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Deterring Iran in the Gray Zone: Insights from Four Decades of Conflict

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Image: The Japanese-owned tanker *Kokuka Courageous*, showing damage from an Iranian limpet mine attack in the Gulf of Oman, June 2019. Screenshot: U.S. Central Command.

President Joe Biden has stated that if Iran returns to full compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the United States will too, as a starting point for follow-on talks about Iran's missile program and regional activities.[1] The path to a stronger, longer, and broader JCPOA, however, may be tortuous and prolonged; success is not foreordained. Indeed, since the Biden administration took office, Tehran has already resumed proxy attacks on U.S. intrests in Iraq, and has accelerated work on its nuclear program while limiting access by international inspectors, in order to (1) build leverage, (2) roll back U.S. sanctions, and (3) obtain other concessions. Washington needs to be able to deter or counter such moves and deny Tehran advantage in ways that do not hinder renewed diplomacy. Moreover, even if talks succeed, U.S.-Iran ties will

likely remain tense for years to come. Deterrence will therefore remain a core component of U.S. policy toward Iran as a way to manage tensions, avoid escalation, and deny Tehran leverage, thus creating an environment conducive to successful diplomacy.

Gray zone deterrence poses particular challenges—because the entire gray zone modus operandi is designed to circumvent or defeat U.S. deterrence efforts. To successfully deter and counter Iran's destabilizing regional activities and its gray zone strategy, then, the United States will need to draw the right lessons from efforts going back over four decades. Fittingly enough, the most effective way for the United States to counter these activities may be by adopting a gray zone *deterrence* strategy of its own.[2] Doing so would rectify a major shortcoming of the JCPOA—its failure to address Iran's destabilizing regional activities—while the credibility engendered by more effectively deterring and countering Tehran's regional activities may enhance Washington's ability to deter a potential future nuclear breakout by Iran.

Author's Note

This paper builds on the analysis provided in the author's Policy Focus *Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War*, published by The Washington Institute in January 2020. However, this paper focuses more narrowly on the special challenges posed by Iran's attempts to circumvent or defeat U.S. *deterrence* efforts, and it incorporates up-to-date insights from Iran's campaign to counter the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure." In the coming years, deterrence will remain the overriding policy imperative vis-à-vis Iran—and other gray zone actors such as China and Russia. This Policy Note, then, aims to help policymakers and planners meet the specific challenges of deterring Iran's destabilizing regional activities and countering its gray zone strategy—as well as that of other gray zone actors.

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Insights from Past Confrontations

A core belief of the Islamic Republic's leadership is that the United States—the "Great Satan"—is the foremost enemy of Iran, of Islam, and indeed of all oppressed peoples, and that they have a revolutionary obligation to overthrow the international order it upholds.[3] This ideological conviction found practical expression in the conduct of the regime once it seized power. As a result, the Islamic Republic was born into conflict with the United States and its leaders believe they have been at war with America—in one way or another—ever since.

Thus, the seizure of the U.S. embassy and fifty-two American diplomats and citizens as hostages in Tehran in November 1979, and the 444-day crisis that followed, set the stage for more than four decades of persistent enmity and intermittent conflict between the two countries.[4] Examples have included acts of unilateral and proxy terrorism such as the 1983 Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, and the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington DC. Other examples have included several irregular warfare campaigns, among them (1) Iran's efforts to counter U.S. convoy operations (Operation Earnest Will) during the Iran-Iraq War, (2) Iran's support for Shia militant groups "resisting" the post-2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq, and (3) the U.S.-Iran pressure/counterpressure campaigns that both preceded the 2015 JCPOA and followed the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018.[5] (Iran's efforts to counter the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy are described in detail in appendix A.)

Deterrence and Iran's Gray Zone Strategy

The Islamic Republic's leadership has always understood that its anti-American, anti–status quo agenda would bring it into conflict with the United States. Accordingly, it developed an approach tailored to this challenge. Indeed, Iran's gray zone strategy is designed to circumvent or defeat U.S. deterrence efforts, with the aim of gaining advantage, obtaining leverage, and increasing freedom of action—while managing risk, in order to prevent escalation and avoid war. This modus operandi, which Iran has refined through its past interactions with the United States, has been characterized by remarkable consistency. It is based on three core principles: (1) incrementalism, (2) preserving a degree of deniability through proxy or covert/unacknowledged activities, and (3) avoiding decisive engagement of the enemy.[6]

If risk management is the main consideration guiding Iran's gray zone strategy, deterrence is its foundation. Deterrence constrains adversaries, and thereby expands Iran's options and affords it greater freedom of action. To establish deterrence, Iran has, over the past four decades, built a deterrence/warfighting triad consisting of (1) guerrilla and conventional naval forces capable of disrupting oil exports from the Persian Gulf;[7] (2) an arsenal of missiles and drones capable of conducting long-range precision strikes;[8] and (3) a stable of foreign proxies[9]—its Shia foreign legion—capable of projecting influence throughout the region and acting as insurgents, counterinsurgents, and terrorists.[10] Iran may now be adding a fourth leg to this triad—offensive cyber operations.[11] Deterrence, therefore, facilitates Iran's gray zone activities, and gray zone activities that demonstrate Iran's precision-strike, sea denial, and terrorist capabilities bolster its deterrent posture. In this way, Iran's deterrent and gray zone activities work hand in hand to reinforce each other.

In implementing its gray zone strategy, Iran relies on a dog-eared playbook dating back to the 1980s—using policy tools and a repertoire of actions that it has augmented over time. This repertoire includes both lethal and nonlethal activities in nearly all domains—from hostage taking, embassy invasions, terrorist attacks, and harassment of and unacknowledged attacks on maritime traffic, to weapons tests (for propaganda purposes); proxy and unilateral drone, rocket, and missile strikes; information operations; and all kinds of cyber activities. Iran leverages various asymmetries (e.g., conceptual, operational, motivational, geographic, and temporal) to gain advantage and achieve disproportionate effects, and operates in a hybrid fashion—blending both conventional and irregular forces and modes of operation—to achieve synergies.[12] Continuities in Iran's approach have resulted in certain recurrent patterns in U.S.-Iran deterrence and escalation dynamics that must be understood if the United States is to more effectively counter Iran's gray zone strategy.

The deterrence lessons of past Iran-U.S. confrontations, then, can be summarized as follows:

IRAN IS A LEARNING, ADAPTIVE ADVERSARY. Iran tests and probes to determine an adversary's resolve and response thresholds, adjusting its strategy according to its assessment of what is likely to work at a given time and place. An increasingly diversified policy toolkit enables Iran to conduct nonlethal and lethal activities along several lines of operation, in diverse geographic arenas, and in several domains, though it generally focuses on one main line of effort at a time—perhaps to avoid task overload or policy overreach. Tehran's timing, choice of targets, and methods emphasize reciprocity and proportionality, and occasionally demonstrate a degree of artistry as well as a flair for the dramatic.

Thus, in its recent efforts to counter the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy, Iran graduated from simple to complex, and from nonlethal to lethal, attacks. In May 2019, Tehran conducted a simple limpet mine attack against four oil tankers parked in an anchorage off the

coast of the United Arab Emirates; the next month, it conducted a more complex limpet mine attack against two tankers underway in the Gulf of Oman. Also in May 2019, Tehran's foremost Iraqi proxy, Kataib Hezbollah (KH), conducted a simple attack on the Saudi East-West Pipeline using two drones, while that September Iran conducted a complex drone and cruise missile strike on two separate oil facilities in Saudi Arabia using eighteen drones and seven cruise missiles, possibly originating from different launch sites in Iraq and Iran.[13]

Iran also adjusts its approach based on lessons learned, as it did after attacks on Gulf oil targets in May–September 2019.[14] The attacks did not achieve the desired objective, alienated the many countries that still depend on Gulf oil, and prompted the creation of U.S.- and European-led maritime security missions in the Gulf in September 2019 and February 2020, respectively.[15] Thus, Iran shifted emphasis to a campaign of proxy rocket and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on U.S. interests in Iraq, which continued through the departure of the Trump administration in January 2021. Tehran raised and lowered the volume of these attacks to test U.S. response thresholds. When proxy rocket attacks were deemed too risky because they could possibly kill American personnel and prompt a harsh U.S. response, Iran's proxies ramped up IED attacks on U.S. embassy supply convoys manned by Iraqi contractors—enabling them to strike a defiant stance while nearly eliminating the risk of killing Americans. (For details, see figure 1.)

FOR IRAN, MANAGING RISK IS PARAMOUNT—BUT "RISK AVERSE" DOES NOT MEAN "RISK AVOIDANT." To manage risk, Iran has often used proxies to attack Americans, which provide it with a degree of deniability. Proxy attacks include the 1983 Marine barracks and 1996 Khobar Tower bombings (with Lebanese Hezbollah); the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington DC (using a Mexican narco-terrorist); and attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq during the post-2003 U.S. occupation and during Iran's recent campaign to counter the U.S. maximum pressure policy by various Iraqi Shia groups, including KH. After the killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasem Soleimani, KH and its associates used a variety of new aliases to claim credit for attacks, providing them and Iran with an additional layer of deniability.[16]

Conversely, in Iran's May–September 2019 attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in the Gulf, limpet mines were placed near the waterline of tankers to cause material damage but not casualties. (By contrast, Iranian boats attacking foreign tankers during the Iran-Iraq War often directed machine gun and rocket fire at the tankers' bridges and crew spaces in an attempt to cause loss of life.[17]) Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly approved the September 2019 drone and cruise missile attack on Saudi oil facilities on the condition that no civilians or Americans be killed.[18] So while Iran's willingness to undertake such attacks shows a tolerance for risk, they were conducted in such a way as to reduce it.

Despite a propensity for caution, Iran may temporarily abandon the protection of the gray zone to act overtly against the United States when its redlines are crossed and the stakes require it. Thus, Iran responded to the killing of Qasem Soleimani by launching sixteen missiles at the U.S. section of al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, hitting living quarters, drone hangers, and support facilities. By warning the Iraqi government prior to retaliating, however, Iran mitigated the risk of taking this action. (Iran likely assumed that its warnings would reach the Americans, thereby enabling U.S. personnel to shelter.[19]) But Iran took a risk, given that Americans could have been killed. That should not have been a surprise; Iran and its proxies have killed hundreds of Americans in the past four decades. This overt response, moreover, was not a departure from policy. The threat of overt action has always been part of Iran's military repertoire. For example, Tehran has long asserted that an attack on its nuclear infrastructure would prompt a "crushing response"

from its missile arsenal.[20] Further, Tehran will act overtly on a sustained basis—as it has in Syria—when risk is not an overriding concern and when doing so is necessary for success.

GRAY ZONE DETERRENCE IS COMPLEX AND CHALLENGING. Deterrence refers to the use of threats to dissuade a party from doing something it otherwise would have done. Compellence is the use of threats to convince a party to stop something it is already doing. Thus, deterrence and compellence are two sides of the same coin, given that both involve use of threats to alter another's behavior. In practice, they tend to "mingle,"[21] and past U.S.-Iran interactions have often blended deterrence and compellence. Operation Earnest Will was a U.S. effort to deter Iran from further escalating the Iran-Iraq War in the Gulf while using diplomacy and sanctions to compel Iran to end the war. The U.S. pressure campaign that preceded the JCPOA attempted to compel Iran, again through diplomacy and sanctions, to cap its nuclear program while deterring a military response. And the U.S. maximum pressure policy sought to compel Iran to return to negotiations with the United States while deterring attacks on U.S. personnel. This dual aspect of U.S. policy has frequently added a layer of complexity to the U.S.-Iran relationship, as American attempts to compel Iran through diplomacy and sanctions have sometimes complicated military deterrence (see below).

It is also sometimes claimed that deterrence is less difficult than compellence. According to this logic, successful deterrence requires that an adversary not do something, allowing that party to convey the impression that its inaction is a manifestation of free will. Compellence, however, requires that the adversary cease something it is already doing, thereby risking loss of face.[22] If there is truth to this logic, it does not apply to gray zone actors, whose entire modus operandi is structured to defeat adversary deterrence efforts by circumventing redlines and acting in a manner that makes it easier for the adversary to not respond. Thus, Tehran doggedly tests limits and works assiduously to erode adversary redlines or circumvent them. And although it may back down when faced with a firm response, Tehran often seeks alternative means to achieve its goals—resulting in what CENTCOM commander Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. has referred to as "contested deterrence."[23]

Tehran acts in this way because (1) the regime believes that it is fighting for its survival, and (2) the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its gradual post-2011 disengagement from the Middle East have created a unique opportunity for Iran to greatly expand its influence in the region. Both goals require a proactive approach to succeed. By contrast, for policymakers in Washington, the stakes just are not as high, and America's regional concerns have to be balanced against competing global interests and commitments. The United States cannot respond to every low-level challenge in the Middle East.[24] Asymmetries in motivation and focus, then, often favor Tehran.

Accordingly, success in the gray zone consists of deterring Iran from employing its most destabilizing capabilities, forcing it to rely on less effective means. Tehran has in the past demonstrated considerable capability: the 1983 Marine barracks bombing killed 241 U.S. service members, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing killed 19 U.S. airmen and injured hundreds of Saudis and others, and pro-Iran Shia proxies killed more than 600 Americans and wounded many thousands more during the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003–11.[25] More recently, Iran's attack on Saudi oil installations in September 2019 demonstrated that it has developed a potent long-range precision-strike capability. Yet, in its recent interactions with the United States, Tehran has generally been measured and cautious, relying mainly on low-end proxy activities and resorting to lethal force only after tests and challenges went unanswered. Having had a front-row seat to two U.S. wars in Iraq, Iran knows the kind of force the United States can bring to bear.

DETERRENCE EFFECTS HAVE A LIMITED SHELF LIFE AND ARE OFTEN SHORT-LIVED. Iran has developed a diverse gray zone toolkit that enables it to operate in multiple domains, arenas, and lines of operation; if it is thwarted in one, it can act in another. Thus, in July 1987, at the outset of Operation Earnest Will, Washington warned Tehran not to carry out Silkworm missile attacks on escorted convoys transiting the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, Iran covertly mined the Gulf prior to the first convoy, damaging a tanker (the *Bridgeton*) in the process. It subsequently launched Silkworms against reflagged tankers no longer under escort in Kuwaiti waters in October 1987, and against oil terminals off the coast of Kuwait that December. Likewise, the day after American forces killed Qasem Soleimani and KH founder and overseer Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in order to "restore" U.S. deterrence, pro-Iran proxies rocketed the U.S. embassy grounds in Baghdad, and continued doing so for several weeks thereafter. Iran, for its part, launched a retaliatory missile strike five days after the U.S. targeted killings.[26] Two months after that, in March 2020, three coalition soldiers (two American and one British) were killed in a rocket attack on Camp Taji in Iraq.

Although the deterrence effects of killing Soleimani and Muhandis were seemingly short-lived, in fact Iran acted with an abundance of caution for the remainder of the Trump administration—carefully testing limits in Iraq and in the Gulf and stepping back at signs of danger. (Some of the subsequent rocket attacks in Iraq may have reflected a loss of control by the IRGC-QF over some of its proxies following the death of Soleimani and Muhandis.) Thus, when the United States threatened in September 2020 and again that December to shutter the U.S. embassy in Baghdad if escalating rocket attacks continued (apparently signaling an American willingness to act militarily), Iran largely halted strikes on the American embassy and troops, substituting less risky proxy IED attacks on embassy convoys manned by Iraqi contractors. The psychological shock created by the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, the potential for military action implied by U.S. threats to shutter its Baghdad embassy, and concerns that an erratic, politically wounded president might lash out seem to have altered Tehran's risk calculus (see figure 1).[27] Moreover, these actions set Iran and its Iraqi proxies back on their heels, eliminated two perhaps irreplaceable operators, and emboldened those in Iraq who were opposed to Iran and its influence there.[28] This shows that deterrence effects are but one factor to consider when evaluating the efficacy of U.S. policy; disruption effects on the adversary's operations, strategy, and policy may be just as important.

Finally, Iranian policymakers have sometimes been deterred by doubts about their ability to act effectively and with a degree of deniability. Thus, in September 1987, during the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. boarding and capture of an Iranian amphibious craft, *Iran Ajr*, while it was covertly laying mines in the Gulf, embarrassed Tehran and led to a temporary halt to mining activities (though other military activities continued unabated). Likewise, at the start of Iran's counterpressure campaign in May 2019, Iran may have halted or deferred planned attacks in Syria, Iraq, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Gulf (including sea-based cruise missile strikes from dhows) when it became clear that the United States had become aware of its plans. Ultimately, though, this did not deter Iran from attacking Gulf oil transport and infrastructure when it thought it could get away with doing so.[29] However, after the United States established a multinational maritime security force in September 2019 to ensure freedom of navigation in the Gulf (followed by a similar European effort in February 2020), attacks on shipping decreased dramatically. CENTCOM commander General McKenzie attributed the decrease to the presence of surveillance assets associated with the maritime security forces, which significantly reduced the possibility of deniable attacks—although such assets will never be present in sufficient numbers to deter all attacks.[30]

LEVERAGE CONCEPTUAL ASYMMETRIES TO DETER. To the degree that Iran's gray zone

strategy has enjoyed success, that achievement can be attributed in part to the strategy's leveraging of differences in the way that Tehran and Washington think, organize, and act on the policy and strategic levels. In particular, U.S. decisionmakers tend to conceive of war and peace with state actors like Iran in stark, binary terms, and have frequently been constrained by concerns about escalation leading to "all-out war." This stance creates opportunities for Iran and others to act in the gray zone "in between." (The main exception—by and large a relatively recent one—is in the cyber domain, where the United States has shown itself increasingly willing to act.[31]) By contrast, Tehran believes it has been at war with the United States since 1979, and it tends to see conflict as a continuum. The key terrain in this gray zone conflict, then, is the gray matter between the ears of U.S. policymakers who often overstate Tehran's tolerance for risk—and who believe that a local clash could derail diplomacy or lead to all-out war. The result is often U.S. inaction, conferring on Iran greater freedom to act.

THE POTENTIAL FOR WAR IS GREATLY OVERSTATED. History is replete with examples of war through miscalculation.[32] Yet, while miscalculations leading to clashes between the United States and Iran have occurred in the past and remain possible in the future, they are very unlikely to lead to "all-out war"—for the whole point of Iran's gray zone strategy is to avoid such an outcome.[33] Tehran's aversion to conventional war is not grounded in a transitory calculation of the regime's interests; rather, it is a deeply rooted aspect of the regime's strategic culture, which is reflected in its gray zone strategy. Likewise, America's long and costly wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have seared into the nation's consciousness a strong aversion to actions that might lead to another "forever war" in the Middle East. Indeed, in the past forty years, Iran and the United States have repeatedly avoided outright war—despite proxy attacks that have killed hundreds of Americans, clashes at sea (toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War) that killed scores of Iranian sailors, the accidental shoot-down by the United States of an Iranian passenger jet in 1988 that killed all 290 passengers, and numerous other incidents. Iran and Israel have likewise clashed repeatedly without sparking an "all-out war."[34]

Moreover, both the United States and Iran have miscalculated on several occasions since May 2019. Washington's efforts to drive Iran's oil exports to zero crossed a longstanding Iranian redline and prompted Tehran to lash out militarily—a response that the United States was apparently unprepared for.[35] Likewise, the late December 2019 killing of an American contractor in Iraq crossed a U.S. redline and led to an American strike on KH bases there and in Syria several days later. When the strikes were followed by violent protests by pro-Iran proxies in front of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad (conjuring up traumatic memories of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the killing of U.S. ambassador Chris Stevens in Libya in 2012),[36] the United States responded by killing Soleimani and Muhandis.[37] The relatively light security for Soleimani and Muhandis indicates that they too were unprepared for such a response; after all, the United States had never previously killed a senior Iranian military officer or proxy commander. And when Iran retaliated with a missile strike on al-Asad Air Base five days later, it gave advance warning to the Iraqi government, thereby ensuring that Americans there had time to shelter.[38] (Had Americans been killed, that could have led to further escalation—though almost certainly not war.) Afterward, the United States and Iran both signaled publicly and through diplomatic back channels that they desired to avoid further escalation and considered the current round over.[39]

So reports and analyses claiming that the United States and Iran were on the brink of "all-out war" at various times since the Soleimani killing do not reflect reality.[40] In gray zone competitions, no well-defined "brink" marks the transition from peace to war. Rather, such competitions are murky, ambiguous, slow-motion conflicts that are punctuated by brief escalatory peaks and prolonged

de-escalatory troughs. For forty years now, despite frequent bouts of tension, the United States and Iran have more or less successfully managed conflict, limited escalation, and avoided all-out war—and are likely to continue to do so.[41] In the unlikely event that a major war occurs between the United States and Iran, it will be because one of the parties opts for it, and the other side obliges by joining battle.

DETER BY CREATING POLITICAL DILEMMAS. Iranian decisionmakers have often deterred the United States by threatening "all-out war"[42]—catalyzing latent divisions within the U.S. political system between accommodationists and activists, and inducing paralysis among American policymakers.[43] Moreover, by attacking U.S. forces in Iraq during its post–May 2019 counterpressure campaign, Iran successfully baited Washington into responding there, generating a nationalist backlash against the American presence that has constrained U.S. options.[44] Experience shows that the political dilemmas engendered by military threats have often affected U.S. cost-benefit calculations as significantly as have fears about the potential costs of war. Iran's cost-benefit calculus has also been affected by political dilemmas. Perhaps because the United States did not draw a redline around Gulf oil, Iran hit those targets in May–September 2019. Such action, however, threatened Iran's ties with the many countries that depend on the region's oil. As a result, Iran has not engaged in destructive attacks on Gulf oil transport or infrastructure since then, limiting itself to occasional attempts to divert tankers in the Gulf.

U.S. FAILS TO ALIGN WAYS, MEANS, AND ENDS. The United States suffers from a persistent inability to align the ways, means, and ends of its global and regional strategies.[45] It has often failed to define realistic, achievable policy goals toward Iran: Is the aim to change its behavior, its policy, or the regime? And Washington has often been unable to formulate a viable "theory of success" that links ways and means to achieve the United States' desired policy ends.[46] Thus, the Obama and Trump administrations leaned heavily on diplomacy and sanctions; but the Obama administration failed to effectively incorporate the U.S. threat of force into its diplomacy, and the Trump administration made this threat credible only belatedly, after an American was killed in Iraq in December 2019.

The United States has also often failed to balance the various elements of its deterrence strategy, including:

- **Deterrence and compellence.** The United States has often tried to simultaneously deter and compel Iran, and these efforts have sometimes worked at cross-purposes. Thus, the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy unwittingly incentivized Tehran's use of force. Withdrawing from the JCPOA made it hard for the United States to convince Iran that compliance with Washington's demands would lead to the easing or lifting of sanctions. And by trying to halt Iran's oil exports and shut down its economy, the United States crossed a longstanding Iranian redline, convincing the Islamic Republic that it had nothing to lose by striking back militarily.

  Moreover, by redlining the killing of U.S. personnel—thereby implying that attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in the Gulf and nonlethal harassment attacks on the U.S. embassy or bases used by American troops would not prompt a response—the United States effectively granted Tehran significant leeway to act. Indeed, when Washington failed to respond to the attacks on Gulf oil and to harassing rocketfire on its troops in Iraq (except by reinforcing its forward military presence in the region), proxy rocket attacks intensified and ultimately led to the death of an American contractor in December 2019. The maximum (economic) pressure policy required maximum military deterrence, but did not achieve it until an American was killed and the U.S. embassy was besieged, prompting the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis.

  Finally, it is often difficult to de-escalate a conflict once an adversary's redlines have been crossed. For this reason, such steps should be considered carefully before they are taken. For instance,

had the United States not acted in May 2019 to drive Iran's oil exports to zero, it is possible that the Islamic Republic would have begrudgingly accepted the status quo—selling just enough oil to get by, but without undertaking a military counterpressure campaign that undercut America's standing with its allies and partners.

- **Denial and punishment.** Washington has often opted for deterrence by denial by warning Tehran that its attacks will be thwarted: mines will be swept, small boats sunk, and missiles intercepted.[47] But such an approach requires a large forward military presence, and permits Tehran to calibrate risks and costs and to wager only those assets it is willing to lose. Washington also needs to deter by punishment, through threatening assets that Tehran truly values. Otherwise, Tehran will continue to set the terms of engagement with Washington, and to impose costs on the United States and its allies with relative impunity.

  A singular emphasis on deterrence by denial also ignores one of the most important insights from the field of behavioral economics: that generally, people are more strongly motivated by the desire to avoid or minimize loss (read: avoid punishment) than by the prospect of gain.[48] And while deterrence by denial might, by necessity, be a more prudent approach for deterring a peer competitor or a nuclear weapons state that is capable of inflicting great harm on the United States, deterrence by denial *and* by punishment may be a more viable and effective means of deterring an adversary over which the United States enjoys conventional escalation dominance. Indeed, Tehran ramped down attacks on maritime traffic in the Gulf after the U.S. Navy sank a large part of its navy in Operation Praying Mantis (April 1988). And it largely reined in attacks in Iraq as a result of the killing of Soleimani (January 2020), a presidential tweet which warned that "any attack by Iran" would lead to "an attack on Iran...1,000 times greater in magnitude!" (September 2020), and U.S. threats to close its embassy in Baghdad if attacks there did not cease (September and December 2020)—measures that underscored America's willingness to escalate militarily.[49]

  In light of growing military commitments elsewhere in the world, the United States will no longer be able to maintain the large forward presence required to deter by denial. Indeed, even with a significant forward presence, it has not always been possible to deter in this fashion, as vulnerabilities will always exist or present themselves as the United States is forced by developments elsewhere in the world to adjust its regional force posture. Rather, a demonstrated willingness to impose costs via punishment may be a more effective way to deter with a relatively small forward presence, which can be rapidly reinforced when needed. In this way, a small, actively engaged force may more reliably deter than a large force restricted to conducting presence patrols. It will take time, however, for U.S. military commanders to become comfortable accepting the risk entailed by deterring with a light force footprint.[50]

  That said, one of the most important lessons of Iran's post–May 2019 counterpressure campaign is that efforts to impose costs do not have to be lethal to produce significant effects. Iran's attacks on Gulf oil transport and infrastructure in the summer of 2019 showed that even nonlethal strikes can have disproportionate psychological and political effects. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE discreetly reached out to Iran to reduce tensions in the Gulf when it became clear that the United States would not respond in kind to the attack—leading them to ruefully conclude that while the Trump administration might take steps that put them in harm's way, it would not actively defend them after doing so.[51]

- **Capability and credibility.** For deterrent threats to work, they must be militarily and politically credible. While its foes have rarely doubted America's military capabilities, they have often questioned its political credibility. They remember how U.S. forces withdrew under fire from Vietnam

in 1975, Lebanon in 1984, Somalia in 1994, and Iraq in 2011—and see how the same thing might be playing out in Afghanistan today—and may therefore doubt U.S. resolve and staying power. U.S. policymakers are often insufficiently aware of this legacy. They seem to forget that while the United States can always surge additional forces into regions where it lacks a strong forward presence, it cannot surge credibility.

Thus, while U.S. carrier strike groups have been deployed regularly to the Persian Gulf region since the late 1980s, they have never launched airstrikes against Iran in anger. Their presence did not deter the Islamic Republic from attacking neutral shipping in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War, supporting thousands of proxy attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq after 2003, or plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in 2011. Likewise, the deployment of a U.S. carrier strike group and bombers to the region in early May 2019 amid U.S. warnings to Tehran did not suffice to deter Iran and its proxies from carrying out a series of attacks on oil transport and infrastructure in the Gulf that summer.[52] By contrast, as noted previously, the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, the presidential tweet that threatened to attack Iran, the threat to close the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, and concerns that an erratic, politically wounded president might lash out made the United States seem more credible and had a chilling effect on Iran and its proxies.

- **Responding consistently, acting unpredictably.** The United States—a Great Power that is often distracted by its global commitments—has often proven unwilling or unable to respond to relatively low-stakes challenges in one or another part of the world. This perceived reticence enables adversaries to persist in their challenges. When the United States has responded, it has often done so predictably, in accordance with its understanding of the law of armed conflict—which requires that actions be proportional, discriminate, and in accordance with military necessity. Thus, the United States often responds to challenges in a tit-for-tat, measure-for-measure manner. This kind of predictability has made it easier for adversaries to manage risk when testing U.S. resolve. For instance, the United States reportedly had planned to respond to the shootdown of a Global Hawk drone by Iran in June 2019 with attacks on the air defense unit that downed it—that is, until President Trump called off the mission and opted to respond with a less risky cyberattack on an IRGC computer database used to target maritime traffic in the Gulf.[53]

  This combination of U.S. restraint and predictability has enabled Iran to wage a low-intensity gray zone campaign against the United States for four decades (just as it facilitated Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's decade-long defiance of the United States in the 1990s).[54] For the first seven months of Iran's counterpressure campaign against "maximum pressure," Washington did not respond to attacks on Gulf oil or on U.S. personnel in Iraq. Had the United States responded earlier, more consistently, less predictably, on a lower rung of the escalation ladder (e.g., responding to nonlethal harassment attacks in Iraq with nonlethal attacks that imposed significant material costs on Iran and its proxies), it might have avoided the death of an American in December 2019. Yet, after the killing of Soleimani, President Trump's image as a mercurial decisionmaker and as a "gambler" may have helped bolster U.S. deterrence vis-a-vis Iran.[55]

- **Restraint and audacity.** U.S. restraint in responding to Iran's tests and challenges has often undermined American credibility and invited additional challenges—sometimes leading to the very escalation it had sought to avoid. Thus, during Operation Earnest Will, the United States ignored the mining of the tanker *Bridgeton* because damage was limited and no lives were lost, prompting Iran to resume small boat attacks on shipping and to ramp up mining operations. During the pressure campaign that

preceded the JCPOA, the United States did not respond to Iranian cyberattacks and attempts to intercept U.S. drones operating in international airspace in the Gulf, or to Iran's deepening military intervention in Syria, in order to avoid jeopardizing ongoing nuclear diplomacy. And after concluding the JCPOA, it did not counter Iran's activities in Syria and Yemen for fear of undermining the fledgling accord. (Such concerns, it should be noted, did not deter Iran from using force to advance its own interests.) Yet there are times when forbearance is in order; for instance, U.S. restraint after Tehran's retaliatory strike for the killing of Soleimani helped de-escalate that crisis.

Experience shows that moderately assertive responses have often proved insufficient to deter; audacity has often yielded better results. Thus, during Operation Earnest Will, more aggressive rules of engagement complicated but did not stop Iranian efforts to threaten freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Only after Operation Praying Mantis in April 1988 inflicted heavy losses on Iran's navy did the Islamic Republic halt mining operations and ramp down (but not halt) small boat attacks. Following its invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United States was initially unwilling to act against IRGC–Qods Force personnel who supported attacks on U.S. forces there. After detaining several Qods Force officers between December 2006 and September 2007, U.S. forces eventually released them in an effort to avert an in-kind response by Iran. The United States was able to temporarily tamp down increasingly severe proxy attacks only when it issued blunt warnings to Iran in 2008 and 2011. Stuxnet, the joint U.S.-Israel cyber operation to sabotage Iran's centrifuge enrichment program between 2007 and 2010, was too subtle to deter; as a result, Iran increased its enrichment activities and eventually responded in kind with its own destructive cyberattacks.[56] And while the killing of twenty-five KH militiamen in response to the December 2019 killing of an American in Iraq led to the siege of the U.S. embassy (stoking fears of an embassy takeover), the subsequent killing of Soleimani caused Iran—after retaliating for his death—to tread much more carefully vis-à-vis the United States. That said, Iran has vowed to avenge Soleimani's killing, and is reportedly keeping that option open.[57]

- **Mixed messaging.** Too often, the United States has sent mixed messages to its adversaries, engaging in bluster and issuing threats that it did not follow through on. Thus, against the background of numerous statements by President Trump indicating his desire to halt "endless wars" in the Middle East, National Security Advisor John Bolton warned Iran in early May 2019 that "any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force."[58] When Iran attacked Gulf oil transport several days later, the United States, unsurprisingly, did not follow through. Likewise, after the United States killed Soleimani, President Trump tweeted that "if [Iran does] anything, there will be major retaliation"—adding that the United States had identified fifty-two sites in Iran, some "at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture," that it would hit "VERY FAST AND HARD" if Iran "strikes any Americans, or American assets."[59] After Iran struck back, the United States did not respond militarily and sought to de-escalate.

  Previous administrations have exhibited similar tendencies. Thus, President Barack Obama frequently warned that "all options are on the table" regarding Iran's nuclear program, and that the United States would use all means necessary to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear bomb. Obama backed up his threats, saying that "as president of the United States, I don't bluff."[60] Yet senior defense officials repeatedly warned that a preventive military strike on Iran's nuclear program would yield only ephemeral results, strengthen the regime's hold on power, and destabilize the region. It is not clear whether those statements reflected a degree of policy disarray, or whether they reflected the president's actual policy position, but their net effect was to undermine the claim that all options were in fact on

the table.[61] Indeed, senior Iranian officials often mocked such claims.[62]

In light of this decidedly mixed record, then, it is worth considering whether a different approach to deterring Iran might yield better results—while understanding that given enduring U.S. and partner vulnerabilities, as well as asymmetries in motivation between the United States and Iran, no approach will succeed completely.

Toward a U.S. Gray Zone Deterrence Strategy

The United States has frequently underperformed in its efforts to deter and contain Iran. This is because (1) gray zone deterrence is hard; (2) the Islamic Republic's gray zone strategy is tailored to exploit limitations in the traditional U.S. "way of war," with its tendency to rely on overt, lethal, and overwhelming force; and (3) shortcomings in U.S. policy formulation and strategy implementation have precluded more satisfactory outcomes.

To more effectively deter and counter Iran's gray zone activities, the United States should adopt a gray zone strategy of its own (see figure 1). An American gray zone *deterrence* strategy would have numerous advantages. It would pose for Tehran many of the policy dilemmas that Iran's gray zone strategy has posed for Washington. If deterrence fails, such a strategy would enable Washington to push back against Tehran's destabilizing activities in ways that are less likely to hinder diplomacy with Iran or engender a political backlash by a war-weary American public. It would enable the United States to more effectively engage in a long-term competition with Iran—which is more likely to be won on points than by a "knockout" blow anyway. It would permit the United States to deter Iran with a small force footprint at modest cost, as U.S. focus and forces shift to the Indo-Pacific region. And it would enable the United States to gain proficiency in a form of interstate competition that is likely to become increasingly frequent in the future. Implementing such a gray zone strategy would be more sustainable than past approaches toward Iran that relied mainly on diplomacy and sanctions, demonstrative (and often mixed) messaging, and the rare, episodic, overt use of military force. In so doing, the United States should seek to leverage asymmetries to gain advantage and achieve disproportionate effects, and operate in a hybrid fashion to achieve synergies by using all the instruments of national power.[63] The following are guidelines for such a U.S. gray zone deterrent strategy toward Iran, derived from four decades of conflict with the Islamic Republic.

Reassess How to Think, Organize, and Act

A robust deterrent posture is the essential foundation for any effective gray zone strategy. But to effectively deter in the gray zone, U.S. policymakers and planners need, first and foremost, to define realistic and attainable deterrence goals. This means understanding that gray zone deterrence is not absolute, and that deterrence campaigns should aim to dissuade Tehran from employing its most destabilizing capabilities, thereby forcing it to rely on less effective methods. The best way to do this is by introducing uncertainty into Iran's risk calculus, since managing risk is the overwhelming priority of Iran's chief decisionmaker, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Moreover, U.S. policymakers need to think, organize, and act in a manner different from what they are accustomed to:

Think. U.S. policymakers need to put aside vocabulary and mental models shaped by Cold War deterrence and America's subsequent "unipolar moment," which have stunted its military thinking and limited its strategic imagination. Thus,

policymakers tend to see deterrence in absolute, either/or terms and to look at conflict through a conventional warfare lens (embodied by the so-called Weinberger and Powell doctrines), which emphasizes decisive force ("Go big or go home"), clear-cut outcomes ("Tell me how this ends"), and time-limited engagements ("What is our exit strategy?").[64] Instead, U.S. policymakers should adopt a vocabulary and mental models that are more appropriate to gray zone competitions, and that (1) eschew binary approaches to war and peace, and treat competition and conflict as a continuum; (2) emphasize ambiguity, incrementalism, and open-endedness; and (3) employ both nonlethal and lethal options. And they should keep in mind that deterrence effects in the gray zone are generally short-lived; thus, deterrence is a dynamic process that requires constant tending, rather than a "state" that can be "restored" by the episodic use of "decisive" force.

Organize. As deterrence is a dynamic process, it needs to be pursued via an open-ended, interagency-driven campaign framework that integrates diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and cyber instruments of national power.[65] As part of this process, policymakers need to continually assess how activities in the virtual (cyber), physical, or informational domains might bolster or weaken deterrence in the other domains. (For instance, might cyberattacks in certain circumstances telegraph reluctance to engage in the physical domain, thereby undermining conventional military deterrence?[66]) Beyond the military, it is not clear that the U.S. government has the conceptual and institutional frameworks needed to (1) ensure that the ways, means, and ends of strategy are aligned; (2) optimize deterrent and disruption effects; and (3) approach deterrence campaigns as learning processes in which policy and planning assumptions are continually tested against reality.[67]

Act. The traumas inflicted by the Tehran embassy hostage crisis (1979–81), the threat of Iranian terrorism (1980s–present), and the post-2003 U.S. fiasco in Iraq have made policymakers reluctant to use the military instrument to deter and contain Iran. Indeed, the U.S. approach to Iran has traditionally relied on diplomacy, economic sanctions, demonstrative messaging, and the rare, overt use of force. But U.S. policymakers may have more margin of military maneuver than they realize—especially if they operate largely in the gray zone. Accordingly, in order to deter and contain Iran, avoid escalation, and prevent war, a U.S. gray zone deterrence strategy toward Iran should rely on the threat of force—followed by quiet, consistent, covert/unacknowledged action if deterrence fails; the concerted employment of all instruments of national power—both military and nonmilitary—to achieve synergies; the patient pursuit of incremental advantage; and discreet messaging. Policymakers should avoid bluster and mixed messaging, and should speak mainly through actions—except when direct communication, through overt means or back channels, is desirable.

Reassure Allies and Partners

U.S. policymakers also need to rethink how they can assure allies and partners if the United States increasingly acts in the gray zone—whether by clandestine or covert means, or via unacknowledged overt action, and thus in ways not discernible to others. Trusted allies and partners can be apprised of U.S. gray zone activities (or at least their broad outlines), though U.S. policymakers will probably have to accept unjustified criticism from domestic and foreign critics for their apparent inaction. But to the degree that U.S. policy toward Iran is likely to consist of both covert and overt action, some of these concerns can be mitigated. The eventual and perhaps inevitable leaking to the media of accounts of these gray zone activities will provide deferred vindication for policymakers, as occurred with past alleged joint U.S.-Israel covert operations like Stuxnet, and the killing of Lebanese Hezbollah external operations chief Imad Mughniyah.

Align Ways, Means, and Ends

U.S. policymakers must also ensure that the various elements of their gray zone deterrence strategy toward Iran are aligned and in balance, and not working at cross-purposes. These elements include:

Deterrence and compellence. In seeking to balance efforts to compel (via sanctions and other forms of pressure) and deter (through military means), the United States should not go beyond the point where compellence undermines deterrence, or limits the ability to deter more destabilizing actions by Iran.[68] To this end, it is important to understand Tehran's redlines—whose crossing will prompt a violent response—and to avoid breaching them unless doing so advances a vital U.S. interest. Iran's traditional redlines include (1) attempts to halt its oil exports, (2) direct attacks on the homeland or its military, (3) threats to its territorial integrity, and (4) attempts to violently overthrow the Islamic Republic by covert or overt means.

Denial and punishment. The United States should seek to deter Iran not only by denial, but also by punishment; this will create uncertainty in Tehran about the risk of challenging the status quo, and raise the prospect that doing so will jeopardize assets that it truly values. In addition, this will allow the United States to deter Iran with a smaller forward presence. The United States should also seek to expand its gray zone toolkit so that it can respond in kind to nonlethal attacks and impose costs (material and otherwise) on Iran via nonlethal means. Although this runs counter to the emphasis in contemporary U.S. military thought on ever-greater lethality,[69] in the gray zone less (lethality) may sometimes be more.[70] And gray zone activities should include nonmilitary options, such as black and gray propaganda to stoke discord within the regime (which would not cross a redline, as opposed to violent attempts to overthrow the regime—which would), as well as cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, or well-camouflaged cyberattacks to drain the bank accounts of malign foreign actors and entities—although such options could entail legal and practical risks.

Capability and credibility. Deterrent threats must be militarily and politically credible to succeed. To this end, America's technological and qualitative overmatch must be preserved, attempts by adversaries to counter U.S. capabilities must be thwarted (e.g., by developing advanced defenses against Iranian drones and missiles), and emerging U.S. military capabilities (e.g., conventional prompt global strike) must be grown. And although the United States can surge forces, it cannot surge credibility. Credibility, therefore, must be painstakingly cultivated and zealously protected—by actions that demonstrate U.S. commitment, resolve, and willingness to accept a degree of risk. Such actions will allow the United States to deter more effectively, and with a smaller forward military presence.

Responding consistently, acting unpredictably. The United States should respond quietly but consistently to tests and challenges, lest inaction embolden Iran. And when confronted by persistent challenges, Washington should not just react—which would allow Tehran to define the terms of engagement—but it should seize the initiative. It should act unpredictably, expanding its target set beyond those assets that Tehran is willing to hazard in tests, challenges, and attacks, in order to introduce uncertainty into Iran's risk calculus. And Washington should try to alter Tehran's cost-benefit calculus by ensuring that Iran "gets worse than it gives" in the majority of interactions, to induce the Islamic Republic to act with greater caution and restraint.

Restraint and audacity. When deterrence fails, the U.S. response should depend on the nature of the activity (cyber or kinetic, nonlethal or lethal), the costs imposed, and the overall policy context. A firm but measured approach involving covert, unacknowledged, and sometimes overt military actions can demonstrate resolve, establish credibility, impose costs, and alter Tehran's risk calculus. The main obstacle to such an approach, however, is the mindset of policymakers who labor under the

misconception (encouraged by Iran) that a local clash could quickly lead to "all-out war."[71] Were U.S. policymakers to realize that they actually have significant freedom of maneuver vis-a-vis Iran—especially if they operate in the gray zone—the Islamic Republic would lose its single most important advantage, and the United States could more effectively counter Iran's gray zone activities.

That said, there are times for restraint in order to de-escalate—for example, as occurred after the killing of Soleimani. Yet the threat of escalation needs to remain part of the U.S. gray zone toolkit, as escalation dominance—embodied by America's unrivaled power-projection and precision-strike capabilities—constitutes one of the United States' most potent asymmetric advantages vis-à-vis Iran. As demonstrated by Operation Praying Mantis during the Iran-Iraq War and by the Soleimani killing and its aftermath, there are times when escalation or the credible threat of escalation can lead to de-escalation.

Creating political dilemmas for the adversary. U.S. policymakers have repeatedly tried to place their Iranian counterparts on the horns of a policy dilemma. They can have a nuclear program or a viable economy—but they cannot have both. It is not clear, however, how often the United States has tried to create *political* dilemmas to deter military action by Iran. Yet politically disruptive threats may more effectively deter than threats to impose costs by military or economic means. Iran has repeatedly done this to the United States—using military threats to tie U.S. policymakers in knots, foment divisions within administrations, and stoke antiwar sentiment among the public.

U.S. policymakers and planners should try to do the same, playing on Tehran's own fears of an "all-out war" with the United States to catalyze cleavages in Tehran's leadership. And the United States should seek to exploit the adversary's own failures to align the ways, means, and ends of its strategy. For instance, the United States was unable to effectively exploit international pique at Iran for targeting Gulf oil transport and infrastructure targets in summer 2019 because many countries were angry at Washington for having left the JCPOA and thereby contributing to that crisis.

Strategic and Operational Art in the Gray Zone: Additional Considerations

U.S. policymakers should keep in mind various additional considerations that are key to formulating a successful gray zone strategy toward Iran.

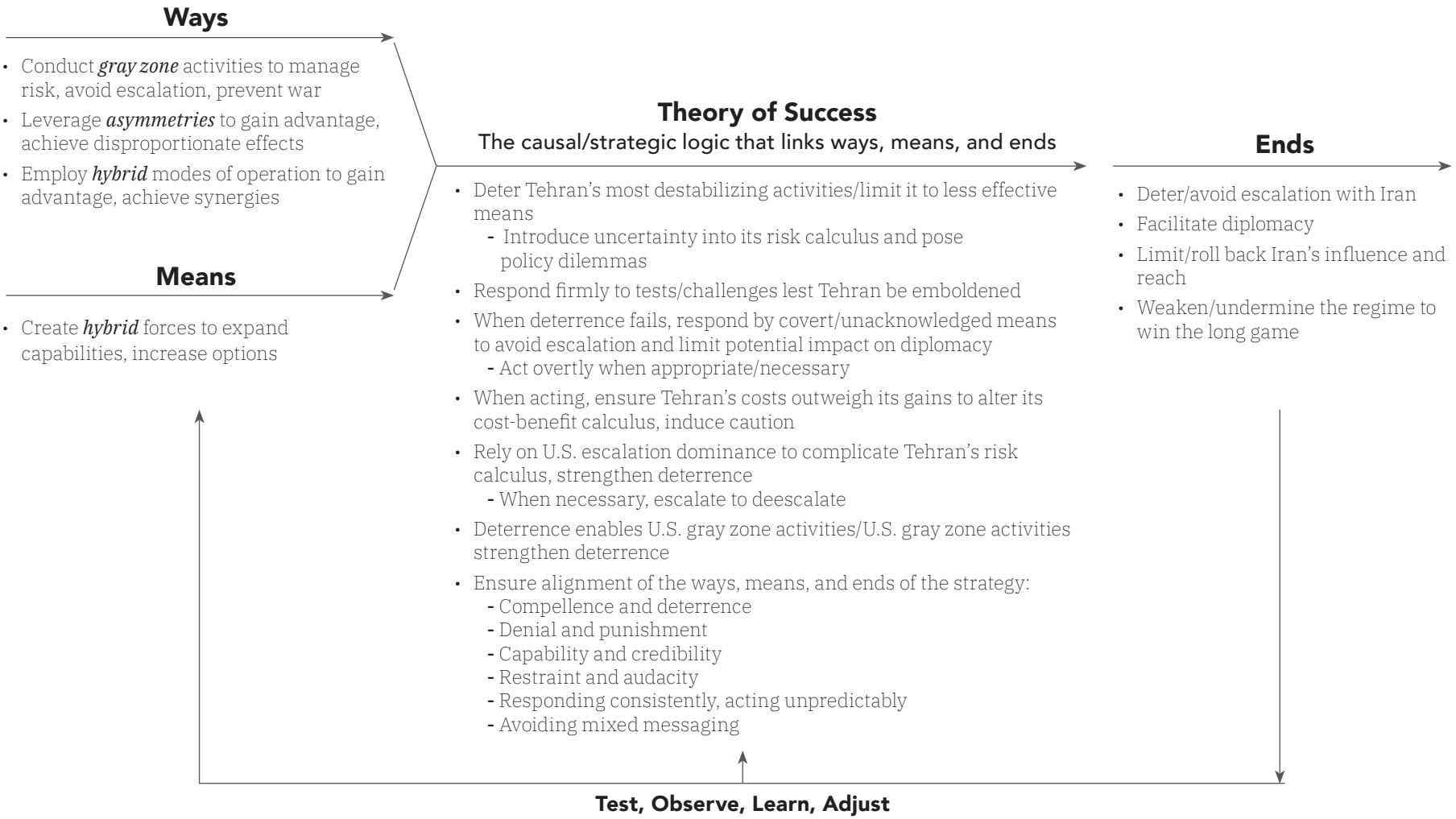
Go long, not big. In gray zone competitions, advantage is generally accrued by incremental, cumulative gains rather than knockout blows. Force is rarely decisive. Yet, as the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis showed, there are times when dramatic measures can produce deterrent or disruptive effects that may justify the risk involved.

Pacing and spacing. U.S. gray zone activities should be paced and spaced to avoid creating an elevated sense of urgency or threat in the minds of Iranian decisionmakers, so that they do not act hastily or overreact in ways that complicate deterrence. Dispersing activities geographically could also force Iran to thin out its defenses, creating exploitable vulnerabilities that might bolster U.S. deterrence.

Moreover, such an approach may help address concerns that artificial intelligence will result in future battles being fought at hyperspeed—causing military operations to spin out of the control of generals and politicians.[72] By carefully pacing gray zone activities and limiting most military engagements to deliberate, set-piece operations, strategists and planners can mitigate the risk posed by artificial intelligence, and ensure that technology and tactics remain the servants of strategy and policy.

Communicating with Tehran. While there are advantages to being unpredictable, there are also times to communicate clearly in writing, verbally, and by actions, in order to set expectations,

Figure 1. Toward a U.S. Gray Zone Deterrence Strategy



Features of a Gray Zone Deterrence Campaign

- An interagency-led, whole-of-government, multi-domain approach that includes covert or unacknowledged as well as overt activities:
  – Diplomacy to communicate expectations—as well as to isolate Tehran, cap its nuclear program, and contain/roll back its regional influence
  – Covert, unacknowledged, or overt military activities to "restore" deterrence (temporarily) when deterrence fails…
  – Economic sanctions
  – Information activities to heighten effectiveness or impact of other instruments of national power and to undermine regime cohesion
  – Cyber activities
- Diversify/expand the policy toolkit to provide additional military and nonmilitary response options beyond vertical escalation
- Go long, not big: seek advantage via incremental, cumulative gains
- Pacing and spacing: manage tempo/scope of gray zone deterrence activities to avoid provoking an overreaction

clarify intentions, and reassure. Indeed, in recent years, Washington has communicated with Tehran publicly and privately—via the Swiss, among others—to deter and to de-escalate.[73] And while constructive ambiguity still has its place (vague redlines increase uncertainty for Iran and preserve flexibility for the United States), mixed messaging should be avoided; Washington should make clear to Tehran that attacks on U.S. interests will draw a firm and painful response. In any case, public and back-channel communications should be an integral part of America's gray zone deterrence toolkit.

Some have also proposed that the United States and Iran adopt confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) to address the potential for miscalculation and accidental escalation.[74] Thus, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen broached the idea of a hotline between U.S. and Iranian military commanders in the Gulf in September 2011, only to be roundly rebuffed by the commander of the IRGC Navy.[75] Likewise, CENTCOM has created a dedicated hotline for use by Iran's military leadership to help manage and de-escalate incidents at sea. CENTCOM has forwarded the hotline number to its Iranian military counterparts, though they have never used it.[76]

For Tehran, CSBMs would institutionalize an unpalatable status quo, whereby U.S. warships patrol right off its coast. Iran therefore sees no need to assure its enemies. Its response is that the United States is the main source of instability and tension in the region, and all would be well if U.S. forces were to leave. That said, Washington should periodically renew these offers of CSBMs to see if Tehran has altered its stance, and if not, to make clear to all that the Islamic Republic is the main obstacle to defusing tensions in the Gulf.

Leveraging allies. Experience shows that Iran generally seeks to avoid escalation on more than one front and with more than one adversary at a time, to better control events and avoid military overextension. U.S. activities should therefore, whenever possible, be coordinated with allies that are actively engaged in action against Iran—including Israel and perhaps some of the Gulf Arab states. The goal should be to pose dilemmas for Iran on multiple fronts and in multiple domains, thereby complicating risk management. Conversely, failing to coordinate with allies and partners regarding diplomatic outreach to Tehran or gray zone activities targeting it could result in actions that complicate U.S. policy—and create gaps between allies that the Islamic Republic can exploit.

Conclusion

Past confrontations with Iran—including the Islamic Republic's efforts to counter the Trump administration's maximum pressure policy—highlight the challenges of gray zone deterrence. Iran-U.S. tensions are almost certain to continue under the Biden administration, as demonstrated by Tehran's renewed proxy attacks in Iraq and its decision to ramp up nuclear activities prior to renewed talks with the United States. Moreover, tensions of some sort are likely to continue even if the two sides eventually return to compliance with the JCPOA. So it will be important that future efforts to deter Iran's destabilizing regional activities or counter its gray zone strategy be informed by this experience.

A U.S. gray zone deterrence strategy would rely mainly on covert or unacknowledged activities (military and nonmilitary) to create uncertainty, pose dilemmas, and impose costs—in order to complicate Tehran's risk and cost-benefit calculations. And it would employ the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and cyber instruments of national power to gain advantage and better deter Iran. While such a strategy might not deter all of Iran's malign activities, it might deter those that are most destabilizing.

Such a U.S. gray zone deterrence strategy would

thus provide a more effective and sustainable way to counter Iran's gray zone strategy than have past U.S. approaches. It would enable Washington to pursue its interests and deny Tehran leverage while engaging diplomatically with the Islamic Republic. In addition, the credibility conferred by a successful U.S. gray zone strategy would make a future military crisis less likely. Should one nonetheless occur, the United States would enjoy an array of options beyond overt action and vertical escalation. And perhaps most importantly, an effective U.S. gray zone strategy would bolster America's ability to deter a future nuclear breakout by Iran. After all, a country not averse to countering Iran's destabilizing regional activities might be willing to act to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. By linking efforts to counter and push back against Iran's destabilizing regional actions with efforts to cap its nuclear program, the United States will have addressed a major shortcoming of the JCPOA. Conversely, the failure once again to do so could undermine domestic U.S. support for even a stronger, longer nuclear deal, and have adverse consequences for efforts to deter a future nuclear breakout by Iran, as well as for U.S. credibility in the broader Middle East and beyond.

The U.S. inability to adapt and operate effectively in the gray zone against a struggling—albeit innovative and motivated—third-tier power like Iran would also raise questions about its ability to counter much more capable gray zone actors like Russia and China, and to gain proficiency in a form of interstate competition that is likely to become increasingly frequent in the future. Such a failure could undermine U.S. deterrence not just in the Middle East, but everywhere it faces gray zone adversaries intent on challenging the status quo.

So, while the United States must continue to prepare for conventional wars with Great Power peers, policymakers and planners need to become familiar with the various shades of gray that will likely characterize future long-term competitions below the threshold of war. And by developing the ability to deter and counter potential gray zone adversaries like Iran, they will be better prepared to face the challenges of the future. ❖

Appendix

Iran's Counterpressure Campaign Against "Maximum Pressure" (May 2019–January 2021)

In May 2018, President Donald Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and instead pursue a policy of "maximum pressure."[77] The new policy sought to impose intolerable economic costs on Iran through sanctions, while deterring lethal attacks on U.S. personnel and interests.[78] The ostensible goal of the new policy was to compel Tehran to abandon its destabilizing activities and negotiate a new deal that would address a range of nuclear, regional, and military issues not dealt with in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).[79]

Tehran initially responded with restraint, hoping that the European Union would ignore U.S. sanctions and conduct business with Iran. When it became clear that this would not happen—and after Washington took additional steps to intensify sanctions in order to collapse Iran's economy—Tehran launched a counterpressure campaign in May 2019. Its goal was to compel the United States to ease or lift the sanctions, induce the rest of the world to ignore them, and deter U.S. military action.[80] Iran also hoped to drive a wedge between Washington and its allies. Following the killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF) commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, Iran declared its intent to expel U.S. military forces from the region (although this has always been a long-term goal of the Islamic Republic).[81]

Iran's counterpressure campaign consisted of gray zone activities in multiple domains, along multiple lines of operation, and in diverse geographic arenas. Such activities included unacknowledged attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf region and petrochemical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, various kinds of cyber operations, proxy attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities in Iraq, and incremental violations of JCPOA limits on its nuclear program (for details, see figures 2a and 2b).

Iran's initial strikes, which targeted oil transport and infrastructure, included limpet mine attacks on tankers in May and June 2019, three attempts in July 2019 to divert foreign tankers in the Gulf, and a dramatic drone and cruise missile strike on Saudi oil infrastructure in September of that year. The United States did not respond with force; rather, it bolstered its military presence in the region, answered the shoot-down of a Global Hawk drone in June 2019 with a cyberattack on an IRGC intelligence database used to plan attacks on oil tankers,[82] and downed by nonkinetic means at least one Iranian drone flying near a U.S. warship in the Gulf in July of that year.[83] These attacks by Iran did not cause the United States to ease sanctions—though they antagonized many countries dependent on Gulf oil and prompted the creation of American- and European-led maritime security missions (in September 2019 and February 2020, respectively) that made it more difficult for Iran to act in a deniable fashion.

As a result, Iran halted its attacks on Gulf oil and intensified proxy rocket attacks on U.S. interests in Iraq in November and December of 2019.[84] This led to the death of an American contractor, prompting U.S. military strikes against facilities in Iraq and Syria that belonged to Kataib Hezbollah (or KH—Tehran's foremost Iraqi proxy). The strikes killed twenty-five militiamen, which led to violent demonstrations in front of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad by pro-Iran proxies, and to the U.S. drone strike in early January 2020 that killed Soleimani and KH founder and overseer Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Five days later, Iran responded by launching sixteen missiles at

al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, producing no fatalities but causing traumatic brain injuries in more than one hundred U.S. service members. Good intelligence, and advanced warning by Iran to the Iraqi government that an attack was coming, enabled U.S. personnel to shelter beforehand.[85] Afterward, the United States and Iran signaled their desire to de-escalate via both public and back-channel communications.[86]

However, rocket attacks spiked in the weeks that followed. KH and its associates used a variety of new aliases to take credit for these attacks, probably to provide an added degree of deniability—although this increase in attacks may also have reflected the IRGC-QF's loss of control over groups that splintered off from its proxies as a result of the death of Soleimani and Muhandis.[87] Another spate of proxy rocket attacks in March 2020 led to the death of three coalition soldiers (two American and one British) and to another round of U.S. strikes on KH facilities in Iraq.

Although the deterrence effects of killing Soleimani and Muhandis were seemingly short-lived, in fact, Iran acted cautiously for the duration of the Trump administration—tentatively and carefully testing limits in Iraq and in the Gulf, and stepping back at signs of danger. Thus, when Iran's proxies ramped up rocket and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against U.S. embassy convoys in July–September 2020, President Trump warned Iran in a tweet that it would be hit "1,000 times" harder if these attacks continued, and the United States threatened in September, and again in December, that it would shutter its embassy in Iraq if these attacks were not halted—thereby apparently signaling its willingness to abandon military restraint.[88] As a result, rocket attacks dropped dramatically in October while IED attacks on U.S. embassy convoys manned by Iraqi contractors spiked, with this trend continuing through January 2021. This approach enabled Iran and its proxies to strike a defiant pose while practically eliminating the chances of harming Americans, which would have given an erratic, politically wounded president a pretext to lash out at Iran.

Meanwhile, Iran acted only intermittently in the Gulf. It again diverted foreign tankers in April and August 2020 and in January 2021 (in the lattermost case, diverting a South Korean tanker in an apparent bid to gain the release of $7 billion in Iranian moneys held in escrow in South Korea). Moreover, in April 2020 Iranian vessels harassed U.S. warships in the Gulf—which they had not done since mid-2017. In response, President Trump warned that if the harassment continued, the U.S. Navy would destroy the Iranian vessels involved.[89] The provocations stopped.

Throughout this period, Tehran intensified cyber-spying and network reconnaissance activities—perhaps to pave the way for future attacks and to signal its ability to respond to a U.S. attack in the cyber or physical domain.[90] It also continued ongoing cyber influence operations to discredit U.S. policy[91] and conducted activities to undermine the credibility of the 2020 U.S. presidential elections.[92]

Iran also repeatedly breached various JCPOA limits on its nuclear program, enabling the accumulation (at the time of this writing) of sufficient quantities of low-enriched uranium for two bombs—if further enriched and weaponized.[93] There is no indication, however, that Iran intends to build a bomb at this time. For now, it is using the accumulation of low-enriched uranium (and related nuclear activities) to create leverage over the United States and the international community, in an effort to press Washington to lift sanctions without reciprocal concessions from Iran.

By the time it left office, the Trump administration had not succeeded in compelling Iran to halt its destabilizing activities or to agree to new talks. Tehran had likewise not succeeded in compelling Washington to ease or lift sanctions or to pull its troops out of the region (though the Trump administration drew down U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria to make good on a campaign pledge).[94] Moreover,

the lack of a U.S. military response to Iran's attacks on Gulf oil transport and infrastructure (beyond reinforcing its presence in the region) created tensions with allies and partners who believed that U.S. actions had put them in harm's way.[95] However, the killing of Soleimani generated a measure of deterrence with Iran and its proxies. And because the United States responded to some of Iran's actions with elements of a nascent gray zone strategy of its own—apparently consisting largely of covert or unacknowledged cyber activities—it is not possible to assess U.S. policy in its totality.[96]

During this period, Iran continued to support its Yemeni Houthi partners in their ongoing war with the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, as well as efforts to transform Syria into a springboard for military action against Israel—which has acted to disrupt these activities (what Israel calls its "campaign between wars").[97] Iran also conducted a number of cyberattacks on Israel—including an apparent attempt to contaminate Israel's water supply in April 2020[98]—which caused Israel to launch a disruptive cyberattack on the Iranian port of Shahid Rajaee.[99] While these parallel campaigns have their own distinct tempo and logic, a number of operations in these far-flung arenas were apparently linked to Iran's efforts to counter "maximum pressure." Thus, a Houthi attack on two Saudi oil tankers in July 2019 reportedly occurred at Tehran's behest.[100] And Iran has occasionally used the Houthis to convey threats to its regional adversaries as part of its counterpressure campaign.[101] Israel, moreover, believes that Iran might eventually use the Houthis to open an additional front against it.[102]

Israel's apparent sabotage of a centrifuge assembly facility at Natanz in July 2020[103] and killing of Iran's chief nuclear weapons scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, that November[104] have raised questions regarding possible Iranian retaliation against Israel—and perhaps the United States—if Tehran concludes that the two countries collaborated in those activities.[105] Such potential spillover likewise raises questions about Washington's ability to keep developments in these largely distinct arenas of conflict separate from the broader U.S.-Iran conflict. In the past, Tehran sought to avoid simultaneous escalations with the "Little Satan" and the "Great Satan." Thus, it retaliated for the killing of five of its nuclear scientists between 2007 and 2012 (which it blamed on both Israel and the United States) by hitting only Israeli targets in a series of attacks in early 2012.[106] As long as the usually cautious Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei remains the preeminent decisionmaker in Tehran, it is likely to continue to avoid challenging the United States and Israel at the same time.

With the swearing-in of the Biden administration, the policy of maximum pressure is now history. But U.S. sanctions remain (for now), and Tehran has resumed its attacks on U.S. military personnel and the American embassy in Iraq. Tehran has also accelerated work on its nuclear program while limiting access by international inspectors in order to build leverage, roll back U.S. sanctions, and obtain other concessions. The future of Tehran's efforts to counter U.S. pressure, then, will likely be shaped by several factors. First, how the Biden administration responds to this renewed pressure from Tehran; the lack of a firm rejoinder will most likely beget even more pressure and a less flexible negotiating stance by Iran. Second, Tehran might still seek to avenge the killing of Soleimani by targeting a current or former senior American official—regime propaganda has focused on former president Donald Trump.[107] Finally, given the rising influence of hardline IRGC officers, it is possible that Iran will eventually adopt a more assertive, risk-acceptant approach that entails a heightened potential for additional tension and conflict with Israel and the United States—especially if a former IRGC officer becomes president in national elections scheduled for June 2021.[108]

Figure 2a. Iran's Counterpressure Campaign: Main Lines of Operation (May 2019–January 2021)

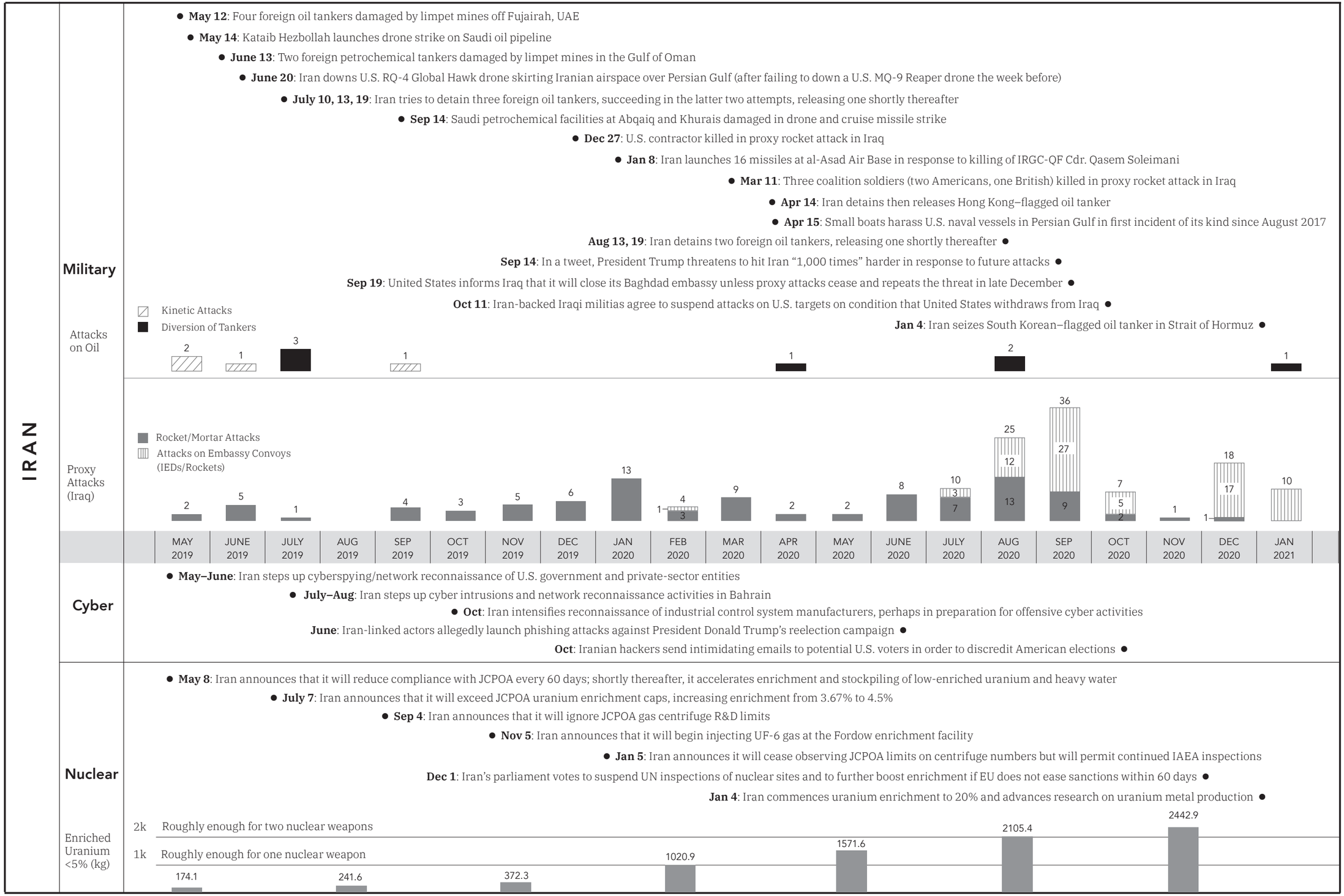
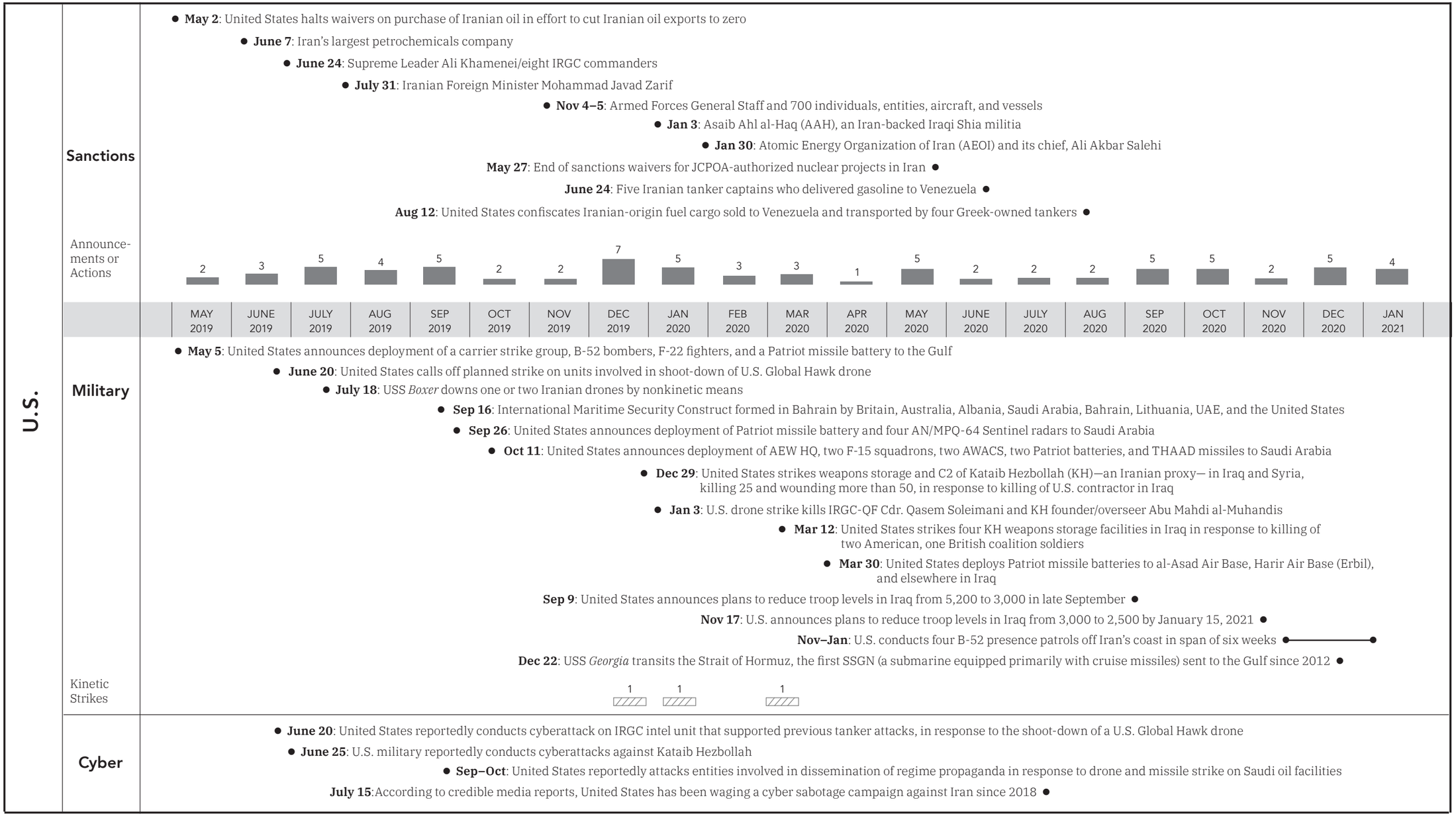


Figure 2b. U.S. Maximum Pressure Campaign: Main Lines of Operation (May 2019–January 2021)



Notes: 1. Information cutoff date is January 20, 2021 (U.S. Inauguration Day); only major activities/incidents are noted, and are illustrative rather than comprehensive. 2. Proxy IED attacks in Iraq generally target U.S. embassy logistical convoys manned by Iraqi contractors. 3. The 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) ensured that Iran's nuclear breakout time was more than one year. By the end of the Trump administration, Iran could have produced enough weapons-grade uranium for a bomb in 3–4 months.

Additional relevant activities: During this period, Israel conducted various gray zone activities against Iran, possibly including: 1. A series of attacks on Iranian shipping, starting with an unattributed Oct 11, 2019, attack on an Iranian oil tanker in the Red Sea. 2. An explosion that destroyed a centrifuge assembly hall at the Natanz enrichment facility on July 2, 2020. 3. The killing of the head of Iran's nuclear weapons program in an ambush near Tehran on Nov 27, 2020.

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