

OBAMA WAS RIGHT ABOUT IRAN

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

“President Trump cannot expect to be unpredictable and expect others to be predictable,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a speech at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute last month. He added, “Unpredictability will lead to mutual unpredictability, and unpredictability is chaotic.” He was perhaps summing up Iran’s response to the U.S. President’s “maximum pressure” policy.

When Mr. Trump unilaterally pulled the U.S. out of the Iran nuclear deal in May last year and subsequently reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic, his expectation was that the renewed pressure tactics would force Tehran to return to talks so that he could bargain for a tougher deal. But Iran was so unpredictable in its response that tensions have rocketed in West Asia over the past year. In the latest flare-up, two critical Saudi Arabian oil installations near the Gulf coast were attacked on September 14, which forced Riyadh to cut its oil production by 5.7 million barrels a day, almost half of its daily output. Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen have claimed responsibility for the attack, but the U.S. has blamed and threatened to strike Iran.

Whether Tehran was directly involved in it or not, the attack on Saturday is a demonstration of Iran’s capability and influence. Perhaps the most sophisticated and daunting of its kind in the Gulf in years, it proved Saudi Arabia’s air defence to be worthless even in protecting its most critical economic assets. If the attacks had originated from Iran, as the U.S. has claimed, it is a serious act of aggression. And if it had originated from Yemen, Iran’s continued support for the Houthis, which enables them to carry out a high-precision, cross-border attack such as this, would come under renewed focus. Either way, Iran cannot escape blame. Mr. Trump failed to foresee the magnitude of Iran’s resistance when he started putting “maximum pressure” on the country. He may have thought that since Iran had once caved in to American pressure and signed an agreement, it could do that again if the pressure was multiplied. But Iran acted exactly in the opposite way.

After Mr. Trump withdrew from the P5+1+European Union (EU) and Iran nuclear deal despite international certification that Iran was fully compliant with the terms of the agreement, Tehran waited for a year, perhaps hoping that the remaining signatories, including the EU, Russia and China, would fix the deal. But they remained more or less spectators when the U.S. continued to squeeze Iran’s economy with sanctions. By May this year, the U.S. had effectively cut off Iran’s oil industry, critical for its economy, from the global economy. Faced with a precarious economic situation and mounting U.S. pressure, Iran adopted a two-pronged strategy — start violating the nuclear deal step by step and target oil supplies through the Strait of Hormuz, a choke-point between the Gulf and the Arabian Sea and through which a third of crude oil exports transported on tankers pass.

Since May, a number of oil tankers, owned by Norway, Saudi Arabia and Japan, have come under attack near the Strait of Hormuz. In June, Iran shot down an American drone alleging that it had violated Iranian air space, taking tensions to the brink of a direct conflict with the U.S. In July, when an Iranian oil vessel was seized by British troops off Gibraltar, Iran captured a British oil vessel.

Iran did all these without inviting any major military response either from its regional rivals or from the U.S. On the other side, it got its vessel released by Gibraltar despite U.S. opposition. With Saturday’s attack on the Saudi oil installations, Iran has upped the ante further, sending a

message across the world that no oil facility or tanker is safe in the Gulf as long as Iran is not allowed to trade its oil.

It's a high-risk game. When Iran shot down the U.S. drone, Mr. Trump ordered a strike and called it off with only 10 minutes to spare. What Iran wants is sanctions relief. But it will not surrender totally to American demands for that as it thinks it was Washington that killed a hard-bargained, functioning nuclear deal. Also the U.S. pullout from the deal appears to have tilted the balance of power within the Iranian regime in favour of the hardliners. During the nuclear talks, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei backed Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif. But now, the security establishment appears to be calling the shots. They may be betting on Mr. Trump's reluctance to launch an open-ended war in the region. Or they are ready to risk even a direct conflict to break the stranglehold of status quo. Egypt had done that *vis-à-vis* Israel in 1973 by launching the Yom Kippur War because Egypt wanted the Sinai Peninsula back from Israel. Iran is either playing a lose-win game (where it is ready to bear with some setbacks for eventual gains) or a calamitous lose-lose game (where everyone could end up as losers in the event of a conflict).

U.S. President Obama's approach was different. Unlike Mr. Trump, he had a strategic goal — to deny Iran a nuclear bomb. He did not act unilaterally on sanctions. He consolidated international opinion, got both allies and partners on his side, imposed UN-recognised sanctions and then offered the olive branch of talks. It was a classic carrot-and-stick policy that works for rational actors. And Iran accepted the offer despite all the bad blood between the U.S. ("the great Satan") and the Islamic Republic, joined the talks and agreed to scuttle its nuclear programme in return for the removal of the international sanctions.

Mr. Obama could have acted unilaterally. He could have made greater demands from Iran such as ending its support for regional proxies. Or he could have threatened Tehran with military action. He did not do any of these primarily because he was aware of the risks involved in a direct conflict with Iran, a country that has always lived in insecurity and cultivated proxies across the region as part of its forward defence doctrine. He carefully avoided anything that could have strengthened the hands of the hard-liners within the complex Iranian regime. He also believed that for peace in West Asia, Saudi Arabia and Iran should dial down tensions between themselves.

He told *The Atlantic*, in 2016: "The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighbourhood and institute some sort of cold peace." The nuclear deal had set the state for a *détente* between the U.S. and Iran. Mr. Obama's successor should have followed that policy up — force Iran to restrain itself through engagement and promote a new equilibrium in the region. It is like Gotham in "The Dark Knight", to use a metaphor used by Mr. Obama in a different context, where the gang leaders have established some sort of order. But then comes the Joker and the city is on fire.

Mr. Trump may be reluctant to launch a new war. But he lacks a strategy to put this reluctance into a policy framework. He has surrounded himself within the administration with warmongers and neocons. He has failed to foresee how far Iran would go if it is pushed to a corner. His unilateral actions have destroyed even the fragile order that existed in the region before May 8, 2018, the day he killed the nuclear deal. If the Gulf is in flames today, Donald Trump is its arsonist.

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