

US-IRAN BILATERAL RELATIONS (2009-2021): STRATEGIC SHIFTS, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of US-Iran relations from 2009 to 2021, focusing on policy shifts under the President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden administrations. The research explores diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions, and regional conflicts to assess their impact on bilateral relations and Middle Eastern stability. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyzes primary documents, policy reports, and scholarly sources within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Game Theory. Comparative analysis is employed to evaluate the strategic effectiveness of decisions taken by different US administrations. The findings reveal that diplomatic engagement, such as the JCPOA, temporarily reduced tensions, while coercive measures, including economic sanctions and military confrontations, escalated hostilities. The inconsistency of US foreign policy has weakened long-term diplomatic efforts. To resolve these issues, the study recommends reviving multilateral diplomacy, ensuring economic incentives for compliance, establishing a regional security framework, and adopting a consistent US policy approach to reduce volatility and promote sustainable engagement between Washington and Tehran.

Key Words: US-Iran Strategic Rivalry, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Game Theory Maximum Pressure Campaign, JCPOA (Iran Nuclear Deal),

Introduction

Background of US-Iran Relations

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Iran has been one of the most volatile and strategically significant in international politics. The hostility between the two nations has shaped regional security, global energy markets, and nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which led to the overthrow of the US-backed Shah of Iran and the establishment of an Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, US-Iran relations have been predominantly adversarial. The US severed diplomatic ties in 1980 following the Iranian Hostage Crisis (1979-1981), in which 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days (Ansari, 2018).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the US perceived Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, particularly due to Tehran's support for Hezbollah, Hamas, and other militant groups (Katzman, 2019). Simultaneously, Iran viewed US policies as imperialist interventions aimed at controlling Middle Eastern geopolitics and resources (Maloney, 2013). During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the US supported Saddam Hussein's Iraq, further deteriorating relations. Despite intermittent diplomatic overtures, such as President Mohammad Khatami's reformist agenda in the late 1990s, deep-seated mistrust persisted, particularly regarding Iran's nuclear ambitions and US military presence in the region (Pollack, 2013).

Since the post-Cold War era, US-Iran tensions have been inextricably linked to nuclear proliferation, economic sanctions, and regional conflicts. The 2002 revelation of Iran's clandestine uranium enrichment program heightened US and European concerns, leading to UN Security Council sanctions and diplomatic interventions (Parsi, 2018). The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 marked a significant diplomatic achievement, temporarily curbing Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for economic relief. However, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump in 2018 reignited hostilities, reinforcing economic and strategic tensions (Nephew, 2020).

Historical Context (Pre-2009)

The historical US-Iran rivalry is rooted in multiple political, ideological, and strategic conflicts that have shaped Middle Eastern security dynamics. The 1953 CIA-backed coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh—who had nationalized the oil industry—laid the foundation for long-term Iranian resentment toward the US. The subsequent US-backed rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi deepened Iran's dependence on Western powers, fueling internal opposition and revolutionary sentiments.

Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the US froze Iranian assets, imposed economic sanctions, and categorized Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" under the George W. Bush administration. The Iraq War (2003-2011) further complicated the US-Iran dynamic, as Iran exploited the power vacuum in Iraq, increasing its regional influence through proxy groups.

By the early 2000s, Iran had established a sophisticated regional network of influence—extending from Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iraq (Shi'a militias) to Syria and Yemen—which the US perceived as a direct challenge to its Middle East strategy (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018). The Bush administration's hardline approach failed to prevent Iran from expanding its nuclear program and strengthening its military alliances (Albarasneh & Khatib, 2019). This background underscores the persistent and multifaceted nature of US-Iran conflicts, setting the stage for policy shifts under President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden.

Research Gap: Shifting US Policies and Lack of Long-Term Stability

Despite extensive academic research on US-Iran relations, there remains a lack of consensus on the effectiveness of US policy approaches. The President Obama administration's engagement strategy (JCPOA), Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign, and Biden's mixed approach illustrate the inconsistencies in US foreign policy toward Iran.

A key gap in the existing literature is the short-term character of US policies, which swing between diplomatic engagement and economic coercion. This inconsistency tends to subvert long-term conflict resolution efforts and to lead, instead, to repeated diplomatic breakdowns. Additionally, although the economic sanctions have considerably hampered Iran's economy, these sanctions have not stopped Iran from making significant progress in its nuclear program, nor have they reduced Iran's regional power. The purpose of this research is to analyze the alterations in US policy that occurred between the years of 2009 and 2021 and to evaluate their effects on bilateral relations with a certain region of the world.

Statement of the Problem: Why Diplomatic and Coercive Efforts Failed

The US-Iran relationship remains unstable despite diplomatic and coercive efforts. President Obama's JCPOA briefly eased tensions, but President Trump's 2018 withdrawal escalated hostilities, and President Biden's diplomacy has faced political roadblocks. Key challenges include

US domestic opposition, Iran's strategic commitment to its nuclear program, and sanctions pushing Iran closer to China and Russia, reducing US leverage. Additionally, the absence of a regional security framework worsens tensions. This study examines these factors' impact on bilateral relations and explores policy solutions for sustainable de-escalation and long-term stability, emphasizing the need for a more consistent and multilateral approach to US-Iran engagement.

Research Questions

1. How have US-Iran relations evolved from 2009 to 2021?
2. What are the major challenges shaping bilateral ties?
3. What diplomatic and policy strategies could de-escalate tensions?

Theoretical Framework

The study of US-Iran bilateral relations (2009-2021) requires a comprehensive theoretical framework that captures the regional security dynamics, strategic decision-making, and geopolitical rivalries that have shaped interactions between the two nations. This study employs the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Game Theory combined with Strategic Culture to analyze the evolution of US-Iran relations, policy shifts, and the broader Middle Eastern security landscape.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

RSCT posits that regional security dynamics cannot be understood in isolation but as part of an interconnected security complex where multiple actors influence threat perceptions, alliances, and conflicts (Buzan & Waever, 2012). In the Middle East, US-Iran relations must be analyzed within the broader context of regional rivalries involving Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, and other Gulf states. One key aspect of RSCT is the interconnected nature of security concerns. The US, Israel, and Gulf States see Tehran's nuclear program as a clear and direct threat, leading to coordinated efforts to counterbalance Tehran's influence (Pollack & Takeyh, 2011).

Conversely, Iran perceives US military presence in the Persian Gulf, arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and Washington's support for Israeli security as existential threats. The region's security landscape is shaped by outside powers like the U.S., Russia, and China. These countries support opposing regional factions. The U.S. is aligned with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Gulf states. In contrast, Iran has turned to Russia and China in response to economic sanctions and military threat (Anderson, 2016). Hostilities between the US and Iran also appear in proxy wars across Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Iran backs Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Shi'a militias in these countries; the US counteracts Tehran's influence with military and financial means along with Saudi Arabia and Israel. This study applies RSCT to place US-Iran tensions in a much larger arena, highlighting the broad Middle Eastern security framework within which the US-Iran rivalry unfolds. The work underscores the complex interplay of broader regional rivalries and power (Buzan et al., 1997).

Game Theory and Strategic Culture

Game Theory provides a mathematical and strategic framework for understanding how states make rational choices in high-stakes international conflicts. It assumes that states act strategically, anticipating their opponents' responses to maximize their own gains (Powell, 1999). In the context of US-Iran relations, Game Theory helps explain key diplomatic and strategic interactions. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a classic cooperative game under the Prisoner's Dilemma model, where Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. However, the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 was a defection strategy, reigniting a cycle of escalation and distrust. Similarly, deterrence and retaliation in US-Iran

interactions align with the Tit-for-Tat model (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018). The US assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 and Iran's retaliatory missile strikes on US bases in Iraq reflect a reciprocal deterrence strategy, where each side seeks to punish and dissuade further escalation. Likewise, the US's maximum pressure campaign and Iran's uranium enrichment expansion demonstrate a strategic standoff, with each side testing the other's tolerance (Katzman, 2019).

Strategic Culture complements Game Theory by incorporating historical, ideological, and psychological factors that shape national security policies. Iran's strategic behavior is influenced by historical experiences, including the 1953 US-backed coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh, which fostered long-term distrust of American interventions. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) reinforced Iran's emphasis on self-reliance and asymmetric warfare. Additionally, prolonged US sanctions and diplomatic isolation have driven Iran to develop economic and military partnerships with China, Russia, and regional militias. By integrating Game Theory and Strategic Culture, this study explains why US-Iran relations are characterized by brinkmanship, deterrence, and selective cooperation.

Overall, the combination of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Game Theory, and Strategic Culture provides a comprehensive analytical framework for studying US-Iran relations. RSCT highlights the regional security dynamics that shape bilateral tensions, while Game Theory and Strategic Culture explain strategic decision-making and policy shifts. Together, these theories illustrate why US-Iran relations remain volatile, emphasizing the need for long-term diplomatic mechanisms and regional security frameworks.

Methodology

This qualitative study looks into US – Iranian relations from 2009 to 2021, the shifts in foreign policy, the nature of diplomacy, the more increased use of sanctions and even its involvement in regional conflicts. Based on secondary sources, like academic journals, policy reports, as well as official documents, it applies two theoretical frameworks, Regional Security Complex Theory and Game Theory to a set of strategic interactions constituting a bilateral relationship. To comparatively evaluate the strategic effectiveness of decisions taken by the President Obama, President Trump and President Biden administrations. Moreover, regional dynamics between the Saudi Arabia, Israel, China, and Russia are analyzed to depict how external actors affect US-Iran relations. In addition, the study relies on interpretative analysis rather than new empirical data, then employs those critical policy decisions and security developments to propose future conflict de-escalation and diplomatic engagement strategies.

Evolution of US-Iran Relations (2009-2021)

The period from **2009 to 2021** witnessed **significant transformations in US-Iran relations**, shaped by shifting US administrations, diplomatic breakthroughs, and escalating tensions. This section examines the evolution of US-Iran relations under **three key administrations— President Obama (2009-2017), President Trump (2017-2021), and President Biden (2021-present)—**focusing on **the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), economic sanctions, military confrontations, and broader regional developments.**

President Obama's Era (2009-2017): Diplomacy & JCPOA

JCPOA Agreement (2015): A Diplomatic Breakthrough

Under President Barack Obama, the US pursued diplomacy paired with strategic pressure on Iran's nuclear ambitions. Recognizing that Iran's uranium enrichment posed a significant security threat, especially to US allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia, the administration stunned many by first reaching out to our traditional adversaries in Europe. This effort led to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany) that aimed to stop the progress of Iran's nuclear program in exchange for a staged relief of international economic sanctions (Nephew, 2020). Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to significantly reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium by 98%, limit uranium enrichment to 3.67% purity—well below weapons-grade levels—dismantle two-thirds of its centrifuges for ten years, and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct rigorous inspections to ensure compliance (Fitzpatrick, 2017). In return, the US and its allies lifted major economic sanctions, granting Iran access to billions of dollars in frozen assets and facilitating its reintegration into global financial systems. The JCPOA was widely regarded as a diplomatic success, effectively reducing the risk of nuclear escalation while maintaining strict verification mechanisms to monitor Iran's commitments (Singh, 2021).

Sanctions Relief vs. Opposition from Israel, Saudi Arabia, and US Conservatives

While the JCPOA temporarily eased tensions between Iran and the West, it faced strong opposition from multiple actors. Israel and Saudi Arabia were among the most vocal critics, arguing that the agreement failed to address Iran's ballistic missile program and regional influence (Mahapatra, 2016). Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu labeled the deal a "historic mistake," claiming that it allowed Iran to maintain nuclear capabilities while reaping economic benefits (Glaser, 2018). Within the United States, the agreement also encountered significant resistance in Congress. Republican lawmakers opposed the JCPOA, contending that sanctions relief empowered Iran economically without permanently dismantling its nuclear infrastructure. A number of Democratic policymakers worried that the deal did not have long term safeguards against Iranian violations. But despite these challenges, the President Obama administration did defend JCPOA and argued that diplomatic engagement remains the better alternative to military contact. Despite that, the future of the agreement remained unclear, especially in view of prevailing developments in US domestic politics and on the road to the 2016 presidential elections.

President Trump's Era (2017-2021): Maximum Pressure & Sanctions

Withdrawal from JCPOA (2018): Policy Reversal

Comparatively, the approach of President Donald Trump's administration (2017–2021), which revolved around economic coercion, military deterrence, and diplomatic isolation, took an entirely different approach on Iran. President Trump ditched the JCPOA unilaterally in May 2018, saying it achieved none of this and did not constrain Iran's destabilising regional activities. President Trump's withdrawal brought back economic sanctions, or the 'maximum pressure' campaign, aimed at crippling Iran's economy to make it buckle under pressure and agree to US demands. This change was a giant leap further in US anti-Iran rhetoric compared to the diplomatic wins under the President Obama administration (Cronberg, 2017).

Reimposition of Economic Sanctions & Oil Export Bans

The maximum pressure campaign was an effort to economically cut Iran off by reimposing financial sanctions on Iranian banks and industries, barring Iran from access to the functions of the international financial system through secondary sanctions, and setting out to lower Iranian oil

exports to zero, depriving Tehran of its major source of revenue. The impact of these measures was severe on Iran's economy; it caused a 50 per cent drop in oil exports between 2018 and 2019, inflation over 40 per cent, and plunged the country into an economic crisis and protests that swept the country in response to worsening living conditions. And yet, Iran refused to follow US demands and instead retaliated by expanding its nuclear program. And by 2020, Tehran had escalated tensions and stoked fear of a fresh nuclear crisis with a buildup of enriched uranium that exceeded the JCPOA thresholds.

Assassination of General Qassem Soleimani (2020) & Military Escalations

The President Trump administration's Iran policy further escalated in January 2020 following the January 2020 US drone strike that assassinated General Qassem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force of Iran. Soleimani was an architect of Iran's regional strategy, and instrumental in helping to build powerful proxy groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The assassination of his person represented a watershed moment in US-Iran incompatibilities prompting missile strikes of US military bases in Iraq as direct response. The result of this incident was a serious aggravation of ties between the countries with all the risks of a total war. In response to the increasing US pressure, Iran strengthened relations with the military of China and Russia, considering these countries strategic allies to counterbalance the US influence. Relations between US and Iran were at their lowest point in decades by the end of Trump's presidency; diplomatic channels were closed, and military tensions were at the highest they have ever been (Young, 2020).

President Biden's Era (2021-Present): Mixed Approach & Challenges

Attempt to Revive JCPOA Negotiations

President Joe Biden entered office in 2021 with the goal of restoring US-Iran diplomacy and re-entering the JCPOA. His administration pursued indirect negotiations with Iran through European intermediaries, emphasizing a return to diplomacy while maintaining strategic pressure. However, efforts to revive the JCPOA faced significant obstacles. In 2021, Ebrahim Raisi, a conservative hardliner, became Iran's president, adopting a more confrontational stance toward the US. Raisi's administration insisted on full sanctions relief before engaging in negotiations, leading to diplomatic deadlocks. Additionally, regional dynamics further complicated President Biden's efforts. The US-brokered Abraham Accords (2020) strengthened Israel's alliances with Arab states, shifting the regional security balance against Iran (Katzman, 2019). At the same time, Iran deepened its military and economic partnerships with China and Russia, signing a 25-year strategic agreement with China to reduce its reliance on Western trade (Wright, 2021). By 2023, President Biden's attempts to revive the JCPOA remained stalled, with growing skepticism over whether a return to the deal was still feasible.

Overall, from 2009 to 2021, US-Iran relations underwent dramatic shifts, oscillating between diplomatic engagement (President Obama), economic coercion (President Trump), and mixed strategies (President Biden). The failure to establish a long-term, bipartisan US policy has contributed to persistent instability, emphasizing the need for a more consistent and multilateral approach.

Key Challenges in US-Iran Relations

The US-Iran relationship is shaped by deep-rooted geopolitical, economic, and security challenges that have persisted for decades. Although moments of diplomatic engagement have offered

temporary relief, the fundamental disagreements over Iran's nuclear program, economic sanctions, regional conflicts, and geopolitical alignments have kept the United States and Iran in a state of prolonged hostility. This section examines the mainstays of this hostility in greater depth, along with their obvious and subtle influences on US-Iran relations from 2009 to 2021, on relations between Iran and its regional adversaries, and on the broader Middle Eastern security landscape.

1-Iran's Nuclear Program & Non-Proliferation Concerns

The primary source of tension between Washington and Tehran, and US allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, is Iran's ambition to develop nuclear weapons. Iran insists its nuclear program is meant for peaceful purposes, like powering plants, and says it has the right under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to pursue nuclear energy. But the US and its allies fear that the program led to development of nuclear weapons, destabilize the Middle East and eliciting the arms race in the region.

The discovery of Iran's secret nuclear facilities in 2002 heightened these concerns, leading to multiple rounds of UN sanctions and diplomatic negotiations. The President Obama administration sought to address these concerns through diplomacy, resulting in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which imposed strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief (Parsi, 2018). However, this agreement was unilaterally abandoned by the President Trump administration in 2018, citing concerns that the deal did not address Iran's ballistic missile program or regional influence (Nephew, 2020). Following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran gradually resumed uranium enrichment, exceeding JCPOA limits and bringing it closer to weapons-grade levels.

Despite diplomatic efforts by the President Biden administration to revive the JCPOA, negotiations have remained deadlocked due to Iran's hardline stance under President Ebrahim Raisi and US domestic opposition. Iran has continued to demand complete sanctions relief, while the US insists on additional restrictions to prevent future nuclear escalation. Additionally, Israel has repeatedly threatened military action should Iran approach nuclear weapon capability, further increasing tensions. The US-Iran nuclear standoff remains unresolved, with ongoing negotiations facing significant diplomatic and political obstacles.

2-Economic Sanctions & Their Effectiveness

Economic sanctions have been one of the primary tools of US pressure against Iran, aimed at limiting Tehran's financial resources, curbing its nuclear program, and restricting its regional influence. The President Obama administration initially imposed sanctions to bring Iran to the negotiating table, which ultimately led to the 2015 JCPOA agreement. However, the President Trump administration reimposed and expanded sanctions in 2018, cutting Iran off from global financial markets and reducing its oil exports to historic lows (Nephew, 2023).

The impact of these sanctions on Iran's economy has been devastating. Iran's oil revenues dropped significantly, inflation soared above 40%, and the Iranian rial lost nearly 80% of its value (Katz, 2022). The economic downturn triggered widespread protests, with Iranians expressing frustration over deteriorating living conditions and government mismanagement. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated economic hardships, as Iran struggled to import medical supplies and essential goods due to US banking restrictions.

Despite these economic pressures, Iran has demonstrated resilience by diversifying its economy, increasing trade with China and Russia, and expanding its black-market oil exports. This has raised

concerns that sanctions, rather than weakening Iran's strategic position, have instead pushed it closer to rival powers such as China and Russia, undermining US influence in the region (Parsi, 2021). Furthermore, many scholars argue that sanctions have disproportionately harmed ordinary Iranians rather than altering Tehran's policies, questioning their overall effectiveness as a foreign policy tool (Nasr, 2022). The ongoing debate over the success of US sanctions remains a major challenge in Washington's Iran strategy, as pressure tactics have failed to bring Iran back into compliance with the JCPOA or curb its regional military activities.

3-Regional Conflicts & Proxy Wars

One of the most significant challenges in US-Iran relations is Tehran's involvement in regional conflicts and its support for militant groups across the Middle East. Iran's foreign policy is centered on asymmetric warfare, using proxy groups to expand its regional influence and counter US-aligned governments (Katzman, 2019). This has placed Iran in direct confrontation with US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In Syria, Iran has been a key ally of President Bashar al-Assad, providing military advisors, weapons, and financial aid to sustain Assad's rule against US-backed rebel forces (Wright, 2021). The US has repeatedly condemned Iran's involvement in Syria, arguing that it has prolonged the civil war and increased instability in the region.

In Iraq, Iran wields significant influence over Shi'a militia groups, which have targeted US military bases and personnel in retaliation for American policies (Nasr, 2022). The 2020 US assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, a key architect of Iran's regional strategy, triggered retaliatory missile strikes against US military installations in Iraq, escalating hostilities (Parsi, 2018).

In Yemen, Iran has supported Houthi rebels, who have launched missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Saudi-led coalition, backed by US military aid, has sought to counter Houthi influence, resulting in a prolonged humanitarian crisis (Al-Qadhi, 2017). The US-Iran rivalry in Yemen reflects broader regional competition between Tehran and Riyadh, further complicating diplomatic efforts.

US policymakers have struggled to develop a coherent response to Iran's regional activities, as direct military confrontation risks triggering a broader Middle Eastern war, while diplomatic engagement faces resistance from US allies. The challenge of Iran's proxy warfare remains a significant obstacle to US-Iran relations, with no clear resolution in sight.

4-Geopolitical Realignments

The US and Iran relations have further been complicated by the ever changing global geopolitical landscape as Tehran seeks to build up ties with China and Russia to counterweight western pressure. US withdrawal from the JCPOA and sanctions drove Iran further into the arms of Beijing and Moscow, to whom it signed major economic and military agreements.

In 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement, aimed at bringing economic investments, energy cooperation, as well as infrastructure development to Tehran. Likewise, Russia has been bolstering military ties with Iran, especially in Syrian conflict where both countries prop up the Assad government. Such a realignment has diminished US leverage in Iran, and some worry that Washington's isolation strategy is working in reverse.

Further shifting regional alliances are the US-brokered Abraham Accords (2020) that normalized relations between Israel and both the UAE and Bahrain. Iran calls these deals an anti-Iran coalition that only bolsters its conviction that Washington wants to disease Iran and surround it. As regional

dynamics further evolve, the task of US policymakers in maintaining influence over the strategic decisions of Iran has become more, not less, daunting. As a result of this, the US-Iran relations are full of deep roots challenges that need long term multilateral strategy beyond sanctions and deterrence to achieve stable sustainability.

Policy Recommendations & Future Strategies

To tackle the long pending problems in US Iran relations would require a comprehensive policy, which involves using diplomatic engagement, economic incentives, and security cooperation with sensitivity to the domestic political factors. Policies have ranged from coercion to engagement in the past. A more sustainable and sensible way would be to combine the two, without going to either extreme. It favours a balancing international order with Iran's regional ambitions outweighed through cooperation and coordination with regional allies..

1- Multilateral Diplomacy & Confidence-Building Measures

Reviving the JCPOA with stronger enforcement mechanisms is one the most viable solutions to the current US- Iran standoff. The original agreement (2015 JCPOA) was effective as a non-proliferation agreement that collapsed under a President Trump administration that exposed its vulnerability. However, for any renegotiated agreement to be worth it, there must be stronger verification measures than these, for example, limitations on enrichment of uranium for at least a longer period and strengthened IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) oversight(Parsi, 2018).

Moreover, Washington and Tehran cannot reach a successful US – Iran diplomacy without also being successful outside of this relationship. It has greater security assurances through regional and global stakeholders, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, the European Union, Russia, and China, as well as broader legitimacy. Which is why it is necessary to engage China and Russia in diplomatic negotiations, as they both have strong economic and military ties with Iran and can play a constructive role in de-escalating efforts.

2- Economic Incentives & Humanitarian Relief

The effectiveness of economic sanctions as a pillar of U.S. policy toward Iran is a matter of contention. Instead of blanket, across the board sanctions that hurt the Iranian people, a posture of offering graduated sanctions relief contingent upon verifiable progress on nuclear compliance and de-escalation in the region offers a carrot rather than a stick.

The benefits of Iran's reintegration into the global economy could also be used to undermine the power of hardliners historically insulated from the effects of diplomatic sanctions by wielding power through black market networks. Access to global markets under the guarantees of security may coax away Iran's current approach towards aggressive foreign policy may help ensure we wouldn't be confronting Iran anywhere in the future.

3-Security Assurances & Regional Cooperation

For US–Iran tensions to be resolved in a lasting way, the threat perceptions of Iran would have to be addressed in the context of a security framework for the broader Middle East. US and its regional allies (namely Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UAE) will have to work on confidence building measures to allay Iran's fear of regime change or military intervention.

An area of potential deescalation could be US-Iran backchannel talks on regional conflicts, including the Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni wars. A regional security dialogue that would include all major actors whether Iran and its rivals could lessen proxy conflicts and cease the perpetual military tension in the region.

4-Managing Domestic & Regional Pressures

Domestic political constraints in both countries have been one of the greatest obstacles to sustained US Iran engagement. Diplomacy is fragile and vulnerable to political shifts, as bipartisanship skepticism in the US Congress and Iranian distrust of American commitments has doomed it. A bipartisan approach to Iran policy could improve policy consistency by establishing policy based in the country's long term strategic interest and not short term political benefits.

Iran's leadership has equal concerns about US credibility which needs to be addressed if lasting agreements are to be ultimately secured. If Washington expects Iran to abide by diplomatic commitments, it has to offer more sure guarantees that the next presidency won't recklessly discard agreements. It might be possible to do so through Congressional (or other) oversight mechanisms or difficult to dismantle unilaterally via multilateral treaties.

Conclusion

US-Iran relations over 2009 to 2021 reflect a cycle of engagement, confrontation, and strategic recalibration driven by nuclear fears, regional struggles and changing US approaches. President Obama administration pursued diplomacy through JCPOA, a framework that laid out the nuclear restrictions and the economic relief. But the President Trump administration reversed this approach, pulled out of the agreement, imposed sanctions once again, and started to escalate tensions. After Iran hardened its position, realigned its regional alliances, and imposed domestic political constraints in both nations, the President Biden administration tried to return to diplomatic negotiations. Why should long term agreements be maintained when Washington's credibility has become weaker with a lack of consistency in US foreign policy?

It is centred on Iran's nuclear program and wider regional sway. Sanctions have hurt Iran economically, but they have not changed Teheran's strategic ambitions. In the process, Iran has grown closer to Russia and China, extended its influence in the region and moved forward with its nuclear program. Both diplomatic and coercive measures have repeatedly failed to address the issue, and require a more reliable and multilateral method of avoiding further escalation.

A balanced strategy including diplomacy, economic incentives and regional security cooperation are critical to future stability. If we have a revived, if not stronger, enforcement mechanisms of a nuclear deal, if we involve more regional stakeholders, then we could prevent further conflicts and have a more predictable engagement framework. Without a consistent, pragmatic US approach to help guide negotiations toward solid solutions, we'll see more short-lived diplomatic efforts followed by sudden shifts in policy, which will further fuel the instability that makes it more and more difficult to forge lasting peace.

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