

Globalization, Cybersecurity and Geopolitics in U.S.–Iran Relations: A holistic, interconnected and personal scientific literature review.

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ABSTRACT: The early 2020s have witnessed a confluence of structural change and geopolitical turbulence. The United States' unchallenged post-Cold War primacy has given way to a fluid multipolar order in which rising powers such as China and regional actors from the Middle East to Latin America pursue independent agendas. Domestic political developments—including the growing influence of ideologically driven think tanks in Washington and the populist nationalism of the Trump era—feed back into foreign policy, complicating efforts to manage crises or forge lasting agreements. At the same time, Iran and its neighbors rely on proxies, economic leverage and, increasingly, digital technologies to project influence. This review revisits the literature on U.S.–Iran relations, think tank influence, energy security, Middle Eastern rivalries and the emerging domain of cybersecurity to highlight how these strands interact.

Keywords: multi-dimensional diplomacy, Iran-U. S relations, U.S-UK alignment, Think Tanks, foreign policy analysis.

Introduction

The course of U.S.-Iran relations, which have been chronically hostile since 1979, continues to be fragile and risk-prone. It is

especially striking following the “Twelve-Day War” between Israel and Iran and the U.S. bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities in 2025. Prior to that, starting from late 2023, Israel’s successful military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah, who are members of Iran’s non-state allies network of the “Axis of Resistance”, have already significantly weakened Tehran’s regional influence. Furthermore, the 2024 fall of Assad and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ loss of foothold in Syria worsened the disruption of Iran’s regional deterrence infrastructure. Thus, the “Twelve-Day War” only deepened this strategic setback, degrading Iran’s missile arsenal and nuclear programme, as well as killing senior military figures (Thomas and Zanotti 2025; Katulis 2025). However, while U.S. strikes on Iran’s uranium enrichment sites in June 2025 inflicted certain losses, reports indicate that Iran still retains enriched uranium and the scientific-technical capacity to develop a small nuclear arsenal (Stewart and Ali 2025; Financial Times 2025). Certainly, Iran has been weakened, but it still remains a key player in the Greater Middle East with its residual asymmetric capabilities comprised of a ballistic missile and drone arsenal, a diminished but active network of regional partners, cyber warfare capabilities, and enduring ideological influence (Fawcett and Payne 2023; Grajewski 2025; ISW 2025). Iran is also an active strategic and economic partner of the U.S.’s global rivals, China and Russia, across multiple domains, and they share a common geopolitical goal of curbing Western influence in Eurasia (Fathollah-Nejad 2021; Masoumzadeh 2025).

Therefore, Iran's geostrategic weight, combined with its enduring enmity towards the U.S. and Israel, raises the potential of renewed military escalation in the absence of diplomatic progress. A diplomatic deadlock could also push Iran to accelerate its armament efforts. Given these risks, the Trump administration and its European allies have signalled interest in a new agreement. Though the nuclear talks launched in spring 2025 were disrupted by the war in June, Trump showed restraint, achieving limited military goals and calling for diplomacy (Nakhoul 2025; AFP 2025). Moreover, the West remains resolute in its stance that Iran’s possession of nuclear weapons is unacceptable. U.S. military-political support for Israel’s operations against the “Axis of Resistance”, direct strikes on the Houthis in Yemen and later Iran, along with the EU’s threat to reinstate sanctions, all confirm this determination

(Northam 2025). For the Trump administration, restoring long-term regional stability serves U.S. interests related to energy security and protecting allies and allows greater focus and resources to be directed toward geopolitical and geoeconomic competition with China (Satoru 2025).

In principle, while the window for diplomatic negotiations is still open, the complex dynamics of relations shadowed by the legacy of past experiences, the persistence of threatening regional strategies, and mutual distrust hinder progress between the parties. This article aims to shed light on that complexity. Thus, it identifies key variables highlighted by academic studies and major think tank reports as shaping U.S.-Iran relations and uses them integratively to explain the phenomenon. Drawing on foreign policy analysis literature, the paper emphasises that U.S.-Iran relations are shaped by both structural factors in the international system and domestic political actors and trends (Rose 1998). In this regard, the article reviews scholarly literature on structural factors—such as U.S. strategies on alliances and energy security in the Middle East, Iran’s proxy warfare network, and the regional balance of power in the cybersecurity domain. It also examines opinions on internal parameters, namely the influence of think tanks and ideological trends in American politics on the course of U.S.–Iran relations. This contributes to a comprehensive picture of the current situation and helps to shape informed expectations about how the process may evolve.

Shifting Hegemony and the Multipolar Order

Observers of American grand strategy note that the era of unrivalled U.S. hegemony is ending. While Washington still spends more on defence than the rest of the world combined, it faces competition from China’s Belt and Road investments and Russia’s resurgence, and it must contend with regional powers that no longer accept U.S. diktats. Donald Trump’s return to the White House in 2025 underscored this transition: he reinstated the maximum pressure campaign against Iran and ordered unprecedented U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, prompting Iranian missile attacks on American bases in Qatar before a cease fire could be restored. Meanwhile Beijing and Moscow present themselves as mediators; China tabled a five point plan to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in March 2025, and

Russia insists on Iran's right to civil nuclear technology. The Middle East has thus become a battleground for competing visions of international order.

Domestic Drivers: Think Tanks, Economic Policy and Populist Doctrines

Scholars of U.S. politics emphasize that policy is increasingly shaped by a network of privately funded think tanks rather than by impartial expertise. Partisan institutes such as the Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress supply ideological blueprints to lawmakers, deepening polarization and sidelining career civil servants. This dynamic spills over into economic strategy. Conservative think tanks champion capital driven growth and deregulation, while liberal counterparts priorities social spending, yet both ultimately rely on federal intervention during crises. The result is an inconsistent policy mix that fails to address structural inequalities or modernize outdated infrastructure.

The "Trump doctrine," as explored in the book *Waking up from an American Dream*, epitomizes this politicization. Drawing on Jacksonian nationalism and post 9/11 fears, Trump's worldview married protectionism, immigration restrictions and unilateralism. It resonated with constituents anxious about globalization and demographic change, yet it undermined multilateral diplomacy—most notably through the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the imposition of sweeping sanctions on Iran. When ideologically driven narratives dominate policy, compromise with adversaries becomes politically risky, reinforcing cycles of escalation.

Iran, Proxies and the Struggle for Negotiation

Iran has mastered the art of indirect warfare. Academic studies chart how Tehran nurtures a network of proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen to expand its influence and deter adversaries. These groups afford Iran plausible deniability while enabling attacks on U.S. forces or Israeli interests. Neighboring Gulf monarchies and Israel decry this strategy as destabilizing, pointing to sectarian violence and humanitarian crises. Any durable agreement on Iran's nuclear programmer must therefore also address ballistic missiles and proxy activities.

Diplomacy remains fraught. Indirect talks in 2025, mediated by Oman, sought to resurrect elements of the JCPOA. Reports indicate that the United States was prepared to accept a 3.67 percent enrichment cap and to ship uranium stockpiles abroad. Iran, however, insisted on recognition of its right to a fuel cycle and demanded sanctions relief, while U.S. domestic politics constrained the White House. The International Atomic Energy Agency's declaration that Iran violated nonproliferation obligations and subsequent Israeli strikes deepened mistrust. Hardliners on both sides continue to stymie compromise.

Iran also faces internal pressures. Experts on migration and development document a severe brain drain repression and economic mismanagement drive educated Iranians abroad, depriving the country of human capital. This emigration undermines efforts to diversify beyond hydrocarbons and threatens long term stability. Policymakers must weigh the costs of ideological rigidity against the need for scientific talent and economic competitiveness.

Globalization and Gulf Monarchies: Lessons from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

While Iran grapples with sanctions, neighbouring monarchies harness globalization to fuel economic growth without significantly liberalising politically. A 2023 comparative study of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) argues that globalization has left their political structures largely intact, in part because both regimes derive legitimacy from economic performance rather than citizen participation. The UAE's demographic composition—around one million citizens among nine million residents—creates a non-native population structure that diffuses pressures for political reform. Saudi Arabia maintains a patrimonial social contract in which oil revenues are exchanged for loyalty.

Economic integration has uneven consequences. The UAE aggressively diversifies through free zones and foreign investment, making its GDP of roughly \$354 billion less dependent on oil than Saudi Arabia's \$700 billion economy. Roughly eight out of nine UAE residents are expatriates. This model offers flexibility but leaves the country sensitive to global trade and tourism disruptions. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030

plan seeks to reduce oil dependence via megaprojects like Neom and investments in non-oil sectors, yet progress remains tied to hydrocarbon revenues. Both states court Chinese and Russian capital while maintaining security partnerships with Washington, hedging against American unpredictability.

Competition between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi surfaces in disputes over monetary union, border demarcation and market share. For example, Saudi authorities once barred UAE citizens from entering using identity cards that depicted disputed territory. Trade is imbalanced: the UAE exports about \$24 billion to Saudi Arabia—about 6.8 percent of its GDP—while imports from Saudi Arabia constitute under 1 percent of Saudi GDP. Despite such tensions, shared security concerns—ranging from Iranian influence to Islamist extremism—push the two monarchies toward cooperation within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Cybersecurity: A New Strategic Domain in the Middle East

An emerging body of research argues that cybersecurity has become as consequential as oil for Middle Eastern politics. A recent case study of Persian Gulf and North African countries catalogues the region's most prevalent cyber-attack methods. Phishing schemes that lure victims into opening malware laden links, denial of service attacks that flood systems with traffic, man in the middle intrusions that spoof Internet Protocol addresses, zero-day exploits against unpatched software and backdoor vulnerabilities together represent the principal threats. The study notes that cybercrime already affects roughly one third of organisations in the Middle East; in the UAE, more than three quarters of internet users have been victimised, costing the economy hundreds of millions of dollars. Cyber incidents have been reported at alarming rates across Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman, and in North Africa more than 20 percent of attacks occur via mobile devices.

Cyber risk has grown alongside the Gulf states' attempts to diversify their economies. The Gulf Cooperation Council's strategic framework emphasises digital infrastructure, smart cities and the Internet of Things as engines of post oil prosperity. Yet the accessibility of these systems, combined with widespread use of personal devices at work and weak regulatory frameworks, has exposed more than 65

percent of employees to security threats. Cybersecurity thus becomes a prerequisite for economic diversification.

The same study identifies three events that galvanized Persian Gulf governments. First, social media and online platforms played an outsized role in the Islamic awakening of 2011, demonstrating how digital networks can mobilise dissent. Second, the Stuxnet virus—widely attributed to U.S. and Israeli actors—sabotaged Iranian nuclear facilities and alerted regional powers to the destructive potential of cyber operations. Third, the United States began cooperating with Gulf monarchies to enhance cyber defences in response to Iran’s growing capabilities. These episodes spurred Gulf states to develop cyber strategies, enact legislation and invest in surveillance technologies.

Iran emerges from this narrative as a cyber power. The case study observes that Iran has integrated cyber tools into its national power arsenal, developing offensive capabilities that can alter the regional military balance. Tehran’s trajectory is instructive: confronted with Stuxnet, it doubled down on cyber defence and offence. In response, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain launched national cybersecurity programmes, while Kuwait partnered with the United Kingdom on a billion-dollar initiative. Future attack probabilities are seen as a function of relations among Iran, its neighbours and external powers, underscoring the link between geopolitics and cybersecurity.

North African states confront similar challenges with different approaches. Tunisia leads the region in cyber preparedness, while Egypt remains the only country with comprehensive laws against cybercrime, Morocco and Libya lag behind. The study notes that North African governments prioritise legislation, standards and end user training, whereas Persian Gulf monarchies emphasise surveillance of non-state actors and promulgation of cyber laws. Foreign powers play a notable role: China and Russia export surveillance technology and invest in digital infrastructure, while the United States remains a key security partner. Despite investments, experts predict that cyber-attacks in the Gulf and North Africa will intensify as countries roll out smart cities and IoT networks.

Cybersecurity's rise interacts with other themes in this review. Iran's cyber prowess expands its toolkit beyond proxies and missiles; U.S.–Iran negotiations must now consider digital deterrence. Think tanks in Washington debate how to integrate cyber threats into national security strategies, often proposing sanctions and public private partnerships. Gulf monarchies treat cyber resilience as part of economic diversification, aligning with energy security and geopolitical considerations. Cyber cooperation between the United States, China and Russia become another arena for great power competition in the region.

Energy Security and the U.S.–U.K. Alignment

The importance of hydrocarbons has not diminished. A detailed case study of U.S.–U.K. coordination in the Persian Gulf shows that both countries priorities control over energy supplies and transit routes. Naval patrols and diplomatic ties to producers ensure that oil continues to flow, while shared intelligence monitors threats. This strategy emphasizes stability over political reform, aligning with Gulf monarchies' preference for external security guarantees that do not challenge their domestic order.

Futures and Policy Options

The path toward de-escalation between the United States and Iran requires reconciling domestic politics, regional rivalries and emerging domains like cybersecurity. Policy analysts argue that Washington must acknowledge Iran's right to civil nuclear technology and provide phased sanctions relief, while Tehran must limit its ballistic missile programme and curtail proxy activities. Any accord should incorporate cyber norms to prevent attacks on critical infrastructure. Equally important is the involvement of regional stakeholders: Saudi Arabia and the UAE could offer investment and security assurances in exchange for Iranian restraint, while European mediators could reintroduce the JCPOA's snapback mechanism.

At a broader level, the decline of American hegemony encourages Middle Eastern states to diversify partnerships. The Gulf monarchies court Chinese and Russian investors and technology providers; Iran strengthens ties with Moscow and Beijing to circumvent sanctions; Turkey, Qatar and Oman navigate between blocs. The United

States oscillates between intervention and retrenchment, constrained by polarized domestic politics and the competing agendas of its think tanks and security bureaucracies.

Conclusion

The Middle East's geopolitical landscape is shaped by the interplay of global power shifts, domestic political currents, economic globalization and now the growing salience of cyberspace. The United States and its allies remain focused on energy security, yet their influence is challenged by China and Russia and by internal polarization. Ideological think tanks and populist leaders contribute to inconsistent policy, complicating negotiations with adversaries like Iran. Tehran wields proxies and cyber tools to offset conventional weaknesses, provoking sanctions and escalation even as economic hardship fuels emigration. Gulf monarchies exploit globalization and digitalization to spur growth while preserving authoritarian stability; they compete and cooperate in equal measure. The emergence of cybersecurity as a strategic domain underscores how technological change adds new layers to longstanding rivalries. Effective policy must therefore address cyber threats alongside nuclear, missile and proxy issues, involve regional actors and adapt to a multipolar world to see how to navigate with the emerging phenomenon of different players, whether translated into positive or negative behaviors; relying and probing all these literature shape us the future way for us through teaching us how to navigate with all the prominent actors.

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