

Calibrated Pressure: Exploiting Iran's Mediterranean Setbacks while Preventing Nuclear Escalation

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Summary

The 7 October 2023 attacks against Israel and subsequent regional developments have drastically altered Iran's strategic position, severing its Mediterranean access and weakening key proxies like Hezbollah. This situation offers a rare chance to reset Western policy on Iran by applying targeted pressure through multilateral mechanisms, while avoiding pushing Iran across the nuclear threshold. This author recommends immediately reinvesting in United Nation (UN) frameworks in Syria and Lebanon, developing containment strategies in Central Asia to counter Iranian reorientation eastward, and strategically engaging Türkiye as a regional counterweight while maintaining de-escalation channels with Tehran to prevent crossing the nuclear threshold.

Iran's Military Setbacks in the Levant and Economic Despair

Weakened access to the Mediterranean Sea reduces Iran's opportunities to supply arms to the Lebanese Hezbollah to outflank Israel and to circumvent international sanctions to diversify its economy. The attacks of 7 October 2023 acted as a powerful catalyst for the reconfiguration of the Middle East. In its attempt to reestablish deterrence by force, Israel, by decapitating the Lebanese Hezbollah and relentlessly targeting Iranian interests and their proxies in Syria, has weakened Iran's invisible hand on the Mediterranean coast.¹ In addition, the incursion by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other Syrian rebel groups into Damascus, crowned by the deposition of Bashar al-Assad's regime, weakened Iranian influence and imperiled Russia's, in favor of their Turkish competitor. Regime change in Syria has reduced the possibilities of interactions in the budding Russian-Iranian relationship, which had traditionally been marked by historical distrust and circumstantial interests.² Iranian proxies remain firmly established in Iraq and Yemen, and the maritime routes leading to the Strait of Hormuz remain closely monitored. Hence, Iran's loss of control over a historic land and air route reduces its military projection capability in its contest against Israel.

A Contrasting Socioeconomic Context

International sanctions spurred an economy of resistance weaker than positive macroeconomic indicators, resulting from Iranian statist dirigisme, would suggest. The Iranian economy has suffered from a drastic drop in foreign direct investments since the first Donald J. Trump administration drew back from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Consequently, state intervention helps maintain production levels. Nevertheless, the increasing obsolescence of production technologies caused by economic isolation and energy and electricity shortages have shattered the development momentum that underpinned the regime's triumphant rhetoric during

the 1990s and 2000s. Today, the government has reinstated coupons to alleviate the situation for the poor but is planning an above-inflation tax increase to close its annual budget.³ If the new 25-year strategic partnership signed in March 2021 materializes with China, however, it offers some protection to Iran from the economic isolation caused by international sanctions.⁴ The gloomy domestic economic outlook, combined with the regime’s repressive policies, has led to declining birth rates in Iran’s demographics, undermining the promises of the Islamic Revolution for creating and expanding a vibrant society.

Iran’s diminished access to the Mediterranean Sea and its mixed economic situation have weakened the *nezam* (system or regime) on the global, regional, and domestic stages. The current feverishness resulting from the regime’s setbacks could either precipitate its crossing the nuclear threshold to reassert its regional position or using its position on the nuclear threshold as a negotiating stance to seek sanctions alleviation, while looking for other ways to ensure its economic and political subsistence.

A Shared Need for New Global and Regional Strategies

The fall of the al-Assad regime, the demise of the Lebanese Hezbollah, direct confrontations between Iran and Israel, and to a lesser extent the war in Ukraine shift regional balances and challenge regional and global stakeholders’ traditional approaches. This new geopolitical situation, which benefits Israel and Türkiye so far, calls into question previous U.S. approaches to regional security such as the 2020 Abraham Accords.⁵ American and European interests are equally challenged regarding, for example, the Syrian Kurdish question and access to refugees’ camps in northeastern Syria. In this context, the new U.S. administration’s strategy, which promised to reinstate its policy of maximum pressure on Iran, raises questions about the integration of its European allies, who seek to relaunch nuclear talks with Iran.⁶ The actions taken so far prove, however, more pragmatic, conducting negotiations with Iran on 12 April 2025. The question remains as to the extent to which hardliners and Israel will influence these negotiations when the temptation exists to push Israel’s military advantage against Iran’s nuclear program.

Iran’s strategy of regional power projection has faced increasing constraints, particularly near Syria’s Mediterranean coast, where historical Russian dominance, recent Israeli military actions, and regime change in Syria have limited its direct presence and forced a more peripheral role. This situation could bring about one of Iran’s most visceral fears: withdrawal (isolation) without access to the sea.⁷ Faced with

Western diplomacy that has lost credibility through the excessive use of economic sanctions, Iran could seek to regain an asymmetrical advantage—characteristic of its strategic culture—in terms of geography or capabilities or see salvation only in access to nuclear weapons.⁸

Russian and Iranian military setbacks in Syria could prompt both countries to take advantage of the International North–South Transport Corridor to strengthen an alternative route less prone to Western control to circumvent international sanctions. Iran could also seek to exploit the voids created by Russia’s disengagement from Central Asia—an area of historic interest to NATO’s Türkiye—to serve its economic needs and its developing relationship with China.⁹ The Russian-Iranian relationship remains complex, and its rough edges can be exploited by European and American leaders in the context of the war in Ukraine and of Chinese economic expansion.

Countering Iran’s Asymmetric Strategies

To exploit the new Syrian and Lebanese paradigm to maintain sufficient pressure to coerce Iran and weaken its relationship with Russia while also offering signs of openness to diplomatic engagement the regime, European and American leaders can activate complementary political, economic, and military levers.

Multilateral Pressure in Syria and Lebanon

This option exploits Iranian proxies’ military setbacks and Russia’s diminished position in Syria to increase multilateral diplomatic pressure on Iran. In Lebanon, Hezbollah’s weakening both militarily and politically offers an opportunity to restore the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon’s (UNIFIL) credibility during the annual negotiation of Resolution 1701. In Syria, a new UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution framing post-al-Assad stabilization with border monitoring mechanisms and law enforcement against drug trafficking would accentuate pressure on Iran and its allies. This option provides an opportunity to force Türkiye’s responsibility in participating in, or leading, a multilateralist action to establish security in Syria, or parts of it. The exclusion of Iranian groups could condition reconstruction funds and sanctions relief; however, passing both of these would holistically harden Iran’s resolve to circumvent sanctions. This UN-centric approach requires Russia’s neutrality at the UNSC, potentially leveraged, regarding the number of its nationals in the al-Hol refugee camp in Syria and persistent interests, through renegotiated Russian-American relations following discussions about the termination of the war in Ukraine. Arab states that once favored normalization with

the al-Assad regime may now back more robust countermeasures—particularly in coordination with existent maritime security efforts—as spillover effects of drug trafficking by Iran-backed groups would pose threats to regional stability and public health.¹⁰ American military disengagement might further empower Türkiye at the Kurds’ expense, thus America backing this approach—alongside Arab and European partnership and Israeli restraint—would ensure balanced pressure on Iran. A regular consultation forum with regional powers would align positions and prevent parallel diplomatic initiatives that could compromise the strategy.

A second option could be a strategy of containment in Central Asia—a Great Game 2.0—in anticipation of Iran’s strategic reorientation. Cornered on its western front, Iran could try to expand its reach into Central Asia, which Russia, focused on Ukraine, struggles to keep as firmly in its fold as it did before the war.

The aim is to counter this potential redeployment of Iranian economic and illicit activities eastward—where Russian and Turkish interests converge—under the unscrupulous patronage of China, which is willing to seize opportunities to advance its Belt and Road Initiative. To this end, diplomatic and economic investments in this region and the disruption of the International North–South Transport Corridor are all avenues to explore. On economic matters, in addition to developing an alternative integrated Western-backed trade arrangement on the western flank (Syria, Jordan, Iraq) with the support of Arab countries, especially in the Arab Gulf, the creation of a Central Asian energy forum would help balance pressure on Iran. On military matters, depending on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) could provide an interesting framework for sharing intelligence and coordinating initiatives to develop local institutional antismuggling capabilities given the experience gained during NATO Mission Iraq (NMI). Iran’s position remains delicate in an area marked by Russian (formerly Soviet) and Turkish influence. Consequently, the ability of Americans and Europeans to balance all the tools of statecraft will guarantee the credibility of their approach.

Finally, a strategic commitment to Türkiye as a pivotal power toward Iran and Russia is a final, and undoubtedly more pressing, option. The new situation since al-Assad’s deposition has repositioned Ankara at the center of the regional stage, and leveraging this new status could prove valuable in containing Iranian influence. Concrete actions include encouraging its new proactive stance in multilateral initiatives on Syria following the Syrian regime change and the development of specific forums recognizing an enhanced Turkish role following the withdrawal of Iran and Russia.

Türkiye, as a NATO member, offers more strategic depth to contain Iran on the Asian continent than Israel, whose maximalist approach reduces European support and is less likely to encourage Iranian diplomatic engagement. Without naïveté about Türkiye’s strategic ambiguity and hedging capacity, controlling Turkish actions on its *Turan* will require leverage on Türkiye, for example, about the status of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.¹¹ Coordination forums could gather Türkiye, NATO, the United States, and the European Union to strengthen the coherence of actions from the Mediterranean coast to Central Asia. The level of Turkish involvement in regional and multilateral initiatives, the reduction of Iranian influence in Syria, and the creation of new regional security dynamics favorable to Western interests will remain key points of attention.

Calibrated Pressure

These recommendations can be integrated into a strategy of calibrated pressure. The complexity of the Iranian challenge calls for a coherent approach that balances pressure and incentives to gain compliance to maximize the effects on Iranian illicit activities’ new fragility and ultimately influence the nuclear negotiations. Multilateral actions, though challenged, would legitimize Western interventions on the regional and global stage. A strategy of maximum pressure that does not involve European or Arab partners seems to be a short-term vision that would favor the emergence of regional power poles unconvinced by the primacy of U.S. interests over theirs. Proactive engagement with Türkiye is an essential linchpin, while integrating Saudi Arabia’s specific concerns regarding Yemen and exploiting the United Arab Emirates’ expertise in controlling financial flows will make it possible to exploit Iran’s current vulnerabilities while anticipating its future geopolitical maneuvers.

The nuance provided by calibrated pressure could bring more solid results than a policy of maximum pressure, which has mainly sparked the resilience of the Iranian regime without producing tangible results. The strategy of calibrated pressure must incorporate de-escalation mechanisms and channels of communication with Tehran to avoid an accumulation of pressure precipitating an Iranian decision to cross the military nuclear threshold or to launch desperate asymmetric operations against Western interests. Seeking regime collapse through economic, political, and military pressure is a risky calculation that must be informed by the Iraqi experience of 2003. The Iranian regime still has resources to organize its resilience, and repeating a strategy of maximum pressure would further push it toward China, with little likelihood of favorable tangible results for the foreseeable

future. Diplomatic success lies in the ability to constantly adjust pressure in the various areas of statecraft. The ability to counter new expansionist impulses and relieve sanctions remains more promising for building a sustainable approach than a maximum pressure approach.

In the short term, the immediate reinvestment in multilateral mechanisms in Syria and Lebanon is a priority, followed by the deployment of containment strategies in Central Asia and a targeted adjustment of sanctions against Iran. In the longer term, the strategy should be evaluated and adapted, prior to the consolidation of diplomatic gains combining economic incentives—gradual relief from sanctions, study of electricity interconnection, authorization of targeted foreign direct investment—and the maintenance of sanctions against Iranian proxies and the nuclear sector. Multilateral initiatives arising from the reconfiguration of the Middle East should enable the establishment of rapid coordination mechanisms in the event of a resurgence of proxies or an acceleration of Iran’s nuclear program.

ENDNOTES

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