

GULF WARNING

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

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Tehran's decision to stop adhering to some of the provisions of the landmark 2015 nuclear agreement with the international community is a sharp reminder that dark clouds are gathering again in the Middle East. When US President Donald Trump pulled out last year from the nuclear deal negotiated by his predecessor, [Barack Obama](#), Iran had the option of walking out too. It did not. Tehran had hoped that the European powers as well as Russia and China might help limit the effects of America's renewed hostility. The Europeans had criticised the US withdrawal, affirmed that Iran was in compliance with the nuclear agreement, and offered to sustain economic engagement with Iran if Tehran stayed true to the deal. China and Russia had criticised the US decision as unilateral and arbitrary. But Iran's hopes of exploiting the cracks among the great powers are looking increasingly unreal as the actions of Europe, China and Russia have not matched their words. Iran's "strategic patience", in the words of President Hassan Rouhani, is wearing thin.

Meanwhile, the Trump Administration is ratcheting up pressure on Iran. Last month, it designated the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. This is the first time the US has labeled the entire wing of a country's armed force as "terrorist". Citing an unexplained threat from Iran, President Trump has despatched the USS [Abraham Lincoln](#) aircraft carrier strike group towards the Gulf. Meanwhile, US sanctions aimed at choking Iran's oil exports and squeezing its finances are beginning to bite. Tehran has no reason to believe that the Trump Administration is open to a reasonable compromise that might include a revised nuclear deal to address any real US concerns. It is no secret in Washington that regime change in Tehran is the Trump Administration's real goal.

Iran's partial withdrawal from the nuclear agreement is aimed at convincing Washington's allies in Europe as well as its competitors that time is running out to save the deal. Tehran is conscious of Europe's difficulty in effecting a real break with the US in the Middle East. It also knows that China and Russia have their own fish to fry with America and are unlikely to challenge the US on Iran. Worse still, Moscow and Beijing could use Tehran as a lever in their bargaining with the US. Iran might lack real friends among the major powers, but it has the capacity to bring the house down in the Middle East. With armed proxies across the region, Tehran is well placed to launch an asymmetric war against the US and its allies. Iran has also threatened to close the Straits of Hormuz — the strategic waterway that moves oil from inside the Gulf to the rest of the world — if its own oil sales remain blocked. With neither side ready to step back, the conflict between the US and Iran might well be headed for a costly showdown.

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