infrastructure. The inconvenient truth is that only military action like Israel's 1981 attack on Saddam Hussein's Osirak reactor in Iraq or its 2007 destruction of a Syrian reactor, designed and built by North Korea, can accomplish what is required." He further persuaded that "time is terribly short, but a strike can still succeed."

On the other hand, there exists a difference of opinion within experts' groups. For instance, Senator Mitt Romney and David Petraeus have ruled out possibilities of war, once the former reminds of Trump's position of abstaining from previous mistakes such as George Bush's decision of going into Iraq.

Alongside, there also emerged signs indicating lesser prospects of war. During his three-day visit to UK in the first week of June, President Trump wisely signaled that he was not seeking a military confrontation with Iran and aimed to have direct talks to negotiate and broaden the nuclear deal. The U.S. officials further claimed that the policy of sending extra troops and an aircraft carrier to the region was used as a deterrent.

Likewise, on June 2, 2019, Bolton said that Washington is willing to hold talks with Iran without any pre-conditions. This indicated that the U.S. had climbed down from its demand that Iran meet the 12 points that were previously laid out as pre-conditions for talks.<sup>5</sup>

In an effort to de-escalate situation, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei offered in a statement issued on May 29, 2019, that Iran was open to talks with Europe but not on defense issues. The same day, President Hassan Rouhani, who had called it a "psychological war" last year, remarked that talks with the U.S. were possible only if the sanctioned were lifted, and even then, certain topics will not be touched upon.

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<sup>5</sup> For the 12 conditions set by the U.S., read "Mike Pompeo speech: What are the 12 demands given to Iran," *Aljazeera*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/mike-pompeo-speech-12-demands-iran-180521151737787.html>.

The recently concluded special Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) Summit in Mecca carried a stern message for Iran and there was clear sign of division in the Muslim world over how to deal with Tehran. For instance, Qatar said that it was not consulted before finalizing the communiqué of the OIC Summit, while its foreign minister questioned the hardline statements on Iran made at the Summit. Middle East's political cohesion has come under increasing stress due to U.S-Iran relations.

The experts however see small incidents growing into a "shadow war" with Iran. Three days after the attacks on oil tankers on June 13 in the Gulf of Oman, the U.S. announced deployment of 1,000 more troops to the Middle East. The Pentagon has reportedly a plan lined up to deploy about 6,000 additional troops. The then Acting U.S. Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan reinforced his country's strong stance on the issue that "the recent Iranian attacks validated the reliable, credible intelligence [they] have received on hostile behavior by Iranian forces and their proxy groups that threaten U.S. personnel and interests across the region." The move, he says, is to ensure the safety and welfare of military personnel.

### **Through the Geopolitical Prism**

Above and beyond its stalemate with the U.S., Iran has enjoyed cordial relations with Russia, China and also India, mainly due to its leading export commodity, the oil. The massive energy supplies and demands bring Iran very close to Russia and China, which enjoy a unique position in the region with regard to their emerging role in geopolitics through initiatives such as the SCO, BRICS, EEU, and BRI. Moscow and Beijing are keeping a close eye over all these developments in the Middle East. They have collectively warned the U.S. over sending more troops to the Gulf, saying that the latter's attempt was "pumping up tensions," and could lead to opening a "Pandora's box" in the Middle East. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters in Beijing that "in particular, the U.S. should change its practice of extreme pressure," and urged Iran to "make prudent decisions" and not to "abandon" the JCPOA "so easily."

*Aljazeera* quoted Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov's remarks that his country has repeatedly warned the U.S. and its regional allies about the "unthinking and reckless pumping up of tensions in an explosive region." He further noticed that "what we are seeing are unending and sustained U.S. attempts to crank up political, psychological, economic and, yes, military pressure on Iran in quite a provocative way. They [the actions] cannot be assessed as anything but a conscious course to provoke war."

Other members of the JCPOA have so far shown patience over the issue of Iran, and emphasized their "continuing commitment" to the deal. The Foreign Minister of Germany opined that the video of attacks on oil tankers was "not enough" an evidence against Iran while the Norwegian government and the EU cautioned against any escalation to counter

Iran, and urged restraint. The U.S. Democratic presidential hopefuls presumed that President Trump either sought a war or was showing an “irresponsible behavior.”

### **Why Iran?**

Iran holds a unique status in the region and waging a war against it is likely to be highly consequential. The cost would outweigh the perceived benefits. Formerly an empire that stretched from Eastern Mediterranean in Europe to the Hindu Kush in Asia, Iran still enjoys great influence at least in its periphery. Endowed with large hydrocarbon reserves, the country has fourth-largest oil reserves and largest natural gas reserves in the world.

Not only that, Tehran retains the ability to block Strait of Hormuz, which is one of the nine major choke points through which world oil is shipped. The geographical terrain also stays on Iran’s side. It will be a Herculean task for any attacker to manage war with Iran, that is abundant in deserts in the Northeast and is enclosed by rough mountains such as Alborz in the North along the Caspian Sea, and Zagros blocking easy access to the Persian Gulf in the South.

Owing to its geostrategic location and its plentiful resources, major powers have competed for more than a century to control and contain Iran. Except close alliance with the U.S. during King Pehlevi’s regime, Iran has refused to play a second fiddle to any external player. Iran’s pride as a Persian civilization came to the fore after the 1979 revolution, placing it at odds with some of the Middle Eastern heavy-weights. Owing to these reasons no major power would be interested in seeing an already strong Iran possess nuclear weapons and exercise more geo-economic and geopolitical influence.

JCPOA is a mean to limit Iran’s nuclear program within peaceful-use dimensions and the economic sanctions an important tool in the kit to force it to oblige. A Russia-China-Iran triangular relationship, if realized optimally, has a potential to envelope key global trade routes and resources. Stringent regulations over Iran not only make space for political controls but also for supervision on oil export and trade routes in the Western flank of the Indo-Pacific region – the pivot of U.S. contemporary strategic planning and known as Pentagon’s “priority theater.”

### **Pakistan’s Interests**

As close ally of both Saudi Arabia and Iran, this divisive situation places Pakistan in a tough spot. Pakistan has played the mediatory and balancer’s role and is trying to bridge the fault lines within the Islamic world. At the 2019 SCO Heads of State Conference in Astana, Prime Minister Imran Khan said that “the evolving situation in the Middle East and Gulf is a matter of grave concern. We join the SCO members in urging the parties to exercise restraint, take steps to deescalate the situation and find solutions through diplomatic means. We believe implementations of the JCPOA by all parties is essential for international and regional

stability. Likewise, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi asserted that the government is driven to strengthen trust and eliminate misunderstandings with Iran.

Peaceful borders are essential for an environment where Pakistan can focus on its economic growth. Pakistan lost its Eastern wing (now Bangladesh) to India-sponsored insurgency and its 2,912 km long border with India still remains volatile. New Delhi is creating troubles for Pakistan through Afghanistan and has nuclearized the Arabian Sea once it carried out first deterrence patrol in 2018 with its nuclear-armed submarine.

Pakistan and Iran have enjoyed deep cultural, economic and brotherly relations. However, full potential of these relations remains unrealized. Initiatives such as the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline are still not achieved given the strict sanctions regime and Indian reluctance. Pakistan and Iran are seized upon settling border mismanagement issues through negotiations and have been active on diplomatic fronts.

Cementing relations is in long-term strategic interest of both countries and quintessential for regional and global stability. Pakistan's relations with Iran are at times seen as something that could only be developed at the cost of Islamabad's ties with some Middle Eastern countries, which is not a pragmatic approach. Notwithstanding the competition between some Arab countries and Iran, Pakistan has exclusive relations with all these at their own merit. As in the past, Pakistan continues to play bridge's role amongst these estranged neighbors.

### **Pakistan's Role**

As a major power situated close to the Persian Gulf, Pakistan should continue to play its proactive role as a conduit in the Islamic world. Diplomacy should be pushed to the limits in assisting Saudi Arabia and Iran in building trust and confidence. Being rich in oil, culture and military power, both Riyadh and Tehran can be the anchors of peace and development in the Middle East.

Although Pakistan's diplomatic leverage with the U.S. has reduced in recent years mainly due to latter's tilt towards India, Islamabad should reassert with Washington that any outbreak of hostilities or war would be calamitous. In this regard, Islamabad could offer to hold a closed-door summit between the U.S., Iran and Saudi Arabia to broker a peace deal. Moreover, the U.S. can mull over holding Regional Peace Conference at a neutral venue, where neighboring states such as Pakistan and all possibly affected parties can join to realize collective win-wins.

On the basis of its key position in the region, cordial relations with Iran, and a fair record of sincere steps taken to bridge divides such as the U.S.-China rapprochement in the 1970s and the latest U.S.-Afghan dialogues, Islamabad can be engaged to work with signatories of JCPOA at upholding the deal, encouraging Iran not to violate its terms even though the U.S. has withdrawn from the agreement. This will be key to contain the volatile situation and rebuilding confidence between Tehran and Washington.

Pakistan must influence the Middle Eastern countries to faithfully negotiate a nuclear weapons free zone. Allowing one state to retain nuclear weapons and expecting other regional powers not to take suitable security measures is unrealistic. The regular calls at IAEA and NPT's review conferences for a Middle Eastern Nuclear Weapons Free Zone should be paid a serious heed. As a state party to the NPT, Iran has rights and obligations. As a matter of principle, Tehran cannot be unilaterally sanctioned and expected to constrain its nuclear program while a blind eye is turned towards Israel's unconstrained nuclear weapons program. Besides, North Korea was offered peace overtures by the U.S. despite potential threat of its nuclear ambition to two of the oldest American allies, Japan and South Korea. Similarly, an assumption that Iranian offensive capabilities and efforts to acquire NWs will pose threat to its neighborhood, does not provide justification for a war that would block key shipping lanes and devastate complete region, in the longer run, if not swiftly. Afghanistan is one fine example of futile warring strategies – the same region cannot sustain more. Therefore, for a greater good, Iran can be brought on the negotiating table, provided it also displays restraint and persistence.

## **Conclusion**

De-escalating Washington-Tehran standoff is quintessential for sustainable peace in the Middle East. A conflict can never resolve suspicions about the military dimensions of the Iranian nuclear program. The JCPOA and IAEA's safeguards mechanism are the leading measures to keep Iranian nuclear program peaceful. Likewise, pressurizing Israel to give up its nuclear weapons and allow negotiations to build a Middle East free of nuclear weapons is equally important. A balanced approach in dealing with the two regional heavyweights can reduce the possibility of crises and conflicts.

Diplomacy should not cease in such tenuous environment. Inter alia measures to avoid miscalculations, joint patrolling of the Persian Gulf under UN mandate could reduce the risks of accidental war. Likewise, as a major stakeholder in Middle East, the U.S. could take the initiative of a Middle East Peace Conference and invite extra regional states as well. The contemporary direction of geopolitics calls for having more empathy towards all states, bringing them on board rather than waging wars.

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