

## SANCTIONS TO STRIKE: THE US-IRAN WAR'S FALLOUT

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### ABSTRACT

The United States-Iran affairs have been among the most debatable and intricate rivalries in the international politics in recent years. The existence of political suspicion, economic sanctions, nuclear issues and the rivalry between the two states in the region has been some of the contributors to constant tension between the two nations. The recent years have seen the increasing level of hostilities changing the diplomatic and economic confrontations in the form of wider security issues that have major regional and global consequences. This paper discusses the shift more economical sanctions towards military challenge and evaluates the political, economic and strategic implications of the US Iran conflict. Special emphasis is placed on the role of sanctions as coercion tools of diplomacy and how they have affected Iranian economy, foreign policies and behavior in the region. The paper also expounds on the role in which military escalation has impacted regional security, worsened proxy wars and caused instability in the Middle East. Furthermore, it examines the consequences of the conflict on the oil markets in the world, the energy security as well as the international trade especially by instabilities related to the Strait of Hormuz. The reactions of key foreign actors, such as the United Nations, the European Union, China, and Russia in dealing with tensions and avoiding further upsurge are also analyzed in the course of the research. Using the Realism Theory, this paper will assert that the behavior of both states is still influenced by the strategic interests, competition in terms of power, and national security factors. The results also indicate that the long run confrontation not only jeopardizes the maintenance of regional stability, but also provide major risks to the global economic and security systems. This paper concludes that the processes of diplomatic intervention, multilateral collaboration and sustainable conflict-management measures are the keys to decreased tension and the establishment of long-term peace in the area.

**Keywords:** United States-Iran Conflict, Economic Sanctions, Military Escalation, Regional Security, Oil Politics, Energy Security, Strait of Hormuz, Geopolitical Rivalry, International Relations, Realism Theory

### INTRODUCTION

The United States-Iran relationship has been one of the issues in the field of international relations that is the most complicated and controversial nowadays. Over 40 years of political mistrust, ideological disparities, economic sanctions and security issues have defined the directive in the two states. This enmity could be traced to the 1979 Iranian

Revolution that has changed the political landscape of Iran and redefined the relations between the United States and Iran (Takeyh, 2017). Since, there has been a long-term battle between the two nations that is marked with diplomatic strains, economic sanctions, proxy wars and military confrontations. One of the main tools such that the United States has been able

to use to influence Iranian actions and curtail its effects in the region are economic sanctions. With time, Iran has faced sanctions against its banking sector, oil exports, and international trade which have increased in intensity especially due to fears relating to Iranian nuclear program and its operations in the region (Katzman, 2023). Although sanctions were to be used to pressure the policy, it created a hand that led to the build-up of animosity and distrust between the two nations. The step-by-step growth of economic stress to actual tensions between the military shows the constraint of coercive steps in solving multifaceted geopolitical conflicts. The US-Iran war is highly strategic as far as the bilateral relationship is concerned. Iran is strategically placed in the Middle East, having strong control over the situation of security in the region. Moreover, the nation is situated in the Strait of Hormuz where much of the global oil flow is through. As a result, any energy of tensions between the United States and Iran will impact the global energy markets, global trade, and economic stability (Cordesman, 2020). The routine clashes have over and over brought up issues of upsetting oil pipelines and the resilience of the sea shipping channels. The conflict has also played a role in the political instability in the Middle East besides the economic impacts. The wider strategic game between Washington and Tehran has involved the involvement of regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as different non-state actors, either directly or indirectly (Juneau, 2019). Such dynamics have heightened already existing conflicts and have escalated the risk of further expansion of the regions. This has been complicated by a sense that the key global powers like Russia and China are also involved and attempts to reach the end-lasting diplomatic resolutions. This paper will discuss the escalation of US-Iran tensions that started with the economic sanctions, then developed to the military disputes and analyzes the overall impact of this conflict. In particular, it examines how sanctions affect bilateral relations, evaluates consequences regarding oil markets and energy security in the world, and focuses on the local consequences of increasing hostilities. Employing the Realist Theory of International Relations, the research aims to determine how the factors of power, security and national interests have influenced the actions of the two states. These dynamics are vital to consider the future of regional

stability and which strategies are effective toward preventing conflicts, and engaging in diplomacy.

## Literature Review

### Background of US–Iran Relations

So, the process of relationship between Iran and United States has experienced a lot of changes in the last few decades as it was based on strategic collaboration, and turned into an intense antipathy. Under the leadership of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran used to be one of the most significant allies of the United States in the Middle East that experienced the Cold War. Nevertheless, the tensions started building up after the 1953 CIA-supported coup, which ousted Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who resolved to nationalize Iranian oil (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026). This incident caused a lasting bitter feeling in most Iranians and was a key element of mistrust of the United States. There was even more worsening on the relations following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which toppled the Shah and formed the Islamic Republic under the Ayatollah Khomeini. The crisis of kidnaping the U.S. embassy in Iran and the hostage taker has become the pivotal moment in the history of the United States and Iran turning into the long-term enemies (Roos, 2026). Ideological differences, regional rivalries and security issues have since then kept on influencing the unfriendly nature of US relations with Iran.

### Past Sanctions and Hostility

One of the key tools which have helped the United States to coerce Iran and shape both its internal and external policies has been economic sanctions. After the Islamic revolution and the hostage crisis, Washington came up with a series of economic sanctions, which focused on Iranian financial transactions, trade and assets. In the 1990s, the number of sanctions began to increase dramatically, especially on the oil and gas industries of Iran, the motive behind this being to contain the influence of Tehran in the region and its military strength (CFR, 2026). The conflict between the Iranian nuclear program even worsened the hostilities further resulting to some more sanctions on Iran by the United States, the European Union and the United Nations. Despite the fact that tensions had been reduced until the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA), the withdrawal of the United States of America in 2018 reinstated the sanctions and made renewed confrontations. These actions have both made Iran economically strained and at the same time escalated political tensions and skepticism towards each other between the two nations (Blakemore, 2025).

#### **Economic Sanctions as It Relates to Foreign Policy**

Economic sanctions are a popular international relations tool that should be considered non-military in nature, creating some form of influence in regards to the actions of the states without employing a direct military action. Scholars believe that sanctions are issues of coercive diplomacy that is supposed to force governments to change the policy that is thought to pose a threat to the international security (Pape, 1997). Because of sanctions, many of the industries have been sanctioned in Iran like banking, oil export, shipping and defense industry. The United States has often been able to defend such actions through their fear of Iran having nuclear ambitions, the development of ballistic missiles and their aids to armed groups in the region. Although sanctions have cost Iran a lot in terms of its economic welfare, such as diminished oil income, inflation, and constraints on foreign trade, the issue on its success in fulfilling the long-term political goals is still controversial among the scholars (Spruk, 2026). Those opposed to this method of sanctions claim that long-term sanctions tend to reinforce nationalist feelings and increase enmity as opposed to promoting diplomatic compromise.

#### **Military Escalation and Regional Security**

The increasing conflict between the United States and Iran has had tremendous implications on the issue of security in the Middle East. Proxy wars, the global rivalry of interests, and face-to-face conflicts between allied peoples and the players in the region are all the ways in which military tension has escalated. Both the Hezbollah and other militia groups that Iran backs is often perceived by Washington as causing instability in the region. Iranian leaders on the other hand see the wide US military presence in the Gulf area to be a direct challenge to its security. Other incidents like attacks on oil production complexes, the Iranian Government killing of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020, and other incidents further heightened tensions

between the two nations (History.com, 2026). Such developments have increased the worry as to whether there can be more expansive military confrontation and have led to instability in the whole of the Middle East.

#### **Oil Politics in US-Iran Tensions**

The role of oil has continued to play a key role in the strategic conflict between United States and Iran. Iran is in a strategic position in the world energy markets, as it is one of the largest energy reserves in the world in terms of oil and natural gas reserves. Iran is further enriched with geopolitical importance as the Strait of Hormuz is the route through which an appreciable percentage of the global oil products flow. The policies of both countries have always had a bearing on the control over energy resources as well as over maritime trading routes. Oil export sanctions and penalties imposed on Iranian oil exports have been designed to impact the revenues of Tehran and to limit its regional ability whereas Iran has gone so far as threatening to polish off shipping to respond to external pressure (Reuters, 2026). The changes in oil prices due to tensions in the region are an indication of the direct impact that the US Iran relations have on energy security and stability in the whole world. Oil politics, therefore, is the topic of one of the most important aspects of the larger conflict between the two states.

#### **Methodology**

This paper uses Realism Theory as a theoretical standpoint in examining the US-Iran conflict and its wider international impacts. One of the most effective concepts in relation to International Relations is realism which underlines the fact that states act in an anarchical international system where no centralized power exists to ensure security or govern of state actions (Morgenthau, 1948). States therefore, are conscious of their survival, national interests, power and security, which is a priority to them even before other matters. Realist academicians believe that global politics are inherently likened to rivalry, strategic rivalry and unending power stupor among states (Waltz, 1979). It is specifically in the US-Iran conflict where the Realism Theory can be applicable since the history between the two countries has been influenced by issues of national security, regional influence, military strength and possessions and strategic interests instead of ideologies collaboration.

According to realist, economic sanctions, military deterrence as well as strategic alliances are the tools of capability that states engage in the pursuit of defending and securing of their national interests. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure have been common means of the United States to contain the influence of Iran in the region and their nuclear desires that it considers as a possible threat to the stability of the region and American interests in the Middle East. Iran on the other hand has aimed at maximizing its influence in the region and enhancing its strategic center on the perceived external threat and security dilemmas.

Realism also elaborates, on how power and influence struggles contribute to the increasing tensions among the states. The US and Iran war cannot be explained by disputes in politics or even ideological differences, the war is a consequence of a greater power struggle in the Middle East. The geopolitical competition between the players on the regional and international level has been enhanced by the strategic value of the region, especially in terms of the huge energy reserves and on the crucial sea routes like the Strait of Hormuz. According to the realist theory, states are encouraged to use economic, political and military resources to gain benefit in such strategic important regions (Mearsheimer, 2001). Moreover, the theory is useful in the explanation of the shift towards economic sanctions to military conflict. According to the realists, states tend to employ coercive tactics to change the actions of other states when they feel endangered or threatened by other states in their security or influence. The economic sanctions that the United States has imposed on Iran can thus be considered to be a form of power projection in order to hold Iran at bay. The various reactions by Iran, such as military readiness, alliances in the region, and backing of proxy groups can also be considered as measures aimed at safeguarding national security and keeping the region at its sway. Application of the Realism Theory in this paper gives a holistic approach in understanding the dynamics of the US-Iran conflict, the driving force of the policy decisions and the overall impacts on both the stability in this region and internationally. Among other insights, power politics, national interests and security issues provide the theory with great insights regarding how the sanctions then transformed into more wide-ranging geopolitical confrontation and how these tensions may prevail to determine

international relations, energy security and stability in the Middle East.

## Discussion

### From Sanctions to Military Confrontation

The US-Iran conflict is one of the longest lasting geopolitical clashes in the modern international relations. Although there has always been tension between the two states, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there have been economic sanctions which have become the most important tool used by United States to approach influencing the behavior of the Iran. Originally aimed at curbing the regional ambitions and nuclear activities of Iran and its support to non-state actors, the sanctions soon turned into a full-scale strategy of putting maximum pressure on Iran, although politically and economically (Katzman, 2023). Nonetheless, instead of leading to a sustainable diplomatic solution, the protracted application of sanctions led to an increase in aggression and suspicions between the two nations. The decision by the United States to pull-out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 was an essential shift in the bilateral relations. The resumption of far-reaching sanctions had a dire economic impact on the Iranian economy, as it led to the decrease in oil exports, restriction of access to global financial networks and added to domestic consumer sufferings (Maloney, 2020). As a counter-measure Iran assumed even more confrontational regional stance, enlarging its military forces and establishing a stronger relationship with the groups of allies throughout the Middle East. Such a process of pressure and resistance heightened tensions and the risk of a military confrontation. The further shift towards an open security confrontation was accelerated by military campaigns that occurred in the Persian Gulf, oil infrastructure attacks, computer attacks, and the assassination of a high-ranking Iranian military officer, Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 (Byman, 2021). These changes revealed how the economic coercion could play a role in escalating military action unintentionally in the event that diplomatic realms are weak or not effective. As the two states tried to protect their strategic interests, more and more, sanctions became incorporated into the larger security issues, and the economic rivalry between the two states became multidimensional and with regional and international vistas. Viewed

through the lens of realism, the intensification of the situation can be seen as a power struggle, a struggle over influence, as well as survival in an anarchic international system. Both parties, the United States and Iran, see their actions as a needed one to protect their interests and have strategic advantages. As a result, sanctions fail to remove tensions but rather gave rise to a security dilemma where each side construed the actions of the other as act of hostility thus escalating the possibility of a confrontation (Mearsheimer, 2014).

#### **Impact on Global Oil Markets and Energy Security**

Among the greatest impacts of the tensions between US and Iran has been its effect on the international oil and energy markets and safety. The region of the Middle East can boast of a large proportion of the existing reserves of oil in the world and the Persian Gulf is an essential center of transportation of energy on the international scale. Consequently, any Iran-related escalation has instant impacts on energy supplies around the world and stability on the global market (International Energy Agency, 2024). The economic sanctions against the Iranian oil industry greatly diminished the export capability of the Iranian oil to the region and globally in energy market. The decline in Iranian oil exports added to the variations in global supply, and brought about instability in the mind of the investors and policymakers. Geopolitical events triggered a more volatile reaction of markets since any worry about potential disruptions was commonly conveyed into the cost of oil and pressure on inflation globally (World Bank, 2024). The Strait of Hormuz has been in the spotlight where a large percentage of the world oil shipments are relayed on a daily basis. Any threat to maritime security within this waterway of strategic location can disrupt international trade and transportation of energy. Efforts to obstruct the passage of shipping through the strait by Iran coupled with increased tensions caused a lot of anxiety among the energy importing countries and the multinationals. These kinds of disturbances might have a profound impact on industrial work, transport systems and the development of the economy of several areas. The impacts do not just limit to oil-producing countries. The high costs of energy raise the cost of operation of businesses, lead to inflation and strain more burdens to consumers. The developing countries are specific vulnerable as they

tend to waste a lot of energy resources that are imported and have fewer resources to endure price shocks. In turn, the US/Iran geopolitical struggle has much further-reaching consequences, as it impacts the global economy and development. Moreover, the recurring crises have promoted the diversification strategies in energy use in many countries. To bolster their reliance on politically unstable regions, governments have been investing more into renewable energy technologies, alternative suppliers and strategic reserves of petroleum. However, Middle Eastern oil continues to be critical in bringing upon Iran related tensions, making the persistence of worries in this area a major issue among policy makers, who would love to sustain global energy security.

#### **Regional Middle East Stability and Fallout**

The impacts of the US-Iran war are best seen in the wider Middle East where the superpowers have acted as to geopolitical rivals, which has resulted in political division, proxy war and insecurity in the region. Iran is centrally located in the politics of the region and enjoys a relationship with different state and non-state actors within the region. As a result, the confrontation between the Tehran-Washington is often impacts surrounding nations and changes the process of ensuring security in the region (Gause, 2022). Iran and its rivals have been in contention on several issues in the region. In the case of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, among others, political and military players tend to be sponsored by rivalry external forces, turning their national conflicts into larger geopolitical conflicts. This has led to proxy warfare that has worsened violence, eroded the institutions of the state and derailed any efforts to bring about reconstruction and development. The sectarian division has also been enhanced throughout the region as a result of the conflict. Political rivalry often overlaps with religious affiliations and poses more problems to national unity and governance. These rifts lead to the social polarization and make it difficult to build inclusive politics that can help in dealing with the underlying grievances. Another critical aspect of the issue of regional instability is economic consequences. The opportunities of economic growth and employment are usually curtailed as foreign investment usually reduces in those regions that are seen to be prone to conflict. Other sectors such as tourism, trade and development of infrastructure can also be affected

during the time of increased insecurity. Such economic issues can also worsen social strains and be a source of dissatisfaction in politics. Humanitarian issues also have a high priority. Continued instability displaced millions of people putting a huge burden on the countries and international humanitarian agencies. Populations affected by food insecurity, vulnerable to healthcare issues, and educational challenges, remain linked to vulnerable populations in the affected region with refugee flows. Consequently, the US (Iran) conflict spills over to the region not taking the classical security issues only but reflecting more socially and developmentally.

### **Diplomatic Responses**

Diplomatic engagement has been a key aspect of international efforts to curb tension between United States and Iran due to the potentially devastating effects of escalation of military. The different governments and international bodies have tried to limit and prevent further escalation of conflicts by imposing negotiations, mediation and confidence building strategies. United Nations has always been promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts and observance of international law. With diplomatic efforts and talks at the Security Council, the organization has tried to promote the dialogue and minimize the dangers of confrontation militarily. The political differences between major powers have limited the effectiveness of such initiatives but the United Nations remains a valuable platform through which diplomacies can be done. The European nations have gained a special importance in maintaining diplomatic lines. Since the US pulled out of the JCPOA, governments in Europe desired to retain the deal and to have further discussions with Iran. Their initiatives were based on their concerns about nuclear proliferation, regional security as well as economic stability. Although these efforts did not live up to much success, they showed the significance of multilateral diplomacy in dealing with the complex international disputes. The same situation has been witnessed with China and Russia who have promoted diplomatic solutions, but insist on state sovereignty and protest against unilateral sanctions. The political and economic relations between the two countries and Iran, have been upheld and both countries have frequently backed talks as an alternative to the military build-up. Their presence amplifies the geopolitical

aspects of the war in general and the growing role of the emerging powers in the region in particular.

Diplomatic involvement has also been undertaken by the regional actors who in view of the challenges of extended instability, the collective security and economic progress are at stake. The Gulf states have been looking more at dialogue processes that would help in calming down and fostering collaboration. These campaigns are an indication of an increased recognition that military conflict would cost all involved parties a lot. Regardless of these endeavors, progress in diplomacy has been uneven with extreme levels of mistrust, opposing strategic perspectives, and political practices back home. However, diplomacy remains the most feasible tool of averting the occurrence of large-scale conflict as well as encouraging stability in regions in the long run. Mutual confidence measures, inclusive negotiations and a desire by all parties involved to focus on dialogue and not confrontation are the things needed to come up with sustainable solutions.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Strengthening Diplomatic Engagement**

Diplomatic engagement is the key tool that United States and Iran should focus on as the main tool to controlling conflicts and avoiding confrontations in the future. The history of enmity, economic embargo and military tensions has proved that people cannot reach the long-term stability only with the help of coercive measures. Positive communication via bilateral and multilateral can also aid in restoring trust, lessening misperceptions and establishing avenues of peaceful conflict management. The international agencies like the United Nations and regional diplomatic forums must be used to negotiate on issues of security, nuclear and regional issues. Building confidence such as open communication and frequent diplomatic consultation could be used to help lower down tensions and avoiding a spiraling effect inadvertently. Moreover, the implication of the use of neutral mediators and regional actors can add credibility and effectiveness to the diplomatic efforts. Only by showing willingness to dialogue, engage in compromise and respect national sovereignty by all parties involved, is it possible to create sustainable peace.

### **Preventing Regional Escalation**

A core concern of the regional and international actors should be avoiding the spread of the situation to an even greater third wave in the Middle East. The prospective fallout of military clashes between the United States and Iran threatens to make the region volatile, as well as raising the chances of proxy wars among the countries in the region. Policies to de-escalate such as cease force agreements, crisis-management, and military channels of communication should be adopted in case of unintentional confrontation by governments. The regional organizations must be more involved in advancing collective security arrangements, and promote cooperation among the rival states. The efforts should also be made towards mitigating some of the causes of instability such as political grievances, sectarian differences and rivalry on control of the region. Policymakers can prevent the development of bigger conflicts that may jeopardize the security of the region and the world in general by toning the tension between military and promoting peaceful resolution of disputes.

### **Enhancing Energy Security Mechanisms**

Since the Middle East has a strategic value in the world energy markets, enhancing the energy security processes is crucial towards reducing the international impact of a conflict. Impairments in oil production and transportation may have a major impact on the stability of the global economy, rise in inflation and unsurely in global markets. Governments need to diversify the sources of energy and invest in other alternative and renewable sources of energy to minimize over dependence on one region. The international cooperation should also be aimed at securing its critical infrastructures related to energy and securing the safety of strategic maritime routes like the Strait of Hormuz. Countries that are energy importers ought to come up with strategic reserves of petroleum and emergency responses plans to counteract the effects of any disruptive plans. Two more factors that can help achieve the resilience to the geopolitical shocks in the long term are more investment in technological innovation and sustainable energy solutions. Enabling energy security is an action that ensures that a country is economically strong, and chances of conflict over resources are minimized.

### **Promoting International Cooperation**

Addressing the complicated issues associated with the US Iran conflict and promoting the stability of the region in the long-term is impossible without international cooperation. The world leaders, such as the United States, China, and Russia and European Union members should collaborate to promote diplomatic resolutions instead of engaging in rivalry agenda in geopolitics. Through international bodies, group work has the ability to resolve the conflict, help humanitarily in the affected regions, and aid in clean up the affected regions economically. An enhanced cooperation among states would also enhance security constructs across the globe, as well as enhance reaction to new security concerns like terrorism, cyber wars and interruption to international shipping channels. Additionally, economic recovery programs that will encourage employment, development of infrastructure, and stability should be supported by international financial and development organizations to recover economies. The international community can mitigate the risks of such a long-range conflict by encouraging dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding of nations and help to achieve a more peaceful and secure international order.

### **Conclusion**

The United States Iran conflict is one of the biggest geopolitical and rivalries in the modern international relations, which has far-reaching consequences, much beyond the borders of the two countries. This paper explored this development of economic sanctions to the threat of military conflict and its eventual occurrence, with a complex interplay of political interests, security concerns and strategic competition. The results indicate that despite economic penalties being used as a tool of political coercion, they have in most cases, fueled enmity and worsened a lack of trust between the United States and Iran. Instead of delivering an enduring diplomatic resolution, sanctions have often exacerbated tensions on regional level and heightened the chances of rising to combat. The paper also exposed the fact that repercussions of the war do not revolve around the bilateral relations. The resulting unpredictability that arises due to US-Iran tensions has had a major impact in the world oil markets, energy security, international trade routes and political dynamism in the region. The conflict has

become a global interest due to the strategic value of the Strait of Hormuz and its role in the production of world energy brought about by the Middle East. Also, the intervention of regional and international forces has turned the conflict to a wider geopolitical problem whose consequences would be in the peace and security of the world community. In addition, the study has underscored the effects of the war on the stability in the Middle East such as increase in proxy warfare, growth of security threats and advancement of diplomatic polarizations. Although other international actors have tried to ease tensions by undertaking diplomatic efforts, it is quite challenging to achieve sustainable peace considering rival interest, and strategic considerations. Considering the realism theory, the United States and Iran further emphasize national interests, security and power and it is therefore hard and short lived to compromise. Conclusion The US-Iran conflict can teach us that economic coercion, military maneuvers, and the geopolitical competition can all play a role in destabilizing the region and the world at large. The paper highlights the need to have diplomatic activity, cooperation between more than two countries and functional conflict-management systems so as to avoid further escalation. Constructive dialogue, confidence-building action and a willingness of all stakeholders to seek peaceful solutions to the problem instead of confrontation is going to be the only thing that will secure peace and stability in the Middle East in the long term. All these are necessary in order to provide the security of the region as well as the international economic stability and world peace.

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