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**Plan: Uncovering the Dynamics of the**

**US-Iran Conflict**

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## **Abstract**

*The US-Iran confrontation is one of the most hot-headed conflicts at present and has been quite dynamic over the course of time. The reasons for the conflict are varied and range from issues surrounding Iran's natural resources, the bigger question of nuclear weapons, ideological differences, etc. However, the unfortunate reality showcases that both the countries, despite numerous efforts, have not been able to establish sustained diplomatic channels. Consequently, the conflict has escalated over the years. The tensions reached their peak during the tenure of the Trump administration with the employment of the "maximum pressure" doctrine, the reasoning behind which was to create uncomfortable conditions for the economically fragile Iran, in order to bring it to the negotiation table. However, the doctrine had quite the opposite effect and led to the worsening of the relations between the two countries. Therefore, making conflict resolution a far-fetched dream. The coming of the Biden administration provides hope for a better future, but this needs to be analyzed by acknowledging the impact of various other players in the bilateral relations of the two countries.*

**Keywords:** *USA, Iran, confrontation, maximum pressure, nuclear weapons, Trump, resolution*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Tensions between Iran and the United States have escalated in recent days, with both countries manoeuvring military forces and warning the other against any sort of attack. The conflict between these two countries and the constant failure of diplomatic communication and international organizations in diffusing the tensions reiterates the Realist notion of states being the primary actors in the international arena. There are several underlying causes that fuel this conflict, points of contention have included control over Iran's oil reserves, US political interference in Tehran, Iran's desire for nuclear power and both countries' growing influence in the Middle East.

The conflict has not restricted itself to a particular arena but has consequently moulded itself to the technological revolutions taking place all around the world. The two countries have been at loggerheads in naval strikes, cyberattacks as carried out by the US and also the constant social media hatred spread by both countries towards each other (Barnes, J. E., & Gibbons-Neff, T, 2019 ). For example, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said that Washington had wasted billions of dollars on the air mission, and reiterated that while Tehran was not seeking conflict, it would defend itself. ( Johny. S, 2020)

It is true that diplomatic communication between Iran and the US hit rock bottom during the Trump administration. Tensions have soared since Trump walked out of the nuclear accord with Iran in 2018, and have escalated further in recent days, with the United States flying B-52 bombers over the Gulf and abruptly reversing a decision to bring home an aircraft carrier. Critics of Trump had accused his administration of looking for a reason to begin military confrontations with Iran in the final weeks of his presidency as a way to sabotage President-elect Joe Biden's plan to re-enter a nuclear deal with Iran. In a positive step, with the coming of Biden's administration, there is a possibility of easing of tensions between the two countries as Biden has made clear his intentions to re-negotiate a deal with Tehran, ending four years of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against the republic.

## **2.0 Research Hypothesis**

The US-Iran confrontation as of today stands to be one of the most hot-headed conflicts occurring in the international arena having wider implications not just for the two countries but also for the rest of the world. The conflict has no clear-cut aggressor or victim, both sides continue to highlight each other's vices and focus on their virtues, which is not surprising given the nature of the conflict. The American obsession with Iran is about oil and natural gas. If these two resources had been absent, it is hard to imagine such an intense American focus on the country from the time of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency-backed coup of Iran's elected government from 1953 to today. This should come as no surprise. Iran was an oil power back in 1953 and it remains one today.

To put it more briefly, the US has employed numerous strategies to gain control over Iran's oil reserves. This particularly involves the US intervention in the domestic politics of Iran to prevent the rise of a strong national leader. This tendency of the US continues to date and can be highlighted with the Trump administration's order of an airstrike that killed Iran's popular top general, Qasem Soleimani.

In the midst of the numerous underlying causes of conflict between Iran and the US, the most prominent has been regarding the question of nuclear weapons. Although ironically, it was the US in the year 1957 that provided Iran with the technology and the resources that eventually became the foundation for its controversial nuclear programme, which it began developing in the 1970s with support from the US. However, it was in 2003 when the US voiced its concerns against Iran's excessive Uranium enrichments which ultimately pushed the US to impose heavy sanctions on the country. Although a breakthrough was reached under the Obama administration

that slowed Iran's nuclear development program in exchange for lifting some sanctions that caused the country's economy to stagnate. With the election of Donald Trump, the tensions between the two countries heightened and reached their peak in the year 2018 when Trump fulfilled a campaign promise and announced that he is withdrawing the US from the Iran nuclear deal, which he viewed as "one-sided". He further implemented his policy of "maximum pressure" against Iran.

The "maximum pressure" policy was designed to disrupt the Iranian economy and force Iran to enter negotiations on the United States' terms for a new nuclear deal through heavy economic sanctions. Thus, the research hypothesis states that the US foreign policy of "maximum pressure" against Iran has failed to bring the country to the negotiation table and has back-fired in the form of "maximum resistance" from Iran. Thus, resulting in long-term hostilities between the two nations.

### **3.0 Rationale behind the Policy**

The rationale behind Trump's Iran policy was simple: Iran was economically fragile, socially unstable and regionally isolated and would simply not stand against the strongest sanctions in history. The declared aim of the "maximum pressure" policy was to make Iran commit to the following: abandonment of every single military dimension of Iran's nuclear program; seizure of ballistic missiles; suspension of its support to the Middle East "terrorist" groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad; termination of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard corps-linked Quds Force's support for "terrorists" and "militant" partners around the world; and putting an end to "its threatening behaviour against its neighbours, many of whom are US allies.

Unsurprisingly, Iran refused to concede to the US threats and evoked "maximum resistance" against the US pressure by not only ramping up enrichment of low-grade uranium but also giving a crushing response to any foreign military action. The research paper uncovers the various dynamics of the conflict to answer the question: 'How did the "maximum pressure" policy of the US further deteriorate its relations with Iran?'

### **4.0 Nature of Conflict**

The Iran and US confrontation involves a series of back-and-forth retaliation by both countries. A week after his inauguration, President Donald Trump signed an executive order banning nationals from seven Muslim-majority nations, including Iran, from entering the US for 90 days. (Gaouette, K. C. L. A. N., 2018). Iran called the ban "an obvious insult to the Islamic

world” and responded by conducting a ballistic missile test.

The confrontation cannot be classified as a case of general war as there are certain limitations and constraints with respect to the use of force. However, the conflict has various dimensions and can be seen as close to that of a limited conflict wherein there have been airstrikes, ballistic missile tests, military drills, naval strikes etc but they have been limited in the sense that the two countries have managed to avoid a direct military confrontation.

Although the conflict does not have implications of that of a general war, it is also important to understand that in case the United States and Iran engage in a direct military conflict, Iran could attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz, through which 30 per cent of the world’s oil flows, which would raise oil prices globally (Gilsinan, K.,2019). Another aspect of how the conflict can have global implications is evident with the presence of nuclear weapons. It is true that nuclear weapons act as a deterrent force and prevent a large-scale war, but the very presence of these weapons of mass destruction instigate a global threat. The conflict has also showcased forms of terrorism. Terrorism may be defined as premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated by groups or individuals and usually intended to influence an audience wider than that of its immediate victims. The United States State Department has accused Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia Militias of terrorism against US troops, and Iran of cyberterrorism, primarily through its Quds Force, one of the five branches of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) specializing in unconventional warfare and military intelligence operations. (Jakes & Crowley, 2021 )

## **5.0 Parties Involved**

The Iran and US confrontation has involved several key players apart from the US government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The presence of multiple players has further complicated the relations between the two states and has added to the hostility.

### **5.1.0 The US Government**

The US government has a vested interest in controlling the oil reserves of Iran and has pursued several strategies, like that of naval and drone strikes, interference in internal matters of Iran, economic sanctions, etc, for the same. In line with Trump’s policy of ‘maximum pressure’ on Iran, in April and May, the US imposed several new sanctions. On 8 April, it designated Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’, putting

anyone worldwide who deals with the IRGC at risk of US criminal charges. While the Trump administration had already sanctioned more than 970 Iranian entities and individuals, Washington had also sought to outlaw a portion of a sovereign nation's armed forces. (Wong, E. 2019)

### **5.2.0 The Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps**

The IRGC has been involved in conducting several military operations against the US. The military preparations of Iran and the US highlight the security dilemma that exists between these two countries. The US has raised its reservations towards the military drills conducted by Iran days after the United States flew nuclear-capable B-52 bombers over the Middle East. In response to the increased US military presence, the army conducted a drill for locally made drones and fired torpedoes from locally made submarines, while the IRGC unveiled a huge underground missile base and tested long-range missiles that it said could take out enemy vessels and aircraft carriers more than 1,800km (1,118 miles) away. (Kaur & Kim, 2021. )This reflects how Iran demonstrated maximum resistance to any foreign military action.

### **5.3.0 Saudi Arabia**

The Iran–Saudi Arabia proxy conflict, sometimes also referred to as the Middle Eastern Cold War, is the ongoing struggle for influence in the Middle East and surrounding regions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. However, the US and Saudi alliance has often acted as a hurdle in smoothening of relations with Iran. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo denounced the attacks on the Saudi oil industry, on 14 September 2019, as an “act of war”. President Donald Trump called for an increase in sanctions against Iran opposing the strikes. ( Ramkumar, A., & Iosebashvili, I. 2019)

### **5.4.0 Israel**

Israel is a great partner to the United States, and Israel has no greater friend than the United States. However, Iran-Israel relations are deeply strained, this is reflected in the Iran–Israel proxy conflict, which is an ongoing proxy war between Iran and Israel. The conflict is bound in threats, the hostility of Iran's leaders against Israel, and their declared objective to dissolve the Jewish state. Moreover, Israel supported the “maximum pressure” doctrine of the US against Iran and had its version of the same in the form of “Mowing the Grass,” a strategy that reflects the assumption that Israel finds itself in a protracted intractable conflict. The use of

force in such a conflict is not intended to attain impossible political goals, but a strategy of attrition designed primarily to degrade the enemy's capabilities. With the election of Joe Biden, the US is expected to sign back up to the deal put in place by former President Barack Obama in 2015. In response to this, Israel's top military chief has said the army is preparing to combat the threat posed by Iran and has ordered US President Joe Biden not to return to the Iran nuclear deal.

## **6.0 Form of Conflict**

The Iran and US conflict is a classic example of an inter-state conflict as it involves periods of tensions and quarrels between two states. Tensions peaked in late June 2019 after Iran downed the U.S. Global Hawk drone in the Strait of Hormuz. In response, President Trump approved—and quickly cancelled—a retaliatory strike, instead of ordering a cyberattack on the IRGC and Iran's missile systems and imposing new sanctions on Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and top Iranian military commanders. The net result is escalated tensions and the clear possibility of open conflict between the world's pre-eminent military power and leading regional power.

The 2018-2019 Report Card on International Cooperation, highlighted that “the United States leaving the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action] undermined international diplomacy and peaceful crisis prevention, and it marked a setback in international cooperation regarding interstate conflicts.” The recent developments surrounding Iran have only added fuel to the fire.

## **7.0 Methods of Conflict**

US and Iran have employed various measures starting from naval strikes, drone strikes, airstrikes and even cyberattacks as their methods of confrontation with each other. However, diving deeper into the methods of conflicts between the two countries gives us a clearer picture of their foreign policy.

### **7.1.0 Explaining US Foreign Policy from the Radical Geopolitics Perspective**

Radical geopolitics seeks to explain US foreign policy in terms of two main forces, or “logics,” that drive US foreign policy, one geopolitical and the other geo-economic. In the case of US policy towards Iran, radical geopolitics argues that the US attempts to isolate Iran through the nuclear crisis are products of two main factors: American interest in controlling its energy resources (the ‘geoeconomic logic’), and the need to maintain credibility by punishing the defiant mullahs (the ‘geopolitical logic’).

### **7.2.0 Iran's strategy of tension**

Since early this year, Iran has committed itself to a strategy of destabilization in and around the Arabian Peninsula. The reasons have been myriad but primarily revolve around the fallout from the US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement. This has left Iran diplomatically isolated, economically strained and feeling betrayed by the wider international community. Seeing few good options, the Iranian leadership has decided to promote chaos and instability to inflict what pain it can on global energy markets. The hope is this will add urgency to the negotiations with world powers and force them to seek a political solution to the economic and security standoff that provides an acceptable exit for Iran.

### **8.0 Conflict Resolution Mechanism**

Wallenstein defines conflict resolution as “a situation where the conflict parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's continued existence as parties and cease all violent action against each other”. The Peace Agreement is an essential part of conflict resolution. As the US-Iran conflict has escalated, the United States has sought to achieve these ends by employing low-intensity weapons such as economic sanctions and targeted killings. However, these weapons at the best leave the conflict unchanged, and, at worse, risk all-out war.

#### **8.1.0 Abstract measures**

In the case of Iran and the US, resolution assumes utmost importance because if the conflict tends to get out of hand it can certainly have global implications. If we were to take abstract measures to resolve the conflict, then it seems evident that structural change would be the best go. A change in the regime type has always had an impact on the relations between the two countries.

It was in 2013, under the Obama administration that the two countries were able to reach an agreement in the form of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which limited Iran's nuclear capabilities and at the same time lifted the economic sanctions against it (Hussain N. , 2015). However, a change in the regime and the coming of Donald Trump strained the relations as he adopted the “maximum pressure” doctrine by putting heavy economic sanctions against Iran to bring it to the negotiation table. The strategy backfired as Iran adopted “maximum resistance” by not only further building up its nuclear capabilities but also carrying out military drills to show that it is capable of resisting any foreign pressure. In the present scenario, structural change can be an apt conflict resolution mechanism as with the election of Joe Biden,



there is a huge possibility of the betterment of relations between the two countries. Joe Biden has also indicated that he will revive the Joint Comprehensive Action Plan that the Trump administration decided to withdraw from in 2018.

### **8.2.0 Institutional Mechanisms**

The major resentment of Iranians against the US has been due to its constant attempts to choke off Iran's oil exports and strangle its economy. Tehran has sought to raise the costs of the U.S.'s "maximum pressure" campaign. This was highlighted in the fiery attack on Saudi Arabia's oil industry, sending oil prices soaring and reminding America and its allies of the risks to global energy markets of a conflict in the Persian Gulf. Hence, as it appears the mechanism of negotiation and conciliation cannot help in this particular context as the relationship has been strained to a larger extent, ever since Trump announced his "maximum pressure" policy. Therefore, there is little hope for a compromise between the two.

### **8.2.1 Good Offices and Mediation**

An important mechanism that may yield results in this particular conflict is that of Good Offices and Mediation. When the parties are not able to resolve disputes by direct negotiations, a third party can assist settlement and provide good offices. The intermediary role can be played by the United Nations, diplomats of neutral countries. South Korea may represent a perfect intermediary between the US and Iran. South Korea had imported a significant portion of its oil from Iran before United Nations Security Council sanctions imposed before negotiating The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action deal (JCPOA). Also, historically, Seoul has had good diplomatic relations with Tehran and the US.

On the other hand, mediation is defined as a process in which parties to a dispute attempt to reach a mutually agreeable solution under the auspices of a third party. The function of mediation is to establish or reestablish sufficiently good communications between conflicting parties. The United Nations can make a strong claim to neutrality and impartiality in the Iran and US conflict. The United Nations-sponsored mediations are often initiated to address member states' interests and the Security council's concerns.

### **8.2.2 Arbitration**

Arbitration involves an adjudication procedure by which disputants agree to submit a controversy to judges of their choosing who render a legally binding decision. The Iran–United States Claims Tribunal (IUSCT) is an international arbitral tribunal that resolves claims between

the nationals and governments of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America. It was established on 19 January 1981 by the Algiers Declaration, an Algeria-mediated agreement between the U.S. and Iran to resolve the Tehran hostage crisis. The IUSCT has been called "the most significant arbitral body in history", and its decisions are considered influential in the areas of investor-state arbitration and state responsibility.

### **8.2.3 Track II Diplomacy**

In the absence of formal U.S.-Iran relations, which were severed in 1980 following the U.S. Embassy takeover, Americans and Iranians have held track II meetings to discuss contentious issues that divide their governments. According to Joseph Montville, "Track II diplomacy" refers to unofficial interactions usually carried out by non-governmental actors with access to decision-makers. In contrast, "track I" denotes diplomacy conducted by government officials.

Since President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, Tehran has stepped back from track II, and opportunities for Americans to engage Iranians in informal settings have been limited. This has further deteriorated after Trump's election as a week after his inauguration, President Donald Trump signed an executive order banning nationals from seven Muslim-majority nations, including Iran, from entering the US for 90 days. This naturally turned the Iranians against the Americans.

It is to be noted that Track II is not a substitute for Track I diplomacy rather it works best when it supplements formal diplomatic communication. With the election of Joe Biden who has indicated towards restoring formal diplomatic relations with Iran, Track II diplomacy can certainly yield effective results in resolving the tensions between the two countries. This can take the form of Citizens Diplomacy which would encompass non-governmental contacts and activities of medical professionals, educators, scientists, etc who could visit the other country and contribute towards building harmonious relationships. This not only enhances informal communication but also results in cross-cultural exchanges which allows the citizens of both countries to develop a positive attitude towards each other.

## **9.0 Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be reiterated that tensions between Iran and the United States have intensified since Mr. Donald Trump formally renounced the nuclear agreement with Iran in May, 2019. He had also warned other countries that under the restored sanctions, they must stop buying Iranian oil, the country's most important export (Cooper, H. 2019). This was a part of

Trump's "maximum pressure" policy wherein the Americans launched an economic war against Iran and tried to contain its nuclear programme.

The strategy was formulated keeping in mind that an economically fragile country like that of Iran would be unable to face the pressure of a world hegemon. Quite to the contrary, Iran's nuclear activities and regional policies became significantly more assertive after the United States reneged on the nuclear deal. In 2019, after remaining in full compliance with the JCPOA, and hoping that Europe would take steps to mitigate the economic damage from Washington's sanctions, Iran upped the ante, in part to gain leverage against the West. Tehran began to gradually violate key provisions of the JCPOA that effectively shortened its breakout time from more than a year to several months.

In parallel, Iran also pursued more assertive tactics in the Middle East, including strikes against tankers and oil infrastructure as well as attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq. Domestically, the Islamic Republic's more hardline factions strengthened their position at the expense of supporters of diplomacy abroad and reform at home. The way forward holds a positive view as President Joe Biden has decided to take a different course in dealing with Iran and opt for a softer approach. He has hinted towards reviving the JCPOA with Iran and thus, indicating a more peaceful communication between the two countries. However, this is going to be a tedious task due to the involvement of multiple players like that of Israel and Saudi Arabia who share bitter rivalries with Iran and would not want an ally like that of the US to develop successful diplomatic relations with Iran.

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