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COULD UNINTENTIONALLY
SPARK ONE*

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U.S. IRAN POLICIES NOT SEEKING WAR BUT COULD UNINTENTIONALLY SPARK ONE

The United States President Donald Trump's main objective of his "maximum pressure" policy against Iran is to force the latter to the table of negotiations to reach a new and broader nuclear agreement, while Tehran's "maximum brinkmanship" policy objective is to regionally and internationally spread fear of a major disaster in energy supplies and rates if U.S. sanctions against it were not lifted. However, neither one wants war, even though their current policies could easily trigger one if either party overplayed its hand. This is the conclusion of the war game simulation that took place at the headquarters of the "Maison du Futur" think tank in Bickfaya in Mount Lebanon, on September 12, 2019. The simulation was co-organized and funded by the German think tank Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and chaired by the author.

The war game ran three simulations of various scenarios. The first scenario depicted an attack on an American warship at the Strait of Hormuz that caused casualties. The second scenario pictured a missile attack by Hezbollah on Israel from either Syria or Lebanon, inflicting a big number of casualties. The third scenario explored the possibility of starting negotiations between the U.S. and Iran and the chances of reaching a new

deal. Participants coming from the U.S., Iran, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, Kuwait, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon were selected to best reflect the views of the respective countries or groups they represented. Since the meeting was held under Chatham House rules, no names will be mentioned or direct attributions be made in this policy paper.

Simulation Summary

In the scenario of an attack by a sea-mine or drone on a U.S. warship causing casualties, and even though Iran could resort once again to “plausible deniability” by asserting it does not bear any responsibility, the American reaction would very likely be a limited retaliation against Iranian missiles or naval bases. “President Trump made it clear that any Iranian attack that sheds American blood will draw U.S. retaliation,” explained the American participant. “A limited U.S. strike on military targets inside Iran will result in a rational and intelligent retaliation by Tehran,” reciprocated the Iranian player. “Iranian leadership does not want war and will do its best to avoid sliding in one, and hence its retaliation to a limited American strike will be measured.” If Iranian retaliation were very limited, causing only material damage without loss of American lives, then the round of violence would end there, and Washington would use other “non-lethal offensive methods like cyber-attacks

and increase military presence in the region.” In addition, more pressure would be placed on the international community to intervene and press all concerned parties to start negotiations. But what if Iranian retaliation was stronger than intended and inflicted heavy casualties? Then Washington would have little choice but to hit back harder, opening the door for an uncontrolled chain of violent events.

The second scenario revolves around a missile attack by Hezbollah against northern Israel in retaliation to Israeli air raids on its bases in Syria or Lebanon. The Israeli government would answer with the launching of a series of strikes on (alleged) missile factories that Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have supposedly established in Syria and Lebanon to build accurate long range missiles. Like its partner Tehran, Hezbollah would also adopt a measured approach in its response to Israeli attacks. “Hezbollah will certainly retaliate but will make its attacks proportionate to the Israeli air raids,” predicted the participant playing the role of Hezbollah. He pointed out that “Hezbollah will avoid sliding into a war with Israel because it wants to spare Lebanon the repercussions.” However, he added that if Israeli attacks were part of an all-out regional war on Iran, “then Hezbollah will definitely be in it. As part of the 150,000-fighter resistance forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.” He was referring to the pro-Iranian Shiite militias operating in Iraq and Syria in addition to the

Palestinian factions of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip.

The last scenario explored the chances of resuming negotiations that would lead to a new deal that replaces the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in 2015 between Iran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. President Trump declared U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA in May 2018 and has called on Iranian leaders to enter into unconditional negotiations with him to reach a new deal that will take into account Iran's ballistic missiles program and its regional controversial policies. Tehran has refused to resume any negotiations before the lifting of U.S. sanctions.

“President Trump’s main objective of the maximum pressure policy is to force Iran into negotiations to reach a deal that would replace the one (JCPOA) negotiated by his predecessor President Barrack Obama,” said the American participant. “Iranian leaders have made it clear that they will never enter into negotiations before there is lifting of the (U.S.) sanctions,” replied the Iranian participant. He noted that Iran has lost trust in U.S. policies and commitments and “wants guarantees that any future deal with the United States will be honored” regardless who is in the White House. The American participant stressed that Trump would be keen to reach a deal if the Iranians sit with him “and he will honor it,

and so would the next Administration even if led by Democrats.” However, the current level of mistrust between both sides is so high that European participants agreed that it would be very hard to fix in the foreseeable future. The current mediations by France, Japan or even Arab Gulf States such as Oman will stand little chance of a breakthrough in the current tense environment.

Main Observations

The reactions and comments of all participants reflected the regional and international actors’ high level of anxiety in light of the current situation. It is clear that all parties fear the breakout of war and are willing to shift and change for the sake of avoiding it. The participant representing Arab Gulf States pointed out that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates realize that they will be the ones most affected by a regional war. He noted that there is very little they can do to influence Washington’s policies on Iran as the U.S. will define its objectives and interests regardless of the views of its Arab allies. However, according to the Iranian participant, Tehran is convinced that Saudi Arabia and Israel talked the Trump Administration into withdrawing from the JCPOA and into re-imposing sanctions on Iran. This is another clear indication of the erosion of trust between all actors.

Iran regards its ballistic missiles arsenal as the backbone of its deterrence and defensive capabilities. This was affirmed during the war game simulation, thus reasserting a long-standing Iranian position that its ballistic missiles program is not up for negotiations, and it could only be discussed as part of a regional disarmament pact. The Iranians believe that their ballistic and cruise missiles are the best means to maintain the balance of power with their Arab Gulf neighbors who enjoy air power superiority and have been acquiring advanced defense technologies from the West. Moreover, Iran regards the thousands of militiamen, including the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as an integral part of its regional defense architecture that has helped to deter its main adversaries, including the U.S. So even if Iran enters into new negotiations with Washington it will be very hard to get Tehran to concede on either its missiles program or its regional expansionist policies. However, it might be more flexible on issues related to its nuclear program.

Although the current Iranian strategy appears to be aimed at pressing global powers to end its economic isolation and to bypass American sanctions, it nevertheless seems that every time there is an attack on oil facilities, more states, especially major European players, become closer to the policies of the Trump Administration. This is being clearly demonstrated by the changing positions of countries like the United Kingdom, France and Germany

that had strongly objected to the U.S. move of pulling out of the JCPOA several months ago, but today are becoming more vocal in condemning Iranian “destabilizing” actions in the region. The United Kingdom has already decided to join the U.S.-led naval coalition to patrol and protect the Hormuz Strait. Contacts are underway with several European and Asian countries to join this coalition that will help protect ships and tankers crossing the strategic strait. The attacks on oil facilities and tankers are therefore increasing the military presence in the region, which plays against Tehran’s objective of reducing the foreign military footprint in the region.

Even though American and Iranian officials do not want war, chances remain high of an incident or a chain of violent events in a tit-for-tat scenario that could easily spark a large-scale regional war with adverse consequences. The incidents in the Strait of Hormuz back in June and the recent attacks on Aramco facilities in northern Saudi Arabia show an escalatory pattern, which indicates that the Iranian leadership is growing bolder and more confident in its ability to use violent means without crossing the war threshold. This over-confidence could drive the IRGC or their militia allies to become more careless in future attacks. Tehran could also misread the behavior of its opponents whom will likely become less tolerant of its bold attacks on their facilities or interests. Every time the IRGC or any party chooses a military approach it will be taking a big risk

of igniting a major conflict as nobody can guarantee the outcome of an attack or how the targeted party will actually respond. This over-confidence could prove to be Iran's Achilles Heel. Continued playing with fire will eventually start a fire that could get out of control.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the participants' interactions and the outcome of the war game simulation, the policy recommendations are the following:

1. The international community, especially countries that can play a mediating role between Iran and its opponents, mainly the United States, must focus on reasonable and doable confidence-building measures to enable Iranian officials to resume face-to-face talks with U.S. officials. The current level of mistrust between both sides is too high to expect a surprise meeting between them on leadership level anytime soon. There should be more active back-channel diplomacy and track-1 or track-2 meetings bringing together representatives from Iran, the United States, Arab Gulf States and other European and Asian countries to help explore ideas and means to restore the lost confidence and pave the way for fruitful high-level talks that could quickly de-escalate the current tense situation.

2. The international community must be more unified and forceful in condemning any violent actions taken by Iran or any other player in the region. Lack of strong condemnation and non-lethal reaction – like sanctions or political isolation – will only encourage bolder military actions which will lead to what the international community is trying to avoid: a downwards spiral into instability and armed conflict in the region.
3. Efforts by the United States to build a naval coalition to protect shipping lanes in the Hormuz Strait and the Arabian Sea must be supported and incorporated within a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution. Many countries, especially in Europe with its already limited military resources, worry that joining the coalition in its current format (led by Washington) could possibly get them entangled in a U.S.-Iranian confrontation that could turn out to be not solvable by diplomatic means. If this coalition were to gain a political cover from the UNSC, then it would gain international legitimacy and there would be clearer rules of engagement sparing member countries from being dragged into war.
4. The signatories of the JCPOA must take notice of all developments since its signing back in 2015, especially the way Iran has expanded its presence in the region (Iraq, Syria and Yemen) and advanced its missiles program. Although restraining the Iranian nuclear

program was more urgent and of higher importance to international powers, the sustainability of any deal with Iran will always prove difficult if its current regional policy continue unabated. The current situation has made it clear that it is time for the global powers to reach a so-called “package deal” with Tehran that will seek a region-wide de-escalation, ending Iranian military and political intervention in neighboring countries, lifting the sanctions on Iran and normalizing relations with it, limiting Iranian missiles program through a regional arms-control regime, and enforcing a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. This “package deal” will very likely kick-start the Middle East peace process on stronger grounds and yield better results.

5. All relevant actors need to stick to their commitment to the implementation of United Nations Security Council resolutions such as 1701. There must be more international restraints on breaches of the above-mentioned resolution, as tensions on Israeli northern and southern borders with Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip are heightening. Israeli attacks on bases of the IRGC or its allies risk a retaliation that could spark a war. Moscow must exercise more pressure on Iran to keep the IRGC and Hezbollah away from the Syrian borders with Israel. An Israel military conflict with IRGC in the Syrian Golan Heights would further complicate efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict.

6. Arab Gulf States must rely more on pressure and mediation from Asian powers than they currently do. Most Arab Gulf States appear to be more focused on winning Western support at a time when the West does not depend on oil from the Gulf region any longer to the extent it used to. Arab Gulf States and even Iran should give equal attention to Asian powers that are very much dependent on energy resources from the Gulf, and hence would have more to lose in case of a military conflict in the Middle East. Besides, Asian powers like Japan, China, South Korea, India and Pakistan have good relations with both Arab Gulf States and Iran as well as with the United States, which makes them more qualified to act as mediators with bigger chances of success.

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