

THE US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS IRAN UNDER OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: DIPLOMACY, PRESSURE, AND THE NUCLEAR DEAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines President Obama's multifaceted approach to Iran, focusing heavily on his diplomatic efforts and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Through a detailed analysis, it examines the divergence in tactical approaches between the US and Iran and evaluates the effectiveness of Obama's policy of pressure and commitment. The study examines the continuity or change in Obama's foreign policy towards Iran and examines the significance of diplomatic overtures and engagement in resolving longstanding tensions. Additionally, it examines the dual-track strategy employed by the Obama administration and examines its impact on US-Iran relations. The paper examines Obama's approach towards Iran during his two terms, particularly in the context of Rouhani's election victory and the subsequent implementation of the JCPOA. By examining the path towards the nuclear deal, the paper provides insight into the complexities of US-Iran relations and provides a comprehensive conclusion.

Keywords: US-Iran relations; JCPOA; Foreign Policy Approaches; Obama Administration

INTRODUCTION

Historical Context the US-Iran Engagements

During the first Persian Gulf War (1990-91), Iran remained neutral. Its neutrality was seen positively and led to a resumption of relations with Saudi Arabia. The diplomatic relations had been severed since hajj clashes and assault on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 1988. Iran saw in its neutrality an opportunity to break its isolation and to start international cooperation.¹ After the first Persian Gulf War, the Clinton administration imposed a strategy called the dual containment that was introduced by Martin Indyk (NSC director for the Middle East). In this document, both Iraq and Iran regimes were viewed as hostile to the US and Israel; so, they were to be included. The Clinton administration increased the sanctions on Iran. It

prohibited the US energy firms from investing in Iranian oil fields.²

The second Clinton term was followed by the election of President Khatami. Khatami's main objective was modernization of Iran and the opening up to the West. Khatami formally introduced the concept of "Dialogue Among Civilizations" in September 2001.³ There was a glimpse of rapprochement. The Secretary of State Madeleine Albright apologized for the American 1953 coup. The administration announced the removal of sanctions on some goods.⁴ In the period

¹ Amiri, R., & Soltani, F. Iraqi invasion of Kuwait as turning point in Iran-Saudi relationship. *Journal of Politics and Law*, 4(1), (2011), 188–194.

² Sherman, W. "How we got the Iran deal, and why we'll miss it", *Foreign Affairs*, 97(5), (September/October, 2018) 186–197.

³ Khatami, Seyed Mohammad, "Dialogue Among Civilizations: Contexts and Perspectives", the United Nations, September 2012, No. 3 Vol. XLIX 2012. Available at:

<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/dialogue-among-civilizations-contexts-and-perspectives>

⁴ Bruce Riedel, "Iran primer: The Clinton administration", *Frontline*. (2010).

following 11 September, the interests of Iran and the US seemed aligned. The Taliban were hostile to both Iran and the US. Iran aided the Taliban regime and aided in the establishment of the Karzai government.⁵ Despite the cooperation on Afghanistan, in the 2002 state of the Union, President Bush blamed Iran as part of the axis of evil.⁶

During the second Persian Gulf war (2003–11), Iran also maintained its neutrality. Again, the interests of the US and Iran were aligned. The US toppled the Saddam regime and ended up putting in place a Shia regime sympathetic to Iran. Initially, the ease with which the US invaded Iraq worried Iran. Its leadership saw that the Islamic Republic could be the next target. The American invasion of Iraq, some claim, was inspired by “the clean break” report. The report was written in 1996 by a group of neo-conservatives and right-wing Israelis.

The collapse of the Saddam regime, seen as an execution of the first stage of the “clean break”, was a matter of great concern for Iran. The Islamic Republic thought it could be next on the US hit list. This pushed Khatami, the Iranian president, to reach out to the US. The US State Department received a fax from the Islamic Republic transmitted via the Swiss Ambassador in Tehran in which Iran showed willingness to discuss everything including the Saudi initiative for the two-state solution and stopping support for Palestinian factions.⁷ An intelligence assessment release in December 2007 stated with high confidence that due to international pressure the military run programme was shut down in 2003. It also states with moderate confidence that

it remained shut down until 2007.⁸ However, despite this overture from Khatami, the ideological oriented President Bush insisted on a regime change.

Bush’s approach undermined Khatami’s narrative which was based on the opening up of Iran and international cooperation. This led to the victory of hardliner Ahmadinejad in the 2005 elections. The Bush administration had a schizophrenic relationship with Iran. In a way, the administration had the pro-Iran group in Iraq as their allies while having a hostile relationship with their patron. Sectarian violence was mounting. Success in Iraq buttressed Iran which began getting vocal about its nuclear program. In August 2002, Iran’s nuclear ambitions became public as a group of Iranian dissidents living abroad claimed in Washington the existence of undeclared nuclear facilities in the south of Tehran including the Natanz enrichment complex.⁹ In September 2005, Ahmadinejad gave a speech at the United Nations declaring that Iran has the right to develop a nuclear power programme.

President Obama’s Approach to Iran.

Obama examined the nuclear deal, or changing Iran’s behaviour regarding its nuclear ambition, as a gateway for future change within Iran, which will lead to different behaviour in the region. Trump, on the other hand, wanted a one-time change in behaviour. Both presidents used sanctions as a negative incentive to push Iran to reach the negotiating table. Both administrations have a similar goal, which is to counter Iranian regional ambitions. The diffuse array of challenges and obstacles that besiege US-Iran relations are deep-rooted. Therefore, the US-Iran relations have been experiencing tremendous setbacks that have locked both countries into longstanding enmity. The US successive administrations, including Obama, had constructed policies that converge towards countering Iran’s ambitions and aiming at changing

⁵ Esfandiary, D., & Tabatabai, A. “Iran’s ISIS policy,” *International Affairs*, 91(1), 1-15. (2015).

⁶ *The White House*, President delivers state of the union address, January 29, 2002, available at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

⁷ Kessler, G. In 2003, U.S. spurned Iran’s offer of dialogue, *The Washington Post*, June 18, 2006, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/06/18/in-2003-us-spurned-irans-offer-of-dialogue-span-classbankheads-officials-lament-lost-opportunity-span/1b6aa764-7acf-4baa-8a4b-e84406d52232/>.

⁸ “U.S. Finds Iran Halted its Nuclear Arms Effort in 2003,” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2007, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/04/world/middleeast/04intel.html>

⁹ Johnson, “Revelations of a Secret Program,” *FRONTLINE/World*, (2005). Also see <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran>.

its regional behaviour. One can say that both administrations have adopted a carrot and a stick. Though one can argue that the stick is longer with Trump and the carrot is bigger with Obama.

President Obama's Diplomatic Efforts

During his first campaign for 2009 elections, Barack Obama talked about the change, analysts and policy makers saw Obama in office as the window of opportunities for breaking the ice between Iran and United States' relationship. Obama's openness to negotiate directly was contrasting to his predecessors such as George W. Bush whose administration's main focus was on the isolation and ignorance of Iran. While, the relationship has never been a cakewalk, still there was an indication of rapprochement during Barack Obama's era, albeit normalization was still far away. Obama's speech in Cairo: "A new beginning" (4 June 2009) showed his optimistic intentions towards the adversary; Iran, Later, in the beginning of his second term, Barack Obama talked about the resolution of conflicts through peaceful means, the following passage from his first State of the Union address as re-elected president stated that;

"We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear".¹⁰

Despite all these encouraging statements and intentions to negotiate with Iran, Obama never ruled out the use of military as an option against Iran in case of futile negotiations. Though, he was against the weaponization of Iran and was the strong advocate of Iran as nonnuclear weapon state, still he talked about sitting on the table for future

settlements, rather than, using hard power against Iran. In March 2009, Obama reached out to Iran in a video message offering new beginning, the president strongly affirmed that the United States wanted the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations, a place that could not be reached through terror or arms, but rather through peaceful actions that demonstrate the true greatness of the Iranian people and civilization.¹¹

Senior American and Iranian officials held one-to-one talks in Geneva for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, marking the most substantive bilateral contact between the two countries for 30 years.¹² The talks lead to a preliminary agreement on the so-called Fuel-Swap proposal: in return for a supply of fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor, Iran would ship out an equivalent amount of uranium enriched to 4%, totaling about 1,200 kilograms, accounting roughly 80% of Iran's low-enriched-uranium (LEU) stockpile at that time.¹³ The optimism in the air was soon vanished away because of the meeting in Vienna, where Iran asked for the international granters and the Iranian negotiators were not sure about the possible unified reaction of the talks at home. The Iranian government didn't respond the Swap proposal because of the division at home which resulted in the collapsed negotiations. Iranian met the United States-delegations headed by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Obama was of his view that the diplomacy should not be restricted to nuclear deal only but should be exercised in other matters of great concern just like, Iran's role in the region, its involvement in Syrian dossier, support of Hamas and Hezbollah, relations with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel. From

¹⁰ *New York Times*, "Obama Confronts Americans' Fears in State of the Union Speech," <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/13/us/politics/obama-state-of-the-union.html>.

¹¹ *The Guardian*, Julian Borger, "Iran Agrees to Send Uranium abroad after Talks Breakthrough," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/01/iran-uranium-enrichment-plant-inspection>.

¹² Julian Borger, Nuclear talks lead to rare meeting between US and Iran, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/01/iran-nuclear-geneva-talks>.

¹³ Julian Borger, Iran agrees to send uranium abroad after talks breakthrough, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/01/iran-uranium-enrichment-plant-inspection>.

mid-2010 to 2012, Obama administration did not launch any major policy to address the Iranian crisis, because of presidential elections and other important and historical events in the world; Arab Spring in Middle East and death of Bin-Laden in Pakistan in 2011. Two years after Obama took office domestic and international constraints, bad timing, and some weaknesses in his overall strategy irritated his hard work, turning him in what has been described as a — progressive pragmatist, progressive when possible, pragmatist when necessary.¹⁴

In April 2013, P5+1 again met after two years following the failure of Swap proposal and agreed to work on a step-by-step process with reciprocal efforts of confidence building.¹⁵ When Obama took office for his second term, Iranian Presidency office was also won by a moderate leader and a strong advocate of engagement; Hassan Rouhani. His victory sent the wave of buoyancy towards the path of bilateral diplomacy. President Obama called Rouhani directly; the first direct talk of Iranian and American leaders since the Islamic revolution of 1979. Rouhani said that;

“Step by step, we will build confidence between our presidents and our countries, with sufficient will on both sides – and I assure you that on Iran's side the will is 100% – the nuclear file will be resolved in a short period of time”¹⁶

¹⁴ Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal and Michael E. O'Hanlon, Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History, Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23217964>.

¹⁵ NTI, Nuclear Iran, <https://www.nti.org/learn/countries/iran/nuclear/>.

¹⁶ Dan Roberts, Julian Borger, Obama holds historic phone call with Rouhani and hints at end to sanctions, *The Guardian*,

Rouhani denied any sort of constraints at his back while sitting for negotiations by saying that, “My government has full authority in these negotiations with support from all three arms of government as well as the people of Iran.” Rouhani appointed Mohammad Javad Zarif (American-educated man) as his foreign minister, who met Catherine Ashton (EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy) at Geneva where both adversaries agreed to continue the P5+1 negotiation and later resulted in JPA (Joint Plan of Action). Iran adhered to all the conditions of Joint Plan of Action and its sincerity to the agreement was confirmed by IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) in later months. In 2014, praising President Rouhani and the historical interim agreement that had recently been negotiated, President Obama, commented that — if Iran seizes this moment, this Nowruz could mark not just the beginning of a new year, but a new chapter in the history of Iran and its role in the world – including a better relationship with the United States and the American people, rooted in mutual interest and mutual respect.¹⁷ On July 14, 2015, Iran and the six powers that had negotiated with Tehran about its nuclear program since 2006 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany — collectively known as the P5+1) finalized a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹⁸

It is important to note that Obama's approach was not much different from his predecessor. They both thought that a military solution to Iran's aggressive behaviour would be disastrous. Therefore, President Bush attempted to increase sanctions and pressure and at the same time held some diplomatic talks with Iran (pressure and engagement policy). The Obama administration followed the same strategic thinking and pursued a “smart power” approach. In other words, Obama adopted a combination of a diplomatic track along with political and economic pressures that had been

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/27/obama-phone-call-iranian-president-rouhani>.

¹⁷ *The White House*, Statement by President Obama on Nowruz,

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/20/statement-president-obama-nowruz>.

¹⁸ Paul K. Kerr, Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Nuclear Agreement and U.S. Exit,” available at: <https://fas.org/spp/crs/nuke/R43333.pdf>.

employed to iron out differences with Iran over the nuclear Program. This confirms that the overall American policy towards Iran was to a large extent consistent in its goals.

Divergence in Tactical Approaches

It is argued that the US successive administrations since the Iranian Revolution have developed an autonomous and overarching grand strategy for dealing with Iran in the Persian Gulf region. Obama administration is not an exception. Obama administration followed a “pressure and engagement” strategy and pursued increasing pressure on Iran in an attempt to force the government to the negotiation table, specifically to discuss limits on their nuclear and missile programmes. Having argued this, the change that can be noticed pertained to the means that were pursued to achieve US strategic objectives. However, there were disagreements between Obama and Trump later on relating to the tactics used to implement the policy. Obama’s approach was that the nuclear deal will lead to more cooperation with Iran, which will eventually lead to full normalization and to a change in Iran’s behaviour.

A variety of factors explain lack of change, including domestic political obstacles and considerations in Iran and the US, the regional allies’ positions — notably Saudi Arabia and Israel, all constitute major impediments to improve US-Iran relations or achieve genuine détente with Iran. In short, the main argument is that the overall goal of Obama’s foreign policy does not represent a break with the long-standing US strategy towards Iran.

Obama’s Policy Towards Iran: Pressure, Engagement and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

The relationship between the United States and Iran has been marked by complexity and tension, particularly in the realm of nuclear proliferation and regional influence. In the era of President Barack Obama, US-Iran relations underwent significant shifts, characterized by a blend of diplomatic engagement and coercive measures. This introduction provides an overview of Obama's approach towards Iran, highlighting the continuity with his predecessor's policies, the emphasis on diplomatic overtures, and the eventual negotiation

of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). By examining the interplay between pressure and engagement in Obama's strategy, this analysis aims to elucidate the multifaceted dynamics shaping US-Iran relations during his presidency.

Continuity or Change: Obama’s Foreign Policy Approaches Towards Iran

President Obama's approach to Iran appears to be a continuation of Bush's strategy, a ‘carrot and stick’ policy. This strategy combined both incentives and disincentives in an attempt to convince Iran to limit its nuclear ambitions. While G. W. Bush relied heavily on sanctions and sometimes threatening to use military force, Obama, in contrast, largely from the beginning of his initial term on the carrots through emphasizing diplomatic and rapprochement with Iran.¹⁹ This policy reflected Obama's campaign's promise that 'his foreign policy techniques and instruments would be different from his predecessors and would focus on engaging with Iran.'²⁰ Before his election, Obama emphasized the importance of engaging in direct diplomatic negotiations with the Iranian leadership. He pledged to "engage in aggressive personal diplomacy" with Tehran if it stopped interfering in Iraq and offered his assistance on terrorism and nuclear issues.²¹ However, in 2009 several factors pushed Obama to adopt a more coercive approach. Iran’s alleged crackdown on the popular uprisings and its refusal to accept compromises to limit its nuclear programme coincided with the discovery of a new nuclear facility.²² Obama was able to garner support for international sanctions against Iran. His administration imposed sanctions against Iran during the 2010-2013 period. The Administration also declared frequently that a military option is “on

¹⁹ Pollack, K., & Takeyh, R. Doubling down on Iran, *The Washington Quarterly*, (Fall, 2011). 34 (4), 7–21.

²⁰ Parsi, R., & Rydqvist, J. Iran and the West Regional interests and global controversies, *FOI, the Swedish Defense Research Agency*, (2011).

²¹ Gordon, M. R., & Zeleny, J. Obama pledges ‘aggressive’ Iran diplomacy. USA: *The New York Times*, (2007).

²² Traynor, I., & Borger, J. Iran admits secret uranium enrichment plant, *The Guardian*, (2009).

the table.”²³ However, in his 2013 UN General Assembly speech Obama welcomed Rouhani’s statement that Iran would not go after the bomb and he directed John Kerry to join the European Union to step up diplomacy to negotiate a deal with Tehran.²⁴ Consequently, the Obama administration signed the interim nuclear deal with Iran on 24 November 2013, and then the nuclear agreement in 2015. The deal sought to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon capability and at the same time to enable Iran to normalize its relations with the western world by lifting the imposed sanctions. As one scholar asserts, despite the objection of American allies in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia and Israel “The deal has been touted as a potential beginning of a thaw in US-Iran relations.”²⁵ This was also emphasized by another scholar who believes that “A deal could herald a new era not just in American-Iranian relations but in the geopolitical landscape of the entire Middle East”. He adds: “Yet a failure to reach a deal risks the collapse of the diplomatic track in which both Washington and Tehran have greatly invested as the preferred path toward a resolution.”²⁶

Diplomatic Overtures and Engagement

Diplomatic overtures with Iran Obama attempted from the outset to pursue a policy that encompassed change in discourse towards Iran with the objective of exhausting the diplomatic efforts before contemplating military options. As such, Obama showed his readiness to talk to the Iranian elite without preconditions stating in a major speech in Cairo that “There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of

mutual respect.”²⁷ Moreover, Obama declared in the State of the Union address in 2013 that “We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear.”²⁸ The March 2009 Nowruz (Persian New Year) message by Obama expressed ambitious attempt to engage Iran diplomatically and it was a proof of the new policy that it was based on mutual respect rather than on a “hawkish” attitude. Obama confirmed this approach when he stated that his administration is committed to diplomacy that depends on engagement and mutual respect.²⁹

However, Obama’s new approach did not mean that he reversed the course that was pursued by G.W. Bush towards Iran. Practically, he continued to share some assumptions on Iran with his predecessor. Obama explicitly stood against the Iranian nuclear programme and emphasized his approach to prevent Iran decisively from acquiring the bomb, “All options are on the table”. Remarkably, the two states’ interests were fundamentally different and therefore rapprochement was not an easy target for the American policy officials. Nonetheless, Obama pledged to take further steps to negotiate directly with Iran.

He started overtures to Iran that may have appeared as symbolic tactics, but they were proven fruitful as they broke the ice and were perceived as primary procedures to initiate larger diplomatic track.³⁰ Obama confirmed this objective when he stated that:

²⁷ *The White House*, Statement by the President on first step agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, November 23, 2013. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.

²⁸ *The White House*, Remarks by the President in the State of the Union address, February 12, 2013. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

²⁹ The White House, Videotaped remarks by the president in celebration of Nowruz, 2009.

³⁰ Sharp, T. “U.S. foreign policy toward Iran in the Obama Era,” *ISPI Policy Brief*, N. 145, (June, 2009). p. 1.

²³ Katzman, K. “Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options,” *Congressional Research Service*, RL32048. VERSION 346, (2019).

²⁴ *The White House*, Statement by the President on first step agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, November 23, 2013. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.

²⁵ Mahapatra, C. “Contemporary review of the Middle East,” *SAGE Publications*, (March, 2016). 3(1), 36–46.

²⁶ Ibid.

“we should take an approach with Iran that employs all of the resources at the United States’ disposal, and that includes diplomacy...we will be looking for openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face; of diplomatic overtures that will allow us to move our policy in a new direction.”³¹

Dual track strategy

As mentioned above Obama sought during his first term in office to identify reasonable options to resolve the longstanding estrangement between Washington and Tehran. Apparently, Obama’s policy of rapprochement with Iran was not a magic cure to all concerns and security issues that characterized US-Iran relations for several decades. Hence, rapprochement might best be understood as somewhere between conflict and normal relations.³² Hence, Obama attempted to develop a vision regarding how to handle effectively the threats posed by Iran and in this context, he came up with the “dual-track strategy” that seemingly was successful in creating new foundations for dialogue with an ideological regime that during the past decades eschewed direct talks with the US. Indeed, forestalling Iran’s nuclear project requires, as argued by Maloney, either that the world negotiates durable constraints to limit Iran’s capability of acquiring a nuclear weapon, or prepares for a third American-led war in the Middle East. Practically, this situation has led the American policymakers to

offer their readiness to revisit American conventional policy towards Iran.³³

Obama attempted to forestall Iranian ambitions in the region through breaking the diplomatic deadlock. In other words, the newfound approach aimed at changing the hard-line “hawkish” approach that Bush pursued in his policy towards Iran through initiating primary contacts with Tehran policymakers.

The US’ created the “dual track strategy” that integrates both diplomacy and sanctions with particular emphasis on a diplomatic track with Tehran.³⁴ As such, Obama attempted to push back against what someone calls “idle talk of war” through an approach encompassing a synthesis of elements; pressure and talk.³⁵ Obama can be described as a “progressive pragmatist” since he was progressive where possible and a pragmatist when necessary.³⁶

A diverse set of domestic, regional and international factors determined Obama’s pragmatic approach to dealing with Iran. At the regional level, there were pressures coming from US strategic regional allies – basically Israel and Saudi Arabia – to adopt a tough position towards Iran. Internally, the Obama Administration had to cope with pressures coming from Congress, not least due to the 2010 Congressional elections that benefitted the Republicans. So, any attempt at a genuine détente with Iran was bound to face a lot of vocal opposition. It follows that Obama’s foreign-policy achievements during his first term were limited. Yes, he gave many good speeches and showed his diplomatic overtures but pragmatism dominated the politics as he backed down whenever he faced domestic pushback.³⁷ Hence, during the period from

³¹ *The New York Times*, “Obama’s prime-time press briefing,” (February 9, 2009).

³² Maloney, S. “U.S. policy toward Iran: Missed opportunities and paths forward,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 32(2), Summer, 2008, 25–43.

³³ Maloney, S. “Engagement with Iran: The sequel,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 37(1), Winter 2013, 91–102.

³⁴ Castiglioni, C. “Obama’s policy toward Iran: Comparing first and second term,” *ISPI Analysis No. 220*, December, 2013.

³⁵ Vali Nasr, V. “Obama Needs to go the Whole Mile on Iran Diplomacy,” *The Brookings Institution*, March 13, 2012.

³⁶ Indyk, M. S., Lieberthal, K. G., & O’Hanlon, M. E. “Scoring Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 91(3), May/June, 2012, 29–43.

³⁷ Walt, S. M. “Iran is the Real Prize for Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2013, retrieved from

mid-2010 to the beginning of the 2012 electoral campaign, the Obama Administration presented a consistent policy to handle the Iranian issue through increasing sanctions on the Iran.³⁸

Furthermore, Israel is a point of contention. Congress has a negative view towards Iran due to its stance towards Israel. Nonetheless, during the first few months of 2009, Obama made slight changes to the US conventional policy towards Iran. Obama had changed the rhetorical style, yet he did not make substantial changes. However, changing the tone from "axis of evil" rhetoric to diplomatic overtures had boosted the prospects for a diplomatic breakthrough.³⁹ Though Obama thought that a softer more engaging approach will serve as a better tool to deter Iran, his policy of rolling back Iran was not successful. Iran had built up non-state actors in the region that made rolling back of Iran extremely difficult. Undoubtedly, Iran emerged in the region with potential leverage and playing an influential role that raise security concerns among the Persian Gulf regimes along with the US. The recently published Iraq war study shows that Iran was the biggest winner from the 2003 invasion.⁴⁰

Obama's Approach Towards Iran in his Second Term(2013-2017):

During President Barack Obama's second term in office from 2013 to 2017, his approach towards Iran underwent significant shifts, characterized by a delicate balance of diplomacy, coercion, and strategic engagement. This period marked a crucial phase in US-Iran relations, with the negotiation and implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, standing as a pivotal achievement. Obama's presidency witnessed a nuanced evolution in US foreign policy towards Iran, reflecting both continuity with past strategies and a departure towards a more diplomatic engagement approach.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/16/iran-is-the-real-prize-for-obamas-foreignpolicy/>.

³⁸ Castiglioni, C. "Obama's Policy Toward Iran: Comparing First and Second Term," *ISPI*, Analysis No. 220, December, 2013.

³⁹ Sharp, T. "U.S. foreign policy toward Iran in the Obama Era," *ISPI* Policy Brief, N. 145, June, 2009, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Rayburn, J. D., & Sobchak, F. K. (2019). *The U.S. Army in the Iraq war – invasion – Insurgency – Civil War, 2003-2006*. Volume 1. Washington: U.S. Army War College.

Against the backdrop of longstanding tensions and complex geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East, Obama's efforts aimed to address Iran's nuclear ambitions while navigating the intricate internal politics of the Iranian regime. This introduction sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of Obama's multifaceted approach towards Iran during his second term, delving into the diplomatic negotiations, strategic considerations, and broader regional implications of his policies.

Electoral Victory of Rouhani and the Implementation of JCPOA

Iranian domestic political developments affected Obama's prospects for reaching out to the nuclear agreement as the presidential elections had changed the political landscape in Iran. The victory of the moderate was a shift from a political system that was dominated by hardliners and conservatives. The election of Hassan Rouhani in June 2013 gave Obama an opportunity to revise the US' overall policy towards Iran. Rouhani's attitude was focused on transforming Iran's image in the west through prioritizing the country's relations with the West and enhancing the Iranian economy by reducing the trade sanctions that were frequently imposed on Iran.⁴¹ As Shokri has noted, "Since Rouhani took over the office of the presidency from fundamentalist Ahmadinejad, we see a discontinuity of the Iranian anti-western foreign policy in a broader sense."⁴²

During the first months of 2013, the two parties were not able to reach any preliminary understanding that could lead to an agreement. Interestingly, this gridlock was broken in June 2013 as a result of the change in the Iranian leadership. The election of Hassan Rouhani gave an impetus to the talks with Iran.⁴³ President Obama, in his 24 September 2013 U.N. Speech, acknowledged that

⁴¹ Nuruzzaman, M. "President Obama's Middle East Policy, 2009-2013," *Insight Turkey*, 17(1), 2015, 171–190.

⁴² Shokri, M. "A new perspective in the Middle East: A comprehensive approach to the US-Iran relations in the region," *Glocalism. Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, 2016 (2), 1-24.

⁴³ Walt, S. M. "Iran is the Real Prize for Obama's Foreign Policy." *Foreign Policy*, September 16, 2013, retrieved from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/09/16/iran-is-the-real-prize-for-obamas-foreignpolicy/>.

he had sent letters to the supreme leader and Rouhani through which he confirmed that the US prefers to resolve the nuclear dispute peacefully and that the US is not seeking regime change in Iran.⁴⁴ The two presidents spoke on the phone on 27 September 2013, the first direct presidential level communication since 1979. After the JCPOA was finalized in July 2015, the officials of both countries held bilateral meetings at the margins of all nuclear talks, but continued disputes prevented a broad enhancement of US-Iran relations.⁴⁵

The US-Iran Relations: Road Towards the Nuclear Deal

The image of Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons was central to the US Iranian antagonism. Iran has long threatened Israel. Additionally, a nuclear Iran would trigger a nuclear arms race in the region. This was emphasized blatantly by Obama when stating that "a nuclear Iran could set off a nuclear arms race in the region that would be profoundly destabilizing."⁴⁶ The multilateral negotiations between Iran and the P5 + 1 (US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany) resulted in the 2015 nuclear agreement, known officially as the JCPOA. This agreement had provided Iran with an opportunity to lift the sanctions in exchange for a substantial reduction in its stockpile of enriched uranium and its number of centrifuges. The deal also included Iran's acceptance for periodic inspections of its nuclear fuel cycle by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Indeed, Iran was building steadily its leverage and by early 2013 Obama realized that if Washington did not make a compromise and reach out to a certain agreement, then Washington would have to either accept Iran as a de facto nuclear power or, alternatively, going to war with Iran.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *The White House*, Statement by the President on first step agreement on Iran's nuclear program, November 23, 2013, retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.

⁴⁵ Katzman, K. "Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options," *Congressional Research Service*, RL32048. VERSION 346, 2019.

⁴⁶ *The New York Times*, Obama's Prime-time Press Briefing, February 9, 2009.

⁴⁷ Parsi, T. "Why Trump's Strategy for Iran is Likely to Lead to War," *The Nation*, May 23, 2018.

The sanctions resulted in limited outcomes, and this conclusion led Obama to exert considerable effort and invest heavily in diplomacy that led to the nuclear deal. Obama's diplomacy has succeeded in altering Iran's calculations, resulting in the agreement of 2015 which broke the stalemate in negotiations between the two parties.⁴⁸ It appears that the American traditional methods in dealing with Iran were ineffective as they did not result in achieving the US objectives in its relationship with Iran. The isolation did not prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear activities. Similarly, the sanctions did not alter Iran's behaviour. According to scholars, there is no evidence to suggest that the policy of sanctions and dialogue has a significant impact on the perceptions of Iran's leading decision-makers, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, among others.⁴⁹ They assert that both the incentives and disincentives have been inadequate to influence Iran policymakers' thinking.

Isolation and military threats bolstered Iranian hardliners and did not result in any repercussions. As an alternative to these traditional tactics, Obama pursued the policy of changing Iranian behaviour through the diplomacy of commitment.⁵⁰ It is evident that Iran's internal politics and identity significantly impacted the foreign policy of Iran. The complexity of US-Iran relations since 1979 could be attributed to the internal structure of Iran's regime and power structure. Evidently, the decision-making authority has been preserved for the "Supreme Leader" known as Leader of the Revolution.

Hence, domestic interactions among groups of the hardliners and other institutions are of particular interest. So, "factional disputes between those who insist on ideological purity and those considered more pragmatic are evident."⁵¹ The Supreme Leader and the president believe that their country is a

⁴⁸ Trita Parsi, "Losing an enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, 96(6), (November/December, 2017), p. 6-10.

⁴⁹ Pollack, K., & Takeyh, R. "Doubling down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, 34 (4), Fall, 2011, 7-21.

⁵⁰ Sharp, T. "U.S. Foreign Policy toward Iran in the Obama Era," *ISPI Policy Brief*, N. 145, June, 2009, p. 12.

⁵¹ Katzman, "Iran: Internal politics and U.S. policy and options," *Congressional Research Service*, RL32048. VERSION 346, 2019.

leading power in the Middle East that seeks to defend the region against imperial dominance.⁵²

Furthermore, the Iranian leaders were suspicious of US intentions and mistrust was and still marks US relations with Iran.⁵³ As such, it appears that the Iranian politics of resistance and the path of nuclear program provide Iran with a proper means, from Tehran's viewpoint, to emphasize its revolutionary values and maintain the regime's legitimacy. Additionally, the Revolutionary Guard Corps firmly believe that the Republic is in constant danger from external forces and therefore military self-reliance is essential for survival. They perceive nuclear weapons capabilities as an appropriate instrument for deterrence and bolstering Iran's reputation in the region. The issue that was raised by the Obama administration is that these Iranian views and the thinking have proven to be effective and effective against economic sanctions or political pressures.⁵⁴ Since Ayatollah Khomeini seized power in 1979, the United States has primarily pursued four objectives with regard to Iran: firstly, to undermine Iranian influence in the region; secondly, to prevent any perceived terrorism support from Tehran; thirdly, to advance democracy and human rights; and fourthly, to prevent the development of nuclear weapons by Iran.

However, the successive US administrations' efforts in this area achieved minimal and limited outcomes. Iran's hegemonic approach in the Middle East has grown steadily and prominently in the last two decades, and thus Iran emerges potentially more powerful and influential in the region than previously. This led some scholars to believe that "In many ways, the Iranian regime is in a better strategic situation today than it has been at any time since the revolution."⁵⁵

Iran succeeded in establishing networks in the region to serve its own national agenda. As such, it allegedly supports constantly Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It has also supported

Hamas in Palestine for many years, though the relationship became rocky after the Syrian crisis, as Hamas began to align itself with the opposition. Furthermore, the Arab spring led to the rise of Iran as a prominent power in the region, particularly its role in the Syrian crisis since its outbreak in 2011. Iran has been accused of supporting the Houthis in Yemen. Consequently, some proponents of the nuclear deal believe that the nuclear deal is a suitable entry point to change Iran's behaviour. From this perspective Washington would believe that through the nuclear deal, it could convince Iran to integrate with the world economy and to open up to the West. This will ultimately lead to the deterioration of the legitimacy of mullahs and their mobilization of people to make a peaceful transition to democracy (in American opinion). However, they believed that the isolation of Iran would be beneficial for hardliners.⁵⁶

The complexity of the events in the region since the invasion of Iraq has shown that the US needs a comprehensive approach to respond to Iran's increasing regional influence.⁵⁷ Iran has allegedly contributed to sectarian radicalization through the use of Shia local proxies to enhance its regional influence. This could be a significant threat to the already weakened regional balance of power and to the stability of the US allies and friends in the Persian Gulf region. Iran is considered to be a crucial element in addressing the nuclear issue, but also to help stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan and to address regional and global energy security.

War rhetoric was not considered to be effective as pursuing a military action could have embroiled the US in a war with a country of 80 million people that has its own military capabilities and is located in the centre of the Persian Gulf region. Furthermore, the American military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan and its complicated security and economic consequences have made the Obama administration not to consider military options in Iran. The most realistic approach to dealing with Iran was Obama's belief that the US could find common ground with Iran as it is in the national interest of the US to be on good

⁵² Pollack, K., & Takeyh, "Doubling down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, 34 (4), Fall, 2011, 7-21.

⁵³ Parsi, R., & Rydqvist, J. "Iran and the West Regional Interests and Global Controversies," *FOI, the Swedish Defense Research Agency*, 2011.

⁵⁴ Pollack, K., & Takeyh, "Doubling down on Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, 34 (4), Fall, 2011, 7-21.

⁵⁵ McFaul, M., Milani, A., & Diamond, "A Win-win U.S. Strategy for Dealing with Iran," *The Washington Quarterly*, 30 (1), Winter, 2006-7, 121-138.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bipartisan Policy Centre, "U.S. Policy toward Iran: Strategic Options," Report of the Task Force on Managing Disorder in the Middle East," *Washington: Bipartisan Policy Centre*, 2018.

relations with a regional dominant and influential power.⁵⁸

Conclusion

During Obama's Presidency, the confrontational relations between the United States and Iran were advancing on the right path of cooperation. These bilateral relations, if not the best or far away from better, were still effective in executing future talks and negotiations or agreement between both countries. Prior to Obama, not a single leader of the United States after the 1979 revolution tried to have a smooth relationship with Iran. At the same time, we have seen hardliners on Iranian side as well. Obama and Rouhani had a great opportunity to lead both countries in the face of the moderate leadership. Fortunately, this golden opportunity was utilized by both sides; despite the fact they had consumed a lot of time in order to join JCPOA.

It is claimed that the successive US administrations explicitly stated a "carrot and stick" approach to dealing with Iran. We can conclude that the policy is based on continuity, though it may have inconsistencies in the tools, the approaches, and interim objectives. In contrast to Bush's approach that relied heavily on military force as a tool in foreign policy, Obama was looking to transform the US-Iran relationship in a positive way, therefore, he employed talks and diplomacy with Iran that led to the nuclear agreement.

However, recent statements from the US officials demonstrate that the US is seeking a better deal with Iran through exerting greater pressure on Iran. To achieve this objective the US withdrew from the JCPOA. Since then, the US has re-imposed a large number of American sanctions with the ultimate goal of boosting the regime in Iran economically. However, the Iranians are unwilling to renegotiate the nuclear deal or discuss a new deal and there is no indication of any significant change in their position. Currently, there is no progress in this area and there is no framework to start with. Hence, one might raise a question, where does the American

policy go? The answer would be more akin to the regime in Iran considering that this policy could allow Iran to resume its nuclear activities and thus lead to more uncertainty.

The support of the international community is essential to make the sanction effective, as Iran is quite resilient to sanctions. The political regimes have been able to endure sanctions for over 40 years since November 1979. In other words, economic pressure could not result in a change in Iran's behaviour in the region as the Iranians had an experience of enduring pressure. The development of the region shows that the momentum is still with Iran and Iranian policy officials do not see any serious deterioration in Iran's position. In contrast, it has expanded its sphere of influence to include Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, particularly in light of the American stance in which Congress voted to stop support for Yemen's war. It is unlikely that Iran will withdraw from Syria and Yemen. It is believed that Iran has a comparable advantage on the ground in the Middle East in establishing leverage against the US in any future negotiations.

Furthermore, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA would enable hardliners in Iran, and this could affect the domestic balance of power in favour of the regime. The US' decision to withdraw from the agreement was a combination of the Saudi and Israeli approaches and their objectives in the region. Realistically, the sanctions might cause Iran to re-engage in negotiations over some issues similar to Obama's era where the pressure of sanction pushed them to negotiate their nuclear program.

However, it is unlikely that pressure will force Iran to abandon its regional ambitions, yet it may favour the hardliners in Iran. Indeed, the US has genuine and valid concerns about the destabilizing risk of Iran missiles capability, and the more worrying concern is the proliferation of those missiles. Iran's missiles can be transferred to its regional allies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, and so on. The proliferation issue is more dangerous than Iran's possession of missiles' capabilities. However, one should be aware that Iran is having and developing a significant amount of medium and short-range missiles that are considered strategic assets for the Islamic Republic.

The Iranian regime believes that military self-reliance is essential for survival, and they believe it is an appropriate tool for deterrence and bolstering Iran's pre-reputation in the region. Such Iranian

⁵⁸ Duggan, M. F. "The Persian Elephant in the room: Revitalizing U.S.-Iran relations after the Iran nuclear deal," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, April 2015, retrieved from <https://www.georgetownjournalofinternationalaffairs.org/online-edition/the-persian-elephant-in-the-room-revitalizing-u-s-iran-relations-after-the-iran-nuclear-deal>.

views and strategic thinking have proven to be effective and tolerant of the American economic sanctions or political pressures. Consequently, there is a fundamental divergence between Iran and the US as successive American administrations

including that of Obama's embraced the policy that Israel should have a military edge in the Middle East and therefore the Iranian long-range missiles erode Israel's military edge.

