

Opinion – How Could Iran Survive Trump’s Maximum Pressure 2.0?

Written by Huzeir Ezekiel Dzulhisham

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HUZEIR EZEKIEL DZULHISHAM, MAR 10 2025

Donald Trump’s re-imposition of maximum pressure on Iran, on February 4th 2025, and his alleged ultimatum letter to the Iranian government, has ignited concerns about rising Middle East tensions. Yet, the US faces an Iran that has past experience of the first Trump administration, and therefore can anticipate Trump’s policies. Iran’s Trump-proofing strategy first involves forming a ring of friendly relations with neighbouring states in the Middle East. Second, strategic signalling and readiness for cooperation with the West. Third, deepening relations with Russia and China, a hedge if the previous two strategies fail. Under the “Neighbours First Policy”, Iran formed friendly relations with neighbouring Gulf states, to blunt America’s ability to hit Iran. After all, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were instrumental in supporting Trump-imposed maximum pressure, and its 1,500 sanctions against Iran in 2018.

Since 2024, Iran has been on a diplomatic offensive. After the landmark 2023 restoration of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, brokered by China, Saudi-Iran relations have warmed to unprecedented levels. In October 2024 Saudi Arabia and Iran remarkably held joint military drills, while the Chief of the Saudi military visited Tehran in November 2024 to discuss bilateral defence cooperation. The bilateral meetings with the UAE have been held with Iranian ministers, who have met the UAE president, and foreign minister. In February 2025, for the first time, four vessels from the Iranian Navy docked in Sharjah for a three-day visit to discuss maritime security. Iran has also been normalising ties with Bahrain, which sent a message via Russia to Tehran to resume diplomatic relations. In October 2024, Iran’s foreign minister visited Bahrain for the first time in seventeen years.

Friendly relations with neighbouring Gulf states serve two strategic purposes. Firstly, reducing threat perceptions of Iran, blunting the Trump administration’s ability to securitise Iran as the most pressing existential regional threat. Consequently, these Gulf states might be unwilling to enforce confrontational American policies, making traditional American strategies against Iran such as diplomatic isolation less effective. Iran’s diplomatic strategy recalls the “forward defence” strategy which uses Iranian-backed proxy militias to create a buffer, pushing conflicts with the US and Israel beyond Iranian territory.

While the Trump administration could compel Gulf states to enforce confrontational policies, leveraging on American military presence that benefits the security of Gulf states. Arguably, the fear of renewed regional instability and war through revived tensions with Iran potentially overrides the Trump administration’s pressure. Also, friendly relations and open dialogue with Tehran, make Iran less of an immediate threat.

Secondly, Gulf states could intercede for Tehran, to moderate confrontational US policies and even mediate US-Iran tensions. After all friendly relations with Iran and a desire to preserve regional stability provide strong incentives for the Gulf to mediate US-Iran relations. It is not incidental that targets for Iranian diplomatic outreach, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are US security partners and whose leaders have close relationships with President Trump. Saudi Arabia recently indicated openness to mediating US-Iran tensions, by formulating a new nuclear deal.

The mutual alignment of interests makes the Gulf unusually receptive to Iranian diplomatic overtures. Both recognise the danger of a destabilising regional war, which neither the Gulf nor Iran can afford. In particular, Saudi Arabia is

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undergoing economic transformation, under the Vision 2030 plan, diversifying away from petroleum with ambitious urban development projects such as Neom. International sanctions have crippled Iran's economy, with high inflation near 40 percent and a devalued currency. However, despite aligned interests, close economic investment and partnerships with Iran represent a red line in Gulf-Iran relations. Gulf states have been hesitant to increase economic ties with Iran, which would violate US-imposed sanctions and provoke US retaliation.

Iran has also signalled openness to dialogue and cooperation with the West, despite Tehran's long-standing anti-Western position. This strategy signals pragmatism, giving the West no excuses to target Iran, and allows Tehran to find willing Western partners that could either intercede on Iran's behalf or moderate Western aggression. Thus, while direct official negotiations with the US may seem unlikely, Tehran hopes to fragment united Western opposition by engaging with more open-minded and neutral parties.

Even before Trump's election and renewal of maximum pressure, Iran's political establishment has signalled openness for Western dialogue. Advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati stated in an interview that Iran is "open to closer Western ties". President Masoud Pezeshkian, announced at the UN that Iran is "ready to engage" the West over its nuclear program. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi proclaimed Iran's openness to "constructive negotiations" with willing Western states.

This explains why direct negotiations took place over Iran's nuclear program with Germany, France, and the United Kingdom on January 13th 2025. In 2024, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were given access to inspect Iran's uranium enrichment facilities. Iran has reportedly allowed the IAEA to increase its inspection visits, to placate international concerns over high uranium enrichment levels and to demonstrate regime transparency internationally.

Enhanced Iranian economic and security relations with Russia and China is the third Trump-proofing strategy and represents a hedge against the other two strategies. Russia and China represent key partners of Iran, collectively facing US sanctions and American attempts to constrain their influence. Therefore, this "axis of upheaval" has been striving to create independent economic and military ties immune to US pressure.

In recent years, Iran has been increasingly reliant on both Russia and China to survive US-imposed economic and diplomatic isolation. Both China and Russia have already signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with Iran outlining enhanced economic, security, and political exchanges.

In 2023, Russia was Iran's largest foreign investor, investing US \$2.7 billion. In 2024, Russia and Iran established the Shetab-Mir system, integrating Iranian and Russian banking systems, allowing Iran to bypass international sanctions and encouraging trade in Iranian Rials and Russian Rubles. China has welcomed Iran as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Council and encouraged Iran's inclusion into BRICS, while covert Chinese purchases of Iranian oil, and reported smuggling of sanctioned technology, emphasize the importance of Iran-China relations.

Indeed, Iranian relations with Russia and China are a fail-safe, providing Iran with a financial lifeline and forestalling complete international isolation. Tehran recognizes that its diplomatic efforts towards the Gulf and the West may be jeopardized by international alarm over its accelerated nuclear program.

While it remains to be seen if these strategies will fully insulate Iran from President Trump's second maximum pressure. Tehran's goal is to survive the second Trump administration by maintaining regional influence and forestalling international isolation. This has become increasingly pivotal to Iranian stability, given the weakened state of Iran's Axis of Resistance, which has suffered from the collapse of Syria's Assad regime, and the embattled circumstances of Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. If successful, these strategies could also signal a broader shift in the Iranian strategic calculus towards more diplomacy. Optimistically, Iran's international influence will benefit greatly if it succeeds in forming alliances with regional rivals, restoring dialogue with Europe while maintaining ties with Russia and China. Therefore, reducing the need to support clandestine militias to preserve Iran's international clout.

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