

The (In)Effectiveness of Coercive Diplomacy:

The US Maximum
Pressure Campaign on Iran

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Introduction

The tension between the US and Iran has escalated to a historic level since the US decided to withdraw from the landmark nuclear deal - officially known as JCPOA - which was signed

in July 2015 between Iran and a group of six countries led by the US. Subsequent developments have prompted fears of direct military conflict. After the withdrawal decision, the US administration launched a strategy of coercion, what is called a "maximum pressure" campaign, in November 2018 against Iran in order to change Tehran's behaviours pertaining to its internal and external activities (Davis, 2019). As part of this campaign, the US has re-imposed economic sanctions, which had been lifted as part of the 2015 deal. In November 2018, new sanctions were imposed which have been depicted as the 'toughest ever' (BBC, 2018). Amid the increased tension, the Trump administration also ordered 1000 more troops to the states neighbouring Iran in June 2019. The US Department of Defence stated that the decision was taken with "defensive purposes to address air, naval and ground-based threats in the Middle East" (Financial Times, 2019). Furthermore, on June 25, 2019, President Trump threatened to use overwhelming force if any American interests were attacked (New York Times, 2019). The president has reiterated on many occasions that he will not hesitate to resort to military force if it is required while adding that he is not looking for a war.

In response to the US's increasingly punitive measures and aggressive policy, Iran took several escalatory steps. The tension reached a peak upon Iran's downing of a US surveillance drone on June 20, 2019, which reportedly triggered a US order to strike three Iranian targets. The order

was cancelled ten minutes before as Trump said it might cost the lives of as many as 150 Iranians (New York Times, 2019). Iran subsequently announced on July 8, 2019, that it surpassed a limit of 3.67 per cent uranium enrichment by breaching the crucial limit set out in the 2015 nuclear deal (Washington Post, 2019). Iran's decision was taken by the US as legitimate grounds for its aggressive actions.

Although both sides assert that they are not seeking war, de-escalation seems out of the question for the moment, since the demands made by two sides are effectively irreconcilable. The Trump administration listed their demands from Iran on 21 May 2018, which aimed at striking a new and more comprehensive deal with Iran, covering issues such as permanently ending the nuclear programme, constraining missile programme to only defensive purposes and halting support for terrorist organisations (Al Jazeera, 2018). In response to these demands, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that they would not back away from their missile programme, citing the threats posed by the neighbouring states that possess advanced US-made weapons (Reuters, 2019). The Iranian side also reiterated that they would only hold talks with Washington if the sanctions were lifted and the 2015 deal is re-established. In a speech on July 14, 2019, Iranian President Rouhani said that "We have always believed in talks ... if they lift sanctions, end the imposed economic pressure and return to the deal, we are ready to hold talks with America today, right now and anywhere" (CNBC, 2019). Thus, in a tit for tat, the US and Iran seem unwilling de-escalate by implementing retaliatory actions, which raises the spectre of direct military confrontation between the two nations.

As revealed by official statements, US military superiority seems to be the most crucial component of the US's maximum pressure campaign, giving them confidence that Iran will surrender to US demands. Indicating this understanding, in a tweet Trump said that "... *the thing they [Iranian leadership] do understand is strength and power, and the USA is by far the most powerful military force in the world...*" (Trump, 2019b). However, in contrast to political leaders' expectations, history shows that military superiority does not necessarily guarantee successful instantiations of coercion.

This report will discuss the factors that render US military superiority ineffective in coercing Iran into changing its behaviours, with reference to coercion literature. I will argue that the US attempt to compel Iran, backed by both implicit and explicit

threats of use of force becomes ineffective because the US threats lack credibility, the demands made by the US are too much to be accepted by Iran, and the US is unable to provide reassurances to Iran. These factors combined make Iran less likely to capitulate to the demands of the US. The report will first present what coercion is and how it differs from diplomacy and use of force, as well as distinguish between compellence and deterrence – two forms of coercion. After demonstrating some of the cases where coercion efforts failed, the report will outline the theoretical frameworks accounting for the reasons contributing to the ineffectiveness of military superiority in coercion attempts against relatively weak targets. In light of these theoretical frameworks, the US coercion attempt against Iran will be analysed.

What is Coercive Diplomacy?

In an international environment where instances of inter-state wars have seen a dramatic decline since the end of the Second World War and states have shown willingness to resolve their disputed issues without resorting to the use of force, direct military actions have become less attractive for states, while making coercive diplomacy backed by threat of force more appealing (Art, 1996). Coercive diplomacy, also known as coercion, is a distinct type of strategy that utilises the threat of force in order to affect the behaviour of another actor (Byman & Waxman, 2002). It is one of the preferred foreign policy tools for states to achieve their political objectives without resorting to the actual use of force. The logic of coercion lies in the fact that with the backing of the threat of force or very limited use of force, the coercing state attempts to persuade the adversary that the benefits of compliance with its demands outweigh benefits of non-compliance which would result in punishment (Freedman & Raghavan, 2018). Therefore, coercion aims to influence the target

state by way of sending credible signals that there would be severe consequences if the target state chooses not to adopt its behaviour in accordance with the coercer's demands. As such, coercive diplomacy lies in between the two extremes of foreign policymaking; diplomacy and military engagement. It utilizes certain elements of both instruments and culminates into one strategy.

Coercion or coercive diplomacy can be exercised through various methods depending on a state's capacity and desired goals. These include limited use of force, military mobilisation, joint military drills, arms transfers, military assistances, troop deployments, economic sanctions, and so forth. As such, the US's "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran involves critical components of coercive diplomacy since the US resorts to a combination of methods that includes the threat of force, troop deployments, military manoeuvres and economic sanctions.

Forms of Coercive Diplomacy: Compellence and Deterrence

As defined by Thomas C. Schelling, coercive diplomacy can take two forms; compellence and deterrence (Schelling, 1966). The distinction between these two coercion methods is noteworthy since they differ in critical aspects ranging from the underlying rationale to types of demands. Hence, while compellent threats require the target state to change its behaviour, deterrent threats aim to prevent the target state from changing its behaviour. As it is framed by Art and Greenhill (2018), deterrence can be articulated as *"Just keep doing what you are doing; otherwise I will hurt you"*, while compellence can be expressed as *"I don't like what you are doing, and that is why I am going to start hurting you, and I will continue to hurt you until you change your behaviour in ways that I specify"* (p. 5). Accordingly, both strategies aim at influencing the behaviour of the adversary, yet they differ on desired outcomes; one requires revision of action while the other seeks to maintain of status quo.

In light of this differentiation, the Trump administration's coercion strategy against Iran can be analysed as an example of compellence since it calls on Iran to make changes in its behaviour regarding its internal and external policies. It is also backed by threats of military operations and economic punishments, as well as the implementation of certain coercive measures.

Related to the discussion on the differences between compellence and deterrence threats, the literature generally acknowledges that compellence is much harder to achieve than deterrence. Firstly, in the case of compellence, yielding publicly to a coercer's demands costs the target state its reputation, revealing an image of weakness. However, in the case of deterrence, the target state finds itself in a riskless position since complying with the deterrence threat means maintaining what it is already doing. In such a situation, the target state can straightforwardly claim that it never intended to take action in the first place, thereby avoiding reputational costs (Art, 1980). Secondly, since capitulating to a compellent threat

requires giving up a certain policy, which might be giving up a territory or as in the case of Iran, ending a nuclear programme, this might cause changes in the relative power capabilities between disputing parties thereby rendering the yielding state in a worse state compared to the pre-compliance period. As it has the potential to generate a negative effect on the balance of power, compelling a state appears as a more challenging strategy than deterring. Finally, based on a psychological perspective, prospect theory suggests that giving up something you already possess is much harder than foregoing something you do not possess (Jervis, 1992). As such, for a target state, it is harder to give up something it already holds as opposed to something it is planning to acquire. In short, as per deterrence strategy, compellence is a more challenging task to achieve. Considering the difficulties of achieving objectives through compellent threats, the US attempt to compel Iran to change its behaviour is an arduous endeavour due to the reasons linked to the nature of compellence, which pertain to reputation costs, changes in relative power capabilities, and psychological factors.

In addition to the general hardship attached to the strategy of compellence, the literature also provides answers regarding the compellence cases where power imbalances exist between the coercer and target state. The next section will analyse the US coercion attempt against Iran from the perspective of power asymmetry by providing more specific reasons behind compellence failures while applying them to the Iranian case.

Power Asymmetry and Coercion Failures

In contrast to President Trump's expectations, recent studies have demonstrated that militarily powerful states are not better at than others when it comes to successfully coercing relatively less powerful adversaries. For instance, according to the Militarized Compellent Threats dataset, which covers the instances of compellence between 1918 and 2001, the success rate of coercive threats by major powers against weak targets is only 36 per cent (Sechser, 2011). Being one of the superior military powers in the world after the end of the Cold War, the US has failed to coerce weaker targets such as in Iraq, Serbia, and Afghanistan and achieved its objectives only after resorting to the actual use of force. In a similar vein, after analysing 22 US coercion cases, Art and Cronin (2003) find that the US coercion attempts have a success rate of 32 per cent. This situation challenges the traditional view that relative power capabilities enable states to coerce their targets without needing to use actual force.

Some of the recent cases of US coercion failures against weak targets include its attempts against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and 2003 and against Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the US harshly condemned the Iraqi action and the UNSC passed a resolution on the same day demanding immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. A subsequent UNSC resolution issued on November 29, 1990, ordered that if Iraq did not withdraw its forces by January 15, 1991, all necessary means would be used (Chamberlain, 2016). As Saddam rejected withdrawing his forces by the deadline, the US-led coalition began launching airstrikes on Iraqi targets in Kuwait on January 17, 1991, followed by a ground offensive on February 24. Despite the seriousness of threats supported by an international coalition consisting of world powers, it became possible to remove the Iraqi army from Kuwait only after they resorted to the actual use of force. Consequently, military superiority failed to coerce a weak target.

In his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, President George W. Bush labelled Iraq as one of the components of the "axis of evil" alongside Iran and North Korea. The White House continuously asserted that Iraq had links with Al-Qaeda and implied that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (Guardian, 2003), accusations which were later proven to be groundless (BBC, 2004). After a series of inspections, US officials were not convinced that the Iraqi government was complying with the UNSC resolutions issued after the first Gulf War ordering the complete elimination of weapons of mass destruction, upon which they issued a final ultimatum on March 17, 2003. The US demanded that Saddam Hussein and his sons leave Iraq in 48 hours (Guardian, 2003) However, Saddam preferred not to capitulate to the compellent threat and did not leave the country. The US then launched its invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003.

Another episode of US coercion failure occurred when the US attempted to change the behaviour of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Following the eruption of protests, clashes between the protestors and regime forces escalated. The UN then issued a resolution on March 17, 2011, asking Gaddafi to end his crackdown on rebellions by threatening the use of force (UN, 2011). Following this resolution, US President Barack Obama March 18, 2011, called on Gaddafi to comply with the requirements of UNSC resolution and demanded that he stop attacks on civilians and withdraw his forces from Benghazi in the eastern part of the country. He also clarified that military action would follow if Gaddafi failed to comply with the resolution (Washington Post, 2011). Gaddafi did not concede to the compellent demands and the troops continued their assault on Benghazi. Hence, the coercion efforts backed by the US and UNSC members failed once again leading to a NATO-led coalition launched a military operation in Libya on 19 March 2011 (New York Times, 2011).

Failed coercion attempts are not unique to the US. In many other cases, militarily superior powers were unsuccessful in achieving their objectives through coercive diplomacy. For instance, at the onset of the Cold War in 1946, the USSR attempted to coerce Turkey into ensuring free access to the Soviet ships through the Turkish Straits with the intention of revising the Montreux Convention – a regime that regulates the transit of navies and gives Turkey control over both the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus straits. To back its demands, the Soviet Union issued two notes against Turkey, carried out naval manoeuvres at the Black Sea and deployed troops in Balkan states neighbouring Turkey (Mark, 1997). However, Turkey still did not concede to Soviet demands.

The US has been trying to change the behaviour of Iran for a long time through economic sanctions, troop deployments and the opening of airbases in neighbouring states, making alliance commitments and providing military assistance and arms transfers to its regional allies, carrying out cyber-attacks on strategic Iranian assets, conducting military manoeuvres and military drills against Iran. However, Iran has not been completely abandoned its policies such as its nuclear and missile programmes, its rivalry with the US regional allies and its support for its non-state proxies, all of which concern the US. In this regard, the US coercion attempt has not been a success so far.

Why Coercion Becomes Ineffective: The US-Iran Case

The literature on coercion employs various theoretical frameworks in order to account for the effectiveness of coercion. One strand of the literature concentrates on the cost-benefit calculations of expected outcomes from the decision of resistance and compliance. In classic bargaining models, since war is costly and risky, even for the victor, it is in the benefit of both sides to settle the dispute with negotiations. According to this approach, if the benefits of resistance exceed the cost of complying with the threatened action, the target state is expected not to yield to the demand. This line of argument is grounded on the rationality assumption. However, states are not perfectly able to calculate the cost of the war *ex-ante* and they are constrained by lack of private information about their opponent's resolve and capabilities (Fearon, 1995), which can lead to failure of coercion (Meirowitz & Sartori, 2008). Moreover, there is also the possibility that states may act irrationally as a result of miscalculations and misperceptions resulting from leaders' cognitive biases, emotions and psychological characteristics (Jervis, 1982). In situations where irrationality prevails, states might be inclined

to overconfidently believe that their material capability is enough to resist a threat, or they can underestimate the resolve of the coercer state and choose non-compliance (De Wijk, 2014).

In addition to these accounts, the realist school of thought underscores that the power imbalances between the coercer and target state convince the latter that non-compliance might result in a total defeat causing unbearable costs (Byman & Waxman, 1999). Hence, from this point of view, it is expected that when confronted with a higher capability state, the less powerful state yields to the demands with the belief that there is no chance of victory. However, historical records show the opposite, as elaborated in the above section, that weak states act willingly to bear the cost of even an ultimate defeat. This puzzling situation requires a more in-depth understanding of why militarily advantageous states often fail to coerce weak targets, which is also important to discern the reasons why the US maximum pressure strategy might fail and invite resistance.

Credibility of Threats

For effective coercion, the threat must be credible to convince the target that it will be executed in the case of noncompliance. The logic of credibility suggests that the target state is more likely to yield to the coercer's demands when it believes that the threat is credible (Press, 2005). In the literature, what makes a threat more credible is approached in different ways. Firstly, the credibility of the threat can be understood as a function of the coercer's records - whether it has followed through with the action it threatens, in previous disputes (Danilovic, 2001). If the coercer has a good record of successfully executed threats in the past, the target is likely to be convinced that the present threat will also be executed. Secondly, credibility can be understood as a function of the material capabilities of the coercer. If the coercing state has the material ability necessary to execute the threatened action, the threat is perceived by the target state as credible (Fordham, 2004). From this point of view, having favourable relative power capabilities renders threats more credible. Thirdly, the credibility of the threat can be enhanced by sending costly signals demonstrating that coercer is ready to bear the costs arising from the execution of threat. Costly signals can take two forms: hand-tying signals and sink-cost signals. Hand tying strategy increases the costs that would be incurred by the leader of the coercive state if they fail to follow through with their threats. The logic of hand-tying strategy is based on the audience cost assumption which asserts that domestic audience will punish the leader for his/her management of foreign policy by removing him/her from the post (Fearon, 1997). As such, in an attempt to enhance threat credibility, the leader of coercer state ties his/her hands by publicly threatening the target state, revealing that he/she will not renege from threats and execute them if not complied. On the other hand, sink-cost strategy is based on the assumption that by taking actions that are costly in the first place such as military mobilisations, troop deployments and building arms, the coercer state displays that it bears the burden even before the execution of threat. Through this way, the coercer state shows its resolve to follow through with its threats and thereby aims to enhance threat credibility (Danilovic, 2001). On that note, demonstrating resolve - willingness to stand firm in

a conflict, becomes one of the prominent components of the threat credibility.

In her book, *Cheap Threats: Why the United States Struggles to Coerce Weak States*, Chamberlain makes a distinction between immediate threat credibility and ultimate threat credibility (2016, p. 6). A threat is immediately credible if the target state believes that coercive state will execute the threatened action, while a threat is ultimately credible if the target state is convinced that the coercer state will endure in the conflict by further escalating violence after the target state continues resisting the demands. At this point, Chamberlain claims that fact the US has rendered the humanitarian, political and financial costs of the use of military force relatively cheap, allows it to easily execute its threatened action thereby making its immediate threat credibility higher. However, the same conditions generate a paradox whereby reducing the ultimate credibility of the threats since the US's threats are not costly enough to signal its true resolve to endure in a conflict (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 12). Grounded on this assertion, she concludes that weak states choose resistance on two bases. First, the target state resists if it believes that the coercing state lacks the resolve to initiate a conflict. Second, the target state resists if it believes that the coercer will not escalate violence to a higher level and will not bear the cost of killing more civilians and causing more destruction, despite its acceptance of initial violence (Chamberlain, 2016, p. 21).

In light of this framework, although the US sends costly signals in the form of hand-tying and sink-cost strategies such as deploying more troops to the region to publicly threaten Iran, several factors reduce US threat credibility. Firstly, the credibility of US threats suffers from its previous policies towards Iran. It is true that the US imposed severe sanctions on Iran and took the support of other world powers for its policies in the past, yet, it has never resorted to the use of force and avoided engaging in a war with Iran. Therefore, the historical record might cause Iranians to think that the US will not act differently this time. This in addition to the fact that the US also refrained from taking military actions against a pro-Iranian Assad regime in Syria despite the Obama administration's clear statement

in August 2012 that use of chemical weapons is a “red line” which would entail enormous consequences (White House, 2012). As such, the credibility of US threats for Iranians arguably declined after it became evident that the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons did not engender a US military intervention or any other significantly punitive measure. Additionally, Iranian leadership knows well that the US did not enter into a war with North Korea while they were in the process of nuclear weapons development, despite threats of US military action (Jervis, 2013). As such, past examples of US attitudes towards both Iran and North Korea and more recently the Assad regime in Syria reduces the credibility of US threats, thereby increasing the possibility of Iranian non-compliance. In addition, Obama’s Iran policy, which culminated in the JCPOA deal in 2015 and which was presented as one of the biggest foreign policy successes by his administration, signalled to the Iranians that the US does not view Iran as a threat that should be countered with the military engagement. This suggests that Obama’s Iran policy further diminished the credibility of US threats, as Washington had shown that they could choose to resolve their problems with negotiations rather than military force.

Secondly, the mixed signals sent by US officials also negatively impacted threat credibility. On the one hand, US officials strongly asserted that the US is ready to use military force if necessary, while on the other hand, they have stated that they are not seeking a war with Iran, which sends muddled messages concerning the US resolve to use force. For instance, following the attacks on Saudi oil supplies on September 14, 2019, Trump implied that Iran was responsible for the attacks, which was firmly refused by Iranians, and said in a tweet that the US is “locked and loaded” to send a warning of a possible military action (Trump, 2019c). Yet, on September 16, Trump stated that “*we’d certainly like to avoid it [war]*” with Iran (Financial Times, 2019). Additionally, President Trump campaigned for getting the US out of wars in the Middle East and reiterated this intention after he became president on many occasions. Trump stated in another tweet: “*I was elected on getting out of these ridiculous endless wars, where our great military functions as a policing operation to the benefit of people who don’t even like the USA*” (Trump, 2019d). Given that 2020 is a Presidential elections year, it is even more likely that Trump would not risk the upcoming elections with a new war in the Middle East. As such, there is

no reason for the Iranians to assume that President Trump would change his policy while the American public holds an anti-war opinion.

Closely related to the last point, although US threats have immediate credibility thanks to its overwhelming military capability, they lack ultimate credibility since it sends signals that even if it might carry out initial attacks in the form of airstrikes against strategic targets in Iran, they are not likely to escalate the conflict to higher levels. The White House’s cautious policy of keeping US soldiers out of direct military conflicts demonstrates that the US does not have the resolve to endure a prolonged conflict and is not willing to bear the cost of a prolonged war, which makes its threats ultimately less credible. For instance, on April 6, 2017, the US carried out military strikes with 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles on Al Shayrat airfield in Syria in response to the Assad regime’s chemical weapons attacks (New York Times, 2017). About one year later on April 13, 2018, together with Britain and France, the US once again carried out airstrikes with warplanes and warships on Syrian targets harbouring Assad regime’s chemical weapons programme (Time, 2018). Just as the previous one, this operation was limited in scope and wary of being dragged into any escalation. Furthermore, the Trump administration’s reluctance to escalate can also be observed in Trump’s approval of military strikes against Iranian targets in retaliation for the downing of the US surveillance drone on the night of June 20, 2019. Trump reportedly cancelled the order ten minutes before its launch by citing potential casualties of as many as 150 Iranians which would not be proportionate to shooting down an unmanned drone (Trump, 2019d). As such, Trump’s unwillingness to increase the cost of conflict further reduced the ultimate credibility of threats.

In short, the US threats are not credible in the eyes of the Iranians due to the mixed messages and signals they send and because of past US attitudes towards Iran, North Korea and the Assad regime in Syria. Additionally, with its advancement in weapons technology and delivery and transportation systems, the US increased its immediate threat credibility and can convince Iran that the US can carry out demonstrative attacks, particularly airstrikes against Iranian nuclear sites. However, the same advancements also reduce the ultimate credibility of US threats leading Iran to believe that the US will not escalate the dispute into an all-out war.

Expansive Demands

One of the reasons why relatively weak targets resist the compelling threats of the powerful state is that powerful states are predisposed to make expansive demands. In his book *Coercion, Survival, and War: Why Weak States Resist the United States*, Phil Haun (2015) develops a theory of asymmetric interstate coercion and claims that weak target resists the stronger coercing state because they face expansive demands which are hardly admissible. Having favourable power disparity, the stronger state is prone to believe that it has the ability to easily defeat the target state if it uses military force in the first place. Having this belief, in return, increases its expectations from the outcomes of coercion leading it to make more demands and ask for even more concessions (Haun, 2015, p. 33). Thus, the coercing state ends up demanding too much from the target state, sometimes threatening the very survival of the target state. At this point, the target state must consider two potential outcomes resulting in a violation of its domestic and international sovereignty: demands related to homeland territory and regime change (Haun, 2015, p. 34). Faced with these demands, the target state's compliance with demands concerning regime change and homeland territory is hardly possible since they pose existential threats. In addition to these two issues, another threat to the survival of the regime might come from the internal dynamics of the country in the form of coup, rebellion or insurgency from opposition groups. This would be the case if domestic opposition groups infer the regime leader's capitulation as a sign of weakness (Haun, 2015, p. 43). As such, the target state also considers this possibility. In short, demands that risk the survival of the state or regime mostly result in non-compliance by the target state since its resolve to endure the cost of fighting will be higher than that of the powerful coercing state, whose survival interests are not at stake. Thus, the ultimate decision of the target state is not only shaped by the relative power capabilities but relative resolves between disputing parties.

In light of the expansive demands framework, in contrast to the expectations of the White House, the US coercion attempt is most likely to engender Iranian non-compliance since the Iranians may regard US demands as too much to accept. The US set out 12-point demands from Iran in

May 2019, in order to negotiate a new deal and threatened it with the strongest sanctions in the history if it doesn't comply (Aljazeera, 2018). The list includes demands regarding Iran's nuclear programme as well as its regional policies. The US calls for Iran to permanently halt its nuclear programme, stop the enrichment process, allow IAEA inspectors to access to nuclear facilities, and to terminate the expansion of its ballistic missile programme. With regards to regional policies, the US demands that Iran halt its support of Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, disarm Shiite militias in Iraq, end its assistance to Houthi rebels in Yemen, pull back its troops from Syria and end its hostile policies towards the US' regional allies including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The US is effectively demanding that Iran completely abandon its current grand strategy and give up its interest for the sake of US interests. Having such a long list of demands requiring Iran to completely abandon its grand strategy, it might seem obvious that the US knows these will not be accepted. So, why might the US make these demands, which it must realize, are extremely unlikely to be accepted? One answer is that the US policymakers might sincerely hold the opinion that Iran will comply with these demands. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's (2018) statements indicate this sort of hope when he compares the US strategy towards North Korea to Iran. He states that it would not be possible for Trump to hold a summit with the North Korean leader Kim to negotiate a deal for their nuclear programme on June 12, 2018, in Singapore if the US would not have put enormous pressure on North Korea. He said, *"Chairman Kim has felt this pressure, and he would never have come to the table in Singapore without it"* (Pompeo, 2019). Therefore, US officials might be seriously expecting to reach the same conclusion with Iran through the same method. One other explanation is that even if US officials know well that Iran will not acquiesce to their demands, they might be pushing this long list of demands in order to appease regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, who want to see the US taking actions against their regional rival. Another alternative explanation might be that the US officials are counting on the possibility of regime change through domestic upheaval by exposing the regime's policies, which could trigger and consolidate the

Iranian public's reactions against the regime. In Pompeo's saying, the US will continue benefit from the "power of exposure" and to "reveal the regime's illicit revenue streams, malign activities, crooked self-dealing, and savage oppression. The Iranian people themselves deserve to know the grotesque level of self-interest that fuels the regime's actions" (Pompeo, 2019).

Upon closer inspection of the demands pertaining to the nuclear programme, we can surmise that it is difficult for Iran to acquiesce to them since it views its nuclear programme as the most important leverage against its enemies and allies alike during bargaining processes. This belief is grounded upon the potential "virtual deterrence" effect stemming from having nuclear latency (Mehta & Whitlark, 2017). Despite not possessing nuclear weapons, Iranian leadership considers their nuclear potential as a decisive deterrent against its perceived existential threat, nuclear-armed Israel. From this perspective, it is not possible for Iran to completely annul its nuclear programme as long as Iran's perception of threat regarding Israel continues to exist.

Considering the demands pertaining to Iran's regional activities, they are hardly acceptable from the Iranian perspective since terminating them might put it in an undesirable situation and put the regime's survival at risk due to the policies of regional states. Given the Trump administration's ample support to Iran's adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia in their regional ambitions, Iran considers such US demands to be unacceptable as they threaten the survival of the regime.

Additionally, although the White House asserts that they are not after regime change and their objective is to bring Iran to the negotiation table with a renewed nuclear deal, it is still implied that they consider the potential of regime change through social upheaval. Secretary of State Pompeo's Foreign Affairs article implies that this expectation could result from Iran's poor economic conditions, human right violations and street protests (Pompeo, 2019). Pompeo states that because the Iranian people are resentful of the human right violations conducted by their government and poor economic conditions they are struggling in, the street protests against the Iranian leadership will garner more supporters, implying that they have the potential to bring about regime change or undermine the regime. In this respect, Iran is not likely to capitulate to

this coercion attempt since it is based on expected regime change through street protests. Given the record of US-orchestrated regime changes across the world, including in Iran, the Iranian regime's worries are not groundless. On August 19, 1953, Iran's first and only democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq who came to power in 1951, was overthrown by a US-orchestrated military coup (Gasiorowski, 1987). The succeeding regime was autocratic monarchy under the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Having experienced this, Iranians are mistrustful of the US intentions which might be direct or indirect regime change.

Regarding the discussion of regime change through domestic upheaval, there is also the possibility that a coercion strategy might produce the opposite effect within the target population, by inciting nationalist sentiments. This provides an opportunity for the target regime to present foreign threats and sanctions as excuses for the negative developments in the country. In this way, the leadership garners more support even from dissidents, who object to foreign threats and any form of foreign intervention. The Iranian leadership has paid great attention to this and knows how to capitalize on this possibility. As such, it is re-branding the Revolutionary Guards Corps as an organisation that defends the Iranian nation rather than the Islamic Revolution, in order to unify citizens around the Iranian identity (Bajoghli, 2019). This is done through refocused media production that spotlights nationalistic feelings, a reinterpretation of Iran's history, and the opening of museums that exhibit the civilizational artefacts of the Iranian nation. In this sense, the US coercion strategy risks having the opposite influence on the Iranian people by uniting them around the Iranian leadership, thereby reducing the likelihood of Iran's compliance.

In conclusion, based on the "expansive demands" framework, the demands made by the US are too much for Iran to concede, as they threaten the survival of the current regime. For Iran, the demands of permanently ending its nuclear programme, limiting missile projects and changing its regional behaviours without any due changes in the regional dynamics are considered a matter affecting its survival. Additionally, the possibility of US-orchestrated regime change through domestic upheaval or in the form of a coup as it happened in the past further disinclines Iranian leadership to acquiesce.

Credibility of Reassurances

For coercion to work, reassurances play a significant role in convincing the target state that if it concedes to the demands, the coercer will not come back in the future and stay committed to the terms of the agreement (Art & Greenhill, 2018). Otherwise, the target state is more likely to defend its reputation, framed by Schelling as “one of the few things worth fighting over” (Schelling, 1966, p. 124). In accounting for the role of reassurances, Sechser (2018) argues that weak states refuse to acquiesce to threats in order to build their reputation for toughness with the consideration of potential future confrontations. This stems from the fact that the powerful state cannot credibly convince the target state that it will commit itself to its promises of not making more demands in the future (Sechser, 2018).

In his analysis, Sechser finds that states that are in close proximity to their adversaries, that share a history of rivalry and that have sufficient power projection capabilities, stand as potential future aggressors for the target state (Sechser, 2018). Based on these, it can be argued that militarily superior powers are inclined to be perceived as future threats because of their characteristics. In addition to possessing necessary power projection capabilities, they also stand in close proximity to a distant target since they are not confined to a geography thanks to their overseas bases and troop deployments. Consequently, a history of rivalry with the target state seems the most important component determining the credibility of reassurances made by superior powers, since the other two components are already there. If the three conditions are present, the target state is most likely to resist the demands of the coercing state because of a high probability of future confrontation, where the coercer might demand even more if it succeeded in its first confrontation. Hence, weak states defend their reputation today in order to deter future demands, even if the demands are somewhat acceptable.

Sechser (2018) further argues that military superiority undermines the effectiveness of coercion by exacerbating the information problem over the levels of resolve between disputing parties. Having military superiority, the coercing state underestimates and fails to accommodate

the reputational concerns of the target state as well as the target state's considerations about future confrontations, miscalculating its resolve as a consequence (Sechser, 2010). This miscalculation leads superior powers to become less capable of providing reassurances for the future.

In light of this framework, the US' coercion efforts with regards to Iran also seem to be suffering due to its inability to offer convincing reassurances. There are good reasons for Iran not to be reassured by US promises regarding the benefits of Iranian compliance since the US keeps itself geographically close to Iran through its airbases in regional states and military deployments. The US has sufficient military projection capabilities with ample missile and aerial attack capabilities and has a history of unfriendly rivalry with Iran. These issues put the US in a position to be perceived by Iranians as a threat who might ask more demands in the future if Iran capitulates today.

Considering the history of the US-Iran relationship, there has been an ongoing strain between the two based on their political and ideological divergence, in addition to geopolitical issues (Dalay, 2019). First and foremost, the American and British orchestrated military coup in Iran in 1953 stands as a landmark episode in shaping the perceptions of not only pro-Islamic revolutionaries but also secularists and Iranian nationalists, regarding British and US policies vis-a-vis Iran. Since then, many Iranians have developed a sense of hostility and a sceptical view of the West and its policies. It can be also argued that the 1953 coup and the subsequent policies of the Shah (who was considered as safeguarding the interests of the Western countries) were significant factors leading up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and shaping the ideology of new regime which has been openly hostile to the West. As such, for the Iranian regime, the US is the 'Great Satan' sponsoring imperialism and corruption across the world. Additionally, the US has not been hiding its enmity towards the Iranian regime since the overthrow of US-backed Shah in 1979 by portraying Iran a rogue state and, since 2001, as one of the members of the 'Axis of Evil' alongside North Korea and Iraq, fighting against liberal values and the American way of life (Heradstveit &

Bonham, 2007). Two crises in history further deepened this rivalry by aggravating already strained relations: the 1979 Hostage Crises which saw 52 American diplomatic personnel taken hostage for 444 days, and US downing of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988 which caused the death of 290 civilians. As a consequence of this deteriorating relationship, the two states have not had direct diplomatic relations since 1980. Against this backdrop, there are good reasons for Iran to be sceptical regarding the US intentions for the future.

Moreover, the US decision to withdraw from the 2015 Nuclear Deal in 2018 dramatically reduces the credibility of US reassurances as Iranians rightfully approach US promises with suspicion. By withdrawing from the deal and imposing more severe economic sanctions on Iran, the US hurts the credibility of its promises and contributes to the Iranians thinking that even if Iran concedes to the de-

mands, the US will not stick to the terms of the contract. Although superior powers can handle this problem by inviting international organisations or establishing international coalitions to enable enforcement of the agreement, the US abrogation of the 2015 Nuclear Deal signed by an international coalition has eliminated this possibility.

In short, the US is incapable of offering Iran credible reassurances regarding the future. Having sufficient military projection capabilities, being in close proximity with Iran and having a history of animosity causes Iranians to perceive the US future intentions as malign, leading them to defend their reputation by resisting its threats now, in order to avert future confrontations which might come with higher demands.

Conclusion

The latest tension between Iran and the US has sparked fears of a direct military confrontation which could result in undesired regional and global consequences. After withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear deal, the US has ratcheted up its coercive measures by imposing more sanctions, deploying troops, sending aircraft to the region and publicly threatening Iran. Iran has retaliated by breaching the uranium enrichment level imposed by the 2015 nuclear deal, downing a US surveillance drone, and threatening the US with retaliation in case it attacks. The situation has turned into a competition in risk-taking, through which both sides try to demonstrate their resolve through escalatory actions while increasing the possibility of inadvertent military conflict.

The US's maximum pressure campaign is aimed at bringing Iran to the table and reaching a new deal that is more comprehensive than the previous one, which would include the issues of Iran's missile programme and regional policies. In order to achieve its objectives, the US implicitly and explicitly relies on its military superiority, which

is regarded as the ultimate coercive tool at its disposal. However, this report demonstrates that military superiority does not often yield capitulation from the target state. Firstly, militarily superior powers are more likely to make expansive demands such as demands for regime change and territory, which are too much to be accepted, even negotiated, by the target state since they are considered as a matter of survival. Secondly, the US's threats lack credibility since the administration sends mixed signals as to whether it is ready to enter a new war. Additionally, even if it has immediate credibility, the US threats lack ultimate credibility since the factors reducing the cost of a potential military operation also paradoxically reveal that the US is not ready to escalate violence to higher levels, once the conflict begins. Finally, the US is not able to make credible reassurances because of its history of animosity with Iran and its decision to renege on the 2015 nuclear deal. These three factors give Iranians good reasons to resist US demands and impose counter-coercion measures to deter potential US attacks.

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