



پروشکاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی



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# Maximum Pressure on the Islamic Republic of Iran as Multi-Layered Hybrid Warfare: An American Narrative

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## Abstract

Over time, various foreign policy and international relations scholars have offered different themes and arguments on foreign policy. The necessity to review these themes and definitions is due to the continuity of foreign policy as a continuum, in which foreign policy and its different terms take shape and are formed. This study conducts research on how the maximum pressure campaign was applied to Iran in the form of hybrid warfare and how it affected regional order afterwards. Since it is argued that it was a new term and policy enforced by the Trump administration, it reviews different tools of American statecraft and argues that the maximum pressure campaign was multilayered hybrid warfare with repercussions. In this regard, historically, the American security arrangement in Western Asia has undergone various stages. In the 1970s, it was based on the Twin Pillars of Nixon, while later, it was based on confrontation, which was adopted under different terms such as dual containment and containment. In this study, through a contextual analysis, it is inferred that the campaign against Iran was an American example of multi-layered hybrid warfare. In addition, it is argued that this multi-layered hybrid warfare created an unstable region. This development, along with the American pivot to Asia, has created a regional arrangement that involves great power competition and is inclined towards Chinese and Russian intervention and mediation. Thus, an increased third-party foothold and a destabilized regional order are the outcomes of the maximum campaign, which ostensibly contradict the American pivot to Asia.

**Keywords:** American Foreign Policy, Western Asia, China, Russia, Great Power Competition.



پښتو، شپږمه، کاله علوم انساني و مطالعات فرېبنځي  
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## Introduction

The Persian Gulf region is undergoing security changes and transformations. However, this is not a new event. Various security arrangements have been made in the region through partnerships between regional powers and great powers. These security arrangements were mostly based on a balance of power and confrontation. As historical events unfolded, the balance of power went through various changes. The Iranian-American relationship has gone from alliance to enmity. As these developments occurred, Iran and the United States each developed modes of operation and adapted to the new realities. The United States formulated a confrontational strategy versus Iran, which took place under different terms such as dual containment and containment. Nevertheless, the gist of the policy remained confrontational over time. This study investigates these modes of operation from an American perspective, from the twin pillars to containment. Afterwards, it is argued that multi-layered hybrid warfare is the most advanced form of confrontation that has ever taken place till now. This study deals with how hybrid warfare was waged against Iran and investigates how it triggered change in a regional context afterwards.

In this regard, contextual analysis is used to identify and analyze the contextual factors that contributed to this campaign of maximum pressure, which itself is an example of hybrid warfare. The factors that shaped the maximum pressure campaign are detected, investigated, and expressed in the order of a structure designed to wage hybrid warfare. The historical stages and context that led to this campaign of hybrid warfare are also identified, which shows how US policy transformed with the passage of time. Eventually, it is argued that maximum pressure didn't yield the desired goals, and its outcome affected regional order in a very different manner than what the perpetrators had intended.

### 1. Containment and its Roots; Departure From Twin Pillars

The American system for the Persian Gulf used to be one of twin pillars. One in which Saudi Arabia and Iran were defenders of American interests. The US, as a superpower with limited regional power projection, relied on a determined regional power which, in this case was Iran. Cooperating against communist forces and utilizing pan-Monarchists to suppress Arab revolutionaries, Iran and Saudi Arabia put down the Dhofar rebellion in the 1970s. In this arrangement, the Iranian pillar was defined by population, industrial

base, oil revenue, and military hardware. However, the Saudi pillar was defined solely by oil. Thus, Iran was the senior partner in this distribution of power. After the fall of the Shah, support for Saudi security formed the basis for American actions in the region, only to come second after Israel's security. The US tilt towards Iraq in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair and even before endured until 1991 and the Persian Gulf War. In the aftermath of the war, America tried to devise a new twin-pillar strategy by getting Syria and Egypt involved in the security of the GCC. However, the reluctance of the aforementioned states puts the responsibility solely on American forces (Brannon, 1994).

After the end of the Cold War, the United States devoted its Western Asian policy to state building based on American values and interests. The US committed itself to neutralizing, containing, and applying pressure to elicit these changes, even eyeing a transformation or regime change in certain states too. The common denominator among these "backlash states" in the American response was the American interest in deterring and responding to these states through military threats and alliances. Also, isolating and pressuring these states through an international coalition of American allies was considered. The balance of power defined to enforce dual containment took into account the demise of the Soviet Union. So, the US didn't face any strategic competition. However, the improvement of ties with other military powers in the region depended on progress made in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Consequently, the US no longer depends on Iran or Iraq. Iraq was unable to sell large quotas of oil, but the disenchanted elite never overthrew their overlords (Lake, 1994). Therefore, the much-expected hopes of an insurrection against Saddam never materialized.

During dual containment, Iran was accused of seeking weapons of mass destruction, missile technology, and being the world's foremost state supporting terrorism. Accusations that the United States has not abandoned yet, despite the Iranian state not acquiring nuclear weapons after 3 decades and the occurrence of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which were perpetrated by non-Iranians, the regional activities of Iran were also under focus during the dual containment policy. Therefore, in many aspects, American grudges with Tehran have contextually remained the same since dual containment. However, dual containment suffered from the lack of global consensus and international support in the case of Iran, which made containing Iran a far more difficult task than Iraq. In the Persian Gulf, the United States tried to create partnerships that were

supposed to prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear and conventional military programs. The aim was to secure the region's then - favorable security arrangements (Lake, 1994). Attempts to maintain this arrangement and balance of power are reappearing themes in American military and national security doctrines. Especially since Iran has been accused of seeking regional dominance, America has been at the forefront of pushing back Iran in the Persian Gulf and beyond. The proclaimed goal of the doctrine was to increase the costs Tehran and Baghdad paid for their policies. Recurring themes of this approach can be noticed in previous American foreign policy-making circles where George Kennan famously declared creating strains over Soviet power in order to either break it up or fade Soviet power away (Lake, 1994).

However, the dual containment of Iran and Iraq didn't yield tangible results, partially due to the non-identical threat perceived by America from Iran and Iraq. Different American administrations tried to keep Iran and Iraq sidelined in regional affairs. Through the Madrid conference and beyond, they tried to strike peace deals that preceded the Abraham Accords Declaration but were essentially more of the same.

## **2. Complex Containment**

During the Trump administration, the United States was actively engaged in a destabilization campaign against Iran, which also bore in mind regime change. In addition, seeking an Arab alliance against Iran had a predecessor here too. (Holland, Mason, & Landay, 2018; Nasr, 2018). The maximum pressure campaign pursued by the White House national security team focused on food riots in major cities, instability and ethnic strife at border areas, and the depreciation of the Iranian currency (Brennan, 2018). On the next stage, a reduction of Iranian foreign ties and targeting Iranian foreign trade and business were the main priorities of the campaign. These, in its turn, would lead to a decrease in the legitimacy of the Iranian government and an increase in its cost of governance. Regional consequences of the policy aimed at gray zone conflict against Iranian allies in the region (Frantzman, 2018). Discrediting the Iranian government in human rights, eliminating its deterrence power, and limiting military escalations were on the agenda too (Porter & Gareth, 2018).

Regional players played a role in dismantling the Iran nuclear deal too. Influential lobbyists on both sides of the aisle were devoted to dismantling and tearing apart the Iran deal. Among them,

the quartet of Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman, Muhammad Bin Zaed, Jared Kushner, and Benjamin Netanyahu were the most prominent figures and officeholders, either passively or actively calling for the tearing up of the deal (Bolton, 2017; Kalin, 2018). Influential right-wing think tanks also lobbied to tear up the Iran deal. Lobbies such as United against Nuclear Iran (UANI) and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) were the top lobbies bidding against Iran (Clifton & Davison, 2018).

To roll back Iranian influence across the region, the Israelis advocated certain policies, which were later adopted by America and her other regional allies. Confronting Iran-supported groups, supporting US allies, conducting reconnaissance operations against Iran, stationing anti-missile systems in the region, and supporting US cyber security against Iran were among the Israeli recommendations to America (Frantzman, 2018). Meanwhile, by labeling Iran as the world's prime supporter of terrorism, the Trump administration reinforced its case against Iran (Harris, 2018).

In this contextual analytical study, in an attempt to establish meaning from American actions during the maximum pressure campaign, hybrid warfare theory is used. Hybrid warfare causes a blurring of lines of conflict. It utilizes integrated military and non-military means of power. According to scholars, hybrid warfare's objectives can be categorized into four domains: political, economic, military, and societal and informational. The battlespaces of hybrid warfare are numerous, as are the tools and means. Weaponization of information, disinformation, and spreading polarizing messages are other tools available to the hybrid actor. These elements are integrated into common military strategy as well, leading to an increasingly complex environment. Hybrid warfare avoids full-scale conflict while trying to achieve goals. A continuum of actions encompasses hybrid warfare with different levels of violence. Engaging adversaries with a combination of political, economic, and subversive techniques is prevalent in hybrid warfare. Weakening alliances, delegitimizing adversaries, and spreading of discord are among the techniques used by hybrid warfare actors. (Abdyraeva, 2020). The United States utilized various hybrid warfare techniques through the maximum pressure campaign. Economic coercion, diplomatic pressure, informational war, and military action were all enmeshed in the American multi-layered hybrid warfare, against Iran. These steps go well beyond political warfare which is suggested in containment (Kennan, 1991).



### 3. Maximum Pressure in Multi-Layered Hybrid Warfare

In order to contain and roll back Iranian influence in the region, Richard Goldberg suggested a three-step policy. Goldberg was later appointed to the White House as a national security team director. He executed his policy recommendations through joint cooperation with Bolton and Pompeo. Goldberg had suggested a wind-down period after decertifying the Iran deal. In this winding down, the strictest economic sanctions in history were to be enforced on the Iranian economy, including the financial sector. Goldberg recommended that the US avoid any formalities in waiting for allies but rather go down with the sanctions rollback and enforce additional ones to impose a Cuba-style embargo on Iran. Goldberg believed that any Iranian exit from the deal would lead to destabilization of Iran. The decertification plan had considered to destabilizing Iran before it could bring back its nuclear program to full capacity. Though not specifying what the destabilization meant, apparently Goldberg had the downfall of the Iranian government in mind (Weiss, 2017).

The maximum pressure campaign applied blanket sanctions to Iran rather than smart ones, thus targeting the whole Iranian state. Therefore, these sanctions affected Iran massively and intensely. Some economists believe that the sanctions had little to do with Iran's behavior and were on the track of a whole breakdown of the Iranian state through an outright economic war (Bezhan, 2018). Alongside economic warfare, the sanctions are supposed to provide time for finding innovative military solutions against Iran. In addition, a sanctioned Iranian state was assumed to change its behavior under the burden of sanctions (Weiss, 2017; Winter & De Luce, 2017).

In order to formulate a multi-layered hybrid threat against Iran that was not solely economic, making new allegations against the Iranian nuclear program based on the Israeli-obtained archive was among the actions taken by the US. Furthermore, in anticipation of Iranian escalation through cyberattacks and actual attacks, the US must have lowered its tolerance and benchmark against Iran regarding alleged and actual military actions attributed to Iran. Whether through Iraqi groups or elsewhere, this new approach could have disabled Iran from reciprocating the maximum pressure campaign. Also, the presence of US naval forces and carrier strike groups in the Persian Gulf could strengthen US deterrence against Iran and shield it from any Iranian retaliation for the sanctions reinforcement (Hannah, 2018). In order to realize this, the US sent

the John C. Stennis after an unprecedented absence of carriers in the Persian Gulf (Youssef, 2018). On the economic side, the maximum pressure campaign that was put forward by the Trump administration (Weiss, 2017; Winter & De Luce, 2017) demonstrated itself through IMF forecasts of the Iranian economy. In November 2018, the IMF predicted negative economic growth for Iran, a contraction of the Iranian economy, and a widening budget deficit. In addition, Iranian exporters had to cease their presence in various energy markets and hand them over to their rivals (Nasseri & Pacheco, 2018).

Alongside economic coercion, the US and Israel coordinated their actions to internally pressure Iran too. Pressuring Iran through internal strife and encouraging domestic protests (Ravid, 2018).

In addition to economic coercion, the maximum pressure campaign had other traits of hybrid warfare too. In the military realm, during the campaign between the wars conducted by Israel (Eisenkoat & Siboni, 2019), America's chief regional ally tried to rollback Iranian influence. The epitome of the military rollback against Iran was the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani (Dagher & Kaltenthaler, 2020).

#### **4. Regional Strategic Implications**

Alongside the maximum pressure campaign, the United States had adopted a new vision for the Persian Gulf's security due to its strategic competition with China and pivot to Asia. In order to allocate more resources to the ongoing competition with China, the US must optimize its presence in other regions (Ross, 2013). One of the regions with a paramount American presence is Western Asia. The US has been actively securing its interests and protecting its allies, at least since the time of the adaptation of the Carter doctrine. The necessity of ingraining the element of force in the Carter doctrine led to an increasing American presence in Western Asia. However, the Persian Gulf region's significance in American foreign policy in terms of great power competition decreased with the demise of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, due to the ongoing hostility in Iranian relations with the US and Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq, the US remained militarily active in the region (Brannon, 1994).

The American strategy of pivoting to Asia has been met with suspicion by American allies. American attempts to maintain a smart presence in the region in order to safeguard American interests and materialize American security commitments across the region require optimizing the stationing and usage of military assets (Wasser &

Stein, 2020). Specifically, since American allies in the region have certain doubts regarding American resolve in upholding her security commitments, especially due to the urge America feels to face strategic competition with China and Russia (Gardner, 2022). American policymakers reiterate the acuteness of Russian threats while echoing the long-term threat from China (Insinna, 2022).

During the maximum pressure campaign, the US resorted to a policy of rollback. This rollback policy was reminiscent of the NSC68 since its advocates argued that the US's reluctance to resort to force in Western Asia, specifically against Iran and its allies, would lead to an expansion of Iranian influence and more countries falling into Iran's sphere (Von Rennenkampff, 2019).

The American attempt to rollback Iranian influence in Western Asia demonstrated itself through various times and spaces. Therefore, the US focus on rolling back Iran can be categorized into three military elements. These elements include the regional sphere of influence called the Axis of Resistance by Iran, the aerial space, including Iranian drone and missile programs, and the waters of the Persian Gulf. The American policy ingrained political aspects with an anti-access and area denial military strategy (IranWatch, 2022). Through area denial, the operational environment of Western Asia, specifically within the Iranian arc of influence, would be less secure for Iran. In such circumstances, area denial would lead to limiting Iranian space for occupation and navigation (Nadimi, 2021). This access denial would in turn limit Iran's asymmetrical capabilities, and deny Iran the right to resort to gray zone warfare, and eliminate of plausible deniability on the Iranian side.

Meanwhile, the United States seeks to reduce its regional responsibilities in order to dedicate more resources to confronting China and containing Russia. Yet, the United States is firmly committed to Israel's security and qualitative edge (CRS, 2020). In addition, maritime security, and a smooth flow of energy from the Persian Gulf are part of US interests in the region too. In order to achieve these two goals while keeping pace with China, the US is relegating parts of its security responsibilities to its allies (Feierstein, Saab, & Young, 2022).

Such responsibility and the integration of aerial and maritime capabilities throughout the region require the active participation of various states, regardless of whether they are stakeholders in confronting Iran or not. The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) is a military platform led by America that is utilized in order to achieve the integration of several offensive and defensive

capabilities and realize the access denial that was mentioned earlier (Gordon, 2022). The share of artificial intelligence in realizing this policy can be coined as a 2<sup>nd</sup> revolution in military affairs, in which integrated aerial and sea defense and unmanned machinery are ingrained with artificial intelligence in order to create an integrated network of intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance.

The scope of smartening the US presence in Western Asia is not limited to the land or skies. In both the waters of the Persian Gulf and the high seas, the US is transforming its approach too. By establishing naval task forces and missions with European and regional allies, the US is facilitating its transfer of force to blue waters and Far East Asia (Katz, 2022). These taskforces expedite the better organization of forces from various nationalities to focus on specific goals such as detecting arms transfers and gray zone military operations in their dedicated spaces. The US will still bear the responsibilities of organization and leadership, yet the resources it has to allocate will drop significantly.

In order to deal with what America perceives as destabilizing Iranian actions, the United States is rapidly developing an integrated military arrangement against Iran. This is stated in the Detering Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses Act of 2022 (Ernst, 2022). The integrated air defense will deal with various projectiles and flying vehicles, specifically drones and missiles. American technological edge, leadership, and resolve are used to facilitate this integration, which aims to counter the repercussions of what it deems the proliferation of missile technology in the region. American allies will allocate human resources, finance, and base facilities too.

Also, specific American allies have been feeling missile threats, for the last couple years. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Israel all face adversaries with a varied inventory of missiles. The quality and quantity of the missile threats, in addition to the cost imposition curve, which slides in favor of the Iranian axis, are all incentivizing this integration. The required arrangement in order to create a holistic environment, collaborative military forces, and political commitment is done through the Pentagon. The United States expects to create a regional military setting versus Iran through a joint effort, with the allocation of minimum resources on the American side (Gordon, 2022). However, the United States will still maintain its role in political and military leadership. This, in its turn, facilitates the regional convergence of states at both a regional

and global level. Defining a common defense and security plan and command and control structure, exchanging technology and human resources, and establishing new economic ties based on the mentioned commonalities are among the benefits of this policy.

Although there are cons to the policy on the American side too, an increasingly militarized environment in the Persian Gulf doesn't necessarily solve the problem of contested deterrence in the Persian Gulf and beyond. The ensuing arms race, following an increased purchase of weaponry by US allies, will further add to the security dilemma in the region. It would lead to a belligerent Iran prepared to spend more on upgrading drone and missile technology. Thus, the created dilemma would make the whole Persian Gulf a tinderbox. This would be a setback for the very purpose the Arab states sought by contributing to the joint military effort. In addition, the Iranian drone and missile programs will be further scrutinized, leading to an increased share of Chinese and Russian technology in the Iranian missile and drone programs, thus drawing Tehran closer to Washington's rivals.

### **Global Implications**

Meanwhile, a more militarized region would draw Chinese attention closer to the region due to China's vast economic interests in the region. If the current path of contested deterrence carries on, with the US being a patron of one party, Beijing would enjoy becoming a mediator between Iran and the GCC countries. Therefore, a result of the American-sponsored joint defense efforts would be China becoming a key broker and mediator in the region (Marks, 2022), which is undesirable for Washington. This, in its own turn, combined with current economic relations, adds to the leverage China holds over Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in the region. In the meantime, China may get access to American and Israeli hardware and technology through its increasing leverage over the region (Mezher, 2021).

Overall, a more militarized region will increase the chances of conflicts while providing Beijing with a new role in the region through strong ties with all parties. Thus, this would be a major flaw of the American regional design, which emboldens China into performing a more serious role in the Persian Gulf and beyond. Furthermore, the chances of long-term encroachment into the Persian Gulf would be a total abandonment of the Carter doctrine. Also, a Chinese intermediation between Iran and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and even beyond could facilitate an increasing

Chinese footprint in the region, which the United States despises, unless the US hopes to cripple China by tying it to regional quarrels.

Beijing's increasing trade ties with the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and Israel will eventually have spillovers in defense and security cooperation too. Dealings with the Chinese communication giant Huawei are intertwined with other fields of cooperation with China and its One Belt, One Road initiative (Mezher, 2021). Thus, even though the core of Saudi or Persian Gulf Cooperation Council cooperation with China is energy, spillovers will occur in the realms of trade, technology, and even military defense. Specifically, due to ongoing cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in missile procurement and missile engine developments, it is worth bearing in mind that the Saudi missiles are nuclear-capable, a feature that could worry the Americans too. In addition, Saudi interest in uranium enrichment and relevant technologies can be a matter for discussion between China and Saudi Arabia (Masterson, 2022).

Integration into *One Belt, One Road* initiatives can provide China with backdoor access to American technology too. Since all Persian Gulf Cooperation Council members and Israel's military are American-based, the Haifa port terminal project, which is Chinese operated has already raised eyebrows in Washington. Haifa has the potential to become a regional hub of trade while all this trade passes through Chinese technology, something that would displease the United States (Rabinovitch, 2021).

Therefore, with the decreasing size of the Iranian economy due to US sanctions, China is on the verge of becoming the region's number one trade partner. Due to Chinese belief in the relativity of human rights, China is less of a norms-based player too. With autocratic tendencies on the rise in the region, China will be a preferred partner in the region. In addition, China gains access to valuable Arab and Israeli lobbying potential in Washington too.

### **Strategic Consequences**

To conclude, a firm sanctions regime and a joint regional integrated air defense and naval command will not necessarily increase deterrence or shoulder off current American security commitments while having various repercussions, such as increasing American entanglement in the region and giving China a stronger regional foothold.

The smaller a system is and the more players there are, considering the closed nature of the system, it has the potential to be driven towards chaos. This could be the case with the Chinese presence in the Persian Gulf and its periphery. Meanwhile, Iranian

plausible deniability is decreased by the partial departure of the US and its increasing usage of artificial intelligence in the region to compensate for the lack of sheer numbers. In addition, Chinese interests are non-legitimate targets for Tehran considering the amicable relations Tehran has with Beijing. Therefore, as this closed system faces more complexity in terms of possible collisions, there is an increasing chance of chaos.

### **Conclusion**

American hybrid warfare against Iran was waged in a manner to affect the strategic calculus of Iran through affecting elements of Iranian comprehensive national power. The campaign was waged in the context of political, economic, diplomatic, and regional areas. It was designed to change the behavior and nature of the Iranian state through containment and destabilization by affecting the elements of Iranian national power. Therefore, this study tried to offer a comprehensive model of American hybrid warfare against Iran and how it was developed overtime. Nevertheless, as argued, this campaign of hybrid warfare didn't yield the desired policy changes throughout the life of the US administration that waged it. It rather had some spillovers in regional order, which are analyzed and explained too.

Overall, the maximum pressure campaign, which is intertwined with a reduced US regional presence, has led Iran to react and escalate on its own terms. Iran means to demonstrate that maritime safety and energy supply lines cannot be secured while Iran is excluded from the regional order and its entailing arrangements. Meanwhile, due to the escalation, US allies are going on a shopping spree for American arms and trying to tie down America in the region. Also, both Arabs and Israelis try to diversify their foreign policy choices by developing relations with Russia and China. Thus, the US maximum pressure campaign has not so far changed Iranian behavior, but it has led to the formation of a regional tinderbox and the increased presence of China and Russia in western Asia. This, in its own turn, invalidates the prerequisite of strategic competition with Russia and China since it ironically deepens the Russian and Chinese foothold in the region while the US seeks to pivot to Asia. Overall, the multi-layered hybrid warfare has made the region more violent and militarized, disenchanting US allies from traditionally trusting the US, and led Iran to act more hostile towards the US, which all contradict great power competition with China and Russia.

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