

Maximum pressure remains the best policy against Tehran

A global consensus will give Donald Trump more leverage in future talks to make a deal actually worth signing

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Despite the hype about a potential meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations between US President Donald Trump and his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani, the tete-a-tete never took place after Mr Rouhani apparently refused to take Mr Trump's call.

However, the US and other interested parties should not be fooled by Iran playing hardball. Behind the obstinacy, rhetoric and belligerence, most notably last month's attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, is a regime in serious trouble.

The US policy of "maximum pressure" should continue, for no other reason than because it works. However, in order to be more effective, the Trump administration needs to take a page out of the Barack Obama playbook by getting other countries on board, especially China and the Europeans.

Although not expressed in such terms now, maximum pressure was essentially the Iran policy of the Obama administration. From 2012 onwards, the White House managed to lead a crippling international sanctions campaign in response to Tehran's drive towards nuclearisation. As a result, Iran experienced high levels of inflation, unemployment, severe trade restrictions and exclusion from international financial transactions. Not only was the Iranian economy crashing but the country was internationally



Hassan Rouhani and the Iranian regime have been put under severe stress by the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy

isolated and there were increasing stirrings of domestic unrest.

Although not constituting regime change, these conditions did lead to a change of government, with reformist Mr Rouhani defeating hardliners in Iran's 2013 presidential elections by an overwhelming majority. Still, Washington and her allies maintained pressure and two years later, when the five permanent members of the UN Security

Council – the US, Russia, China, France, UK – plus Germany, were negotiating the details of what resulted in the 2015 nuclear deal, Tehran was facing the harsh reality that it could not fund its international proxies, maintain its presence in Syria and also have an unrestricted nuclear programme.

The tragedy of Mr Obama's Iran policy was that it squandered the success of its maxi-

mum pressure policy for what turned out to be a worthless deal. The deal did not include restrictions on missiles or Iran's support for the Assad regime in Syria, terrorist groups and proxy militias. It also contained a sunset provision that allowed Iran to increase its uranium enrichment after 10 years.

Then US secretary of state John Kerry and his undersecretary and chief negotiator Wendy

Where are the checks and balances

HUSSEIN IBISH

Americans face a historic test of their much-vaunted political freedom. At stake are the fundamental norms of democratic governance, and the outcome is greatly in doubt.

The crisis is both complex and extremely simple. Last week, a dizzying torrent of revelations emerged at an alarming frequency.

But underneath the whirlwind of details, Mr Trump stands accused of leveraging the vast power of his office and the weight of US foreign policy for personal political gain, especially seeking foreign investigations against a likely 2020 election opponent; and of soliciting interference in domestic politics over several months from Ukraine by effectively making military aid and potential presidential-level meetings for that beleaguered country conditional upon investigations into former vice president Joe Biden and his son Hunter, who once served on the board of a Ukrainian energy company.

All this is thoroughly documented in a White House memo, a whistleblower complaint and text messages between senior administration officials. At least one additional whistleblower has reportedly stepped forward and "multiple" others might apparently follow.

The CIA's head lawyer Courtney Simmons Elwood even made a criminal referral to the Justice Department as far back as August

14 – a complaint that appears to have been summarily dismissed – about Mr Trump's conduct, based on the whistleblower's account.

It is not a question of whether Mr Trump did this or even if he broke the law. The American system must instead determine if he abused the powers of his office and violated standards of acceptable presidential conduct.

Meanwhile, not only is there no evidence against the Bidens, there isn't even a concrete accusation. Mr Trump and his allies speak vaguely about "corruption" but they offer no specific allegations. This is nasty innuendo, apparently unsupported by any evidence.

Mr Trump and his aides are also fixated on two preposterous conspiracy theories. The first holds that Ukraine rather than Russia intervened in the 2016 US election. The second imagines that the Russia investigation was a set-up by anti-Trump "deep state" US officials working with British, Australian and possibly Italian agents, who supposedly lured Mr Trump's convicted former aide George Papadopoulos into a trap laid by Maltese-born academic Joseph Mifsud, who has denied the accusation.

Chasing after such follies is now a key priority of US foreign policy.

Additionally, Mr Trump last week publicly urged China to investigate the Bidens. He also allegedly made similar requests of Britain, Australia and Italy on these matters. So after years of insisting that there was "no



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and US President Donald J Trump.

collusion" between the Trump campaign and Russia in 2016, Mr Trump is openly attempting collusion with numerous countries for 2020. Now, as then, his defenders claim he is just joking but that is absurd.

An enraged Mr Trump has described the House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry as a "coup", branded his critics "traitors" and even warned of "civil war" if he is constitutionally and lawfully removed from office.

He insists he cannot be criminally investigated by either Congress or authorities in various US states such as New York, where prosecutors are trying to examine his taxes, effectively placing himself above the law. And he

If there is no pushback against Trump's behaviour, there will be a new set of norms and expectations