

Proving the hardliners in Tehran right

The cornerstone of U.S. President Donald Trump's West Asia policy, as it appears, is Israel's security, and the containment of Iran is a subplot of this approach. | Photo Credit: [Getty Images/iStockphoto](#)

America's Iran policy has come full circle with U.S. President Donald Trump's recent and open threats against Tehran — from historical hostility towards post-revolutionary Iran, to engagement during the Barack Obama era, it has now flipped back under the new administration.

The cornerstone of Mr. Trump's West Asia policy, as it appears, is Israel's security, and the containment of Iran is a subplot of this approach. America's traditional allies, Israel and the Sunni Arab world (read Saudi Arabia), were upset with Mr. Obama's outreach to Iran. His approach was focussed on restoring some balance in the region, which was shaken up by revolts in the Arab world and civil wars. The Obama administration could persuade Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions in return for the lifting of international sanctions. The 2015 nuclear deal with Iran had at least opened new avenues for both Washington and Tehran to reimagine their relations. Those avenues have been closed, at least for now.

Interestingly, it's not Iran which is responsible for the current escalation. Iran, as the UN atomic watchdog has certified, has been fully compliant with the terms of the nuclear accord. Other signatories of the deal, including the European Union, still stick with it. But Mr. Trump, who has called it the "worst deal ever" in American history, withdrew from it unilaterally this May, thereby manufacturing a new crisis. If the Obama administration had a nuanced view of Iran's leadership — it engaged with Iranian moderates such as President Hassan Rouhani — in the Trump team's perspective, there's no statesman-like figure within the Iranian government. A few hours before Mr. Trump warned Mr. Rouhani late on Sunday of unprecedented consequences if Iran threatened America, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo addressed a group of Iranian diaspora in California, and called the regime a kleptocracy akin to the mafia.

Why this U-turn? Besides his urge to undo every achievement of his immediate predecessor, Mr. Trump sees Iran through the establishment's foreign policy prism. He wants U.S. policy to swing back to America's traditional allies, Israel and the Sunni Arab world. They saw the nuclear deal and the subsequent opening up of the global economy for Iran as further helping Tehran consolidate its position in West Asia at a time when it's already spreading its influence through a Shia corridor. Mr. Trump doesn't have a broader regional stabilisation strategy. Rather, in his worldview, Iran has to be rolled back for the U.S.'s traditional allies to assert themselves even more strongly in the region. He dumped the nuclear deal not to force Iran to renegotiate it, but to provoke and isolate it instead.

The plan is to deny Iran the economic benefits of the nuclear deal, incite Iranians against the regime and scuttle Tehran's influence within Syria using Russian help. The Trump-Vladimir Putin agreement in Helsinki (which was pre-endorsed by Israel) to keep Iranian-trained militias away from the de facto border between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and sustain the relative freedom Israel enjoys within Syria to target Iranian assets at will suggest that Moscow is ready to cooperate to a certain extent.

Conventionally, Iran is not a great military force. It spends far less on defence than what Saudi Arabia, its regional rival, does. In 2016, Iran spent \$12.7 billion on defence, compared to Saudi Arabia's \$63.7 billion. Even in terms of percentage of GDP, Iran, at 3%, is behind even Jordan, which spent 4% in 2016, not to mention Saudi Arabia's 10% and Israel's 6%. It's to overcome this asymmetry in its conventional might that Iran has adopted a 'forward defence' doctrine,

empowering militias and proxies in other countries, such as the Hezbollah in Lebanon, mobilisation units in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. This upsets both Israel and the U.S. In the event of a war, Iran could activate these groups, unleashing havoc in its neighbourhood and targeting both American and Israeli soldiers. This doctrine draws from Iran's insecurity, not from some revolutionary zeal. Iran is basically a pragmatic power with revolutionary rhetoric. It's also a country that has a complex system with multiple power centres that requires a nuanced approach — a message completely lost on the Trump administration.

In the past, there have been different attempts, from both Iran and the U.S., for a rapprochement. In the last leg of the Bill Clinton presidency, the administration had ended a few of America's sanctions on Iran and made a commitment to take steps towards ending two decades of hostility. After the 9/11 attack, Iran offered cooperation to the U.S. in its war against the al-Qaeda and Afghanistan. But the George W. Bush administration reversed the Clinton-era policy and even ignored the goodwill Iran showed after the 9/11 attack; it clubbed Iran alongside North Korea and Iraq as part of an "axis of evil". Within a few months Iraq was invaded and there was talk of an imminent Iran invasion. The election, in 2005, of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, a hardliner, as Iran's President only made matters worse.

What's happening now is a repeat of history. After Mr. Rouhani became President in 2013, there was a climate for engagement, which Mr. Obama seized. Mr. Rouhani ignored or overcame the warnings and pressure tactics from hardliners within the regime and went ahead with negotiating the nuclear deal. In 2015, they made history. Mr Rouhani's bet was on the economic benefits the deal would bring, which helped him secure a re-election last year. It had both global and domestic ramifications. Globally, checks were introduced on Iran's nuclear ambitions without coercion. It was a triumph of diplomacy. Domestically, it strengthened the hands of the moderates in Iran's power dynamics. A U.S. administration with a rational policymaking machine would have appreciated the deal and consolidated it, by retaining the checks on Iran while sharpening the contradictions within Iran's power games. Continued normalisation should have been the key, which would have allowed both sides to address lingering concerns such as Iran's support for militias. It would also have set a global example for non-proliferation and new rules to check countries with nuclear ambitions.

Instead, the Trump administration has demolished all these possibilities with its irrational, if not ideological, hostility towards Iran. Look at these two examples: Iran is a country which had an active nuclear programme and came forward to negotiate a deal with world powers. But the deal has been jettisoned by the U.S., which is now threatening Iran with force. North Korea, on the other hand, went ahead and built nuclear bombs and missiles, threatened the U.S. and its allies and is living in a permanent state of war in East Asia. The U.S. President travelled to Singapore to meet the North Korean leader and is seeking an agreement with him, with assurances of economic benefits in return. In other words, the Trump administration is punishing the country which agreed to scuttle its nuclear programme and engaging with the country that built nuclear weapons. The U.S. President is proving Iran's hardliners right. How will they trust America again?

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