

The West Asia Stalemate

Here's why you should binge-watch *Damaged*, India's first show about female serial killer

Bobby Fischer used to say "all that matters on the chessboard is good moves". On the Iran deal, it looks like the players around the chessboard are short of good moves. Perhaps diplomacy is not like chess at all. But in both chess and diplomacy, what is needed is logic and precision while managing complexity. The Iran nuclear deal crisis is certainly complex, but there is no management in sight.

There is a deep disagreement between Europe and the United States over how to proceed with the 2015 Iran nuclear accord after Washington's exit in early May. Moreover, Europe is also in trouble dealing with Iran on the conditions of saving the deal. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, underlined the conditions the three European signatories must accept in order for Iran to stay in the agreement. First, they should pledge to avoid opening negotiations over Iran's ballistic missile programme and any actions taken in the Middle East. Second, European banks should "safeguard trade" with Tehran and continue buying Iranian oil. Third, the European powers should "stand up against US sanctions" and condemn the Trump administration for breaking a UN resolution that supports the deal.

On the optimistic side, the Europeans are struggling to provide the guarantees Tehran is seeking. Last week, at a meeting in Brussels, the French, British and German foreign ministers pledged to preserve the deal by trying to keep Iran's oil and investment flowing. However, the US sanctions suspended by the nuclear agreement have now been restored. Those who are already in business with Iran have three to six months to terminate their contracts and newcomers are prohibited from buying, selling or investing in Iran. Moreover, at least 80 per cent of international trade uses American currency, which makes it subject to US sanctions. As a result, the European banks, hit by heavy fines, have refused to resume business with Iran.

To meet the US sanctions, the Europeans are planning several strategies: First, to set up financial circuits that operate without the dollar. Second, to update the 1996 regulation blocking the effect of some US laws on European territory. Third, to adopt retaliatory measures against American companies in Europe. But none of these counter-measures can take place in a short period of time. European companies, therefore, have no other choice than to comply with the requirements imposed by Washington, while trying to maintain diplomatic ties with Iran.

As for the Trump administration and its allies, things seem very different. By reinstating the sanctions, the Americans, Saudis and Israelis are expecting to bring the Iranian regime to its knees, while rolling back Iran's gains in Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sanaa. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made clear that the US under Trump is preparing a coordinated regional strategy to cut Iran down to size.

Among the enemies of the Islamic Republic, one can also mention the Arab countries in the Persian Gulf area, who feel endangered by an empowered and aggressive Iran. Though countries like the UAE and Kuwait are not looking for an all-out war, they are ready to spend millions to encourage uprisings by Iran's ethnic minorities.

Containing Iran is a big task and the US and its allies know this better than anyone else. The Trump administration will certainly not participate in a new military adventure in the Middle East while it is planning to withdraw more than 2,000 US troops from Syria. However, Trump is determined to win the chess game against Iran.

Hopefully, for Trump and company, Khamenei is not a chess champion. The worst ending would be that neither Iran nor the US recognises that they have been checkmated, and simply knock the chessboard over. That is the end of diplomacy and the beginning of a military adventure which will be long and painful. After all, on the chessboard, megalomania and incompetence do not last long.

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