

# FORECAST OF IRAN-US CONFLICT: A THEORETICAL MODEL

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## Abstract

*Since the Islamic revolution, Iran is viewed in the West as a terrorism-supporting state. This view is propagated by the US to counter Iran's efforts to attain regional supremacy. For preserving its sovereignty in the face of growing threats, Iran is trying to develop its nuclear capability, by virtue of which it could attain regional hegemony. Iranian intention of dominance in the region is viewed as a potential threat to regional peace by the West, especially by the US. To counter it, the US has placed economic sanctions and an embargo on Iran. In this paper, different theory models are used to interpret the core issue of tension between both countries and the current situation of the crisis. Furthermore, the political and economic aspects of the conflict are presented. The analysis provides various possible policy choices for Iran and analyses the consequences of each choice.*

**Key Words:** *Iran, US, Game Theory, Power Transition Theory, WMD, IOR*

## Introduction

The continuing rift between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States shows the central absurdity of the US policy towards the Persian Gulf region. The main US concern about Iran is based on three main factors: first, Iran is supporting terrorism; second, Iran is pursuing nuclear enrichment (to develop weapons

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of mass destruction); and third, Iran is interfering aggressively in the peace process of the region (especially, meddling in the Middle Eastern region). Not only this, but the US is also concerned about the human rights of minorities in Iran because there is a theocratic government in Iran.<sup>1</sup>

From a geopolitical standpoint, the Persian Gulf is a buffer zone detaching Iran from its (resource-rich) neighbourhood and strategically positioning it in an ideal zone. Contrary to the traditional approach of occupying resources, countries now tend to follow the Chinese 'strings of pearl policy'. Iran is building a strong naval presence with the help of its allies in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf (especially the Strait of Hormuz, which is already under Iran's control). Since all the major Asian trade routes are passing through the Indian Ocean, the US is increasing its naval presence in the Gulf region to counter Iran with the help of its allies and reduce its supremacy in the region. The constant Iranian struggle for uranium enrichment and intervention pushed the US to increase its rhetoric and action against the Iranian regime. The main objective of this paper is to understand the root cause of tension between Iran and the US and explore the deep interests of the US and Iran in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. This paper also explores the invisible and visible supporting actors who are playing an important role in this conflict and have brought a change in the magnitude of the conflict.

### **Historical Overview**

The US had remained more inclined towards the south and south-west Asian region. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Iran was a close ally of the US. This support was a part of their grand strategy to monopolize Iranian oil. However, in 1979, major internal unrest by radical Islamic groups erupted in Iran to end US influence. Since then, relations between both countries have remained very hostile with events like the US embassy hostage crisis and the shooting

down of an Iranian Air flight. The US is still concerned about the potential influence of radical Iran as a regional power.<sup>2</sup>

After the Second World War, Iran became more important to the US because it was sharing its border with the Soviet Union, which was a US Cold War adversary and, secondly, Iran was a powerful player in the oil-rich area. This pushed the US to change its foreign policy towards it.<sup>3</sup> History shows that the US actively participated in the external and internal affairs of Iran. The US secretly supported Iran's Shah and with the help of intelligence and the Iranian military, it deposed the then prime minister of Iran M Mossadegh who was elected in 1951 and was known as an architect of the Iranian energy nationalization drive. As a result of this support by the US to the Shah of Iran, it joined the Baghdad Pact (backed by the US) called CENTO (Central Treaty Organization) just to hold off the expansionist designs of the Soviets in 1955. Because of the US alliance, Shah confronted violent opposition from those who were opposed to his autocratic rule and forced westernization. As a result, Shah exiled one of the leading figures of the opposition Imam Khomeini to Turkey and then Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Khomeini, however, returned to Iran in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, in which the revolutionaries, inter alia, took 63 Americans hostage at the US embassy and started protesting for Shah's return to Iran from his asylum in Egypt to face trial. Due to the hostage crisis, the US cut its diplomatic ties with Iran and imposed sanctions on the country. In 1980, Iraq backed by the US, invaded Iran. Finally, on the day of Reagan's inauguration in 1981, the US freed almost \$8 billion of frozen Iranian assets and the US hostages were released after 444 days. In 1985-86, senior officials of the Reagan administration secretly shipped arms to the Khomeini government through Israel supposedly in exchange for Iran's assistance in freeing American hostages held by the Hezbollah militants in Lebanon because Iran was subject to an arms embargo. The plan was to use the proceeds from the sale to fund a Nicaraguan rebel group, the

Contras. The transaction was investigated by the US Congress subsequently and came to be known as the 'Iran-Contra affair' or the 'Iran-Contra scandal'. In the last decade, relations between the US and Iran worsened because of trade and oil sanctions on Iran by US President Bill Clinton on allegations of Iran's support to terrorists and seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). With every passing year, the US increased sanctions and penalised the firms investing \$40 million or more per year in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Since the early 2000s, relations between both countries worsened owing to US allegations that Iran was engaged in developing WMDs, even though Iran repeatedly denied its involvement in nuclear proliferation. During 2015, the conflict turned into a standoff when the matter was temporarily settled by the landmark nuclear agreement named Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>6</sup>

### **Theoretical Framework**

Many researchers have the view that the zero-sum game can better explain the core issue of the US-Iran conflict. The game theory is a mathematical representation or a model of conflict, cooperation, and negotiation between individuals, groups, or organizations, and governments.<sup>7</sup> John von Neumann and John Nash propounded the game theory. They described the game theory as a 'zero-sum game'. It is a mathematical image of a situation in which each contributor's gain or loss is exactly adjusted by the gain and loss of the other. Key pioneers suggest game theory as a science of strategy (from a military perspective), whereas, in international relations, game theory is the most favourable decision-making process of sovereign and contending actors or states in a strategic framework where actors or states should take an action to get the best outcome for themselves on the losses of others (during the conflict).<sup>89</sup>

Iran is rich in minerals and oil. According to Organski, the international system is based on hierarchical order means. The

leading power will maintain and create the international arrangement according to the growth level of states. He presented the power transitional theory in the late 1950s. He described that just because of a bumpy growth rate new powers are emerging and when they reach or go beyond the dominant power, hostilities could ensue, which could escort the world into a new international/hierarchical order.<sup>10</sup> Ancient Greek states of Athens and Sparta in 431 BC are a classic example of this case.<sup>11</sup>

### **Causes of conflict**

Major causes of conflict between these two states are listed below:

#### **Regional dominance**

The first and foremost cause of conflict is regional dominance. The Persian Gulf region provokes both Iran and the US to interfere in different states of the region overtly and covertly because of its resources and strategic importance.

#### **Iran's role in Yemen:**

Iran is interested to influence Yemen because of its geographic location. Yemen is located near the strategic international corridor from where Iran can control trade in the strait of Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden. This is the main link that connects the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf through the Suez Canal and is also considered as the main waterway to the world's oil region.<sup>12</sup> In March 2015, the crisis in Yemen arose when nine Sunni Arab states including Saudi Arabia (backed by the US, UK, and France) started airstrikes against the Houthi rebels, to reinstate Hadi's government (the then president).<sup>13</sup> A coalition led by Sunni Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes stating that they were defending the legitimate government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi against the Shia Houthis after the rebel forces positioned themselves in the capital Sanaa. The rebel group emerged as an opposition to the Yemeni

President and military whom they charged with corruption with the backing of Arab states and the US at the expense of Yemen's sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

According to Saudi Arabia, Iran is helping the Houthis with weaponry and logistical assistance, whereas Iran has denied this accusation. However, signs of Iranian involvement in supporting Houthis via arms and ammunition grew in 2012. In 2013, the Yemeni navy in collaboration with the US navy, seized Jihan I—an Iranian ship that was carrying about 40 tons of military supplies including rockets, missiles, ammunition, grenades, and explosives planned for the Houthis. Iranian Revolutionary Guard was also tracked by the US providing financial assistance as well as training to the Shia Houthis.<sup>15</sup> According to a report, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen has cost its exchequer around \$6 billion a month, while Iran's expenditures in Yemen probably totalled only millions a year.<sup>16</sup>

### **Iran's Role in Syria**

Russia and Iran have long supported Assad's regime. In the beginning, Iran restricted its involvement in providing financial and technical assistance to the Syrian government. The Hezbollah attack in July 2006 at Israeli border towns in which eight IDF soldiers were killed and 2 kidnapped,<sup>17</sup> soon after that the then foreign minister of Iran visited Damascus to express Iran's support for Syria, which shows greater coordination between these two states.<sup>18</sup> By late 2013, Russia had steadily started assisting Syria in terms of providing equipment and training to the Syrian army before its direct intervention on 30 September 2015 to support the government,<sup>19</sup> while at the same time Iran and Hezbollah increased their assistance in the form of physical presence on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

The US was hesitant to get involved in the Syrian conflict, but it had to interfere due to two main reasons: first, because it wanted to punish Assad's regime for using chemical weapons in

Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 causing 80 deaths and hundreds of injuries from nerve gas. Second, because of the existence of militant groups like ISIS.<sup>21</sup> The US role in Syria was also to support its ally Saudi Arabia, which supported Syrian Sunnis.

### **Role of Saudi Arabia**

Since the invasion of Iraq by the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran have been engaged in a continuous rivalry over influence and power in the region. The hegemonic designs are extensively marked by revolutionary ideologies, sectarianism, oil prices, and competition over regional dominance and attitudes towards the military presence of the US in the Gulf region. Ever since the Islamic Republic of Iran has pursued an independent foreign policy against the West, it was pitted against the United States in particular as well as other pro-Western countries including Saudi Arabia. There is a clear sectarian dimension of this contention as well. However, the petromonarchies of KSA and other Gulf countries are viewed in Iran as superficial entities established by the colonial powers as a part of their regional policies. Such entities, according to Iranian perception, are unable to survive without external support. In Iran, the KSA leaders are seen as hand-puppets of the United States just to facilitate 'imperial- Zionist designs' in the region. The US aims to contain the rise of Iran by generating the support of the KSA based on sectarianism. The KSA has also expressed its support for foreign-based militants working against Iranian Shia. Iranian government agencies have blamed Saudi Arabia for the terrorist attacks in 2017 in Tehran.

Furthermore, 40% of oil exports of the world pass through the Strait of Hormuz that is controlled by Iran so the condition in the Gulf remains extremely volatile.<sup>22</sup> The whole situation is a game of power projection between Iran and Saudi Arabia or Shia vs. Sunni in the region.

### **Nuclear Regime**

There has been a continuous conflict between the US and Iran since Iranian Revolution in 1979. The situation became more challenging when the US found the Iranian plans of nuclear enrichment. But the controversy worsened after an Iranian group in exile, the National Council of Resistance Iran (NCRI), uncovered their activities connected to nuclear enrichment program in 2002. The information was later found correct as Iran was enriching nuclear facilities at *Arak* and *Natanz*. According to the US officials, they were aware of some activities, however, the fact of uranium enrichment was unknown to the International Atomic Energy Commission (IAEA).<sup>23</sup> Then, the top US Officials repetitively indicated that there might be an option of a military strike against Iran to stop the country from uranium enrichment.<sup>24</sup> However, the US government, at least until the term of President Trump, took a conciliatory approach. Rather, the US put forward a milder response which is further assisted by its European allies. Oman smoothed the talks between P5 + 1 (US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany). The result of talks conducted in 2013 was the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action-JCPOA between Iran and P5 + 1 (aka E3 + 3) on 14 July 2015. The agreement ended the long concerns of the world over the nuclear program of Iran.<sup>25</sup> The US has enforced a number of sanctions against Iran keeping into consideration the resolutions by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). UNSC passed a resolution on 20 July 2015 where it has also requested the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to undertake necessary actions to monitor and verify Iran's commitment as well as nuclear intentions under JCPOA.<sup>26</sup> IAEA submitted its reports. As a result, all previously imposed sanctions were terminated. However, even after so much input regarding efforts to curtail the Iranian nuclear enrichment process, the US failed to stop Iran and its enrichment program. Later President Donald Trump had also criticized JCPOA during his presidential campaigns. He termed



the deal as “defective at its core” and the “worst deal ever.” He strongly condemned the sunset clause of the agreement which permitted Iran to undergo nuclear enrichment program after 2025.<sup>27</sup> This was the main reason why the US withdrew from JCPOA. However, Iran’s enrichment programme is still going on, according to some observers.<sup>28</sup>

### **Terrorism**

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran and the US have seen repeated tensions due to terrorism allegations as well. In 1984, the US Department of State labelled Iran as a country that sponsors terrorism following the Beirut Barracks Bombing that killed 241 US military personnel. Since Vietnam War, it was the highest death toll in a day for US armed forces. Islamic Jihad took the responsibility for the attack that was thought to be a front for Hezbollah. During his 2002 address, President George W Bush also described Iran, along with North Korea and Iraq, as a part of the ‘axis of evil’ owing to an allegation of pursuing weapons of mass destruction while exporting terrorism to other countries.<sup>29</sup> In response to the terrorism allegations, the Iranian government stopped secret missions with the US that were targeted to capture Al- Qaeda operatives. The invasion of Iraq by the US forces and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein government in 2003 was considered a bonus for expansionist Iran, according to the US army. Withdrawal from JCPOA during the Trump administration also marked the new beginning of military escalation between the US and Iran. The Trump administration also designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). This was the first time when the US categorized another country’s governing body as an FTO. In this regard, Qassem Soleimani, the commander of IRGC’s Force was also killed in 2020 with a drone strike. The United States also blamed Iran for the repetitive attacks on oil tankers and commercial ships in 2019 near the Strait of Hormuz as well as

attacks on Saudi oil fields while calling Iran a nation for promoting terrorism.

### **Dominance in the Indian Ocean**

The well-known naval strategist Alfred T Mahan writes in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon*

*History*, "Whoever rules the waves rules the world."<sup>30</sup> Over the decades, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has become the centre point of the most powerful global activity owing to multiple reasons. Around 80 per cent of the world's trade goes through this region, which also offers a key route for oil trade all over the world through the Persian Gulf.<sup>31</sup>

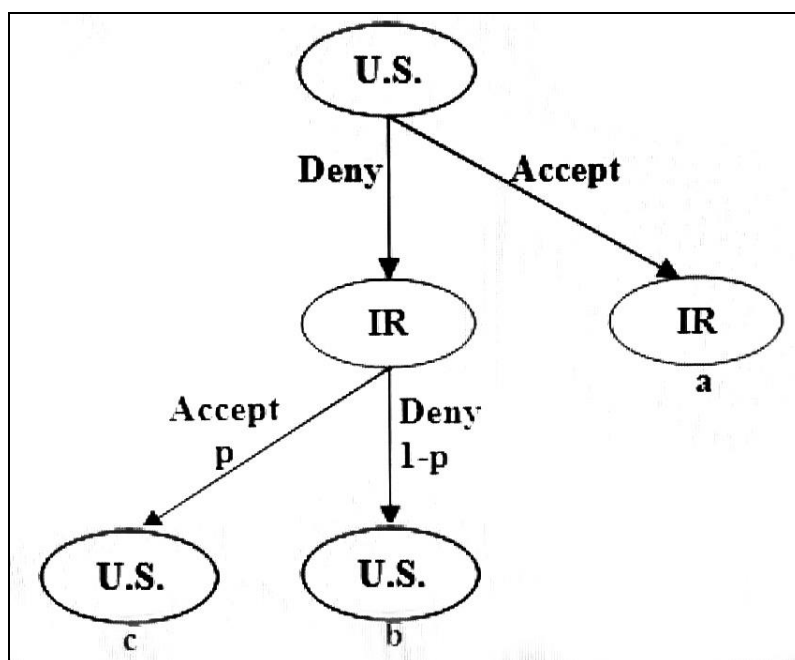
Iranian watercourses, especially the Strait of Hormuz (between Iran and Oman), serves as a political means to deal with other major powers of the world, mainly with the US owing to escalating tensions on the nuclear regime of Iran, the Iranian government cautioned the US that if it did not allow Iran for oil export, it would close the Strait of Hormuz. Although Iran has never tried to close this strait, there still is a possibility of a naval blockade if Iran feels a security threat. Any attempt by Iran to disrupt oil shipment from this region may bring adverse effects on the international oil market.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the US had a strategic port deal with Oman (Duqm and Salalah) that will permit US military entry to the Gulf region and also decrease the need for the Strait of Hormuz for trade, which is a maritime chokepoint of Iran.<sup>33</sup> Just to counter this and any future escalation, the US has been maintaining a permanent naval base in Bahrain, named Naval Support Activity, and an airbase in Qatar (Al-Udeid Airbase).<sup>34</sup>

### **Analysis**

Power transition theory is a power struggle theory and this theory can best explain the root cause of this conflict, which is the struggle for becoming a regional power. In international politics, the US is basically at the top of the hierarchical order and aims to

maintain this hierarchical arrangement. The US wants to maintain its dominance and does not want another power in the international power system. If we go through the causes of conflict, both countries are intervening in the region just to attain regional dominance (not only for now but also for their future benefit). Iran is intervening in the region directly and indirectly by funding different proxies like Hezbollah, Houthis, etc., and wants an old monarchy system in the region. On the other hand, in the response of Iran, the US is supporting opponent countries, which include some strong allies like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt against groups that are getting support from Iran. The US has also started investing in GCC states, which will maintain a stronghold of the US in this region and not let Iran achieve its goal of regional dominance in this region.



On the other hand, according to game theory, one party wins at the cost of the other party. In the last few years, the US is

pushing Iran to listen to and accept its demands, whereas until now Iran is denying its requests to scale down nuclear enrichment. Just because of this denial, Iran is facing a number of economic sanctions imposed by the US. The US has also listed Iranian government forces in the FTO. Other major powers, like Russia and China, are also supporting Iran. We see that the US's strong ally Saudi Arabia is also against Iran because of its regional intervention and sectarian difference.

This model gives a better explanation of the future of the Iran-US conflict, which is closer to reality as compared to other regular models. It also gives a better reflection of how states involve and behave in reality. If Iran accepts US demands then the US will be a winner and Iran will lose its dominance in the region whereas if Iran remains stubborn and does not accept US demands, the US will use other means as it had done before, i.e., withdrawal of JCOPA and increasing sanctions on third parties. If this happens, the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) of Iran will be affected badly. Not only this, but there is also a chance of a direct US strike on Iran's strategic assets. The US is maintaining a large air presence and facilities in both Qatar (Al-Udeid airbase) and on the island of Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean.<sup>35</sup> For its survival, Iran will have to accept the US demand and, in this way, in the end, the US may become the winner, however, if Iran refuses the US demands then, perhaps in the future, the US may forcefully push Iran, as many officials speak of a military strike.

The US has been strategically targeting Iran's strategic assets who have played a key role in Iran's military strength and dominance in the region. These events show that the US has been a winner at the loss of Iran. Some of the most recent examples of these events in the last decade include assassinations of four Iranian nuclear scientists between 2010 and 2012, a drone attack on the border area of Iran, in 2019; a cyber-attack on the Iranian weapon system employed for controlling rocket and missile launchers and earlier this year on 3

January 2020, a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport targeted and killed Iranian major general Qassem Soleimani. In all these cases, without initiating an invasion, the US has inflicted major damage to Iran's ability to make rapid progress in regional dominancy and has strategically targeted as well as removed the individuals who were key to increasing Iran's influence outside its borders.

## **Conclusion**

Iran and the US are both struggling for dominance in the Middle East, which is obvious from their regional intervention. Power struggle in the Gulf region has its reasons, both economic and political. Iran's nuclear enrichment program is a key contention with game players and with the stakeholders within the region and outside. However, the core issue of conflict between Iran and the US remains to be regional dominance. Iran's intention to dominate the region is taken as aggression by the US, which is shown by its decision of putting economic sanctions on Iran. The US remains defiant to maintain its supremacy in world politics, while Iran is keen to maintain its place in the region as well as in international politics. Saudi Arabia (a strong ally of the US) wants its dominance in the Arab region and has provided logistical and financial support to Sunni forces in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, Iran provided arms and financial support to Shia proxies in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon which has led to prolonged wars for one decade killing thousands of people and destroying the infrastructure in these countries. Iranian intervention and power struggle have pushed most nations to go against them and have made them isolated in the world. In addition to that, US strikes on Iranian strategic assets have hit hard on its nuclear and military intelligence capability. Some speculations are that Iran's inability to respond to the US, in the same manner, shows that the US has an upper hand in the power game as well as dominance in the regional conflicts. The US has also made better alliances in the

region with Middle Eastern nations compared to Iran. Iran knows that a direct war with the US or regional countries is not in the interest of Iran. The upcoming US elections may change the Trump's Administration policy towards Iran and for the Middle Eastern region but that will not change US intentions and future goals associated with this region.

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