

CLOUDS OF WAR: ON U.S.'S 'MAXIMUM PRESSURE' TACTICS WITH IRAN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

U.S. President Donald [Trump's decision to pull back from air strikes on Iran](#), after the latter shot down an American drone near the Strait of Hormuz, was a rare moment of restraint amid otherwise escalating tensions between the two countries. The rationale behind the pull-back, according to Mr. Trump, was that he did not want to cause any loss of Iranian lives as no American lives were hurt by the Iranians. Clearly, Mr. Trump, who had campaigned against the costly wars of the U.S. overseas, does not seem to be in favour of launching an open conflict with Iran. A war with Iran could be prolonged and disastrous. Iran has ballistic missiles, proxy militias and a relatively vibrant navy. And the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-third of the world's seaborne oil shipments move, is within its range. Mr. Trump does not want to take a risk unless there are provocations from Iran targeting American lives. While this approach is better than that of Mr. Trump's National Security Adviser, John Bolton, who has threatened Iran with war several times, what the U.S. President overlooks is that the current state of tensions is a product of his "maximum pressure" tactic. A year ago Mr. Trump pulled the U.S. out of a nuclear deal with which Iran was fully compliant, setting off the escalation. His plan was to squeeze the Iranian economy and force Tehran back to the table to renegotiate the nuclear issue as well as Iran's missile programme and regional activism, for a "better deal". A year later, the U.S. and Iran are on the brink of a war.

Game of Chicken in the Gulf

The problem with Mr. Trump's "maximum pressure" approach is that he doesn't seem to have a plan between the sanctions-driven pressure tactics and a potential military conflict. Iran, on the other hand, is ready to take limited risks, as its actions such as the threat to breach the uranium enrichment limits set by the nuclear deal and the downing of the American drone suggest, to break the stranglehold of the sanctions. As a result, Mr. Trump has a situation where maximum pressure is not producing the desired result, and both countries are edging towards a war he doesn't want. This is a strategic dilemma that warrants a recalibration of policy. Mr. Trump's decision to call off the strike and the new red line he set for Iran could create an opportunity for such a recalibration. He could seize the moment to assure Iran that his primary goal is engagement, not conflict. What Iran wants the most is relief from the sanctions. Instead of sticking to a policy that has proved to be counter-productive and risky, Mr. Trump could offer Tehran some reprieve in return for its remaining in the nuclear deal, which could be followed up by a fresh diplomatic opening. If he continues with the pressure tactics, tensions will stay high, the Strait of Hormuz would be on the brink, and further provocations by either side, or even an accident, could trigger a full-scale conflict. That is a dangerous slope.

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