



Putting Diplomacy First

A Strategic Alternative to President Donald Trump's
'Maximum Pressure' Approach on Iran

By Brian Katulis and Peter Juul March 2020

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

After nearly two years, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” approach on Iran has increased the risk of a wider Middle East war and failed to bring the world closer to a better nuclear deal with Iran. In response to the Trump administration’s increased economic pressure through sanctions and isolation, Iran has taken a series of actions targeting U.S. partners and the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. This reaction prompted the Trump administration to send 17,000 more U.S. troops to the Gulf in 2019,¹ undercutting the administration’s own stated national security strategy to prioritize great power competition with Russia and China and ultimately harming long-term U.S. interests.

Moreover, as the first few months of 2020 have shown, this is shaping up to be a pivotal year for U.S. policy in the Middle East, as tensions with Iran remain center stage. The year began with the U.S.-Iran confrontation entering a more dangerous phase after the U.S. strike that killed Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq—an act that prompted an overt Iranian attack on U.S. troops and pushed both nations to the brink of war.

On the Trump administration’s watch, Iran has ramped up its nuclear program once again. Its stockpile of nuclear fuel has increased, and the country now has enough enriched uranium to produce a single nuclear weapon—even though it will lack an operational warhead and ballistic missile delivery system for the foreseeable future.²

In the wake of these tensions, a new threat has emerged: The coronavirus has spread inside Iran, which has become an epicenter for the spread of the deadly virus throughout the Middle East.³ In this increasingly complicated environment, the Trump administration’s Iran approach continues to fall short of achieving its goals of a better nuclear deal with Iran and stabilizing the Middle East.

The main reason why President Donald Trump’s approach is doing more harm than good is found in the incoherence at the heart of the maximum pressure effort: Key members of his own team and supporters of Trump’s Iran approach are unclear

about the ultimate goal of the campaign. Tensions with Iran were already on the rise after the president came to office.⁴ However, the course for the current crisis was set with the United States' May 2018 withdrawal from the 2015 international Iran nuclear agreement—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—which some argue is part of the Trump administration's strategy to get a better nuclear deal.⁵ On the other hand, others argue for more expansive aims that hint at a goal of regime collapse or regime change, as outlined in U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's May 2019 speech outlining 12 demands related to Iran.

Alarming, the Trump administration does not seem to have worked out a clear game plan for its next step on Iran—a plan that will require coordination with regional security partners. This strategic incoherence unnecessarily puts the United States in a dangerous—and much weaker—position.

After a series of destabilizing incidents in the Middle East in 2019—including attacks on oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, the shooting down of a U.S. military surveillance drone, and a complex missile strike on Saudi oil facilities—key countries in the region and around the world, such as Oman, Iraq, Pakistan, and Japan, among others, have sought to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Iran and the United States.⁶ These channels offer possible openings to avoid continued escalation and encourage discussions among regional parties in order to avoid the slippery slope to war and begin a broader, more inclusive discussion that strives for a more balanced U.S. approach to the Middle East.

For years, the ingredient missing from discussions of U.S. policy toward Iran has been incremental progress on improving the regional security environment in the Gulf and the wider Middle East. That ingredient, no matter how tactical and incremental it may appear, remains necessary to foster a better regional atmosphere in which to address Iran's nuclear program and other concerns that spur mistrust and have produced a volatile environment in the region.

However, the Trump administration appears poised to ratchet up a risky maximum pressure approach that has isolated the United States and decreased its policy options. Because of the downsides of the current approach, it is important to offer strategic alternatives that are not simply criticisms or a return to past approaches.⁷ This report provides an analysis of two main steps necessary to deal with the volatile situation between the United States and Iran:

1. Develop a new framework for comprehensive diplomacy with Iran starting with a strong focus on de-escalating regional tensions. A new round of diplomacy with Iran will be necessary to secure the United States' security interests in the long run. The starting point for a more comprehensive regional diplomatic effort should be the current discussions to de-escalate regional security tensions and expand the diplomatic channels that have opened up between Iran and its neighbors.

The efforts aimed at de-escalating tensions in the Middle East should be the starting point for a broader conversation that is integrated into the framework of discussions that led to the 2015 agreement but expands the sets of issues and partners engaged in the discussion. To move beyond the current diplomatic impasse, the United States should be prepared to offer limited sanctions relief in exchange for opening a new dialogue with Iran—similar to an interim deal crafted in 2013 that preceded the negotiations that led to the JCPOA. Comprehensive diplomacy with Iran should address issues that were left unaddressed in the 2015 deal, including ballistic missiles and sunset provisions as well as long-standing concerns about actions taken by many countries in the region to undermine stability. In the long term, the conversation should also seek to engage the people of Iran, many of whom are fighting for basic freedoms and human rights, as well as develop tools to encourage progress on these fronts across the Middle East, including with regional security partners.

2. Rebalance the United States' regional security approach to enhance overall stabilization in the Middle East. In the current environment, the top U.S. policy priority remains protecting U.S. troops, diplomats, and citizens. U.S. security cooperation with regional partners should be carefully calibrated to help them defend themselves without offering these partners a blank check for actions that undermine regional security or contradict U.S. values and interests. The United States needs to leverage its security cooperation to produce progress toward regional stability.⁸ But the steps the United States takes on enhancing regional stabilization should seek to decrease uncertainty and unpredictability, which feed insecurity across the broader region.

This alternative seeks to apply the fundamental lesson with regard to Iran from the 2015–2018 period: Without robust diplomatic and regional security cooperation efforts to lower tensions and protect regional security partners from threats, diplomacy on nuclear issues with Iran will leave any future deal on a shaky, unstable foundation.

This report recognizes that the Trump administration is quite unlikely to chart a different course than the present one—and the costs of the current approach will continue to add up. For these reasons, it remains important to move beyond criticisms of the current approach and, with an eye to the future, offer a strategic alternative that is less anchored in the past and more prepared to face the grim reality of the present moment. This alternative is unlikely to gain much traction in the short term, given the impulsive president in the White House, his short-staffed foreign policy apparatus, and his dangerous determination to press on the present path.

Although it is unlikely to be pursued immediately, this alternative can put the United States and the region on a pathway to greater stability over the long run. It effectively manages the challenge that Iran poses and works to address the security concerns of U.S. partners in the Middle East rather than make both problems worse. Most importantly, it reduces the risk of an inadvertent and unwanted war in the Middle East while allowing the United States to direct its resources toward other pressing strategic priorities.

The United States' current approach in a shifting strategic landscape in the Middle East

The Trump administration has shifted the top strategic focus of U.S. Middle East policy away from the fight against al-Qaeda, the Islamic State group, and other terror networks and toward an aggressive confrontation with Iran. This shift accumulated over time through a series of impulsive and seemingly disconnected decisions by President Trump and his administration since taking office rather than a coherent process of strategic thinking and planning.

President Trump's initial foreign policy team prevailed in convincing him to stay in the Iran nuclear deal for roughly a year. But the advent in 2018 and 2019 of a new and more hawkish foreign policy team that included Mike Pompeo as secretary of state and John Bolton as national security adviser opened the way to the current risky path that the president continues to pursue with Iran. The Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign of economic sanctions against Iran was intended to force Tehran's capitulation on a set of 12 conditions that Secretary of State Pompeo issued, among which were ending Iranian support of its proxies across the Middle East and withdrawal of Iranian troops from Syria.⁹

Despite this shift in focus away from the fight against terror networks such as the Islamic State group and toward confronting Iran, the Trump administration offered a limited response last year to Iran's counterpressure campaign against the United States and its Gulf partners. From May 2019 to September 2019, Iran attacked oil tankers in and around the Gulf, downed a U.S. military surveillance drone, and launched a sophisticated attack against Saudi oil facilities.¹⁰ In response, the Trump administration reportedly initiated some cyberattacks and introduced additional economic sanctions.¹¹

These responses clearly failed to deter Iran from further escalation. Indeed, President Trump's decision to strike Soleimani appears to have been in part a reaction to criticism that characterized his response to earlier Iranian actions as feeble and feckless.¹² However, similar to the Trump administration's approach on Syria, the Soleimani strike itself—and most of the debate that it provoked—was tacti-

cal and operational rather than strategic. Soleimani was a dangerous actor who was responsible for regional instability, terrorist attacks, and the deaths of American troops and many others—but the strike against him fails to address the underlying sources of regional instability.

The strategic costs of the Trump administration's overall Iran approach are clear:

- **A ramped-up enriched uranium program:** The Trump administration's approach is premised on the notion that increased economic pressures—including cutting Iran's oil revenues—would compel Iran to give up all nuclear capabilities. But the policy has had the exact opposite effect, with Iran's enriched uranium stockpile tripling on Trump's watch.¹³ Iran has taken additional steps to remove the restrictions on its nuclear program that were negotiated by the Obama administration in the 2015 nuclear agreement, and some nuclear experts now believe that Tehran could build a nuclear weapon in as few as five months.¹⁴
- **A more isolated America:** Trump's decision to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal has fragmented the global coalition constructed by the Bush and Obama administrations to contain and engage Iran. This international division has ultimately weakened the United States' position relative to where it was in 2015 and will make diplomacy unnecessarily more difficult moving forward.
- **Increased instability in the Middle East:** The U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State group suspended many of its efforts to focus on force protection following the Soleimani strike.¹⁵ Iraqi political leaders—including Iraq's otherwise pro-American president, Barham Salih¹⁶—condemned the strike, and Shia political parties in Iraq's parliament pushed through a nonbinding resolution in favor of expelling all foreign troops.¹⁷
- **Fraying the United States' checks and balances on national security:** The legality of the Soleimani strike itself remains highly questionable—and the Trump administration's position on the legality of further military action against Iran has failed to persuade conservatives and progressives alike in Congress.¹⁸

The incoherent strategic rationale behind the Trump administration's Iran and Middle East policies creates its own hazards and dangers, especially in the current crisis. It does not have a clear sense of what it aims to achieve in the Middle East or vis-a-vis Iran. As a result, it has increased the threat that Iran poses to Israel, some Gulf countries, and U.S. forces in the region—without any clear benefit. These

long-standing partners are far more likely to be hit by any further Iranian retaliation and have already been subject to Iran's counterpressure campaign. Some of these regional partners have pressed the Trump administration to refrain from further escalation and initiated their own diplomatic efforts with Tehran.¹⁹

The current tensions in the Middle East are the result of bad policy choices by Iran and the United States, among others. Since the United States pulled out of the nuclear deal almost two years ago, both the Trump administration and the Iranian regime have taken mutually reinforcing steps that stretched bilateral and regional tensions to the breaking point.

At home, President Trump's continued practice of politicizing complicated national security issues such as Iran unnecessarily divides Americans. Iran and other outside actors have sought to exploit these internal divisions to their own benefit and will continue to do so moving forward.²⁰ A better alternative would seek to build greater bipartisan unity of purpose as the United States seeks to address challenging national security questions linked to Iran and the United States' role in the Middle East. But the impoverished political and policy debate in both countries has fed a cycle of internal political fragmentation and short-term crisis management thinking that encourages reckless escalation that could easily spiral out of control. The United States' interests and values would be better served by stepping back to look at the big picture and develop a multiyear game plan that seeks to restore some balance and order in the Middle East as well as conduct the debate in a way that builds coalitions at home rather than fragments or prevents them.

This sort of long-term approach would acknowledge that even as the United States shifts its global strategic focus away from the Middle East, it remains strongly against U.S. interests to see a regressive power such as Iran dominate the Gulf and further extend its influence across the wider region. A strategy of calibrated engagement gives the United States the best chance to prevent such negative outcomes while decreasing the risk of open military conflict with Iran. It requires the United States to do its part to maintain a stable balance of power in the Gulf, though in a much more considered and controlled fashion than has been the case in recent decades. This approach ultimately aims to keep the regime in check until either its conduct changes or Iranians change the regime themselves.

This new strategic alternative should have two core components: diplomacy and de-escalation as well as defense and regional stabilization. These core components are essential for a more coherent and more effective U.S. policy.

Putting diplomacy first: Using de-escalation efforts to carve a path to inclusive diplomacy

One key missing ingredient in the Trump administration's flawed Iran policy is comprehensive diplomacy aimed at defusing regional tensions and avoiding future escalations. The United States should build on current regional and international diplomacy efforts to lower tensions between Iran and its neighbors and use this as a pathway to reopening talks with Iran.

Increase diplomacy to decrease regional tensions

The increased instability in the Middle East resulting from Trump's risky maximum pressure approach and Tehran's response has created incentives for some countries in the region, as well as other countries dependent on the region's energy resources, to pursue avenues for de-escalating tensions. These quiet efforts are unlikely to resolve all long-standing issues and mutual insecurities between Iran and its neighbors, but the United States should welcome efforts to lower tensions, no matter how insignificant.

- **Support the de-escalation efforts of global and regional powers.** Over the past year, a number of countries have attempted to defuse tensions among Iran, the United States, and the Gulf Arab monarchies. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Tehran in June 2019 in an attempt to mediate between Iran and the United States, to no avail.²¹ Likewise, the prime ministers of Pakistan and Iraq offered their services as mediators between Iran and Saudi Arabia toward the end of 2019.²²

These international mediation efforts have not borne fruit, but in recent months, the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have quietly reached out to Iran in order to de-escalate tensions across the Gulf.²³ This direct and discreet diplomacy by the United States' Gulf partners reflects the fact that they have the most to lose in any outright military conflict between Iran and the United States.²⁴

The United States should support the efforts made by its Gulf partners to de-escalate tensions with Iran. That means listening to these partners when they counsel de-escalation and refraining from taking actions that might undermine their own diplomacy as well as quietly working with these partners to coordinate these diplomatic efforts in order to ensure that they complement rather than undermine one another.

- **Recalibrate relations with Iraq.** The U.S. relationship with Iraq suffered a blow with the Soleimani strike, as it was carried out without the Iraqi government's consent and also targeted pro-Iranian Iraqi militia leaders who were technically part of the Iraqi security services.²⁵ Bilateral ties between Washington and Baghdad remain tenuous. In the immediate term, the United States needs to stabilize its bilateral relationship with Iraq. That means refocusing U.S. policy back on the unfinished fight against the Islamic State group—not turning Iraq into an arena for conflict with Iran. Over the medium and long terms, the United States should properly calibrate its security relationship with Iraq to match its interests in the country. Perhaps more importantly, the United States should expand its diplomatic engagement in the country to include not just Baghdad politicians but the civil society activists who braved bullets and Iranian-backed militias in the waning months of 2019 to protest widespread corruption.²⁶
- **Establish a U.N.-mandated mechanism to offer independent assessments of security incidents in the Gulf.** Following the September 14 cruise missile and drone attack on its oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, Saudi Arabia invited U.N. experts to participate in the investigation into the attack.²⁷ These experts—seconded from the panel of experts assembled to investigate the war in Yemen—concluded that Yemen's Houthi militants were not responsible for the attack.²⁸ As a result, this independent assessment undermined Iran's unconvincing attempts to deny responsibility.

The United States should work with its allies and partners around the world introduce a measure in the U.N. Security Council to create a panel of experts to examine security incidents in the Gulf, akin to similar bodies established to investigate the conflicts in Libya and Yemen. Impartial and widely credible attributions of responsibility for incidents that Iran and its proxies attempt to deny or obfuscate will prove useful to the United States as well as its regional partners. They can provide the basis for further international diplomatic action against Iran in response to the attack, potentially including a reimposition of an arms embargo on Tehran that is slated to be lifted later this year or similar measures.²⁹ If the Iranian regime knows it will be held responsible for aggression in the Gulf by an

impartial body authorized by the U.N. Security Council, it may think twice before launching similar operations moving forward.

Taken together, these steps can help reduce tensions in the Middle East while holding Iran accountable for its destabilizing actions. They can lay the foundation for diplomacy that aims to address Iran's nuclear program in a more sustainable and enduring fashion.

Open comprehensive talks with Iran by offering limited sanctions relief

The lesson from the past five years of U.S. policy on Iran is that ongoing, steady diplomacy is an integral part of success. But the most effective diplomacy needs to be integrated into a broader strategy that is realistic and linked to conditions in the Middle East. Even under the Trump administration, the stated goal of U.S. policy remains diplomacy with Iran on nuclear issues and regional security questions. Vigorous and creative diplomacy will be necessary to address the enduring security concerns that U.S. partners in the region have vis-a-vis Iran.

The most probable point of entry back into diplomacy will likely look similar to the 2013 Joint Plan of Action—the interim deal with Iran that consisted of a short-term freeze of Iran's nuclear program for some form of sanctions relief that provided incentives for Iran to enter into a broader discussion about a wider set of security concerns. France's proposal to extend Iran a line of credit in exchange for Tehran's continued adherence to the 2015 agreement, for example, is worth exploring and could also serve as the basis for U.S. diplomatic reengagement.³⁰ Again, however, the current stance of the Trump administration moves America further away from this point of entry to renewed talks.

Working to assuage these concerns about issues such as Iran’s ballistic and cruise missile programs, Gulf maritime security, and confidence-building measures on wider regional security constitute important avenues for de-escalation. Making progress toward resolving these missile-related issues—no matter how incremental—will also help lay a more secure geopolitical foundation for any new nuclear agreement with Iran. The United States can start laying that foundation with following policy steps:

- **Open diplomatic channels to address short-term regional security issues—including maritime security—while setting the table for a broader agenda that seeks to rebalance the United States’ overall regional stabilization strategy.** The United States should work in concert with its Gulf partners to formulate a common plan of action for diplomacy with Iran in order to address short-term regional security issues and de-escalate regional tensions. Washington should also reach out to European allies such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom to obtain their support for this diplomacy and to ascertain what they might bring to the table. This diplomacy will focus on a small number of critical and immediate security problems facing the Gulf. It should also lay the foundation for possible talks regarding a wider range of regional security problems over the long term.

In its joint diplomatic outreach to Iran, the United States and its regional partners should make clear they intend to focus on core regional security challenges: maritime security; cybersecurity; and ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. These issues should not be used as a precondition to restarting talks; rather, Iran should understand that these issues will be part of a long-term diplomatic effort that will likely last years. The JCPOA’s 2023 deadline for addressing these issues provides one possible point of leverage with Iran and a way to focus international diplomatic efforts.

While the United States should seriously consider rolling back sanctions imposed under the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign in exchange for a rollback of Iran’s violations of the 2015 nuclear agreement, U.S. diplomats should also leverage American reengagement on the nuclear file to make progress on regional security challenges that will need to be addressed in concert with a new nuclear agreement.

On maritime security, the United States and its regional partners should propose a code of maritime conduct for all nations with naval forces in the Gulf. Such a code of conduct could help prevent an incident at sea between Iranian and U.S.

naval vessels. Similar codes of conduct were agreed to by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and, more recently and less formally, between several western Pacific maritime powers, including the United States and China.³¹ Likewise, the United States should propose an incidents-at-sea hotline to keep channels of communication open between relevant commanders of naval forces sailing in the Gulf and help enforce the provisions of a maritime code of conduct.

Iran's ballistic missile, cruise missile, and drone arsenals represent a major threat concern for many U.S. regional security partners, particularly Israel and the Gulf Arab states. On ballistic missiles, Iran has continued to advance its capabilities while adhering to a self-imposed 2,000-kilometer range limitation.³² Tehran has also developed its own cruise missile and drone capabilities—and used them in the attack against Abqaiq.³³ In addition to ballistic and cruise missiles, Iran and its network of proxies have targeted U.S. partners with a range of standoff weapons such as rockets and drones.

Regional missile arms control talks could build off Iran's stated commitment to limit the ranges of its ballistic missiles.³⁴ But these negotiations should include all standoff weapons, including cruise missiles, precision-guided rockets, and drones as well as ballistic missiles. These talks would also force Saudi Arabia to be more open and transparent about its own ballistic missile program: According to the U.S. intelligence community, Riyadh has expanded its ballistic missile production capabilities with Chinese help.³⁵ U.S. involvement can help ensure that the resulting arms control deal includes an independent international verification mechanism that will keep both Iran and Saudi Arabia open, if not honest.

- **Prioritize conflict resolution in Yemen.** The United States should prioritize resolving Yemen's multiple internal conflicts and bringing regional military intervention in the country to an end. For more than a decade now, the overriding U.S. policy focus in Yemen has been on targeted counterterrorism and military measures to defeat threats. However, a broader strategy is needed to address the instability and environment that enables terrorist threats to emerge and survive.

The United States should use the leverage of its arms sales and military cooperation to advance political and diplomatic efforts in order to help resolve Yemen's conflict. Looming threats to cut security assistance in the past year helped motivate the United Arab Emirates to find a pathway out of its military engagement in Yemen and may have contributed to recent diplomatic and political moves to end the conflict.³⁶

In general, however, the path to peace in Yemen remains long and difficult. Small steps forward may be the best option for U.S., regional, and international diplomats hoping to bring the country's multiple internal conflicts to an end. Implementing any agreements will likely prove even more difficult than negotiating them. Yet, recent moves by Saudi Arabia and its Houthi adversaries—including a suspension of Houthi drone and missile strikes in the wake of the rise in cross-Gulf tensions after the Abqaiq attack and back-channel talks between the two sides—suggest that progress toward peace remains possible, if fragile and reversible.³⁷ The United States should do whatever it can to support Saudi diplomacy to bring its military intervention in Yemen to an acceptable conclusion.

At the same time, however, the United States should recognize and address the legitimate security concerns that drove and sustained the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Inviting Iran into diplomatic discussions about the political future of Yemen will only exacerbate these anxieties and make Saudi Arabia less likely to negotiate a settlement with the Houthis. Nonetheless, Iran's role in the conflict—in particular its material support to the Houthis—will need to be addressed via creative diplomacy. A side deal with Iran to end its support to the Houthis when the Houthis and Saudis negotiate an end to their conflict could be one possible way to handle this diplomatic challenge.

- **Reengage on human rights and the battle of ideas.** Even as it conducts the necessary diplomacy to de-escalate tensions and stabilize the region, U.S. policy toward Iran should not neglect human rights and values. Perhaps most importantly, it should not carry forward the cynical opportunism that characterizes the Trump administration's attitude toward human rights in Iran. This approach should start with lifting the Trump administration's travel ban against citizens of a number of Muslim-majority countries, including Iran. The travel ban only harms U.S. outreach to average Iranians and damages the United States' reputation in the country and around the world. Indeed, the United States should create more opportunities for average Iranians to travel to the United States, especially in order to forge ties between Iranian and American civil society organizations such as labor unions, women's rights groups, and environmental advocates. Sustained outreach to Iranian society only strengthens the United States' diplomatic position and challenges regime hard-liners who wish to isolate Iranians from the rest of the world.

With the travel ban in the rearview mirror, the United States will be in a stronger position to raise issues of human rights and political freedoms in Iran. In late 2019, protests that led the regime to cut the country off from the internet and kill

scores of its own citizens brought these issues to the forefront.³⁸ Although they must do so carefully, U.S. political leaders and diplomats should not shy away from shining a spotlight on these violations of basic rights and freedoms despite the fear that acknowledging the Iranian regime's brutality will torpedo progress in other strategically important areas. They should also call attention to the severe violations of human rights and political freedoms among the United States' Gulf Arab partners without the fear that such honesty will jeopardize cooperation in areas of mutual strategic interest. One potential way to raise these concerns in a constructive fashion could be through the creation of a Helsinki-style regional security conference that links respect for basic human rights to mutual respect for regional security and national sovereignty.³⁹

Iran's poor human rights record at home and adventurism abroad also present the United States with an opportunity to shape and influence the political debate in the region and around the world. But even prior to the Trump administration, the United States systematically underinvested in its own public diplomacy capabilities. Meanwhile, Iran has developed a fairly sophisticated propaganda apparatus that allows Tehran to punch far above its weight when it comes to political and social influence in the Middle East and worldwide.⁴⁰ At present, President Trump and his policies create insurmountable obstacles to public diplomacy competition with Iran, transforming what ought to be an American strength into a weakness. But a real U.S. public diplomacy campaign would aim to counter Iranian obfuscation—seen most brazenly in the regime's initial attempt to deny responsibility for the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet over Tehran in January—with a clear and factual accounting of Tehran's responsibility for its own actions, including the attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.⁴¹

These policies work together to build a more stable and sustainable foundation for any future nuclear agreement with Iran. They constructively address the security concerns of U.S. regional partners while reviving diplomacy on the nuclear question.

A more balanced regional stabilization strategy

The second main component of an alternative strategic approach to Iran should garner broad consensus in the United States: a more balanced regional stabilization strategy that seeks to move beyond the region's dysfunctional dependency on U.S. hard power for the past 40 years.

A continued escalation with Iran is the most likely path to an inadvertent Middle East war, and a balanced defense of the United States and its partners against threats from Iran and its networks in the region is crucial to avoiding more conflict. Such a defense must focus on the following:

- **Protect U.S. personnel deployed in the Gulf and the wider Middle East.** Prior to the strike on Soleimani, the United States had between 70,000 and 80,000 troops deployed across the Middle East.⁴² Iran's overt retaliation came just days after the Soleimani strike in the form of a missile strike against an Iraqi base housing U.S. troops. Tehran is likely turn to its traditional mode of operation and power projection for follow-on attacks. That means the use of proxies—such as Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and Yemen's Houthi militants—to create distance between Iran and whatever further actions it takes in retaliation for the Soleimani killing moving forward.

These U.S. troops must receive adequate protection against the asymmetric attacks they are likely to face from Iran and its proxies as Tehran continues to respond to the Soleimani strike. This force protection equation will be complex, as Iran has demonstrated the ability and willingness to use both terrorism and more conventional means such as cruise missiles to attack targets across the region. Major U.S. bases across the Gulf remain vulnerable to such attacks, and defensive capabilities such as Patriot missile batteries remain in high demand worldwide.⁴³

U.S. diplomats in the Middle East will also require protection. Iran and its proxies may attempt to assassinate U.S. diplomats or attack American diplomatic facilities in the region. It does the United States no good for its diplomats to protect

themselves in bunkers over the long term, but caution should be prioritized for the foreseeable future given the capabilities and track record of Iran and its proxies.

- **Start the transition of the United States' security cooperation with regional partners.**

The United States should continue to work with Israel and key countries in the Middle East to develop more effective defenses against likely Iranian threats that avoid the prospect of escalation to a wider conflict. But as it helps these countries develop more effective defenses, it should do so in a way that decreases their dysfunctional dependency on the United States and puts a higher priority on practical defense of their own territories against external aggression. The Trump administration's attempt to build a Middle East Strategic Alliance—a security alliance among key countries in the region—has not produced meaningful results and has stalled in the face of mutual mistrust among key member countries.⁴⁴

While counterterrorism cooperation against terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group remains strong with both Middle Eastern partners and European allies, there is still significant room for improvement when it comes to counterterrorism cooperation against Iranian-backed terrorist networks—particularly on the nonkinetic components of counterintelligence and efforts to shut down illicit finance networks used by Iran. Putting an enhanced focus on Iran's terrorist networks will require significant diplomatic work both in the Middle East and in Europe. U.S. security cooperation with regional partners should be carefully calibrated to help them with their defense without offering these partners a blank check for actions that undermine regional stability and contradict U.S. values.

Counterterrorism cooperation between the Europe and the United States against Iran and its proxies also needs to be enhanced. Several European governments, including the United Kingdom and Germany, have moved closer to the U.S. position on terrorist groups such as Hezbollah in recent years.⁴⁵ The United States should take advantage of these moves to press for greater counterterrorism cooperation between U.S. and European intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

- **Defend against Iranian cyberattacks.** Iran might well use cyber capabilities to further respond to the Soleimani strike, as it has during and after previous crises.⁴⁶ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security characterizes Iranian cyber capabilities as “increasingly sophisticated” and identifies the IRGC as “a driving force behind Iranian state-sponsored cyberattacks—either through contractors in the Iranian

private sector or by the IRGC itself.”⁴⁷ Already, private U.S. cybersecurity firms hold Iranian hackers responsible for acts of cyber vandalism against local and federal government websites.⁴⁸

However, more dangerous and potentially lethal attacks could follow against either the United States or its regional partners—particularly those in the Gulf. Saudi companies have repeatedly been hit by cyberattacks believed to have originated in Iran, including one against a petrochemical company’s industrial control systems that could have caused an explosion and deaths.⁴⁹ Moreover, just before the Soleimani strike, Saudi authorities identified a new cyberattack likely perpetrated by Iran with the intent to wipe data from an unidentified regional computer network.⁵⁰

- **Enhance the security and harden the defenses of U.S. partners in Israel and the Gulf.**

The United States should work with regional security partners—especially Israel and the Gulf Arab countries—to develop effective countermeasures against likely Iranian threats that avoid the prospect of escalation to a wider conflict.

Israel and the United States maintain strong coordination on defense; this cooperation has been essential in helping Israel defend itself from attacks from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Gaza Strip. Current U.S. security assistance to the Gulf in particular has not yielded effective militaries capable of defending their own territories against external aggression. Over the decades, these partners have systematically overinvested in expensive, high-prestige capabilities such as fighter jets and underinvested in less prestigious but more important naval, air and missile defense, and cybersecurity capabilities.⁵¹ Moreover, deep mutual suspicions and rivalries among these countries have posed a thus-far insurmountable obstacle to an integrated Gulf Arab air defense system that would protect against Iranian missile threats.

As a start, the United States and its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) should revive and update the security cooperation provisions of the communiqués issued following the 2015 and 2016 U.S.-GCC summits.⁵² These communiqués identified key areas for security cooperation, including maritime security, ballistic missile defense, and cybersecurity. In the wake of the Abqaiq attack, defenses against cruise missiles and drones should be included with ballistic missile defense under the broader rubric of air and missile defense.⁵³

Previous U.S. attempts to foster greater security cooperation in the Gulf have foundered amid regional rivalries and higher U.S. policy priorities. The three most recent U.S. presidential administrations have paid far less attention to these efforts than they have to other priorities in the Middle East, such as the war in Iraq or the nuclear agreement with Iran. Moreover, these attempts have by and large lacked a main focus or central organizing theme: The Bush administration's Gulf Security Dialogue, for example, had six areas of focus ranging from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to counterproliferation activities.⁵⁴ Any new Gulf security cooperation initiative should concentrate far more narrowly on the defensive capabilities necessary to protect against potential Iranian aggression in the Gulf and toward the Gulf Arab states.

To implement the security cooperation provisions of these Obama-era communiqués, the U.S. Department of Defense should dispatch an independent military assessment team to determine the requirements and needs involved in these four critical areas. Once this fresh assessment is complete, the United States should work with Gulf Arab partners to develop plans to address significant regional defense weak spots such as the absence of an integrated air and missile defense system. American arms sales to the region should be reconfigured and tailored to rectify the defensive shortcomings that the assessment details. Significant diplomacy with European allies will be required to ensure their arms sales do not undermine the defensive program created jointly by U.S. and Gulf Arab defense officials.

Diplomacy will also be a prerequisite for expanding the maritime security coalition recently established by the United States. Led by U.S. Central Command and known as the International Maritime Security Construct, this coalition already includes traditional U.S. allies such as the United Kingdom and Australia as well as regional partners such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.⁵⁵ Other allies—most notably Germany, France, and Japan—have refused to participate in no small part due to fears of escalation.⁵⁶ Every attempt should be made to convince these allies to join this maritime security coalition—perhaps by linking it to an incidents-at-sea agreement for the Gulf that includes Tehran—on the grounds that it represents an important step toward regional stability and the de-escalation of tensions with Iran.

With these policies, the United States can begin the long-term process of right-sizing its role in regional security while encouraging international allies and especially regional partners to take on more constructive roles and responsibilities themselves.

Conclusion

The United States needs to be realistic about what it can and cannot achieve regarding Iran, but the Trump administration's current course has unnecessarily produced too much risk with very little to show for it. On the immediate horizon, there are no grand bargains or sweeping negotiated deals with Tehran that can address all major U.S. or regional partner concerns. The components outlined here should be seen as the beginning—not the end—of a strategic effort to create an inclusive regional security architecture. In taking these steps, the United States should also do more to build a stronger foundation of domestic support for this right-sized U.S. engagement in the Gulf.

In other words, the United States needs to put diplomacy first and deepen its diplomatic engagement in the Middle East. A narrow fixation on the size and length of troop deployments—although an important part of the debate—is an incomplete strategy. After more than 40 years of U.S. engagement in the Middle East that has produced very mixed results, a broader strategic rethink is warranted on Iran, relations with key security partners, the broader factors driving unrest in most Middle East countries, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

As a first step, this new strategic alternative on Iran enables the United States to protect its long-term interests in the Middle East while dramatically reducing the risk of an unintentional and unnecessary war.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank colleagues who reviewed this report throughout the drafting process. Their comments and criticisms helped strengthen the report, but the authors are solely responsible for the content. These reviewers included CAP colleagues Mara Rudman, Gordon Gray, Kelly Magsamen, Rudy deLeon, John Halpin, Daniel Benaim, Michael Fuchs, and Alexandra Schmitt. The authors are equally grateful for comments provided by their external reviewers: Steven Cook, Elisa Catalano Ewers, Yasmine Farouk, Jon Finer, Hussein Ibish, Prem Kumar, Karim Sadjadpour, Dana Stroul, and Ariane Tabatabai. Finally, we would like to thank the Editorial team here at CAP and in particular, Will Beaudouin, Shanée Simhoni, and Christian Rodriguez for their work bringing this report to publication.

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The Center for American Progress is an independent, nonpartisan policy institute that is dedicated to improving the lives of all Americans, through bold, progressive ideas, as well as strong leadership and concerted action. Our aim is not just to change the conversation, but to change the country.

Our Values

As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

Our Approach

We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

