

ISSN: 2051-0861

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<https://journals.le.ac.uk/ojs1/index.php/nmes>

Deciphering Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran

Author(s): Hossein Aghaie Joobani and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar

To cite this article: Aghaie Joobani, Hossein and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar (2020) "Deciphering Trump's 'Maximum Pressure' Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran", *New Middle Eastern Studies* 10 (1), pp. 22-44.

Online Publication Date: 25 September 2020

Disclaimer and Copyright

The NMES editors make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information contained in the journal. However, the Editors and the University of Leicester make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness or suitability for any purpose of the content and disclaim all such representations and warranties whether express or implied to the maximum extent permitted by law. Any views expressed in this publication are the views of the authors and not the views of the Editors or the University of Leicester.

Copyright New Middle Eastern Studies, 2020. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, transmitted or disseminated, in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from New Middle Eastern Studies, to whom all requests to reproduce copyright material should be directed, in writing.

Terms and Conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Deciphering Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy: The Enduring Challenge of Containing Iran

Hossein Aghaie Joobani* and Mohammadhossein Daheshvar**

Abstract

Since the advent of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the US has pursued a policy of containment towards Iran. In a major shift from Obama's policy of appeasement, the Trump administration has spearheaded the "Maximum Pressure" campaign in an effort to contain Iran and coerce it into changing its behaviour. Although the fate of Trump's policy remains a puzzle, it is evident that the US administration's decisions, i.e. the withdrawal from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), re-imposition of nuclear-related sanctions and re-securitisation of Iran as well as Tehran's counter-strategies to defy US pressures have exacerbated the enmity between Washington and Tehran. By applying the Regional Security Complex theory and linking it with George Kennan's "containment strategy", this article attempts to deconstruct the modus operandi of Trump administration towards Iran and scrutinise the various policy tools the US has employed to implement the maximum pressure doctrine. This research concludes that through exerting vast economic sanctions, maximizing diplomatic pressures and maintaining military deterrence, the Trump administration aims to create the conditions of possibility for regime collapse in the event that Iran refuses to change its behaviour. The article uses an analytical-explanative method and seeks to contribute to the existing academic and policy-oriented research regarding US-Iran relations via employing a hybrid theoretical lens.

Keywords: Regional Security Complex Theory; Middle East; Iran; Donald Trump; Maximum Pressure; Containment Strategy

Introduction

Since the rapture of 2011 Arab Uprisings, the security architecture of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has undergone colossal transformations as the region became deeply penetrated by extra-regional powers and intense geopolitical rivalries among regional powers have gained momentum. Beset by rampant security dilemma, the MENA region has entered a new era of tectonic power shifts and unbridled uncertainties. Most specifically, the region has recently witnessed military interventions and heightened foreign policy activism from Russia, Turkey, Iran and USA and to a lesser extent from Saudi Arabia, Israel and

*Hossein Aghaie Joobani, PhD Candidate in International Relations at the Department of International Relations, Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir, Turkey. Email: hossainaghaie@gmail.com

**Mohammadhossein Daheshvar, an Independent Researcher & holder of a Master's Degree in International Relations with a major focus on Middle East studies from Tehran University, Iran. Email: mhdaheshvar2014@gmail.com

Qatar. These dynamics became much more conspicuous particularly after Donald Trump came to office with his “America First” grand strategy and in view of the growing perceptions of the US withdrawal from the Middle East (Hudson 2013: 458-466; Gause 2019: 7-24; Feltman 2020: 94-100). Meanwhile, the US-Iran relations continue to change for the worse, oscillating between indirect military showdowns and moments of strategic respite.

Having pinned the blame squarely on “the Obama administration’s appeasement of Iran”, Trump fulfilled one of his campaign promises and withdrew in May 2018 from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) which was signed in 2015 between Iran and P5+1 countries (Britain, France, Russia, China, Germany, the EU and, formerly US) (Cummings 2020). The Trump administration replaced the JCPOA with the “maximum pressure” campaign and reinstated all previous nuclear-related sanctions on Tehran. In a sign of fundamental detour from the previous US administrations’ approach, Trump’s Iran policy disavowed passive containment or negotiations through backdoor channels with the so-called reformist elements within the Islamic Republic establishment. Instead, the volte-face in the US policy towards Iran apparently aims at coercing Tehran through pressure to change its behaviour or face the inevitable—that is regime change. The current US administration believes that unbearable economic hardships and subsequent irregular waves of protests which started in January 2018 and continues until now are likely to leave Tehran in the end with no feasible option but to acquiesce to the list of 12 specific conditions that would need to be met for the US to hold talks with Iran. Of particular note here is that through deepening ties with its regional allies, particularly with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, America is also trying to create a particular type of regional ordering whose primary object is to re-securitise the regime and compel it to alter its behaviour from Kabul to Caracas. From the perspective of the Trump’s administration, Obama’s leniency towards the Islamic Republic as evidenced by his administration’s signing of the nuclear accord and the subsequent US payment of \$1.8 billion in cash to Iran achieved nothing but to embolden Tehran to create “hell in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Iraq” (Blake 2020). From Tehran’s viewpoint, the US and Israel are bent on destroying the JCPOA in an effort to revive the securitization project of Iran (Mehr-News 2019). As can be seen, the key pillar of contention between the US and Iran relates to the former’s objection to the latter’s destabilizing efforts in, inter alia, expanding its influence over its “near abroad”, particularly around western Iraq and across the Levant (Maloney 2017: 4). Hence, the US has apparently come to the conclusion, at least for now, that Obama’s appeasement strategy failed to harness Iran’s quest for regional hegemony as exemplified by Tehran’s development of ballistic-missile program and its use of Shiite militant proxies across the Middle East—all of which regarded as posing a serious threat to the security interests of America and its allies, both in the Middle East and beyond.

In light of the foregoing assumptions, an important question arises as to what specific foreign policy methods and tools of statecraft the Trump administration has employed to effectively implement the maximum pressure doctrine in its relentless bid to force the Islamic Republic to change its strategic behaviour? Other questions germane to the subject of inquiry are as follows: How and in what specific ways the US wants to contain and further isolate Iran in the Middle East security complex? What are the security and geopolitical implications of the US maximum pressure doctrine on the future of Iran’s expansion into the Levant and the Persian Gulf? As Tehran remains, as of the writing of this article, defiant in the face of

mounting US pressure, what specific counter-strategies the Islamic Republic may have at its disposal to guarantee regime survival without having to give in to the US pressures or risk a major military confrontation. The hypothesis is that by way of exerting comprehensive economic sanctions, maximizing diplomatic pressures both at the regional and international levels and maintaining military deterrence, the US appears adamant in coercing Iran to change its strategic behaviour. Having said this, the aim of this article is to make sense of the Trump administration's campaign of maximum pressure against Iran by means of deconstructing the new US policy into its constitutive components. Using the Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory as developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, this research will endeavour to conduct a thorough analysis of the *modus operandi* behind the new US approach to contain Iran's quest for regional hegemony. From a methodological perspective, this investigation employs an analytical-explanative method and uses primary and secondary sources. The organization of the article is as follows: First, we will elaborate on the RSC theory in order to shed light on regional patterns of rivalry, patterns of securitization, polarity, and social construction (patterns of amity and enmity among units) which serve as important variables in analysing security and geopolitical dynamics within regional complexes, namely the Middle East security complex (the locus of Trump's maximum pressure policy against Iran). By means of the empirical deployment of these variables in the study of US foreign policy towards Iran and linking them with George Kennan's containment policy, we will endeavour to elucidate the different types of containment policies of the Trump administration to scrutinise the rationale and potential effectiveness of US maximum pressure campaign in its quest for curbing Tehran's ascent in the Middle East security complex. This section will be followed by a succinct overview and appraisal of what kind of counter-strategies the Islamic Republic has taken to possibly resist the US pressure.

Theoretical Framework

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver foreground the salience of regional sub-system as the object of security analysis. Grounded in a mixture of neo-realist/constructivist assumptions, one of the central tenets of the RSC theory is that "efforts to cope with conflict and to promote security are frequently occurring within regional security complexes, rather than at the global level" (Lake & Morgan 1997: 343). The RSC theory is useful for three reasons. Firstly, it provides clear insights about the suitable level of analysis in security studies. Secondly, it can vocalize tentative studies, and, eventually, theory-based scenarios can be settled on the basis of the known possible forms of, and alternatives to, RSCs. The RSCT includes a model of regional security that empowers researchers to analyse, predict and describe developments within any region. From the perspective of RSC theory, region refers to the level where states or other units connect together sufficiently closely that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other (Buzan 1983: 190). The regional level is where the dynamism of national and global security interacts, and where most of the action occurs. The main idea is about the intersection of two levels: the interplay of the global powers at the system level, and clusters of close security interdependence at the regional level. Each RSC is made up of the dismays and ambitions of the separate units (which in turn partly deduce from internal features and

fractures). Both the security of the separate units and the process of global power intervention can be grasped only through understanding the regional security dynamics (Buzan & Waever 2004: 43). The Regional Security Complex theory discerns between the system level interplay of the global powers, whose capabilities enable them to transcend distance, and the subsystem level interplay of lesser powers whose main security environment is their local region.

Of particular note is that the degree of discipline and security at the regional level is crucially influenced by variables operating at the global and domestic levels (Ayoob 1999: 247). The core concept in RSCT is that, as most threats travel more easily over short intervals than over long ones, security affiliations are normally integrated into regionally based clusters: the security complexes (Buzan & Waever 2004: 4). Security complexes are areas as seen through the lens of security. They might or might not be regions in other senses, but they do not depend on, or emanate from, other cognitions of regionness. Security complex is defined as “a set of states whose major security perceptions and concern are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan, Waever & Wilde 1997: 12). The central notion remains that essential segments of the securitization and (de)securitization proceedings in the international system will present themselves in regional clusters. These clusters are both lasting and discrete from global level processes of (de)securitization. Each level needs to be comprehended both in itself and in how it interacts with the other (Buzan & Waever 2004: 44). Buzan followed the analysis of each of the security regions at regional, domestic, global and inter-regional levels. At domestic level, he referred to the nature of political-economic structures of governments, at regional level the power division of the countries, amity-enmity models, anarchism structure and border as separating factor from the neighbours. This high level of interdependence, the common procedure of building security concerns and techniques for addressing them among member states, points toward a functioning structure that can be systematically recognized. The lack of such a reasonable claim about most states at the global level points toward the relevance of RSCs as a proper level of focus (Frazier & Stewart-Ingersoll 2010: 733). The most well-established function for RSCT is as a framework organizing scientific researches of regional security. RSCT ascertains what to look for at four levels of analysis and how to connect these:

1. Internally in the countries of the region, especially their internally generated vulnerabilities (is the state powerful or weak due to stability of the domestic discipline and relations between the government and the people? The specific vulnerability of a state defines the type of security dismays it has and sometimes makes another state or group of states a systematic threat even if it or they have no antagonistic intentions);

2. State-to-state interactions (which procreate the region as such);

3. The region's relations with neighbouring regions (this is supposed to be relatively restricted given that the complex is defined by interaction internally being more significant. But if primary changes in the patterns of security interdependence that define complexes are underway, this level can become essential, and in situations of hulking asymmetries a complex without international powers that neighbours one with an international power can have intense interregional connections in one direction); and eventually;

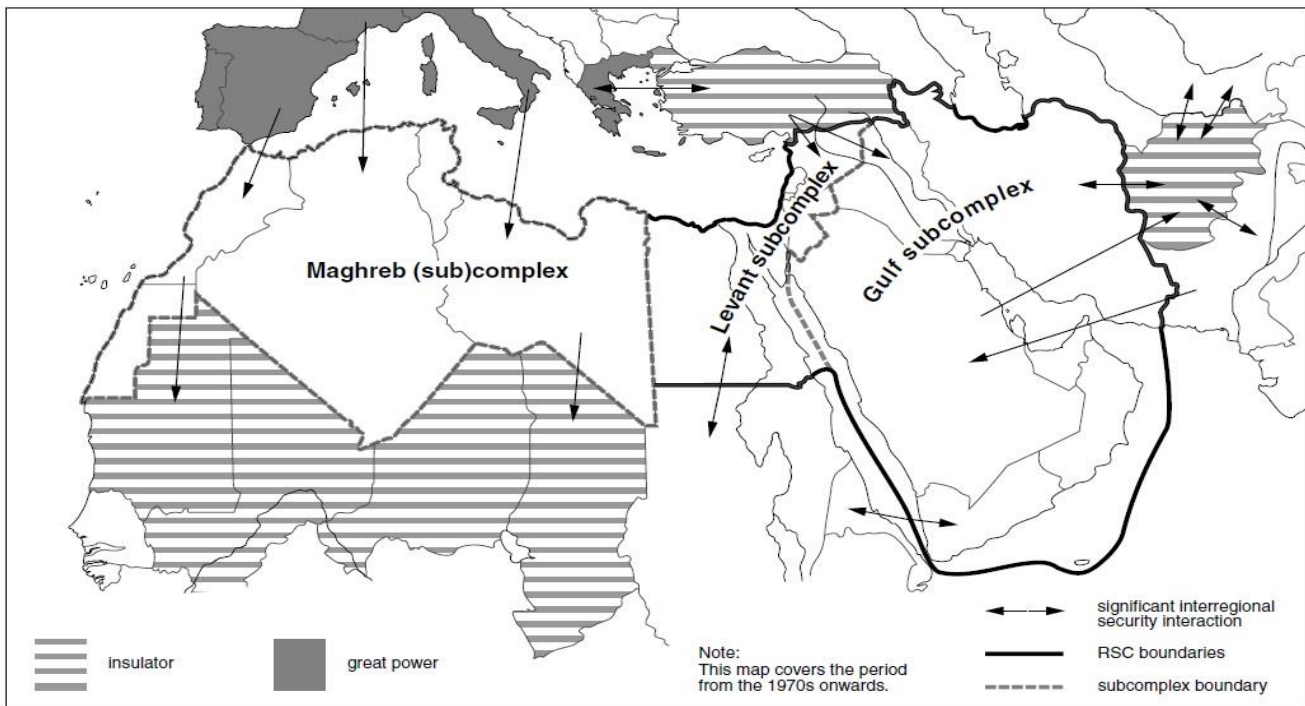
4. The role of international powers in the region (the interaction between the international and regional security structures) (Buzan & Waever 2004: 51).

The RSC theory rests on the interdependence among the key national security interests of a geographically compact group of states (Eyvazov 2011: 17). The relations within RSC are defined not only by the geographic vicinity of the countries involved, but also by the chaotic character of the international system. To put it in another way, RSC is a geographically confined and materially and perceptually peculiar instance of global chaos with the corresponding domestic amity/enmity relationships (McSweeney 1999: 63). The essential structure of an RSC embodies four variables:

1. Boundary, which distinguishes the RSC from its neighbours;
2. Chaotic structure, which means that the RSC must be composed of two or more independent units;
3. Polarity, which demonstrates the distribution of power among the units;
4. Social construction, which illustrates the patterns of amity and enmity between the units (Buzan & Waever 2004: 53).

Regional Security Complex in the Middle East

In Buzan's view, "the Middle East is a place where an autonomous regional level of security has operated strongly for several decades in spite of continuous and heavy impositions from the global level". Buzan's framework is a clear example of a conflict formation, one that is unusually large and complex, and that also includes some specific cultural features. As in many other places in the Third World, the insecurity of ruling class within their internal sphere plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of (in)security overall (Buzan & Waever 2004: 187). Under the RSC framework, the complexes are composed of two or some subsets. Sub-complexes have essentially the same definition as the RSCs with the difference being that a sub-complex is highly embedded within a larger RSC. Sub-complexes present distinguished templates of security interdependence that are nevertheless caught up in a broader model that defines the RSC as a whole. The most obvious example is in the Middle East, where distinct sub-complexes can be observed in the Levant (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria) and in the Gulf (Iran, Iraq, GCC), but where there is so much overlap and interplay that the two cannot be separated (Buzan & Waever 2004: 52). In the Middle East security complex, regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel are present and international powers such as China, Russia, the European Union and the US. The level of international penetration into the Middle East RSC has not decreased in remarkable ways, but its character and form has changed fundamentally. Instead of projecting a bipolar superpower competition into the region and reinforcing its domestic lines of conflict, international intervention took a unipolar shape, with a dominant United States using its influence to dampen the interstate (but not intra-state) conflictual security dynamics of both core sub-complexes (Buzan & Waever 2004: 202).

Figure 1: The Middle Eastern Regional Security Map

Source: Buzan & Waever (2004: 187).

Occupying a pivotal position at the juncture of Europe, Africa, and Asia, the “Greater Middle East” here is defined as the sum of the core Middle East, North Africa, the African Horn, South Asia and also Central Asia occupies a vital position with respect to some of the major issue of the contemporary era (Kemp & Harkavy 1997: 5-13). Having delineated the main contours of the RSC theory and its relevance to the Middle East, this study poses the key question: By means of which methods of foreign policy and tools of statecraft has the US tried to contain Iran in the Middle East regional security complex, which is in the Levant and the Gulf sub-complex? In order to provide cogent answers to this question, it is vital that we, first and foremost, explain the nature of containment policy and then shift our focus towards the Trump administration’s application of methods, i.e. the maximum pressure policy, to contain the Iranian expansionism in the Middle East security complex. Before we venture ahead with our core analysis, it is worthwhile to note that the concept of insulator is specific to the RSC theory. As Buzan and Waever argue, “the insulator concept refers to a location occupied by one or more units where larger regional security dynamics stand back to back. This is not to be confused with the traditional idea of a buffer state, whose function is defined by standing at the centre of a strong pattern of securitization, not at its edge” (Buzan & Waever 2004: 41). In the past, these “outlier” states have often been called “buffers” and have been defined by their impartial foreign policies. This is generally because of the pressure from the large powers surrounding them, where to support one is to risk the rage of the other (McClean 2015: 17). For example, Tibet was considered as a buffer state by the British to protect its Indian interest from Chinese and lost its influence as a result of the ensuing great power politics (Clive 1976: 483-486). Here, the concept of polarity gains

relevance as it impinges on the distribution of power among the units. So, an important caveat begs attention: how a great power can possibly polarize the regional security complex?

For example, in the Middle East setting, the United States, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE are seen as playing an important role in creation of a particular type of geopolitical polarization whose primary aim is to contain and isolate Iran. In so far as the strategy of containment is concerned, it merits noting that George Kennan is the founder of the containment strategy. In a telegraph called the “Long Telegram” in February 1946, Kennan expounded on the need for expanding the US influence, and along the same lines, reminded the US authorities that the Soviet Union must come under immense pressure in order to force it to ignore the domestic problems and focus mostly on foreign affairs. As such, internal divisions and social unrests on top of external US pressure led to the collapse of the Soviet system. Kennan believed that the communist goals of Russia must become fruitless and the revolutionary ambitions and desires of Moscow must be eliminated once and for all. Also, Kennan argued that the totalitarian and militaristic nature of the Soviet regime lend credence to the view that “at bottom of Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity” (Kennan 1946). In this context, the term containment corresponds to containing or hindering. This term is based on five points underlining the containment policy, namely inclusion, equality, capacity, hindering and restricting. Inclusion means accepting the adversary or an enemy which cannot be eliminated or neutralised. Equality refers to considering risks and the importance of the enemy or adversary at an equal level. Capacity refers to tolerating and enduring the adversary or an enemy and hindering means that besides accepting adversary as a reality, one must prevent its expansion, and, finally restricting refers to halting the enemy’s projection of power and influence. This policy is not tailored to wage war and is based on compromise. In other words, when one cannot defeat its enemy or adversary and simultaneously cannot remain dormant about its sphere of influence and expansion, it must endure, compromise and try to limit enemy’s influences in definite borders. Thus, the goal of containment policy is between waging war and peaceful coexistence. The ultimate goal in this framework is to isolate the enemy and weaken its power and if possible, facilitate its internal collapse and possibly eliminate its threat. Kennan added that “the main element of any United States’ policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies” (Kennan 1947).

Containment is pursued by two methods: a) the asymmetrical containment or (passive) containment which involves confronting an adversary at times and in places of one’s own choosing. The idea is to retain the initiative: in the field which the contest was to take place, the means by which it was to be conducted, and the balance between the costs encountered and the benefits derived. That, in turn, meant differentiating clearly between crucial and peripheral interests. Symmetrical (or active) containment, conversely, looked to address two major defects of asymmetrical containment: its neglect of apparently peripheral areas that could, under unexpected situations, become crucial, as had happened in 1950 with South Korea, and the apparent shortages of the choice, in Korea and similar conditions, between escalation, on the one hand, and doing nothing at all, on the other. The classic public statement of symmetrical containment was of course John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, with its commitment to “pay any price, bear any burden”. It was Kennedy who insisted on the

capacity for “flexible response”. That goal, as Kennan had formulated it in 1947, had been to convince the Soviet leadership to change its demeanour so that there would be nothing left to contain. No president has a better record than Reagan for having accomplished that task (Gaddis 2001). The containment policy, which instructed Washington in its confrontation with the USSR during the Cold War, is a way in which the US can harness Iran and its effort to undermine US interests in the region. The Clinton administration implemented this strategy along with containment of Iraq with success in the 1990s (Cook 2020). Here it must be mentioned that the Trump administration’s containment policy is different than the previous US administration as it resembles the Reagan Doctrine of “Roll Back” towards the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The attractiveness of applying to Iran the set of policies that caused the relatively peaceful dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s, often called the “Victory Strategy,” is evident. The strategy produced the most favourable feasible end to the Cold War and a major victory for the US and its allies without a major direct conflict with the Soviet Union. Homogenies between Iran and the USSR make it sensible to assess that applying a similar set of strategies would yield a similar outcome. That evaluation might indeed be precise, and some several of policies are surely the right strategy to implement against Iran today. However, important structural, ideological, experiential, and personal factors strongly discern the situations today from those at the early 1990s (Kagan 2018).

These discrepancies might sequel in the failure of the Victory Strategy; they will almost surely mean that even the successful implementation of that strategy will follow a very different and most likely a much bloodier path. However, these variations do not mean that the US must not adopt a properly updated version of the Victory Strategy. That strategy will have positive effects in most areas of concern to the US policy even if it does not obtain the overall goal of causing the peaceful transition of the Islamic Republic. The reason to focus on the differences is not to argue against the strategy, but rather to temper expectations of its likely outcomes and propose methods of adjusting its execution to amends its effects against this special adversary (Kagan 2018). As such, the US-Russian relations during the Cold War are different in two aspects compared to the US-Iran relations in the post-Cold War and the post 9/11 environment: First, the ideological clash between communism and liberalism is replaced by the revolutionary Shia Islam versus liberalism. Of the principal ideology, nothing has been officially changed. Belief is sustained in the evil nature of liberalism, in the inevitability of its demolition, in the obligation of the downtrodden believers to assist in that demolition and to take power into their own hands (Sadjadpour 2010). Secondly, unlike the USSR, Iran is not an international military power seeking global territorial/ideological expansion. Rather, Iran is a regional power with relatively inferior conventional capabilities that seeks to increase its political and ideological influence in the Middle-East (Dassa Kaye & Lorber 2012: 54). Having discussed the intricacies and distinctions of the containment strategy, an important issue arises as to what specific tools of statecraft the US is using to contain and to exert maximum pressure on Iran within the MERSC. These are as follows:

1- Re-securitisation of Iran and Shia-phobia: According to the RSCT, the specific vulnerability of a state defines the kind of security fears it has and sometimes makes another state or group of states a structural threat even if it or they have no hostile intentions. Excessive insecurity led the Soviets to create a system in which all the key elements of state

power were organized to ensure the regime survival. External enemies were often used as a tool for domestic crackdowns against regime critics. This did provide a point of entry for the US attempts to shape Soviet policies. In a similar vein, the Islamic Republic has exaggerated the external threat to justify brutal crackdowns on critics at home as evidenced by the suppression of popular protests in 2009 and 2011. Ultimately, the Iranian regime's top target is its own survival more so than reaching certain foreign policy goals (Dassa Kaye & Lorber 2012: 56). Accordingly, the sectarian approach and the unconventional, non-state regional proxies of the Islamic Republic provided the US with all possible means to orchestrate the re-securitisation of the Iranian dossier. Furthermore, it helps Israel to portray Iran as the main enemy of Arab countries and push Tel Aviv to embark on a normalisation of its relations with the Arab world as it has been the case with its recent rapprochement with the UAE. The most immediate outcome is that it provides the US with ample excuses to solidify its permanent, long-term and low-cost military presence in the region – particularly in the Persian Gulf sub-complex. A consensus emerged, especially after the 2003 Iraq War, that the growing Iranian influence in the region has sparked an antagonistic reflex from its Arab neighbours, hence opening the gate for these Arab countries to become more inclined towards confronting Iran through aligning themselves with the US (Nasr & Takeyh 2008). It is on the basis of this rationale that the US attempts to reduce cooperation and convergence of interests between Iran and its neighbours in order to isolate and contain Tehran.

2- Containing Iran-backed proxies to guarantee the security of the US and its regional allies: This policy refers to combating terrorism throughout the Middle East RSC. Unlike the previous administrations, Trump and his national security team view the Shia militant groups as a real threat just as they see Sunni extremist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIL as existential threats. By highlighting the Islamic Republic's special relations with the Palestinians and other militant groups such as the Hezbollah, the US and Israel seek to contain Iran's regional expansion and also convince their allies to maximise coordination for imposing and implementing sanctions on Tehran and isolate it further (Akhbari et al 2011: 105). As the RSCs have boundaries and mutual interactions with their neighbouring regions, Israel attempts to make meaningful forays into the Central Asia and Caucasus region, normalise relations with Gulf states such as Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia and also deepen ties with Russia and India to block possible Iranian infiltrations into these areas. Arming specific groups in Syria such as the Syrian Liberation Army and Kurdish militants must be mentioned alike (Cafiero 2019). The US apparently seeks to turn Syria into a quagmire for Iran and thereby increase the cost of the Islamic Republic's regional behaviour in Syria just like what it did with the former Soviet Union in Afghanistan by supporting and arming Jihadist guerrilla fighters throughout the 1980s. Thus, Iran is paying a heavy price in Syria: it cannot leave, but it is not likely to be able to withdraw and so decrease its costs soon. That creates an opportunity where the US could instead raise Iran's costs by backing its enemies. In reality, the Iranians have gotten themselves into the same conundrum that the Soviets got themselves into in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Iranians are caught in a war that is more costly than they want to bear, but it is too important for them to want to withdraw (Pollack 2018). Also, Turkey's securitisation policy towards Syria appears to have created an obstacle for Iran to freely implement its policies as illustrated by Tehran's and Ankara's

disagreements over the situation in Idlib where the two Astana players clashed with each other in February 2020 (Aghaie Joobani & Adisönmez 2018).

3- Countering political Islam based on the 1979 Revolution of Iran: It refers to fighting against Islamism in the form of ideological war and it means the fight between two political thoughts and lifestyles. In this arena, the goal is weakening the Islamic ideology via showing its inefficiency in social and economic affairs and the political system based on it, that is the Islamic Republic (Dehghani 2004: 489). It seems that there is a conventional view among the political experts of the US focusing on the necessity of effective relationship with Muslim groups with supposedly moderate and liberal views of Islam. Even, some believe that the most important measurement of the US in fighting against Islamic radicals is supporting an “Islamic renovation”. They believe that the US should interact with “mild Islam” and the US strategy should support reformist movements that can gather Muslims against Islamic radicalism (Mahpishanian 2011: 148). This is the same policy adopted by the US towards Saudi Arabia, particularly towards the Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. In this setting, the US policy makers believe that supporting democratic forces inside Iran puts radical groups under pressure and makes them isolated. The political unrests in the aftermath of Iran’s 2009 presidential elections and the steady wave of protests from early 2018 onwards have all together made this approach stronger. Some of the US actions in this regard include: the establishment of Iran Table in the US State Department, creation of monitor sector of Iran affairs in the US embassy in Dubai and in the neighbouring embassies of Iran, Ratification of Iran’s Freedom Support Act in US congress, allocation of some \$75 million budget to produce radio and TV programs, modification of US Persian language media, and designation of Brian Hook and later Elliott Abrams as Iran’s special envoy in the US State Department (Berman 2019). Some of the US think tanks and strategic coteries believe in democratisation and consider it the best policy with lowest risk and costs in the long run. They also believe that despite its liberal appearance such as holding regular elections, the Iranian government is highly totalitarian and that democratization policy can deteriorate the situation for the Islamic Republic (Milani 2005: 41-56). What seems to be a veritable assumption is that if democratic process were to be a dominant modus operandi in Iran’s political system, the bellicose sentiments of the hardliners who aspire for the destruction of a country like Israel based on revolutionary ideas were considered null and void as democratic systems take all necessary pragmatic precautions and cost-benefit calculations before taking any aggressive measures (Gharayagh Zandi 2009: 100).

4- Developing a comprehensive sanctions regime: The international dispute between Iran and the West with regards to the nuclear program started in 2002 with the revelation that the Islamic Republic had built two nuclear sites in two cities. Iran’s nuclear case is regarded as one of the most complex and heavily securitised international disputes in modern times. It remains an acute security concern for the international community partly due to the importance of nuclear weapons which can turn the possessing countries into a major power at both regional and global levels. Pakistan’s success in acquiring nuclear weapons in 1999 which in turn provided the troubled country a special place and role in the Middle East and South Asian RSCs is a stellar case in point. Therefore, the US believes that if some radical Islamic states acquire nuclear weapon, it would be tantamount to not only allowing terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda to obtain atomic bombs but also to showing leniency towards state-

sponsoring terrorists who can arm terrorist organizations with atomic bombs. It must be borne in mind, however, that the logic of deterrence among great powers such as the US and Russia is hardly applicable to a particular type of “ideological grievance states” whose rationality is defined by a radically different standard than the ones these great powers uphold (McIntosh & Storey 2019).

This is all the more true for the case of the Islamic Republic, which sees itself as a global defender of Shia Islam, to include defending against “crusader” and Sunni Muslim encroachments and whose ideology borders on anti-Semitism and militant anti-US sentiments. The contention here is that although the logic of *raison d'État* is largely seen as the dominant state of mind in Iran and survival remains to be the supreme goal of the Islamic Republic, there is no iron-clad guarantee that a nuclear Islamic Republic would never use atomic weapons against a Western country. It is important to note that an ideological establishment characterised by deep political divisions can under certain circumstances reach a point where it makes policy decisions that are not necessarily based on cost-benefit calculations (Dassa Kaye & Lorber 2012: 57). The US is of the conviction that the Islamic Republic’s resolve to achieve uranium enrichment cycle in the incomplete Bushehr power plant constitutes a non-peaceful activity. Hence, the US developed a comprehensive sanction regime against the Islamic Republic, targeting predominantly the Iranian oil and gas industries in order to deprive it from its main source of foreign exchange incomes. It must be mentioned that Iran had no oil exports without foreign investment by 2015 due to sanctions which were lifted following the signing of the JCPOA (Jacobson 2008: 77). The imposition of sanctions on Iran’s Central Bank is widely viewed as the complementary measure to the initial sanctions regime but the present sanctions policy differs from the previous one in two specific ways. First, the scope and nature of the new sanctions are broad enough to include international sanctions, bearing testimony to the importance of international efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons and safeguarding international peace and security. The import of the internationalised dimension of the sanctions regime lies in the fact that in so far as the non-nuclear issues are concerned, the US efforts to block the flow of foreign investment in Iranian oil and gas industries, namely D’Amato Act have not only failed, but also have sparked criticisms of European powers who argued that these sanctions contradicts rules and regulations of the World Trade Organization. Second, the new sanctions vary from traditional sanction policies in the sense that the new sanctions regime is smart and all-encompassing covering three issue-areas: A) transfer of high technologies to Iran, B) illegal and dangerous activities of Iranian individuals and institutions, C) inclusion of financial and banking sanctions.

An important caveat, however, is that sanctions are a double-edged sword. The US seeks to make it clear to the Islamic Republic that destabilizing regional policies are costly and that constructive interaction is an alternative (Jacobson 2008: 70). In Trump administration’s view, Iran has to make a choice: whether to cease or persist in the policies that triggered the measures in the first place (Pompeo 2018 B). In hindsight, one should not forget that in the case of the USSR, embargoes were planned to diminish the system over time through the denial of key military capabilities rather than accelerating an instant relapse of strategy through punitive economic measures, as it is the case in regard to the US efforts toward Iran (Dassa Kaye & Lorber 2012: 55-56). In the Iranian case, the Trump

administration's decision to designate the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) can be seen as the most significant blow to the IRGC since it controls the nuclear program, ballistic missiles and regional policy and also controls large parts of Iranian economy. Founded as the Praetorian Guard shortly after the 1979 Revolution, the IRGC has evolved into a full-fledged conventional military that commands terrorist activities abroad. But it has also become an economic conglomerate, controlling nearly 40% of Iran's economy (FDD 2016).

5- Military Deterrence: Economic sanctions constitute only one pillar of the broader US maximum pressure campaign. Deterrence also plays an instrumental role in keeping Tehran's influence at bay (Pompeo 2018 B). The US as an extra-regional power but a dominant one in the Middle East Security complex has deployed more than 65,000 residual troops near Iranian borders, many of whom are stationed in about 30 military bases throughout the Middle East (McCarthy 2020; Wallin 2018: 3-18). The military overlay of the United States shows itself in the form of military bases in Middle-Eastern and Eastern Europe countries like Romania, Poland and Czech Republic and even in the Mediterranean and India Sea. America has established three missile defence systems around Iran: Missile shield in southern of Persian Gulf, US Missile defence in Europe and the Patriot system in Turkey close to Syria borders. Furthermore, the US has created a maritime coalition to deter any Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz (Cordesman 2020; Judson 2019; Dortch 2019). The US has, most likely, no intention of carrying out a military strike against Iran potentially because it is fully aware that Iran is different from Iraq and Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a very weak nation state and Iraq is a country with artificial national structure based on Shia/Sunni and Kurd/Arab heterogeneity inherited from the late Ottoman era (Gharayagh Zandi 2009: 95). Rather, the US is willing to refer Iran's case to the UN Security Council under three main pretexts of violations in relation to nuclear and ballistic missile program, rogue and malign behaviour and sponsoring terrorism and in so doing seeks to crank up maximum pressure and at the same time make necessary legal and international preparations to counter Iran militarily if need be. One of the key aims of the US military deterrence is to put Iran under immense pressure in order to force it to ignore the domestic problems and expend much of its energy and capital on foreign affairs. As such, domestic divisions and unrests on top of external US pressure could potentially lead to the collapse of the regime. The popular protests in 2009 in the wake of the fraudulent presidential elections and also the intermittent waves of protests erupting from early 2018 till now are the clear examples of this policy. Some of the US measurements for Iran's containment are briefly as follows: A) The attainment of the "Deal of The Century" initiative via securitising Iran as an immediate danger and presenting the Islamic Republic as the common enemy of the Arabs and Israelis. B) The renewal of the UN arms embargos and the activation of the "snapback mechanism" in line with the UNSC's 2231 Resolution. C) The prevention of the construction of gas and oil pipelines from Iran to India and Europe.

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech on the new Iran strategy clearly illustrates the novel measures taken by the US to exert maximum pressure against the Islamic Republic. In his speech, Pompeo spelled out twelve demands that Iran had to meet for the Trump administration to re-consider new negotiations with the regime (Pompeo 2018 A). The new aggressive approach demonstrates that the US does not want to simply contain Iran

through passive containment, but rather it is willing to implement an active and comprehensive containment strategy (roll-back) that covers not only nuclear related issues but also regional matters and ballistic missile program. Of paramount importance is that despite the imposition of “strongest ever US sanctions on Iran”, the White House has not declared regime change as an official policy line apparently because Washington does not want to forfeit the opportunity of direct talks with the regime. One can argue that in the view of Mike Pompeo and the US Special Representatives for Iran, severe economic hardship and probable subsequent irregular waves of protests in Iran are likely to leave Tehran in the end with no feasible option but to acquiesce to the list of twelve requirements that would need to be met for the US to hold talks with Iran. Following this line of thought, Iran’s repudiation of the US demands and its refusal to sit at the negotiating table with the Trump administration would, ipso facto, create an inescapable Catch-22 situation in which the Islamic Republic, at least from the US perspective, would face regime collapse in the face of maximum pressure.

Based on the knowledge the US administration have about the internal dynamics in Iran, it appears that Washington thinks there is still room for negotiations with Iran, so is the prospect of regime change given the recent outbursts of public protests. Nevertheless, as some analysts contend, in order to “maintain international pressure and congressional support for an aggressive policy, the US must remain open to negotiations even after it embraces regime change as a goal” (Edelman & Takeyh 2020). Woven into the foregoing arguments is the relevance of the role of the United States’ regional allies in aiding and abetting the Trump administration to effectively implement the maximum pressure campaign. As regards to the role and implications of polarity in the Middle East security complex, it must be emphasized that the Middle East is a multi-polar region with America as a major pole in this regional complex. Most of the members of the three sub-complexes with the MERSC define their national interests in line with the US policies. For example, the United Arab Emirates is a small country with low population but due to great oil and gas resources and deep ties with the US, the country has an important role within the security framework of Middle East. Saudi Arabia has also the same condition with much greater scales and also its influence and extension is more than that of the UAE. Turkey as an insulator and a NATO member is structurally connected with the West. “Although it had once ruled much of the Arab world as the heartland of the Ottoman Empire, from the 1920s onwards it largely turned its back on this past in order to pursue Ataturk’s Western-oriented vision of its future” (Buzan & Waever 2004: 187). Qatar is akin to the UAE but of course with some policy differences and with very close ties with NATO and Turkey. A key question here is where does Iran stand in this multi-polar regional security complex?

What is remarkable about Iran’s regional role is that the country as a member of the Persian Gulf sub-complex has in recent years made deep penetrations into the Levant sub-complex as attested to by Tehran’s military intervention in the Syrian Conflict since 2012. (Aghaie Joobani & Mousavipour 2015). When we look at Iran’s position in this multi-polar ordering of the Middle East, it becomes clear that due to its quest for hegemonic ambitions in the region, the Islamic Republic has a subject of intense US securitization. Looking at the Trump administration’s efforts to re-securitise the Iranian case, it can be argued that America is seeking, inter-alia, to place Iran at the centre of a strong pattern of securitization, thereby, as seen through the prism of Regional Security Complex theory, turn it into a buffer state.

Through the re-securitisation of Iran, intensifying geopolitical polarisation and building security alignments with Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel—all of which at the expense of Tehran's regional security interests, the US has maximised its concerted efforts to contain and further isolate Iran. Since isolation is an anti-security process performed against challenging actors, isolation and containment are taken together against development and expansionist projects of states. An actor needs influence and developing expansion to achieve its strategic goals. Without a doubt, other Middle Eastern states were also involved in securitization process. For instance, Iraq was subject to a somewhat similar process after the Persian Gulf War. Syria is also tussling with similar securitisation processes as the US cranks up efforts to weaken Syria via sanctions on the Assad's regime and prolonging the civil war. Overall, the Novel Regional Cold War is premised on a securitised competition between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia beside multiple axes of rivalry. The conversion of this relationship from rivals into enemies has happened in the last 17 years and has become the defining conflict shaping the MERSC. The Gulf sub-complex has illustrated an unprecedented potential to influence security dynamics in the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt) and the Maghreb (Libya and, to a lesser extent, Morocco and Tunisia), drawing regional non-Arab players (Turkey) and global powers (Russia, the US and several European countries such as France, Italy and the UK) into regional proxy wars, mainly in Syria, but also in Libya and Yemen (Santini 2017: 11).

Iran's Counter-Strategies vis-à-vis Maximum Pressure

Having discussed the intricacies and nuances of the Trump administration's maximum pressure doctrine, an important question arises as to what specific counter-strategies the Islamic Republic may have at its disposal to guarantee regime survival without having to give in to the US pressures or risk a major military conflict. These measures are as follows:

1- Increasing public diplomacy: The Islamic Republic has tried to deepen the divisions between the two sides of the Atlantic given the unilateral and neo-Monroeian approach of the Trump administration. In this context, the Islamic Republic has been cautious not to cease diplomatic and economic relations with the EU as part of efforts to avoid European sanctions. Furthermore, Iran has maintained ties with international organizations to possibly stymie the Snapback process and use the benefits of arms embargo which will soon expire under the 2231 Resolution. Also, the Hague International Court condemned the US sanctions and "Iran's lawyers said at the court hearing that the US sanctions were blanket measures that had strangled the Iranian economy, affecting ordinary citizens in all aspects of their lives" (BBC 2018). The Islamic Republic is endeavouring to exploit its network of influence in the West on both media and academia fronts to denounce sanctions in global media platforms and thereby portray itself as an oppressed victim of the US sanctions regime via its power of lobbyists and sympathizers (Ghasseminejad & Nader 2020).

2- Devising the resistance economy strategy: Iran's leaders have identified economic resurrection as a top priority for the regime. They fear that widespread social disappointment about economic opportunities could cause popular protests, akin to those that followed the 2009 presidential elections, and jeopardize the regime's survival. Having defined the

economic crisis as a national security problem, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared the “Economy of Resistance” doctrine as his “soft war” repercussion to embargoes, hence subordinating Iran’s economic policy to a national security doctrine. The Resistance Economy doctrine is designed to make the Iranian economy resistant to all external economic shocks in the long run, including to probable Western sanctions and international financial crises. Iran’s economic plans currently aim to build a “knowledge economy” based on information technology. Reforming the domestic financial market and inhibiting integration with the international economy serve to decrease vulnerability to international crises while establishing a self-sufficient system of capital stream (Toumaj 2014: 2). In this context, take for example Tehran’s use of national currencies for economic trading and commercial goods with countries such as Russia, China, India and Turkey. In Tehran’s view, this strategy can reduce the economic dependency of Iran and further consolidate economic independence as it has been the case since the 1979 Revolution. However, Rouhani and Khamenei appear to disagree on the degree to which Iran should be integrated into the international economy under the Resistance Economy doctrine (Toumaj 2014: 2).

3- Deepening ties with China and Russia: Buzan considers China as a reformist-revisionist power as Beijing accepts some of the international community institutions – particularly the financial ones – but resist to other institutions and try to reform them in a way that improve its position at the international stage (Buzan 2010: 29-30). The strategies of the “war on terror” and the US plans for democratizing the Middle East possibly through military intervention were deemed as a golden opportunity for China as it has caused the US, as the sole remaining superpower of the incumbent international system, to pay less attention to the rise of China (Mearsheimer 2011: 20). That is why, in 2011, the Obama administration pursued a “pivot” to East Asia, concentrating on the US diplomacy in this region as a means to counter-balance the growing power of China. Of particular note is that the Trump administration has also doubled down on this approach and that as of the writing of this article, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a situation in which the US-China strife looks less like a trade war and more like a “New Cold War” between the world’s two most powerful economies (Pillsbury 2020). The Islamic Republic is also trying to improve its relations with Russia. Putin is considering coping up with American dominance in line with Russian interests and perceive the support for anti-Western states such as Iran as a foreign policy priority. The Syrian Civil War has afforded Russia a unique opportunity to renew its hitherto lost position during the Cold War and possibly improve its relations not only with Syria but also with other Middle Eastern states. In this context, Iran’s cooperation with Russia can be seen as a clear example of Moscow-Tehran alliance to prop up Bashar al-Assad, albeit Israel has, owing to Russia’s green light, persistently started an aerial campaign against the IRGC-affiliated groups in Syria. What can be inferred from this observation is that the Trump administration’s maximum pressure policy, which has contributed to the Islamic Republic’s isolation, has ironically provided Russia and China with an opportunity to penetrate deeply into Iran. Furthermore, Iran’s efforts to establish stronger ties with China may pave the way for Beijing and Moscow to strengthen their footprints in the Levant and Persian Gulf sub-complexes. Nevertheless, it is important to be reminded of the fact that both China and Russia have proven to be unreliable trading partners. “Russia and China cooperate, but they also compete with each other. And while both have good relations with Iran, both

also have large and potentially restive Muslim populations, giving them reason to worry about the growth of Iranian power and influence” (Mandelbaum 2019).

4- Using the recent changes in Middle East to increase regional clout: Since the outbreak of the 2011 Arab Uprising, the balance of power in the Middle East has significantly changed. These transformations in the balance of power and the subsequent overthrow of a number of state leaders have not only exposed security problems in the regional environment but also have ushered in an era of fundamental changes in the regional security complex. The Islamic Republic tried to take advantage of the collapse of regimes to change the regional power balance in its own favour. In the Persian Gulf sub-complex, for example, Tehran sought to assist Qatar during the blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Some of Iran’s measures to use this period as an opportunity are as follows: increasing military presence in Syria and trying to establish permanent military bases, increasing support for terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah and providing material and logistic support for the Houthi militants in Yemen. Furthermore, the Islamic regime has a durable campaign to establish hegemony throughout the MERSC, export its revolutionary ideals, and threaten Israel and the West. Iran’s effort to build a land bridge across Syria and Iraq is related to a four decade-long proxy war that Iran is waging to follow its revolutionary agenda. Tehran has already unblocked one route to the Mediterranean and would gain real strategic benefits from consolidating control over this route and the others connecting Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Logistical paths are necessary too, but political and ideological homogenies serve as the cornerstone for the Axis of Resistance. Moreover, Iranian ambitions include hegemony in the Persian Gulf, not just those countries along the route of the land bridge (Adesnik, Ben Taleblu & McMaster 2019). As a result, one can argue that the Islamic Republic has struggled, despite the harassment of the US maximum pressure policy, to reinforce its position in the Persian Gulf sub-complex and expand its sphere of influence from the Persian Gulf to the Levant and Maghreb sub-complexes as evidenced by its continued support of Bashar al Assad and verbal backing of the Tripoli-based National Accord headed by Fayez al-Sarraj.

5- Buying time to see the results of US presidential elections: Tehran’s officials want to wait and see the final results of the US presidential elections in 2020 since they believe that time is on their side. They believe that President Trump will presumably lose the November election, and if Josef Biden, the Democratic candidate, gets elected, he will return to the JCPOA, largely follow his Democratic predecessor President Obama’s reconciliatory Iran strategy, and accordingly lift the trade embargoes on Iran. So, the Iranians may be hesitant to do anything that would upset this state of affairs (Rezaei 2020).

Conclusion

As has been discussed throughout this article, the US has long attempted to contain and isolate Iran. In a fundamental shift from the approach of the Obama administration, President Trump replaced the JCPOA with the “maximum pressure” campaign against the Islamic Republic. His administration has re-imposed all previous nuclear-related sanctions on Tehran and implemented the policy of the re-securitisation of the Islamic Republic. In order to

decipher the modus-operandi of the Trump administration in its pursuit of maximum pressure policy, we employed Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex theory to pinpoint regional patterns of rivalry, patterns of securitization, the problem of polarity, and patterns of amity and enmity between Tehran and Washington under the Trump administration. Afterwards, we drew a link between the RSC theory and George Kennan's containment policy to shed light on the various methods and tools of US foreign policy regarding Iran's containment as well as the Islamic Republic's counter-strategies to resist US pressure. As stated earlier, isolation is part of the maximum pressure strategy against the Islamic Republic. Reminiscent of the Reagan Doctrine, Trump's maximum pressure policy serves as a clear example of a somewhat similar containment policy the US had used against the Soviet Union in the Cold War. As Kennan formulated it in 1947, the goal was to persuade the Soviets and – now presumably the Islamic Republic – leadership to change its own behaviour so that there would be nothing left to contain. Arguably, the Trump administration wants to abandon the prevalent goal in US-Iran relations, i.e. containing Iran's power and turn to a comprehensive objective of rolling Iran's power back to its territorial boundaries. to rephrase it, the administration seeks to check and roll back Iran's regional expansion (Albarasneh & Koleilat Khatib 2019: 12).

In a similar vein, the maximum pressure strategy pursues three goals at three main levels. In the short-term, it aims to achieve the "Maximum Degradation" of the Islamic Republic by depriving it of much-needed funds and resources to pursue its nuclear, military and regional strategy in the MERSC. In the mid-term, it seeks to change the strategic behaviour of the Islamic Republic through a comprehensive treaty that will address the ballistic missiles, nuclear program and regional policy through Pompeo's twelve requirements which would be ratified by the US Senate to guarantee its endurance under different US administrations in the future (Ben Taleblu, Dubowitz & Gerecht 2019). In the long term, Trump's Iran policy aims in reality to change the Iranian regime through weakening the Islamic Republic's security apparatus and giving material support for opposition voices and protestors inside Iran. But with the use of "Selective Ambiguity" tactics, the US shuns from overtly calling for regime change as an official policy as the US Congress and the administration have not ruled out the possibility of talks with Tehran.

Trump's policy has already delivered results; it has stagnated the Iranian economy considerably and deprived it of acquiring enough resources – particularly financial resources – to fund its regional and military ambitions and further its nuclear program. Iran's economy has shrunk by 7% in 2019, after having contracted by 4% in 2018. Inflation is more than 40% and the Iranian currency Rial has lost 40% of its value against the USD this year and 20% since early June, driven by trade disruptions and corruption (World Bank 2019; Rome 2020). Also, the Islamic Republic has faced acute domestic unrests as sporadic waves of protest emerged from January 2018 until the present time. For example, in November 2019, popular protests erupted in more than 100 Iranian cities over a weekend in protest against abrupt fuel price hikes. The Iranian regime imposed a total internet black-out and killed 1500 of protesters in what was referred to as the deadliest uprising since the 1979 Revolution (Maloney 2019). Also, at the regional level, the US was successful to deter Tehran's aggression throughout the MERSC. Beyond the internal troubles of Iran, serious waves of protests also erupted in Lebanon and Iraq against Tehran's influence and its sectarian Shia

proxies such as Hezbollah and Hash al-Shaabi. The US also assassinated Iran's chief IRGC Commander General Qassem Soleimani without facing any visible repercussions for it or receiving a proportional response from the Islamic Republic.

Moreover, the Islamic Republic has lost considerable military prestige by targeting the Ukrainian civilian airplane and accidentally hitting Iran's own military support ship Konarak in a friendly fire. These incidents lay bare the low level of proficiency of the Iranian armed forces during crisis times (CNN 2020 & BBC 2020). A long-term approach would concentrate on forming a consensus among the US allies regarding the need to execute the Victory Strategy. Accordingly, the US would dissuade Russia and China from stepping in to keep the Iranian regime alive. It would interrupt the supply-chain of strategic materials Iran needs to promote its nuclear and military capabilities. The US would also compel Iran to fight hard to preserve its influence in the Middle East and simultaneously pressing the Iranian economy in every feasible method. Such a strategy would almost certainly induce the Islamic Republic back in on itself, cease and reverse its march toward regional dominance, deepen divisions within the regime leadership and between the people and the state, and potentially, over time, and in a uniquely Iranian way, lead to a change in the nature of the regime (Kagan 2018). A better understanding of the containment strategy suggests that a different mix of policy tools may be necessary to neutralize and effectively "mellow" Iranian behaviour over time (Dassa Kaye & Lorber 2012: 59). If the US decides to designate the maximum pressure as the "Constant Maximum Pressure Strategy", it is likely that the policy can bear its intended results in the mid to long terms, particularly given the fact that Islamic Republic does not hold any proportional advantage over the US in almost every metric and elements of power.

References

Adesnik, David, Ben Taleblu, Behnam, Lieutenant General McMaster, Herbert (2019) *Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean, Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>

Aghaie Joobani, Hossein & Mostafa, Mousavipour (2015) Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Moving Towards Strategic Synergy in the Middle East?, *Strategic Analysis*, 39 (2), pp. 141-155.

Aghaie Joobani, Hossein and Umut Can Adisönmez (2018) Turkey's Volte-Face Politics: Understanding the AKP's Securitization Policy toward the Syrian Conflict, *New Middle Eastern Studies* 8 (1), pp. 42-62.

Akhbari, Mohammad, Abdi, Aattollah, & Mokhtari, Hossein (2011) Mogheyiate Geopolitic-e Iran va Talash-haye Amrika Baraye Tasbite Hegemony-e Khod Dar Jahan (Motale-eye Morediye Tarhe Khavarmiyane Bozorg), *Human Geography Researches Journal*, 43 (75), pp. 87-112. <https://www.sid.ir/fa/journal/ViewPaper.aspx?id=126454>

Ayman Saleh Albarasneh & Dania Koleilat Khatib (2019) The US policy of containing Iran – from Obama to Trump 2009–2018, *Global Affairs*, DOI: 10.1080/23340460.2019.1701951

Ayoob, Mohammed (1999) From Regional System to Regional Society: Exploring Key Variables in the Construction of Regional Order, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 53 (3), pp. 247-260.

BBC (2020) “Iran navy 'friendly fire' incident kills 19 sailors in Gulf of Oman”, 11 May. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52612511>

BBC (2018) “International Court of Justice orders US to ease Iran sanctions”, 3 October. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45729397>

Ben Taleblu, Behnam, Dubowitz, Mark & Gerecht, Reuel Marc (2019) *What “Yes” With Iran Looks Like*, FDD, June 26, 2019. <https://www.fdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/fdd-report-what-yes-with-iran-looks-like.pdf>

Berman, Ilan (2019) Reforming U.S. Persian Language Media: A Preliminary Assessment, *American Foreign Policy Council*, Iran Strategy Brief No. 13, April. https://www.afpc.org/uploads/documents/Iran_Strategy_Brief_No_13.pdf

Blake, Aaron (2020) As Trump Claims a Win on Iran, He Accuses Obama of Funding its Attacks, *Washington Post*, 8 January. https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fpolitics%2f2020%2f01%2f08%2ftrump-claims-win-iran-he-accuses-obama-funding-its-attacks%2f

Buzan, Barry & Waever, Ole (2004) *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press)

Buzan, Barry (2010) China in international society: is peaceful rising possible?, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3 (1), pp. 5–36.

Buzan, Barry, (1991) *People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (ECPR Press; 1st edition)

Buzan, Barry, Waever, Ole, Wilde, Jaap de (1997) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers; UK Edition).

Cafiero, Giorgio (2019) Israel’s PKK-YPG Kurdish Connections, *Inside Arabia*, Nov 21. <https://insidearabia.com/israels-pkk-ypg-kurdish-connections/>

Clive Christie (1976) Great Britain, China and the Status of Tibet, 1914–21, *Modern Asian Studies*, 10, pp 481-508, DOI:10.1017/S0026749X0001492X

CNN (2020), “Iran admits to shooting down Ukrainian passenger plane unintentionally”, January 11. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/10/middleeast/iran-plane-crash-intl-hnk/index.html>

Cook, Steven (2020) The Only Sensible Iran Strategy Is Containment, *Foreign Policy*, January 29. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/29/iran-strategy-containment-suleimani-trump-nuclear-deal/>

Cordesman, Anthony (2020) The Gulf and the Challenge of Missile Defence: Net Assessment Indicators, *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, February 24. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/gulf-and-challenge-missile-defense-net-assessment-indicators>

Cummings, William (2020) Secretary of State Pompeo blames current tension with Iran on 'Obama administration's appeasement, *USA Today*, January 7, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/05/pompeo-blames-obama-iran-situation/2818151001/>

Dassa Kaye, Dalia & Lorber, Eric (2012) Containing Iran: What Does It Mean, *Middle-East Policy Journal*, 19 (1), pp. 51-63

Dehghani, Seyed Jalal (2004) The Greater Middle East Plan and the Islamic Republic of Iran's National Security, *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 7 (25), pp. 475-500. http://quarterly.risstudies.org/article_1018.html

Dortch, Jaleah (2019) UAE joins naval security coalition in the Gulf, *Defense News*, September 20. <https://www.defensenews.com/news/your-military/2019/09/20/uae-joins-naval-security-coalition-in-the-gulf/>

Edelman, Eric & Takeyh, Ray (2020) The Next Iranian Revolution: Why Washington Should Seek Regime Change in Tehran, *Foreign Affairs*, April 14, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-04-13/next-iranian-revolution>

Eyvazov, Jannatkhan, (2011) Some Aspects of the Theory of Regional Security Complexes as Applied to Studies of the Political System in the Post-Soviet Space, *Journal of Central Asia & The Caucasus*, (12) 2, pp. 17-24.

FDD Study (2016) Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Benefits Most from Iran Deal, October 5, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2016/10/05/fdd-study-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-benefits-most-from-iran-deal/>

Feltman, Jeffrey et al (2019) The New Geopolitics of the Middle East: America's Role in a Changing Region, *Brookings*. January. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FP_20190107_new_geopolitics_of_mena_final.pdf

Frazier, Derrick, Stewart-Ingersoll, Robert (2010) Regional powers and security: A framework for understanding order within regional security complexes, *European Journal of International Relations*, 16 (4), pp. 731-753.

Gaddis, John Lewis (2001) Strategies of Containment, Past and Future, *Hoover Institution*, April 30, <https://www.hoover.org/research/strategies-containment-past-and-future>

Gause, F. Gregory (2019) Should We Stay or Should we Go? The United States and the Middle East, *Survival Journal*, 61 (5), pp. 7-24.

Gharayagh Zandi, Davoud (2009) Bush Second Term Administration's Foreign Policy Towards IRI: The Containment Policy (2004-8), *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 12 (43), pp. 83-118. http://quarterly.risstudies.org/article_919_en.html

Ghasseminejad, Saeed & Nader, Alireza (2020) Who Runs Iran's Propaganda Machine Abroad, *Radio, Farda*, April 17, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/who-runs-iran-s-propaganda-machine-abroad/30561872.html>

Hudson, Michael (2013) Geopolitical Shifts: Asia Rising, America Declining in the Middle East?, *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, 6 (3), pp. 458-466.

Jacobson, Michael (2008) Sanctions against Iran: A Promising Struggle, *Washington Quarterly*, 31 (3), pp. 69-88.

Judson, Jen (2019) US Army terminal missile defense system is headed to Eastern Europe, *Defense News*, April 11. <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2019/04/11/us-army-terminal-missile-defense-system-is-headed-to-eastern-europe/>

Kagan, Frederick (2018) Can we pursue a victory strategy against Iran?, *Commentary Magazine*, August 15. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/frederick-kagan/can-pursue-victory-strategy-iran/>

Kemp, Geoffrey & Robert Harkavy (1997) *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

Kennan, George (1946) The Long Telegram, 22 February, *National Security Archive*, The George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

Kennan, George (1947) Article X; The Sources of Soviet Conduct, *Foreign Affairs*, 5 July. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>

Lake, David, & Morgan, Patrick (1997) *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania State University Press).

Mahpishanian, Mahsa (2011) Diplomacy Omoumi Abzare Amperyalism Farhangy-e Amrika Dar Khavarmiyane, *Journal of Soft Power Studies*, 1 (1), pp. 119-160. <https://www.sid.ir/fa/journal/ViewPaper.aspx?id=171746>

Maloney, Suzanne (2017) The Roots and Evolution of Iran's Regional Strategy, *Atlantic Council*. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The_Roots_and_Evolution_of_Irans_Regional_Strategy_web_0928.pdf

Maloney, Suzanne (2019) Iranian protesters strike at the heart of the regime's revolutionary legitimacy, *Brookings Institution*, November 19,. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/19/iranian-protesters-strike-at-the-heart-of-the-regimes-revolutionary-legitimacy/>

Mandelbaum, Michael (2019) The New Containment; Handling Russia, China and Iran, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-02-12/new-containment>

McCarthy, Niall (2020) Where U.S. Troops Are Based in the Middle East, *Statista*, January 6. <https://www.statista.com/chart/9727/where-us-troops-are-based-in-the-middle-east/>

McIntosh, Christopher & Storey, Ian (2019) Would terrorists set off a nuclear weapon if they had one? We shouldn't assume so, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 20. <https://thebulletin.org/2019/11/would-terrorists-set-off-a-nuclear-weapon-if-they-had-one-we-shouldnt-assume-so/>

Mclean, Wayne (2015) Regional Security Complex Theory and Insulator States: The Case of Turkey, *Researcher Gate*, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Wayne_Mclean/publication/265230745_Regional_Security_Complex_Theory_and_Insulator_States_The_Case_of_Turkey/links/56217be208aea35f2681bb1c/Regional-Security-Complex-Theory-and-Insulator-States-The-Case-of-Turkey.pdf

McSweeney, Bill (1999) *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press).

Mearsheimer, John (2011) Imperial by Design, *The National Interest*, No. 111, Jan/Feb 2011. <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Imperial-by-Design.pdf>

Mehr News Agency (2019) "US, Israel trying to re-securitise Iran: FM spox", July 14. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/147614/US-Israel-trying-to-re-securitize-Iran-FM-spox>

Milani, Abbas (2005) US Foreign Policy and the Future of Democracy in Iran, *The Washington Quarterly*, 28 (3), pp. 41-56.

Nasr, Vali & Takeyh, Ray (2008) The Costs of Containing Iran, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2008-01-01/costs-containing-iran>

Pillsbury, Michael (2020) "A New Cold War with China?", *The Institute of World Politics*, April 23. <https://www.iwp.edu/press-releases/2020/04/23/prof-michael-pillsbury-discusses-a-new-cold-war-with-china/>

Pollack, Kenneth (2018) Pushing Back Against Iran in Syria, Tehran's Vietnam, *Newsweek*, February 14, 2018. <https://www.newsweek.com/pushing-back-against-iran-syria-tehrans-vietnam-806775>

Pompeo, Michael (2018) After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy, Remarks, Secretary of State, *The Heritage Foundation*, Washington DC, May 21, <https://www.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/>

Pompeo, Michael (2018) Confronting Iran; The Trump Administration's Strategy, *Foreign Affairs*, November. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>

Rezaei, Farhad (2020) Experts blame Israel for the recent explosions. Why won't Iran?, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 23. <https://thebulletin.org/2020/07/experts-blame-israel-for-the-recent-explosions-why-wont-iran/>

Rome, Henry (2020) Maximum Pressure May Bring Iran Back to the Table After All, *Foreign Policy*, August 13. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/13/iran-maximum-pressure-trump-negotiating-table/>

Ruth Hanau, Santini (2017) A New Regional Cold War in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Security Complex Theory Revisited, *The International Spectator*, DOI: 10.1080/03932729.2017.1371487

Sadjadpour, Karim (2010) The Sources of Iranian Conduct, *Foreign Policy*, October. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/10/12/the-sources-of-soviet-iranian-conduct/>

The World Bank (2019) Iran's Economic Update - April 2019. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/publication/economic-update-april-2020>

Toumaj, Amir (2014) Iran's Economy of Resistance: Implications for Future Sanctions, *The Critical Threats Project of the American Enterprise Institute*, November. https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/imce-imagesToumajA_Irans-Resistance-Economy-Implications_november2014-1.pdf

Wallin, Matthew (2018) U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East, *American Security Project*, June. <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf>

Wolf, Albert (2020) Strategies of Retrenchment: Rethinking America's Commitments to the Middle East, *Comparative Strategy*, 39 (1), pp. 94-100.

About the Authors

Hossein Aghaie Joobani is a PhD Candidate at the Department of International Relations, Dokuz Eylül University, Turkey. He holds a Master's Degree in Political Science with a major focus on International and European Relations from Linköping University, Sweden. His research interests are mostly in the areas of security studies with a major concentration on the Middle Eastern affairs, namely Iran-Turkey-Russia and Iran-US relations. He serves as a contributing editor in the peer-reviewed journal *Asian Politics & Policy*. His research has featured in academic journals and websites such as *Asian Politics & Policy*, *New Middle Eastern Studies*, *Strategic Analysis*, *International Policy Digest*, *IRAM Center*, *Anadolu News Agency*. He frequently appears as a geopolitical analyst on the London-based *BBC Persian TV Channel*, *Iran International TV* and the Prague-based *Radio Free Europe (RFE/RL)*. Email: hossainaghaie@gmail.com.

Mohammadhossein Daheshvar holds a Master's Degree in International Relations with a major focus on Middle East studies from Tehran University and a B.A in Political Science from Allameh Tabatabaie University in Iran. His research interests include Middle Eastern studies, Political Economy, US-Iran relations and security/ defence studies. Email: mhdaheshvar2014@gmail.com.