

UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY IN RESPONSE TO IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM 2021-2024

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Abstract

This study analyzes the United States' foreign policy toward Iran's nuclear program during 2021–2024. In 2022, President Joe Biden expressed the intention to resume dialogue with Iran; however, this effort was rejected by 48 Republican senators who insisted on continuing the Maximum Pressure policy initiated during the Trump administration. Using a qualitative approach and literature study, this research examines the interplay between identity, domestic politics, economic strength, and military capacity in shaping U.S. foreign policy. The findings reveal that the construction of U.S. national identity, reinforced through social and political interactions, significantly influences the formulation of foreign policy. These factors led decision makers, particularly the President, to maintain the Maximum Pressure strategy as the main approach in addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions during the 2021–2024 period.

Keywords: Foreign Policy; United States of America; Identity; National Interest; Iran Nuclear Program

A. Introduction

Currently, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran have a relationship that is highly prone to conflict between the two countries, due to several factors such as regional security issues, human rights, democracy, and nuclear proliferation. The development of Iran's nuclear program is currently considered a threat to the United States, especially in relation to regional security in the Middle East. Iran and the United States do not have formal diplomatic relations and have largely acted antagonistically since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but have periodically participated in bilateral or multilateral negotiations. However, in 2022, when President Joe Biden wanted to resume dialogue with Iran, 49 US Senators from the Republican Party refused to negotiate with Iran regarding Iran's nuclear program and continued to apply *maximum pressure* with maximum sanctions on Iran (Foreign Relations Committee, 2022).

Rejection of the United States and its regional influence has been a hallmark of the Islamic Republic of Iran's identity and ideology since its founding (Thomas & Clayton,

2024). Of course, Iran's current nuclear program affects relations between the United States and Iran (). The United States understands that Iran's nuclear program indicates activities that could threaten regional security and the values that the United States has built regarding nuclear development. The regime, which is considered tyrannical by the United States, is an unlimited power because the United States has anti-tyrannical values due to past events (Falvo & Nicolette, 2024). However, the status and identity of countries in the international system, nuclear weapons prevention is considered legitimate for superpowers but not for most other countries, thus reinforcing the post-Cold War global hierarchy by distinguishing between "civilized" countries that are allowed to have nuclear weapons and those that are not (Tannenwald & Nina, 2007).

After World War II, countries around the world began to reconstruct their states and formulate national goals to achieve public welfare and national interests in accordance with the values formed from their identities. The United States was one of the victorious countries in World War II, while the Eastern bloc, such as the Soviet Union, was another significant actor that won and had a significant impact on World War II. This victory created a bipolar pattern of international relations, characterized by a group of democratic countries led by the United States and communist countries led by the Soviet Union. This pattern of relations led to increased and heated competition between the two blocs, known as the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, because they had different ideologies (Yazid & Mat, 2014). The two blocs were the two major world powers at that time, so that every policy issued between the two blocs would trigger another policy. Nuclear technology was one of the technologies developed during World War II, with three countries deciding to build atomic bombs: Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Britain set aside its own work and joined the Manhattan Project as a *junior partner* in 1943. The Soviet Union was still conducting small-scale development before August 1945.

The Cold War is generally still considered a power struggle between two superpowers over military strength and strategic control, largely centered in Europe. In contrast, the most important aspect of the Cold War was not military or strategic or centered in Europe, but related to political and social development in the Third World (Westad & Arne, 2005). The Cold War also led the Western world to create military alliance systems in the North Atlantic, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere. Most importantly, the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO) united North America and most of Western Europe in a collective military institution united against the Soviet Union and its allies (Frieden et al, 2019). Whatever Truman's motives, Stalin viewed the use of the bomb as an anti-Soviet move, designed to deprive the Soviet Union of its strategic gains in the Far East and, more generally, to give the United States the upper hand in defining the postwar settlement (Holloway & David, 2010).

Atomic weapons have such a destructive impact that their use is restricted. Early efforts toward a worldwide non-proliferation movement began in 1953 with the atomic energy for peace program. However, it was not until 1957 that the United States, the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (USSR), and 22 other countries with nuclear energy and technology signed and ratified a law establishing the *International Atomic Energy Agency*

(IAEA) on July 27 of that year (Opuware et al, 2018). The main purpose of this agency is to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons by safeguarding fissile materials and inspecting nuclear installations. Efforts were made to prevent proliferation by ensuring that easily decomposed materials and isotopes were not used for weapons manufacturing. In order to do this effectively, the agency had to be legally supported, not only by the approval of IAEA member states to *the Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT), which provided legal support for the IAEA to carry out its activities.

Cooperation between Iran and the United States at that time was very close because the United States had established relations with Iran since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. American Christian missionaries had been in Iran even longer than that. However, significant US involvement with Iran only began after World War II. The relationship was generally close, but it was first marked by the involvement of *the Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) in the 1953 coup that overthrew the popular prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh (Aldasam & Dabbous). The overthrow of Mossadegh at that time was based on Mossadegh finding a popular issue in his resistance to British control of Iran's oil industry and being able to gain support from nationalists, communists, intellectuals, and religious leaders. When Mossadegh clearly used the oil issue to oppose British control by bringing up the issue of reducing the monarchy to under control (CIA, 1972).

The United States strengthened its influence in Iran after the coup, with Reza Pahlavi becoming the leader of Iran and helping Iran in its efforts to rebuild the country after a wave of demonstrations. Reza Pahlavi was supported by the British and American powers due to his strong belief in democracy and nationalism, and his European education. He sought natural resources that would generate more profitable income for entities outside Iran (CIA, 2011). The competition for influence, especially in third world countries, was carried out by the victorious countries, namely the United States and the Soviet Union, to develop their influence in third world countries. In a historical sense, and particularly as seen from the perspective of the Southern countries, the Cold War was a continuation of colonialism through slightly different means. This war centered on control and domination, especially in terms of ideology. The methods of the superpowers and their local allies were very similar to those honed during the final phase of European colonialism, namely giant social and economic projects that brought promises of modernity to their supporters () and mostly death to their opponents or those who happened to stand in the way of progress (Westad & Arne, 2005).

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 made reducing the perceived threat Iran posed to various US interests, including the security of the Persian Gulf region, a US policy priority. In the 1980s and 1990s, US officials identified Iran's support for Middle Eastern militant groups as the main threat posed by Iran to US interests and allies. Iran's nuclear program became a priority in US policy after 2002 as the program expanded and Iran's chances of developing nuclear weapons increased (Katzman & Kenneth, 2016). Relations between the United States and Iran after the overthrow of the Reza Pahlavi regime during the Islamic Revolution became more strained, which certainly affected Iran's nuclear

development program, which during Reza Pahlavi's leadership was part of U.S. assistance in the field of nuclear energy. Beginning in the late 1980s, Iran's nuclear weapons program was coordinated by an entity linked to *the Ministry of Defense Armed Forces Logistics* (MODAFL). The AMAD plan took over these activities several years later; these projects were "allegedly managed through *the 'Orchid Office'*". After Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003, the staff remained in place to record and document the achievements of their respective projects (Kerr & Paul K, 2019).

The change in Iranian leadership led the United States to decide to terminate the nuclear development assistance program through the U.S. Department of State from the American embassy in Iran. The Secretary of State said that now was not the right time to maintain the bilateral nuclear agreement between the United States and Iran because the unstable political situation in Iran and the reorganization of the Iranian bureaucracy had halted all processes. The Iranian leader at the time told the American ambassador, according to the telegram, that only the nuclear power plants already built by French and German companies, Bushehr and Darkhovin, would continue at this time (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011).

Developing countries oppose the collective identity implied by the hierarchy imposed by the norm of non-use in global politics. Therefore, they threatened to oppose the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in April 1995, not primarily for realist reasons but because of status issues (Tannenwald & Nina, 2007). Global and geopolitical developments, especially in the Middle East, have forced Iran to prepare efforts to protect its national interests by continuing its nuclear program. The development of Israeli nuclear weapons poses a serious threat to Iran's influence in the Middle East (Waltz & Kenneth N, 2012).

These reasons underlie Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons to counterbalance the threat from Israel, as this will affect geopolitical stability in the Middle East and pose a threat to Iran. To date, the United States is still trying to do everything it can to deal with Iran's nuclear program. The system of *checks and balances* in the US political system influences the formulation of US foreign policy, namely mutual interference between the branches of government, which has proven to be beneficial for the United States (Sparkman & John, 1977). It is interesting to reconstruct *the foreign policy input* related to Iran's nuclear program.

B. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with an explanatory case study design. According to Robert K Yin Ph.D, explanatory case studies are particularly suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts where the boundaries between phenomena and contexts are unclear (Yin & Robert K, 2018). This approach allows researchers to explore the complexity of US foreign policy toward Iran by considering various interrelated factors. Professor Creswell explains that qualitative research with a case study design is very effective for answering "how" and "why" questions about a contemporary phenomenon (Creswell et al, 2018).

C. Findings and Discussion

1. Findings

Anti-US sentiment has existed since the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi in the 1979 Iranian revolution. This revolution was a significant moment for Iran as it restored the Islamic constitution in the country. However, these events actually worsened relations between Iran and the US. This was because Ayatollah Khomeini, the revolutionary leader and President of Iran, actively campaigned for anti-US sentiment. At the same time, Iranian students attacked the US embassy and detained 52 US diplomats in Tehran. This incident angered President Jimmy Carter. Due to this incident, relations between the two countries have never been harmonious (Sundari & Rio, 2018).

Before the revolution, Iran was one of America's closest allies in the Middle East. The United States never considered restricting arms supplies to Iran to prevent the influence of communism in Iran and the Middle East (Blight & James G, 2014). The United States promised to meet Iran's defense needs, as long as Iran did not seek to acquire nuclear weapons (Olson & Erik A, 2016). After the 1979 revolution, Iran's foreign and security policies shifted towards a new anti-Western and hardline orientation (ADIB-MOGHADDAM, ARSHIN, 2005). The Islamic Revolution, based on the idea of *mardom salari dini* (Islamic democracy) complemented by *velayat e faqih* (jurisprudence), essentially rejected the interests of superpowers and opposed the existing world order (Tabriz & Behrooz, 2014). Many international actors openly opposed Iran's views on the international stage.

The Middle East has been the focus of the United States for decades, with its influence increasing since the end of the Cold War. During that era, the region's oil resources, along with its communist-leaning governments, became a battleground in the geopolitical struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, the US strengthened its military presence in the region as a way to contain Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the clerical government in Iran (, 2021). Many countries have attempted to shape international nuclear norms: established countries and new powers such as the United States, Russia, China, and India; "good" international citizens such as Canada, Germany, and Sweden; and non-aligned reformists and revolutionaries such as Egypt, South Africa, Iran, and North Korea. In most of these cases, the direction of normative advocacy has actually been contrary to the norms of the NPT as they are generally understood (Ruble et al, 2018).

In 1991, two historically hostile countries, India and Pakistan, signed an agreement not to attack each other's nuclear facilities. They realized that far more worrisome than their enemy's nuclear deterrent was the instability caused by challenging it. Since then, even in the face of high tensions and risky provocations, both countries have maintained peace. Israel and Iran should consider this precedent. If Iran had nuclear weapons, Israel and Iran would deter each other, as nuclear states always do (Waltz & Kenneth N, 2012). If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, deterrence will prevail, even though Iran's arsenal will be relatively small. No other country in the region will have an incentive to acquire its own nuclear capability, and the current crisis will eventually subside, leading to a more stable

Middle East than exists today. Therefore, the United States and its allies need not go to great lengths to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Efforts to promote democracy and freedom have been a permanent feature of US foreign policy projections. Based on a belief deeply rooted in American political culture about the exceptional quality of the US and its mission to lead the world toward freedom, successive administrations in Washington have placed the promotion of democracy at the core of their foreign policy declarations. Whether in the fight against the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union or in the defeat of terrorism, which was seen as an existential threat to the American way of life, democracy was presented as the solution (Akbarzadeh & Shahram, 2011). The US has also been involved in promoting democratization in the region, as seen through initiatives such as the *Middle East Partnership Initiative* (MEPI), although these efforts have yielded mixed results. Nevertheless, political instability and the persistence of authoritarian regimes still dominate the region. The US has been forced to balance its advocacy for democratic reform with the realities of strategic interests, often choosing stability over political change (Zazai et al, 2025).

Domestic Politics

Differences in views and ideologies, particularly in domestic politics, between the United States and Iran can influence foreign policy. In Iran, the world's only Shiite regime, Shiite jurisprudence provides the foundation for the country's contemporary strategic culture. This jurisprudence centers on the principle of *maslahat*, which offers an inferential tool for the Supreme Leader to "decide the fate of the Islamic community ()" in strategic dilemmas, including issuing fatwas that temporarily suspend certain Islamic provisions (Eslami et al, 2022). Decision-making in Shia jurisprudence is based on the supreme leader's understanding of conditions in the Islamic state, which then leads to specific strategic actions. However, as mentioned, there are a number of Shia principles that are crucial to understanding Iran's strategic actions.

Iran's theocracy filters its interactions with the international community through the lens of Quranic law. This constitutional requirement means that the elite clerics will formulate moderate policies slowly, if at all. Despite the conservative approach inherent in the *Mullahs*, there has been a policy shift that, on the surface, appears to contradict religious dogma (Cain & Christopher, 2002). Perhaps most significant, and alarming from a weapons of mass destruction proliferation perspective, is the reversal of Ayatollah Khomeini's policy, based on the Qur'anic prohibition of the use of poison, during the Iran-Iraq War condemning the use of chemical weapons including nuclear or biological weapons. This decision was made after Iranian forces suffered heavy losses from Iraqi chemical weapons attacks (Ali & Javed, 2001). Iran has a very strong theocratic system in which the position of Supreme Leader is considered to be that of an Imam representing the voice of God, which naturally positions the individual appointed or sent as Supreme Leader as the strategic decision-maker for Iran.

As Supreme Leader, Khamenei's constitutional authority is unmatched. The Imam controls the main wheels of the state judiciary, military, and media by appointing the heads

of the judiciary, state radio and television, the regular armed forces, and the elite Revolutionary Guard. He also has effective control over the second most powerful institution in Iran, the Guardian Council, a twelve-member body (all of whom are directly or indirectly appointed by Khamenei) that has the authority to vet election candidates and veto parliamentary decisions (Sadjadpour & Karim, 2009).

Economic Capabilities and Military Capabilities

Economic Capabilities

US economic cooperation assistance to countries in the Middle East and North Africa is intended to support long-standing US foreign policy objectives for the region, such as containing Iranian influence, combating terrorism, and promoting Israeli-Arab peace (Lawrence & Robert Z, 2006). The spread of democracy and economic liberalization are among the factors behind the United States' foreign policy in the Middle East. This is because the Middle East has lagged behind in economic and educational development and is dependent on the energy resources in its region (Pollack & Kenneth M, 2006).

This aid also aims to support the US response to emerging challenges, such as the US. With 63 percent of the world's proven oil resources and 37 percent of its natural gas, it seems ironic that the Middle East and North Africa are also the largest recipients of US foreign aid. In addition to fossil fuel, the region is also rich in minerals and other crops, giving it a GDP per capita twice as high as the average developing country, even higher than former socialist transition countries. Poverty is relatively low in MENA, with only 1.6 percent of the population earning less than \$1 per capita per day (Root et al, 2016).

Supporters of the *Maximum Pressure* Policy expected that maximum pressure would cause the collapse of Iran's political regime due to economic disaster and widespread public dissatisfaction with increasingly severe sanctions. However, in Iran's domestic politics, hardliners gained complete control over the state structure and the economy, which, despite experiencing a recession in the first year, began to experience moderate growth in subsequent years. The IMF estimates Iran's GDP growth for 2022 at 2%. Combined with an average growth of 3% over the previous two years, this would place Tehran at 95% of its pre-Trump administration "*Maximum Pressure*" condition. It should be emphasized that the rise in energy commodity prices after February 24, 2022, is likely to contribute to a stronger recovery in growth, possibly even above 4% of GDP (Office of the US Trade Representative, 2025).

The US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2021-2024 is as follows: GDP in 2021 reached \$23,681.18 billion, in 2022 it was \$26,006.9 billion, in 2023 it was \$27,720.73 billion, and in 2024 it was \$29,184.9 billion. In terms of growth rate, 2021 saw an increase of 6.06%, 2022 saw an increase of 2.51%, and 2023 and 2024 saw an increase of 2.8% (World Bank, 2025). This steady increase indicates that the US economy is growing steadily based on GDP. Total U.S. merchandise trade with the Middle East and North Africa is projected to reach \$141.7 billion in 2024. U.S. merchandise exports to MENA in 2024 will reach \$80.4 billion, up 5.8% (\$4.4 billion) compared to 2023. U.S. imports of goods from MENA reached \$61.3 billion in

2024, down 1.6 percent (\$1.0 billion) compared to 2023. The U.S. goods trade surplus with the Middle East reached \$19.1 billion in 2024, an increase of 39.8 percent (\$5.4 billion) compared to 2023.

Military Capabilities

Iranian leaders consistently claim that Iran's military strategy is essentially defensive, relying on deterrence to maintain the country's security in the face of external threats. The United States, Israel, and Arab countries around the Persian Gulf have always viewed Iran as a major threat to them, especially after the development of Iran's nuclear program since 2003 and its uranium enrichment to 84% in 2023, which coincided with the rapid advancement of Iran's intercontinental ballistic missile, hypersonic, and drone programs¹ (Eslami et al, 2022). Iran's post-Revolution strategic challenges began immediately with the war against Iraq, followed by the war against terrorism and ISIS, as well as proxy wars in the region (Eslami, *Shia Geopolitics or Religious Tourism? Political Convergence of Iran and Iraq in the Light of Arbāeen Pilgrimage*). However, the country has always faced comprehensive threats from the United States and Israel (Jahromi & Ghanbari, 2015). The military capabilities of the US government's war training show that morality and tradition inform expert decision-making on the use of nuclear weapons in crisis simulations, confirming that the logic of conformity greatly influences behavior in this critical area of nuclear politics (Rubble et al, 2018).

The United States itself has dynamics related to military capabilities that are reinforced by economic ties between arms sales, private contractors, and logistics companies, as well as by the circulation of former military officers as formal and informal advisors to governments and militaries in the region. The militaristic nature of US Middle East policy is supported by the interests of countries in the region in US security commitments, which also help protect their regimes from domestic threats. These countries often seek to maintain U.S. security commitments by maintaining political pressure and influence in Washington through direct lobbying, support for think tanks, and indirect economic influence through arms purchases (Hazbun & Waleed, 2023).

Decision Making

American leaders have articulated a spectrum of crucial (and sometimes less crucial) interests in the Middle East. These interests have fluctuated across administrations and historical periods, but have consistently included ensuring the smooth flow of oil and maintaining Israel's security. The United States has also voiced a firm commitment to preventing further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

Once Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, deterrence will take effect, even though Iran's arsenal will be relatively small. No other country in the region will have an incentive to acquire its own nuclear capability, and the current crisis will eventually subside, leading to a more stable Middle East than at present. Therefore, the United States and its allies need not go to great lengths to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons (Waltz). Diplomacy between Iran and major countries must continue, as open lines of communication will make Western countries feel more capable of coexisting with a nuclear-armed Iran. However, the current sanctions against Iran can be lifted: they mainly harm the

Iranian people, with little benefit (Waltz) . Chapter Four will present the results of research combining the values of identity, norms, and national interests of the United States that were formed through past events that can influence the foreign policy-making process. There are four indicators analyzed, namely International Context, Domestic Politics, Economic and Military Capabilities, which will influence decision makers.

E. Conclusion

The relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution continues to be marked by multidimensional tensions, covering political, economic, military, and ideological aspects. Iran's nuclear program is one of the main factors deepening the conflict, given that the United States views this development as a serious threat to the stability of the Middle East and the global order. Meanwhile, Iran considers mastery of nuclear technology to be part of its efforts to protect its national interests and balance of power in the region, especially in the face of Israel and Western hegemony. The dynamics of the relationship between these two countries show how identity, international norms, and national interests influence each other in the formation of foreign policy. The United States, with its ideology of democracy and anti-tyranny values, emphasizes the importance of preventing nuclear proliferation through maximum pressure, sanctions, and limited diplomacy. Conversely, Iran, through its Shiite theocracy framework, views its nuclear program not only as a defensive instrument, but also as a symbol of political sovereignty and an ideology of resistance against foreign domination.

From a geopolitical perspective, US-Iran relations cannot be separated from the dynamics of the Cold War, great power rivalry, and the international hierarchical structure that distinguishes between countries that are "entitled" and "not entitled" to possess nuclear weapons. International context, domestic politics, and the economic and military capabilities of both countries have proven to be important indicators in determining the direction of policy. Thus, the relationship between the United States and Iran reflects the complex reality of global politics, which is fraught with conflicts of interest, ideology, and status. Going forward, inclusive diplomacy and sustained dialogue are the only way to prevent further escalation. However, the success of these efforts depends heavily on the willingness of both parties to balance their national interests with international norms in order to create stability in the Middle East and global peace.

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