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BEYOND MAXIMALISM:

Reimagining U.S. Strategy
Toward Iran Through Systems
Thinking

**RISK REDUCTION, STRATEGIC
REALISM, AND THE MANAGEMENT
OF RIVALRY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S.-Iran war launched in February 2026 fundamentally altered the strategic landscape of the Middle East. The conflict engulfed the Persian Gulf and broader region, destabilized global energy markets, pushed the Strait of Hormuz to the center of an international crisis, shifted elements of great power competition in ways favorable to China and Russia, and brought the region to the edge of an even wider catastrophe. Although a fragile ceasefire currently holds, the underlying drivers of conflict remain unresolved. The memorandum of understanding reached after the war established a temporary framework for further negotiations, but early disputes over Lebanon, navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, and the sequencing of economic relief quickly demonstrated the persistence of deep mistrust on both sides. Rather than signaling a return to the diplomacy of the prewar era, the agreement's initial implementation reinforced the extent to which diplomacy, economic warfare and blockades, military brinkmanship, and nuclear threshold dynamics now coexist within an unstable and increasingly militarized regional order.

This war tested several core assumptions that had long underpinned U.S. and Israeli strategy toward Iran: that escalating military and economic pressure could produce political collapse or capitulation inside the Islamic Republic; that Iran's military and institutional capacity had been fundamentally hollowed out; and that sustained coercion would weaken rather than strengthen the actors most invested in confrontation and nuclear deterrence. Many of these assumptions proved deeply flawed.

Despite unprecedented military pressure, the assassination of senior military commanders and political leaders including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, extensive strikes on Iranian territory and infrastructure, and broad efforts to destabilize the political order itself, the Islamic Republic did not collapse. Even after more than 40 days of sustained bombing, Iran retained the ability to launch missile and drone attacks, impose severe disruption in and around the Strait of Hormuz, and inflict significant damage on U.S. bases and regional assets.

Rather than collapsing under pressure, the war strengthened the role of security and military institutions inside Iran, intensified at least temporary nationalist mobilization under external attack, and reinforced arguments within the Iranian political system for nuclear deterrence and strategic self-reliance.

At the same time, the conflict exposed the limits of American military and economic leverage. The crisis surrounding the Strait of Hormuz demonstrated Iran's enduring asymmetric capacity to impose severe costs on global energy markets, regional infrastructure, and maritime trade. Gulf states' long-standing fears that conflict with Iran would spread directly onto their territory and critical energy assets were borne out. International visibility into Iran's nuclear program has now been severely degraded, while debates within Iran over nuclear doctrine have shifted decisively in favor of maintaining or expanding nuclear capabilities. Rather than producing durable strategic stabilization, the war appears to have created a far more brittle and dangerous equilibrium in which future escalation remains highly plausible, even as pathways toward renewed diplomacy may still emerge.

This report argues that these outcomes reflect not simply policy failure, but a deeper failure of systems thinking in U.S. strategy toward Iran spanning multiple decades. For much of the post-revolutionary period, Washington approached Iran through a largely linear framework that assumed escalating pressure, military superiority, and decapitation strategies would generate predictable political outcomes inside the Islamic Republic. This framework repeatedly underestimated the adaptive and institutionalized nature of the Iranian state, the role of nationalism and external threat in generating social cohesion, and the nonlinear regional and global consequences of escalation. Rather than weakening Iran’s strategic posture, coercive policies frequently strengthened the very dynamics they were intended to reverse, including hardline consolidation, nuclear hedging, regional militarization, and long-term strategic alignment between Iran, Russia, and China.

The war further exposed the failure of pressure centric strategies aimed at collapsing or fundamentally weakening the Iranian system through economic siege, military escalation, and implicit or explicit regime change ambitions. These approaches produced neither meaningful behavioral change nor regime change. Instead, they narrowed political space within Iran, strengthened coercive institutions, normalized securitized governance, and lowered the threshold for state violence. In practice, prolonged siege weakened civil society while empowering the actors most invested in repression and confrontation.

This report begins from a clear premise. The Islamic Republic bears responsibility for severe repression inside Iran, including mass arrests, lethal violence against protesters, executions, and the expansion of digital authoritarianism. But recognizing that reality does not eliminate the need for strategic realism. The United States cannot indefinitely pursue maximalist pressure, recurring military escalation, and implicit regime change objectives while simultaneously expecting diplomacy, regional stability, and nuclear restraint to remain viable outcomes.

Drawing on historical case studies spanning from Iran–Contra through the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the spring 2026 regional war, this report develops a systems-oriented framework for understanding how Iranian decision making evolved under conditions of external pressure, internal insecurity, and institutional competition. Drawing on Robert Jervis’s concept of “system effects,” it argues that U.S.-Iran relations cannot be understood through linear assumptions about coercion and compliance alone, but must instead be analyzed as interacting and adaptive political, regional, and global systems shaped by feedback loops, unintended consequences, institutional responses, and reciprocal escalation dynamics.¹ Within this framework, Iran’s strategic behavior appears driven less by ideological irrationality than by regime security calculations shaped through repeated cycles of confrontation, coercion, insecurity, and failed diplomacy.

The report ultimately argues that the February-April 2026 war exposed a deeper failure of systems thinking in U.S. strategy toward Iran and the region. Linear assumptions about coercion, military superiority, and maximalist pressure repeatedly failed to account for adaptation, unintended consequences, escalation dynamics, and the resilience of institutionalized political orders under external attack. Rather than producing strategic victory, these approaches intensified regional

¹ Jervis, 1997.

instability, strengthened hardline and militarized actors, accelerated nuclear hedging, and increased the risk of a wider and more permanent conflict.

The central conclusion is that a sustainable regional order cannot be built through maximalism, coercive transformation, or fantasies of total victory by any side. Reducing the risks of permanent war, nuclear escalation, and societal collapse requires abandoning zero-sum frameworks in favor of systems-based approaches grounded in strategic realism, reciprocal compromise, risk reduction, and the long-term management rather than elimination of geopolitical rivalry. In the near term, temporary de-escalatory arrangements, ceasefires, or limited diplomatic understandings may still play an important role in reducing immediate dangers and creating space for diplomacy. But absent a broader strategic framework aimed at durable stabilization and managed competition, such arrangements are likely to remain fragile and vulnerable to renewed cycles of escalation.

STRATEGIC DIAGNOSIS: THE STRUCTURAL FAILURES OF PAST IRAN POLICY

The strategic blueprint advanced in this report begins from a different premise than that which has dominated debate in Washington. For decades, influential strands of U.S. analysis portrayed the Islamic Republic as uniquely intransigent, ideologically rigid, and fundamentally incapable of meaningful negotiated outcomes. This assumption became a central intellectual foundation of pressure centric U.S. policy toward Iran and reflected a broader tendency toward linear rather than systems level thinking. Iran was often treated as a static problem to be coerced into submission, rather than as a complex adaptive political system shaped by feedback loops involving regime security, nationalism, sanctions, regional conflict, institutional competition, and external threat perceptions.

The historical record is more complicated. Across multiple eras and leadership configurations, Iran repeatedly demonstrated conditional openness to diplomacy when negotiations were perceived as credible, reciprocal, and compatible with regime security. Yet these openings repeatedly collapsed. Not because engagement was impossible, but because cycles of coercion, partial engagement, escalation, and diplomatic reversal consistently reinforced the most securitized and confrontational elements within the Iranian system.

Over time, these breakdowns reshaped Iranian threat perceptions and redistributed internal power toward institutions most invested in coercion and confrontation. Pressure centric strategies weakened political currents that argued for managed integration, narrowed the space for negotiated restraint, accelerated nuclear hedging as a form of counter leverage, and lowered the threshold for securitized governance. In practice, prolonged siege conditions weakened civil society while strengthening the institutions best positioned to survive under conditions of permanent confrontation.

Understanding this pattern requires moving beyond linear assumptions that pressure automatically produces compliance or moderation. The central question is not whether diplomacy with Iran was ever theoretically possible. It is how U.S. policies interacted with Iran's internal political system over time and what unintended consequences those interactions produced.

This section therefore examines breakdowns in U.S.-Iran diplomacy not as isolated failures, but as

recurring systemic dynamics. Each case study analyzes the mechanisms that derailed diplomacy, how those collapses reshaped Iranian decision making and internal power balances, and what they reveal about the limits of coercive strategy. Taken together, these cases challenge the assumption that diplomacy with Iran is inherently futile. Instead, they show a political system that has repeatedly hardened under exclusionary pressure while remaining responsive, under certain conditions, to credible and sustainable engagement.

Each case study in this section follows the same analytical framework. The “failure mechanism” identifies the decision, policy choice, or external shock that derailed diplomacy and narrowed political space, while the “diagnostic lesson” examines what each episode reveals about the limits of pressure-based strategies, the unintended consequences they produced, and the conditions under which Iran has historically adjusted its behavior.

CASE STUDY I: IRAN–CONTRA AND THE LOGIC OF COVERT PRAGMATISM

The Iran–Contra affair demonstrated a foundational feature of the Islamic Republic that would recur across subsequent decades: even at moments of intense ideological hostility, Iranian decision-making prioritized regime survival and national security over doctrine. During the Iran–Iraq War, Iran’s armed forces—still dependent on U.S.-origin equipment—were crippled by sanctions and isolation. Facing existential battlefield pressure, Tehran turned quietly to intermediaries to secure arms and spare parts, including through covert Israeli channels that, by contemporary estimates, supplied up to 80 percent of Iran’s early wartime arms imports, often financed through oil deliveries.² These transactions were extensive, tolerated at the highest levels of the system, and treated as matters of wartime necessity rather than ideological contradiction.³ As Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reportedly remarked when informed of the questionable provenance of a shipment, “Then we don’t care.”⁴

By the mid-1980s, this pragmatism evolved into what became the Iran–Contra channel, linking Iranian, Israeli, and American intermediaries. For Washington, the arrangement offered a means to secure the release of hostages in Lebanon and probe the possibility of limited engagement with Tehran, while also serving unrelated domestic objectives. For Israel, it helped weaken Iraq and preserve a tenuous connection with a former partner. For Iran, the channel served two purposes. It addressed acute military shortages, but it also reflected a deeper strategic calculation among pragmatic elites: that Israeli intermediaries could provide indirect access to Washington. As Iranian interlocutors made clear, the objective was not normalization with Israel but leveraging that relationship to test whether a broader opening with the United States was possible.⁵

Failure Mechanism

Iran–Contra collapsed not because Iran was unwilling to engage, but because covert, transactional diplomacy proved politically unsustainable. Once the operation became public, it triggered scandal in the United States and forced Iranian leaders to deny the channel outright, rendering continuation impossible. More fundamentally, the episode exposed the limits of engagement conducted without transparency, institutional backing, or a credible pathway to reciprocal normalization. Cooperation remained episodic and fragile, dependent on secrecy rather than durable political commitment.

² Parsi, 2007, p. 117

³ Parsi, 2007, p. 117

⁴ Parsi, 2007, p. 95

⁵ Parsi, 2007, p. 116

Diagnostic Lesson

The Iran–Contra episode established a pattern that would repeat across later decades. Iran is prepared to engage adversaries when core security interests are recognized, even under conditions of overt hostility. But engagement that lacks reciprocity, political sustainability, and a path toward institutionalization cannot endure. When such channels collapse, they reinforce Iranian perceptions that reliance on U.S. assurances is inherently risky and that leverage, not accommodation, is the safer strategy.

Rather than disproving the possibility of diplomacy, Iran–Contra revealed its structural vulnerability. Pragmatic flexibility without durable reciprocity leaves no framework to translate tactical cooperation into strategic accommodation. That lesson would shape Tehran’s long-term preference for counter-leverage and inform how Iranian leaders interpreted subsequent diplomatic overtures and breakdowns.

CASE STUDY II: RAFSANJANI'S RECONSTRUCTION ERA AND THE LIMITS OF ECONOMIC OPENING

The end of the Iran–Iraq War created the first sustained opportunity for post-revolutionary recalibration. As president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani organized both domestic and foreign policy around economic reconstruction, viewing recovery from war as inseparable from reducing Iran's international isolation. His strategy rested on a pragmatic premise: that if Iran were treated as a rational economic actor and gradually reintegrated into global markets, it would become more internally stable and externally restrained.⁶

Rafsanjani pursued this approach deliberately. Iran facilitated the release of Western hostages, adopted restraint during the 1991 Gulf War, improved relations with Gulf Arab states, and softened its public posture on the Palestinian issue.⁷ These moves were intended as confidence-building signals that Iran was prepared for reciprocal engagement.⁸ At the same time, Rafsanjani sought to use economic ties, especially with Europe and eventually the United States, as an entry point into broader diplomatic inclusion.⁹

Two U.S. policy choices proved decisive in unraveling this strategy. First, Iran's exclusion from the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference signaled that even restraint and regional cooperation would not earn recognition as a legitimate stakeholder.¹⁰ Second, the reversal of the 1995 Conoco oil contract, followed by the imposition of comprehensive U.S. sanctions and later the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act, collapsed Rafsanjani's effort to anchor détente through high-profile commercial engagement.¹¹ This reversal occurred amid sustained Israeli opposition and lobbying that framed Iran as the primary regional threat in the post–Cold War environment.¹² These decisions did not merely halt diplomacy. They discredited the economic logic underpinning it.¹³

The consequences inside Iran were immediate. Rafsanjani's credibility eroded, hardliners were vindicated, and security institutions regained the upper hand.¹⁴ Tehran recalibrated by restoring support for non-state allies and treating economic leverage, rather than integration, as its primary defense against exclusion. What appeared externally as ideological retrenchment was internally understood as strategic retaliation.

⁶ Harris, 2017, p. 278

⁷ Mousavian, 2014, p. 135

⁸ Parsi, 2017, p. 151

⁹ Mousavian, 2014, p. 129; Mousavian, 2014, p. 110

¹⁰ Parsi, 2007, p. 153

¹¹ Mousavian, 2014, p. 140

¹² Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007, p. 298

¹³ Mousavian, 2014, p. 122

¹⁴ Parsi, 2007, p. 155

Failure Mechanism

Rafsanjani's outreach failed because economic engagement was not politically insulated or reciprocated at moments of Iranian risk-taking. Strategic exclusion and abrupt reversal transformed commerce from a stabilizing tool into evidence that accommodation increased vulnerability rather than security.

Diagnostic Lesson

The Rafsanjani era demonstrates that economic engagement can moderate Iranian behavior only when it is credible, durable, and protected from domestic and allied vetoes. When openings are offered and withdrawn, they do more than fail. They strengthen security actors, narrow political space, and teach Iranian leaders that leverage, not integration, is the only reliable hedge against isolation.

CASE STUDY III: THE KHATAMI ERA AND THE LIMITS OF REFORMIST ENGAGEMENT

Mohammad Khatami's election in 1997 marked the most explicit popular mandate for political reform and international engagement in the Islamic Republic's history. His call for a "Dialogue of Civilizations" rejected zero-sum confrontation and sought to reposition Iran as a responsible, cooperative actor.¹⁵ Early signals reinforced this shift. Iran eased regional tensions, hosted Arab leaders, publicly rejected terrorism, and pursued cultural and diplomatic outreach to the West.¹⁶ In Washington, Khatami's victory was initially viewed as an opportunity, culminating in Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's 2000 speech acknowledging past U.S. actions and expressing cautious openness to improved relations.¹⁷

The September 11 attacks briefly aligned U.S. and Iranian interests more concretely than at any point since 1979. Iran cooperated extensively in Afghanistan, providing intelligence, facilitating diplomacy at the Bonn Conference, and helping stabilize the post-Taliban political order.¹⁸ Senior U.S. officials later acknowledged that Iranian assistance was decisive.¹⁹ Yet this cooperation was not translated into broader diplomatic recognition. The 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech abruptly reframed Iran as an irredeemable adversary, reinforcing perceptions in Tehran that engagement would not alter Washington's fundamental posture.

As this disillusionment set in, the nuclear issue moved to the center of U.S.–Iran relations. After previously undisclosed facilities at Natanz and Arak were revealed in 2002, Khatami responded with an unusually transparent approach. Iran acknowledged the sites, invited International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, and entered negotiations with Britain, France, and Germany.²⁰ Under the 2003 Saadabad Agreement, Iran voluntarily suspended enrichment, signed the Additional Protocol to its IAEA safeguards agreement allowing for expanded and more intrusive inspections of nuclear facilities, and accepted the most extensive inspection regime in the agency's history.²¹ IAEA reports following this agreement repeatedly confirmed that declared nuclear material remained under international safeguards.²²

Iran's objective was to convert restraint into a comprehensive settlement.²³ In 2003 and again in 2005,²⁴ Tehran transmitted proposals aimed at addressing the full spectrum of U.S. concerns, including strict and verifiable nuclear limits and, in the 2003 offer, cooperation on counterterrorism, regional de-escalation, and acceptance of Israel's right to secure borders.²⁵ In return, Iran sought sanctions relief and recognition of its core security interests. These initiatives were rejected or

¹⁵ Nasr, 2025, p. 157

¹⁶ Khatami, 1998

¹⁷ Litwak, 2013, p. 19

¹⁸ Mousavian, 2014, p. 172

¹⁹ Mousavian, 2014, p. 172

²⁰ Ghazvinian, 2021, p. 475

²¹ Mousavian, 2014, p. 175

²² Ghazvinian, 2021, p. 661

²³ Parsi, 2007, p. 246

²⁴ Mousavian, 2014, p. 175

²⁵ Mousavian, 2014, p. 216

dismissed, as U.S. policy converged on a zero-enrichment position that collapsed the distinction between confidence-building and capitulation, with Vice President Cheney reportedly dismissing engagement with Iran completely by saying, “We don’t speak to evil.”²⁶

The political consequences inside Iran were decisive. Reformists could no longer demonstrate that restraint (on the nuclear file?) produced security or economic dividends. Hardliners argued that cooperation invited pressure rather than inclusion. After years of suspension, Iran resumed enrichment in 2005, a shift that coincided with conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s election but reflected a broader institutional learning process rather than a sudden ideological turn. Nuclear leverage became a substitute for building diplomatic trust.

Failure Mechanism

The Khatami-era opening failed because Iranian cooperation was met with non-reciprocity and maximalist demands that treated restraint as weakness. By insisting on zero enrichment and dismissing comprehensive proposals, the U.S. collapsed reformist political space and rendered engagement unsellable inside Iran.

Diagnostic Lesson

The Khatami period demonstrates that Iranian willingness to undertake far-reaching concessions depends on credible reciprocity and recognition of sovereign rights. When diplomacy is framed as a tool to extract unilateral concessions rather than negotiate mutual restraint, it strengthens security actors and accelerates nuclear hedging. Durable diplomacy requires not only Iranian compliance, but U.S. political sustainability and mechanisms that lock in gains early. The failure to do so during the reformist era made a more costly and complex nuclear crisis inevitable.

²⁶ Parsi, 2007, p. 248

CASE STUDY IV: AHMADINEJAD'S PARADOX OF BELLICOSITY AND TECHNICAL ENGAGEMENT

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency combined maximalist rhetoric with continued technical engagement, revealing a persistent disconnect between Iran's public posture and its underlying negotiating behavior. While Ahmadinejad cultivated confrontation through inflammatory speeches and symbolic defiance, his administration simultaneously pursued discreet, technically grounded diplomacy on the nuclear file. This duality reflected not incoherence, but a political environment in which engagement had to be insulated from ideological and factional attack.

The clearest test of this dynamic emerged in 2009 with the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) fuel-swap initiative. Iran informed the IAEA that the reactor supplying medical isotopes would soon run out of fuel and accepted an IAEA-mediated proposal under which most of its low-enriched uranium stockpile would be transferred abroad and returned as fabricated fuel.²⁷ The arrangement would have sharply extended Iran's breakout timeline while remaining framed as a humanitarian and technical exchange rather than a political concession. When Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany) agreed to the swap in principle in October 2009, senior U.S. and Iranian officials held their first direct bilateral talks since 1979, widely viewed at the time as a genuine diplomatic breakthrough.²⁸

That opening collapsed under domestic pressure on both sides. Inside Iran, the disputed 2009 election and subsequent unrest politicized the deal. Reformists, including Mir Hossein Mousavi, warned that exporting most of Iran's low-enriched uranium could leave the country exposed if fuel deliveries failed, while hardliners framed the agreement as a political liability.²⁹ As mistrust of U.S. follow-through grew, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei withdrew tentative support.³⁰ In Washington, Iranian requests for phased transfers or escrow arrangements were rejected in favor of a single bulk shipment designed to maximize confidence-building impact.³¹ When negotiations stalled, the United States pivoted rapidly to escalation.

Iran responded by enriching uranium to 20 percent to fuel the reactor domestically, effectively converting a confidence-building initiative into a new source of leverage.³² A final attempt to revive the deal through the 2010 Tehran Declaration brokered by Turkey and Brazil was dismissed by Washington, which proceeded with a sweeping new round of UN and unilateral sanctions. Between 2010 and 2012, pressure escalated into full-spectrum economic warfare targeting Iran's oil exports, banking system, and access to global finance.³³ Despite severe economic damage, these measures did not produce nuclear capitulation. Instead, Iran expanded key elements of its program while absorbing mounting social costs.³⁴

²⁷ Ghazvinian, 2021, p. 709

²⁸ Poneman and Nowrouzzadeh 2021.

²⁹ Parsi, 2017, p. 94

³⁰ Poneman and Nowrouzzadeh 2021.

³¹ Parsi, 2017, p. 92

³² Cordesman, A. H., Gold, B., & Coughlin-Schulte, C. 2014, p. 128

³³ Poneman and Nowrouzzadeh 2021.

³⁴ Cordesman, A. H., Gold, B., & Coughlin-Schulte, C., 2014, p. 10

By the later years of Ahmadinejad's presidency, the limits of escalation were evident on both sides. Sanctions were inflicting hardship without halting nuclear advances, while zero-enrichment demands proved unattainable. This recognition produced a quiet shift. In 2012, the United States opened a secret bilateral channel in Oman and, for the first time, signaled willingness to accept limited Iranian enrichment under strict verification and caps.³⁵ Ahmadinejad left office having presided over intensified pressure and nuclear expansion, but also over the gradual convergence of U.S. and Iranian negotiating positions that made the subsequent Iran nuclear deal in 2015 possible.

Failure Mechanism

The TRR initiative collapsed because technical confidence-building was treated as a test of submission rather than reciprocal risk management. Iranian hesitation, shaped by domestic instability and acute mistrust of U.S. follow-through, was interpreted in Washington as bad faith. At the same time, the post-election protests inside Iran reinforced a Western tendency to view diplomatic engagement as politically costly or strategically unnecessary, even as prominent Iranian protest leader Mousavi adopted a harder line against the swap proposal. These dynamics narrowed diplomatic space on both sides and accelerated a pivot toward escalation that foreclosed compromise.

Diagnostic Lesson

The Ahmadinejad era demonstrates that even amid hostile rhetoric and internal unrest, Iran remains capable of pragmatic, technically grounded engagement when proposals respect core security concerns and allow for reciprocal risk management. It also exposes a recurring pathology of pressure-centric strategy. When restraint fails to deliver tangible relief, Iranian leaders conclude that advancing nuclear capabilities is the only reliable way to restore leverage. Absent mechanisms that reward early compliance and manage political risk, pressure does not compel capitulation. It incentivizes counter-leverage and accelerates escalation.

³⁵ Cordesman, A. H., Gold, B., & Coughlin-Schulte, C., 2014, p. 141

CASE STUDY V: THE ROUHANI YEARS AND THE OPENING CREATED BY RENEWED DIPLOMACY

The Rouhani administration marked the most consequential diplomatic opening in U.S.–Iran relations since 1979. In July 2015, Iran and the P5+1 concluded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a multilateral agreement endorsed by the UN Security Council that imposed strict limits on Iran’s nuclear program and established the most intrusive inspection regime ever negotiated. Between 2015 and 2018, Iran complied fully with its obligations, a record repeatedly confirmed by the IAEA.³⁶ In return, sanctions relief delivered tangible economic gains, including renewed growth, falling unemployment, and a partial restoration of Iran’s middle class.³⁷ Rouhani staked his political project on the proposition that sustained diplomacy could reduce external pressure and rebalance Iran’s internal political economy away from permanent securitization.³⁸

That experiment ended abruptly in May 2018, when U.S. President Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA and reimposed sweeping sanctions under the banner of a new “maximum pressure” to elicit greater Iranian concessions.³⁹ The campaign rapidly expanded into one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes ever imposed, with senior U.S. officials at times openly framing pressure as a tool for regime collapse rather than negotiated restraint.⁴⁰ From Tehran’s perspective, the withdrawal demonstrated that even full compliance with a multilateral, UN-backed agreement offered no protection against unilateral reversal.

Iran’s response was calculated rather than impulsive. For one year after the U.S. exit, Tehran remained in technical compliance with the JCPOA to deny Washington the claim that Iran had violated the deal. At the same time, it prepared a strategy of calibrated nuclear escalation designed to restore leverage without triggering immediate war. Beginning in 2019, Iran incrementally exceeded JCPOA limits by expanding stockpiles, increasing enrichment levels, suspending implementation of the Additional Protocol, and progressively reducing inspection access over several years.⁴¹ Each step was framed as reversible and explicitly conditioned on sanctions relief, reconstituting the nuclear program as a bargaining instrument rather than an irreversible departure from negotiated restraint.⁴²

The internal political consequences were profound. The U.S. withdrawal discredited the pragmatic coalition that had negotiated the agreement and vindicated hardliners who argued that accommodation with Washington was inherently dangerous. The reimposition of sanctions collapsed oil exports, devastated the currency, and erased the economic gains of the JCPOA years. Between 2018 and 2022, Iran’s economy contracted sharply, real incomes fell, and the middle class shrank dramatically.⁴³ The social base for gradual reform and sustained diplomacy was hollowed out, while security institutions gained influence as managers of scarcity and confrontation.

³⁶ Millar et al., *From Crisis to Opportunity*, p. 4

³⁷ Nasr, 2025, p. 245

³⁸ Blanc et al., 2017, p. 14

³⁹ Nasr, 2025, p. 246

⁴⁰ Gordon, 2020, p. 281

⁴¹ Lord et al, 2023, p. 3

⁴² Nasr, 2025, p. 263

⁴³ Kahalzadeh, 2025.

By the end of Rouhani's presidency, the lesson absorbed across Iran's political spectrum was stark. Diplomacy without durability was worse than no diplomacy at all. The collapse of the JCPOA did not merely restart nuclear escalation. It reshaped Iranian threat perceptions, entrenched distrust of U.S. commitments, and accelerated the transfer of authority from elected institutions to coercive ones. The Rouhani era thus stands as both proof that negotiated restraint is possible and a warning that non-reciprocity carries lasting structural costs.

Failure Mechanism

The JCPOA collapsed not because Iran violated its terms, but because of unilateral U.S. withdrawal. By reimposing sanctions despite verified Iranian adherence, Washington transformed diplomacy from a source of stability into a liability for Iranian pragmatists.

Diagnostic Lesson

The Rouhani years demonstrate that Iranian nuclear restraint is achievable when agreements are reciprocal, verifiable, and economically meaningful. They also reveal the central fragility of diplomacy that lacks political insulation. When compliance is punished rather than rewarded, Iran learns that leverage must be preserved outside agreements. The result is not capitulation, but a return to calibrated escalation under worse conditions, with higher nuclear risk and a far narrower space for internal political moderation.

CASE STUDY VI: POST-MAXIMUM PRESSURE AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE SECURITY STATE

The post-2018 period marks the culmination of a long shift in Iranian strategy away from broad conditional engagement toward entrenched resistance. This shift was driven less by ideology than by the collapse of confidence in the durability of agreements with the United States. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, the subsequent “maximum pressure” campaign, and the January 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani shattered a core assumption that had underpinned Iranian diplomacy since the Rafsanjani era: that negotiated restraint, even when backed by international partners and codified through UN Security Council authority, could reliably deliver lasting security or sanctions relief. Rather than capitulating, Iran’s leadership concluded that agreements with Washington were inherently reversible and that national survival required insulating core capabilities from outside pressure, including through enhanced deterrence and the cultivation of nuclear leverage.

Yet Iran did not immediately abandon diplomacy. After initially remaining in compliance for a year, Tehran shifted toward calibrated nuclear escalation designed to restore leverage without triggering war.⁴⁴ This reassessment was formalized with a parliamentary bill in 2020 and the election of conservative Ebrahim Raisi in 2021, which consolidated power around institutions that viewed Rouhani-era diplomacy as a strategic miscalculation that exposed Iran without delivering tangible benefits.⁴⁵ Under Raisi, Tehran embraced a “Look East” posture, integrating into alternative economic and security blocs such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and accelerated nuclear expansion as part of a broader effort to harden its strategic position.⁴⁶ Enrichment reached 60 percent, breakout timelines shrank dramatically, and cooperation with the IAEA was steadily curtailed.⁴⁷ These moves were deliberate, aimed at creating a nuclear reality that could not be reversed without meaningful concessions and at correcting the asymmetry created by unilateral U.S. withdrawal.

At the same time, Iran continued to test whether limited accommodation could still produce meaningful relief. Under Ayatollah Khamenei’s oversight, Tehran repeatedly signaled its willingness to return to the JCPOA if the United States reversed course under the Biden administration. A narrow opening appeared in September 2023, when a de-escalation understanding was reached alongside the transfer of Iranian frozen assets from South Korea to Qatar.⁴⁸ Yet the funds remained effectively inaccessible, and the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel quickly overtook the arrangement, reinforcing the perception in Tehran that even calibrated restraint yielded little tangible benefit and that accommodation carried political and strategic risk.⁴⁹

Regional escalation followed a parallel logic. After October 7, 2023, Iran operationalized its doctrine of “forward defense,” leveraging regional partners to impose costs on U.S. and Israeli interests while seeking to avoid full-scale war. These dynamics escalated through two direct Iran–Israel

⁴⁴ Atlantic Council, 2024.

⁴⁵ Nasr, 2025, p. 262

⁴⁶ Nasr, 2025, p. 276

⁴⁷ Atlantic Council, 2024.

⁴⁸ CRS, 2023.

⁴⁹ Bruce et al., 2023.

confrontations in 2024, before intensifying further in June of 2025, when Israel launched a surprise attack on Iranian territory and nuclear infrastructure. The escalation culminated in with U.S. participation in an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities before ending in a ceasefire, ultimately reinforcing Tehran's assessment that diplomatic restraint did not insulate Iran from military attack.⁵⁰ While Iran absorbed tactical losses, the June 2025 conflict neither dismantled its nuclear capabilities nor its regional deterrence architecture. Instead, the Iranian state responded by reinforcing nationalist cohesion at home, accelerating the suspension of IAEA monitoring, and consolidating a posture of deliberate nuclear ambiguity regarding its remaining capabilities, including its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.⁵¹ Together, these steps reflected and reinforced Tehran's conclusion that diplomatic restraint had failed to provide insulation from coercion or escalation, and that ambiguity and leverage offered greater protection than transparency without guarantees.

Yet this consolidation of resistance also revealed its limits. Prolonged sanctions, economic contraction, and societal exhaustion widened the gap between the security state's strategy and public tolerance for permanent confrontation. The unexpected election of Masoud Pezeshkian in 2024 reflected this strain. Although his rhetoric echoed earlier reformist calls for engagement, Pezeshkian entered office from a markedly weaker political position than predecessors such as Rouhani or Khatami, with limited institutional leverage and an explicit emphasis on deference to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei rather than challenging the security consensus.

That said, Pezeshkian backed by figures associated with the JCPOA, argued that resistance without economic development was unsustainable and that sanctions relief remained essential for social stability. His victory did not reverse the dominance of the security state, but it underscored a persistent reality in Iranian politics: even within a hardened system shaped by repeated diplomatic reversals, economic pressure continues to generate incentives for calibrated, risk-managed re-engagement.⁵²

The events of January 2026 underscored the volatility and danger of the trajectory U.S.-Iran relations had entered. Faced with renewed nationwide protests, the Iranian state responded with one of the most severe episodes of internal repression in the Islamic Republic's history, employing mass lethal force, widespread arrests, and near-total shutdowns of access to the global internet. This crackdown unfolded amid renewed threats from President Trump, rhetorical signaling of U.S. support for protesters, and a visible buildup of American military forces across the region. Only after the protests were violently suppressed were indirect negotiations with the United States scheduled to resume.

Yet diplomacy unfolded within an increasingly compressed and militarized environment. In the weeks before the war, indirect U.S.-Iran talks in Geneva had reportedly produced meaningful, if still incomplete, progress toward a potential framework agreement, with mediators and some Western officials believing a negotiated path remained viable. Discussions reportedly included enhanced inspections, limits on enrichment, down blending of highly enriched uranium, and broad sanctions

⁵⁰ Toossi, 2025, July 1.

⁵¹ Toossi, 2025, July 1.

⁵² Toossi, 2025, December 22.

relief.⁵³ Nevertheless, on February 28, before a planned follow up round of technical negotiations in Vienna could take place, the United States and Israel launched a surprise attack on Iran.

The spring 2026 U.S.-Iran war became the clearest stress test yet of the assumptions that had long underpinned U.S. and Israeli strategy toward Iran. One core assumption was that overwhelming military pressure, decapitation strikes, and economic coercion could trigger the rapid collapse or destabilization of the Islamic Republic. Yet despite extensive strikes on Iranian territory and infrastructure, the assassination of senior military commanders and political leaders including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and broad efforts to weaken the political order itself, the Iranian state remained intact.

A second assumption was that Iran had become fundamentally hollowed out, internally incoherent, or incapable of sustained resistance under pressure. This assumption also proved deeply questionable. Even after more than 40 days of intense bombing, Iran retained the capacity to launch missile and drone attacks, severely disrupt maritime traffic and energy flows around the Strait of Hormuz, and inflict significant damage on U.S. bases and regional infrastructure. At the same time, the war reinforced many of the conclusions Iranian hardliners had drawn from the collapse of the JCPOA and the Soleimani assassination years earlier: that diplomatic restraint does not insulate Iran from military coercion, that agreements with Washington remain fundamentally reversible, and that deterrence, ambiguity, and strategic leverage provide greater protection than integration without guarantees.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the war ultimately reinforced many of the conclusions Iranian hardliners had drawn from the collapse of the JCPOA and the Soleimani assassination years earlier: that diplomatic restraint does not insulate Iran from military coercion, that agreements with Washington remain fundamentally reversible, and that deterrence, ambiguity, and strategic self-reliance provide greater protection than integration without guarantees. Rather than weakening the security state, the war accelerated militarization inside Iran, strengthened coercive institutions, deepened nationalist mobilization under external attack, and further shifted internal debate toward maintaining or expanding nuclear threshold capabilities.

At the same time, the conflict exposed the limits of pressure centric U.S. strategy and revealed a broader failure of systems thinking in Washington. Iran was repeatedly treated as a static problem to be coerced into submission through military superiority and economic pressure, rather than as a complex adaptive political system shaped by feedback loops involving nationalism, regime security, sanctions, institutional competition, and external threat perceptions. The war generated second and third order effects that often worsened the very strategic conditions coercive policy sought to reverse, including degraded international visibility into Iran's nuclear program, strengthened hardline and militarized actors, intensified regional instability, and heightened risks of long-term nuclear ambiguity.

Although a fragile ceasefire now holds, the underlying drivers of conflict remain unresolved. The memorandum of understanding reached after the war established a framework for further negotiations, but it did not resolve the fundamental mistrust that has defined U.S.-Iran relations for

⁵³ Wintour and Borger, "UK Security Adviser 'Attended' US-Iran Talks."

⁵⁴ Entous, Haberman, & Swan, "U.S. Intelligence Shows Iran Retains Substantial Missile Capabilities."

decades. Early disputes over Lebanon, navigation through the Strait of Hormuz, and the sequencing of economic relief quickly exposed competing interpretations of the agreement and lingering disagreements over implementation. Rather than marking a return to the diplomacy of the prewar era, the first phase of negotiations demonstrated that both sides continue to approach engagement through the lens of leverage, reciprocity, and coercive bargaining. The negotiations themselves became an extension of the broader strategic contest, with each side seeking to shape the postwar environment while avoiding concessions that could weaken its position.

For Tehran in particular, the postwar negotiations reinforced strategic conclusions that had been emerging throughout the conflict. Iran's conduct during the initial implementation period reflected a noticeable shift from earlier negotiating patterns. Iranian officials repeatedly linked progress on broader issues to developments in Lebanon, temporarily reclosed the Strait of Hormuz following Israeli military operations there, and signaled a greater willingness to suspend cooperation or increase pressure when they believed understandings were being violated. Whether this approach ultimately produces a lasting agreement remains uncertain. More significant is what it reveals about how many Iranian decision-makers now understand diplomacy itself. The dominant view increasingly appears to be that negotiations should complement deterrence rather than substitute for it, and that leverage should be maintained throughout a diplomatic process rather than traded away in anticipation of future concessions. The result is not strategic stabilization, but a brittle equilibrium in which diplomacy, economic warfare, military brinkmanship, and nuclear threshold dynamics coexist, renewed conflict remains highly plausible, and the costs of failed coercive strategies continue to accumulate across the region.

Failure Mechanism

The post-maximum pressure era failed not because diplomacy with Iran became inherently impossible, but because repeated cycles of coercion, diplomatic reversal, and military escalation destroyed the credibility of negotiated restraint. By withdrawing from a verified agreement, escalating sanctions and military pressure, and ultimately participating in a regional war despite years of Iranian nuclear restraint under the JCPOA, Washington reinforced the view inside Iran that accommodation increased vulnerability rather than security. The February-April 2026 war further entrenched this perception. Rather than collapsing the Iranian system, the conflict strengthened military and security institutions, intensified pressures toward nuclear hedging, and reinforced the belief that deterrence and strategic leverage provide greater protection than transparency commitments made without credible guarantees.

Diagnostic Lesson

This period demonstrates the limits of linear, pressure centric approaches to Iran and the broader failure of systems thinking in U.S. strategy. Economic siege, military escalation, and coercive pressure did not produce either regime collapse or durable behavioral change. Instead, they generated cascading second and third order effects, including the closure and militarization of the Strait of Hormuz, severe disruption to global energy markets and maritime trade, intensified great power competition, and the strengthening of the most securitized elements of the Iranian system while further narrowing political space for pragmatists. The core lesson is not that diplomacy is futile, but that diplomacy cannot succeed when each side increasingly comes to view the other as

fundamentally committed to coercion, temporary agreements, and strategic bad faith. Any sustainable framework going forward will require credible durability, reciprocal compromise, and recognition that maximalist strategies have repeatedly produced escalation and unintended consequences rather than strategic resolution.

THEORY OF THE CASE — HOW TEHRAN DECIDES

Any sustainable approach to U.S.-Iran relations must begin with a systems level understanding of how decision making inside the Islamic Republic truly functions. Iranian behavior is not produced by a single ideological impulse or unitary actor, but through continual bargaining among competing institutions and coalitions operating within a deeply institutionalized political order. These rivalries are shaped not only by domestic politics, but by external pressures that alter internal threat perceptions and redistribute political leverage inside the system.

At the center of the Islamic Republic sits the Supreme Leader, but authority is exercised through institutions that mediate conflict rather than eliminate it. The Supreme National Security Council serves as a key arena where the presidency, parliament, military, intelligence organizations, and economic actors negotiate strategy. Durable policy outcomes generally emerge through internal consensus formation among actors holding coercive, political, and economic power, with the overriding objective of preserving regime cohesion and state survival.

Within this structure, two broad strategic orientations have historically competed over Iran's external posture. One coalition, often associated with technocrats and elected officials, has generally argued that Iran's security and stability are best preserved through managed engagement, sanctions relief, and reintegration into the global economy. The opposing coalition, rooted primarily in the security services and especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, generally views the international system as fundamentally coercive and believes deterrence, regional strategic depth, military capabilities such as the ballistic missile and drone programs, and nuclear threshold capabilities are the only reliable safeguards against external subversion or regime collapse.

U.S. policy has consistently shaped the balance between these coalitions. When diplomacy produced credible relief and appeared politically sustainable, advocates of engagement gained leverage by arguing that restraint could produce tangible strategic and economic benefits. When agreements collapsed, were reversed, or were followed by escalating pressure, the political costs fell disproportionately on those who had argued for compromise. Over time, repeated cycles of coercion and diplomatic breakdown strengthened the actors most invested in securitization while narrowing political space for negotiated restraint.

The February-April 2026 war represented the most consequential culmination of these dynamics. Rather than collapsing the Iranian system, the conflict reinforced the central arguments long advanced by Iran's security establishment: that agreements with Washington remain fundamentally reversible, that external pressure ultimately seeks strategic weakening rather than coexistence, and that deterrence and strategic leverage provide greater protection than transparency without guarantees. The war further accelerated militarization inside Iran, strengthened coercive institutions, intensified pressures toward nuclear hedging, and deepened the structural advantage held by the security apparatus over advocates of engagement.

Today, diplomacy survives inside Iran in a narrower and more conditional form. It is tolerated primarily as a mechanism for managing risk and alleviating pressure, not as a pathway toward normalization with the United States. Any U.S. strategy that ignores these systemic dynamics will continue reproducing the same outcome: strengthening the actors most invested in confrontation

while eroding the political space for negotiated restraint. A viable strategy must therefore be designed not simply to alter Iranian behavior through coercion, but to reshape the internal balance of incentives by making sustainable cooperation more politically credible and strategically rational than permanent escalation.

THE BLUEPRINT — FROM COERCIVE TRANSFORMATION TO MANAGED COMPETITION

The February-April 2026 war demonstrated the limits of maximalist strategies pursued by all sides. Efforts to impose strategic capitulation through military superiority, economic siege, and escalating coercion did not produce decisive victory or durable political outcomes. Instead, the conflict generated cascading second and third order effects across the region and global economy, intensified militarization, accelerated nuclear ambiguity, and pushed the Persian Gulf toward a more unstable and crisis-prone equilibrium.

The central lesson is not simply that past policies failed. It is that the broader strategic framework and assumptions underpinning them were flawed. For decades, U.S. policy toward Iran was shaped by largely linear assumptions: that pressure would decisively weaken the Iranian state, that military escalation would produce political moderation or collapse, and that diplomacy could function primarily as a vehicle for extracting unilateral concessions. The war exposed the limits of these assumptions. Iran proved far more institutionally resilient, economically adaptive, and strategically capable of imposing regional and global costs than many policymakers anticipated. That is because they weren't thinking of the entirety of the Iranian system, and the wider geopolitical system that Iran was operating within.

A systems-based analysis grounded in strategic realism begins from a different premise. The objective of strategy should not be coercive transformation, total victory, or the fantasy elimination of geopolitical rivalry. It should instead be the construction of a regional order capable of managing rivalry while reducing the risks of permanent war, nuclear escalation, societal collapse, and regional fragmentation.

From Linear Pressure to Systems Thinking

This approach requires moving beyond the recurring cycle that has defined U.S.-Iran relations for decades: escalation, partial diplomacy, diplomatic collapse, renewed coercion, and intensified conflict. Under conditions of deep distrust and competing regional ambitions, durable stability cannot emerge through pressure or unilateral dominance. It can only emerge through reciprocal restraint, bounded competition, institutionalized deconfliction, and the gradual reduction of incentives for escalation.

Such an approach does not require abandoning pressure entirely, nor does it ignore the Islamic Republic's severe domestic repression, regional coercion, or human rights abuses. Rather, it recognizes that external pressure operates within complex political systems and often generates unintended consequences that strengthen the very actors most invested in confrontation and securitization. Systems thinking therefore requires evaluating policy not only by its stated objectives, but by the broader political, institutional, regional, and economic dynamics it produces over time.

Core Principles of a Sustainable Strategy

Several broad principles follow from this framework.

Diplomacy as Permanent Risk Management

Diplomacy must be treated as a permanent mechanism for risk management rather than a temporary reward for political convergence. Sustainable engagement cannot depend on assumptions of imminent normalization, regime collapse, or ideological transformation.

Prioritizing Stabilization Over Maximalism

Military and nuclear stabilization must take precedence over maximalist demands. The destruction of diplomacy in pursuit of total capitulation repeatedly produced worse outcomes: accelerated nuclear expansion, degraded monitoring visibility, regional escalation, and strengthened hardline actors.

Regional Integration Over Permanent Exclusion

Regional stability cannot be built around permanent exclusion. The Persian Gulf functions as an interconnected security and economic system in which attempts to isolate major regional actors generate systemic instability affecting energy markets, maritime trade, military postures, and great power competition.

Durability and Reciprocity

Durable restraint requires reciprocal incentives and political sustainability. Agreements perceived as structurally temporary or politically reversible will not produce lasting behavioral change. Under conditions of profound distrust, durability itself becomes a strategic variable.

Harm Reduction and Societal Resilience

Systems based strategy requires abandoning the assumption that coercion alone can engineer favorable internal political outcomes inside Iran. The past two decades repeatedly demonstrated that prolonged siege conditions narrowed political space, weakened civil society, strengthened coercive institutions, and intensified nationalist and securitized forms of governance. A more sustainable approach must therefore prioritize harm reduction, civil society resilience, de-escalation, and the management rather than attempted elimination of rivalry.

The End State: A Durable Cold Peace

The end state envisioned by this report is not reconciliation, alliance, or democratic transformation imposed from outside. It is a durable and managed cold peace in which conflict remains bounded, escalation is constrained, nuclear risks are contained, regional competition is managed through rules and institutionalized restraint rather than recurring military escalation, and the people of the region are no longer forced to bear the immense human, economic, and societal costs of perpetual war.

This framework does not promise resolution of the underlying ideological and geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic. It instead seeks a more realistic objective: preventing that rivalry from repeatedly collapsing into regional catastrophe.

CONCLUSION — BEYOND THE FAILURE OF MAXIMALISM

The central challenge after the spring 2026 war is not simply how to avoid the next crisis, but how to rethink the assumptions and institutional habits that repeatedly produced escalation in the first place. If U.S. policy continues to evaluate success primarily through short-term pressure, military signaling, or tactical coercive gains, it is likely to reproduce the same cycles of instability examined throughout this report.

A more sustainable approach requires embedding systems-based thinking more directly into policy planning and decision making. That means evaluating strategy not only by its immediate effects, but by how external pressure reshapes internal political balances inside Iran, alters regional incentives, affects global energy and security systems, and generates second- and third-order consequences over time. It also requires stronger institutional capacity for long-term scenario planning, escalation analysis, and diplomatic risk management rather than treating diplomacy primarily as episodic crisis response.

Temporary ceasefires, interim agreements, or limited understandings may still help reduce immediate dangers and create political space for broader diplomacy. But durable stabilization will likely require a longer-term framework grounded in reciprocal restraint, institutionalized deconfliction, and the management rather than attempted elimination of geopolitical rivalry. The realistic objective is not reconciliation or total victory, but a more stable regional order in which competition remains bounded and the Middle East is no longer repeatedly pushed to the edge of catastrophic war.

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