

CONFRONTING TRUMP'S POLICY TOWARDS IRAN WITH OBAMA'S: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

VÍTOR RAMON FERNANDES

vrf@edu.ulusiada.pt

Assistant Professor, Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa (Portugal).
Integrated Researcher, CEJEIA, Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa.
Adjunct Professor, Sciences Po Aix..

Abstract

The article argues that President Trump's policy change towards Iran—and the Middle East more broadly—during his first term was motivated by a shift in external structural conditions caused by his predecessor's policy. More specifically, President Obama's signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—commonly known as the 'Iran nuclear agreement'—amid his Middle East policy led to a change in the external environment that was perceived by President Trump as an external threat from a domestic point of view. The change in the external environment led to a change in foreign policy with domestic-level factors intervening between the external driver and the strategic response. From an international relations theory perspective, the idea that great powers can induce shifts in the regional distribution of power that create threats at a systemic level and that individual states adjust their foreign policy behaviours to systemic outcomes is consistent with the neoclassical realist framework. The article also confronts Trump's Middle East policy with Obama's arguing that, apart from different styles, both presidents essentially adopted different tactics to pursue U.S. interests.

Keywords

U.S. Foreign Policy, Neoclassical Realism, Trump, Obama, Iran.

Resumo

O artigo argumenta que a decisão do Presidente Trump de alterar a política em relação ao Irão, e ao Médio Oriente em geral, durante o seu primeiro mandato foi motivada por uma alteração nas condições estruturais externas causada pela política seguida pelo seu antecessor. Mais especificamente, a assinatura do Plano de Ação Conjunto Global (PACG) pelo Presidente Obama — vulgarmente conhecido como o 'Acordo nuclear iraniano' — no âmbito da sua política para o Médio Oriente provocou uma alteração no ambiente externo que foi percebida pelo Presidente Trump como uma ameaça externa do ponto de vista doméstico. A alteração no ambiente externo levou a uma alteração de política externa em que fatores domésticos interferiram entre o estímulo externo e a resposta estratégica. De um ponto de vista da teoria das relações internacionais, a ideia de que as grandes potências podem provocar mudanças regionais na distribuição de poder, criando ameaças ao nível sistémico, e que os Estados ajustam a sua política externa face a ocorrências sistémicas é consistente com o modelo realista neoclássico. O artigo compara também a política do Presidente Trump para o Médio Oriente com a do Presidente Obama argumentando que, para além de estilos



diferentes, ambos os presidentes adotaram essencialmente táticas diferentes na persecução dos interesses norte-americanos.

Palavras-chave

Política Externa Norte-americana, Realismo Neoclássico, Trump, Obama, Irão.

How to cite this article

Fernandes, Vítor Ramon (2025). Confronting Trump's Policy Towards Iran with Obama's: Neoclassical Realism and Strategic Change. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL. 16, Nº. 1. May-October 2025, pp. 20-37. DOI <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.16.1.2>.

Article submitted on 22th July 2024 and accepted for publication on 24th September 2024.





CONFRONTING TRUMP'S POLICY TOWARDS IRAN WITH OBAMA'S: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND STRATEGIC CHANGE

VÍTOR RAMON FERNANDES¹

Introduction

Differently from previous periods relations between the U.S. and Iran have never been good since the hostage crisis in the U.S. Embassy in Teheran at the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran back in 1979. Nevertheless, during the Obama presidency an agreement was signed in an attempt to soften tensions between the two countries and to counter Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. This agreement—known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (hereafter JCPOA) and also as the 'Iran nuclear deal'—was the result of a negotiation process that was signed in Vienna on July 14 2015 between Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, and the European Union (EU). Following that, it was adopted in October 2015 and began to be implemented by mid-January 2016.² Later, President Trump decided to withdraw from the JCPOA considering it a very bad deal. In effect, the JCPOA was always a source of great debate in the U.S. and never really generated consensus.

Against this background the article argues that the policy change by President Trump relative to Obama was due to a perception of threat increase caused by a change in the external environment resulting from the signature of the JCPOA under President Obama. Indeed, great powers can provoke regional shifts in the distribution of power, which create threats at a systemic level (Lobell, 2009: 49).³ In this particular case the argument is that the signature of the JCPOA is considered to have created a change in the distribution of power between Iran and its neighbouring countries, notably Israel and several Arab countries in addition to the U.S.. This created a new threat that was in itself the main trigger for the change in U.S. policy in which domestic factors also intervened. The article argues that this situation is consistent with the neoclassical realist framework of strategic adjustment. Further to that the article analyses comparatively President Obama and President Trump's foreign policies towards Iran and the Middle East region more broadly with respect to their expected objectives and argues that, apart from

¹ I wish to thank Inderjeet Parmar, Professor of International Politics at City, University of London, and two anonymous referees for helpful written comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² The full text of the document is available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf.

³ On threats assessment within neoclassical realism, see Lobell (2009: 42-74).



different styles, both presidents essentially adopted different tactics to pursue U.S. interests.

Overall, the article has four purposes. First, to argue that the policy change by Trump is consistent with the neoclassical realist framework (hereafter NCR). Second, to challenge the idea that President Trump's foreign policy was just based on a will to reverse as much of President Obama's policies as possible—as with the "Obamacare", the TPP, and the Paris Agreement—to make up for a lack of strategy. Third, to argue that the main aim of Trump's foreign policy compared to Obama's was to isolate Iran with the possible objective of bringing about a regime change in this country, and to cause a rebalancing of the Middle East region in favour of the U.S. other long-standing allies and of U.S. interests. Fourth, that this was a tactical shift towards Iran in particular and the Middle East more broadly that might belie a strategic shift in U.S. thinking towards the Middle East. Overall, the argument is that both presidents basically wished to promote U.S. goals in terms of U.S. grand strategy that may not be that different and that the most significant difference between the two concerns their tactical approach and style.

The article is organized as follows. Following a short introduction, I survey and set up the general theoretical framework that underlines the rest of the article. Following that I outline the general contours of the terms of relations between the United States and Iran since World War II. Then, I examine the Middle East foreign policy of President Obama and in particular what that led to in terms of consequences for the U.S. in the region. After that I assess President Trump's policy towards the Middle East region and show how it contrasted with his predecessor. This is followed by a more detailed comparison between two different foreign policy options with respect to Iran and the Middle East more broadly by these two very distinct U.S. presidents, Barak Obama and Donald Trump, more specifically the 44th and the 45th Presidents of the United States of America, although focusing the attention on the latter within the NCR framework. The article ends with some final remarks.

The general theoretical framework

The analysis undertaken here is considered to be consistent with the NCR approach to international politics. NCR seeks to provide a realist theory of foreign policy to explain strategic choices of states instead of just considering the structural effects of power in international relations and states' relations. The fundamental and most important idea is that domestic-level factors intervene between external drivers and strategic response, but the framework also seeks to highlight the limits of political choice faced by the foreign policy executive (hereafter FPE) when reacting to structural constraints.

This presents a change relative to structural realism, which argues that given the characteristics of the international system and the conditions of anarchy and self-help "the pressures of competition weight more heavily than ideological preferences or internal political pressures" (Waltz, 1986: 329). As a theory of international politics that is concerned with macro-outcomes at the structural level what that means is that in the long run states that choose to ignore those structural constraints will risk losing out in balance of power terms.



According to Waltz the fundamental idea is to highlight the major characteristics of the international system independently of the units that exist in the system. This does not mean, nor imply, that the foreign policy adopted by the units—in this particular case the states—should be excluded. It only means that it is not an essential element for establishing a theory of international relations (Waltz, 1996: 56). According to Waltz it is necessary to distinguish foreign policy from general theory. Nevertheless, those foreign policy variables are important and may be included in the analysis despite not being essential for theory building (Waltz, 2008: 89). The main point here is that the behaviour of states is strongly conditioned by structural factors and by a struggle for security and survival independently of the nature of the political regime and its societal preferences (Waltz, 1979).

However, structural realism in itself tells us nothing about how states go about processing the pressures and the incentives in the short term or about how they choose to act or react. Differently, NCR is a theory of foreign policy that seeks to fill that gap, that is, to provide a means of analysing why and how states respond to specific pressures in particular ways. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of the permissiveness of the structural environment in determining the impact of domestic level intervening variables on foreign policy outcomes (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). The basic idea behind NCR is that the systemic environment provides the starting point but that domestic intervening variables also play a significant role in determining foreign policy outcomes.

As an essential part of the model the NCR framework has four categories established that affect the FPE's response to systemic stimuli. Those are: leader images and beliefs, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016: 58-79). This article does not address the four categories of the model in detail. Instead, it puts its attention on the first of these intervening variables, that is the leader images and beliefs, which includes the individual decision makers in the FPE. These individuals include the president and all those involved in the conduct of foreign policy. The viewpoint that is adopted here is that in this particular case each of these two presidents was the most important decision-maker and the ultimate responsible for foreign policy choices within the FPE, albeit not the only one (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016: 123). That is, other actors and policymakers' viewpoints matter on what concerns the formulation of foreign policy as is traditionally considered in the foreign policy analysis literature (Alden & Aran 2017; Beasley et al, 2013; Hill, 2003; Mintz & Derouen Jr, 2010; Neack, 2019; Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016; Smith, Hadfield, & Dunne, 2016). As a result, in order to explain the policy change within the Trump administration the policy stance of some of the most relevant members of that administration is also taken into consideration with regards to the policy decisions bearing in mind the perception of threat (Breuning, 2007).

The state of relations between the U.S. and Iran since World War II

After the end of World War II Iran was a close ally of the United States. The United States always seemed willing to provide support inclusive military to Iran in its pursuit of regional dominance. The reason for that was that for quite some time despite its wealth it was not obvious that Saudi Arabia would be able to compete for regional dominance.



This was the case since the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 23 1932 but also even after the emergence of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in the early 1930s and the importance of oil for the U.S.. In essence, this idea resulted from the size of the population of Iran and its military capabilities (Halliday, 1979: 248-9). Nevertheless, in this competition and taking advantage of the importance of oil Riyadh was also able to foster relations with Washington, which resulted in important military ties (Al-Rasheed, 2002: 118-9). Indeed, at some stage the United States was able to establish and maintain close ties both with Saudi Arabia and Iran. In addition to the oil interests one of the U.S. Middle East policy concerns until the end of the Cold War "...was to keep the Arab states away from Soviet influence." (Ross & Makovsly, 2009: 38).

Relations with Iran suffered a blow when the United States and the United Kingdom put together a coup in August 1953 through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), respectively. Both organized a coup to overthrow Mohammed Mosaddeq—the prime minister of Iran at the time—who had been democratically elected and was greatly appreciated by the people in general. The coup—known under the code name of Operation Ajax—was a response to Mosaddeq's decision to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Britain had been unhappy with Mosaddeq for quite some time and had attempted to bring down his government on several occasions (Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004: 6). Given that the British had already withdrawn from the country and seen their influence significantly reduced it was not possible for them to change the political situation and replace Mosaddeq without external assistance. In light of this they decided to request the support of the United States basing their arguments on concerns related to the Cold War and arguing that there was a risk of an expansion by the ex-Soviet Union in the region in general and Iran in particular. After several attempts they were able to convince President Eisenhower and the United States agreed to participate in the coup (Dueck, 2010: 103). Significantly, the Shah accepted the coup taking place and was happy to get rid of Mosaddeq although he was also very apprehensive if it were to fail (Rahnema, 2015: 14).

In the aftermath of the coup and with the support of the West Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi turned the country into a fierce dictatorship. But all this was not without other consequences. Until 1953 Britain was considered by Iranians in general as a colonial and imperialist country while the United States was seen as anti-imperialist and a friend of Iran. However, after the 1953 coup the United States generated an anti-American sentiment among the general population and was considered a traitor. This occurred despite the friendly relations with the Shah and the support to its regime. That sentiment has never disappeared since.

Following the events of 1979 in Iran as the Islamic Revolution took place the situation changed again, but this time much more dramatically. This time around it altered both the terms of the relation between Washington and Tehran as well as the rivalry and regional security conditions in the region. In effect, that event was the major turning point in the relations between the United States and Iran that has since been considered from a U.S. viewpoint a major security risk by U.S. governments and by Americans at large. Iran became a security threat to the United States and since 1979 most U.S. presidents have in some form voiced concerns over Iran. Interestingly, despite that in regional terms and in spite of being suspicious of each other and of their rivalry both



Saudi Arabia and Iran have managed to coexist (Halliday, 2000:119). In fact, a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia was brokered by Beijing around mid-2023 with the objective of rapprochement or at least of defining long-lasting peaceful terms of engagement (Jash, 2023; Cafiero, 2024).

Obama's foreign policy towards the Middle east

Oddly enough analysing President Obama's foreign policy towards the Middle East and Iran in particular helps understand President Trump's foreign policy in the region. Obama's main priorities were more targeted towards domestic issues such as transforming the United States into a more liberal and equitable society. As a result, the focus concerning foreign policy evolved around changing the American policy stance in the world to a more friendly and appeased image notably towards foreigners and Muslims in particular.⁴ This was also specially contrasting with the George W. Bush era (Kindsay, 2011). With respect to foreign policy the discourse seemed to be based on a need to convey the image of a conciliatory president committed to diplomacy and multilateralism directed at improving the United States' image in the world and in particular with respect to the Middle East. That included Iran as well (Indyk, Lieberthal, & O'Hanlon, 2012: 1; Nasr, 2013: 2).

This was particularly noticeable during Obama's first term, but it can also be traced throughout his entire presidency. Obama's attitude, which reflected his belief was that by adopting a posture of retrenchment and disengagement from the international geopolitical arena and by accepting other countries' interests in a more generous manner without harming U.S. national interests and security concerns that would lead to reciprocal behaviour (Dueck, 2015: 36-37). However, and most significantly there also seemed to be a sheer disbelief in the capabilities of American power in the world—especially military power—and most notably compared to other Democrat predecessor's such as President Bill Clinton and in terms of the ability of the United States to maintain its unrivalled position of dominant power in the world (Mann, 2012: 72). This was also a major change in attitude compared to President George W. Bush's exaggerations.

Nevertheless, as always occurs policy evolves, and presidents learn as they move along their mandates. By 2011 Daniel Drezner argued that there was a policy attitude adjustment in Obama's foreign policy and grand strategy that was composed of two elements and that was less accommodating: 'multilateral retrenchment' and 'counterpunching' (Drezner, 2011). The expression 'multilateral retrenchment' referred to the reduction of U.S. commitments abroad and the attempt to shift part of the burden to allies around the world while 'counterpunching' referred to Obama's willingness to assert American influence in the world at times when the United States was being challenged.

Overall, the main idea that seemed to prevail was a will to disengage from the region and to accommodate occurring events taking place at the time as much as possible or at least to engage as little as possible. This became apparent during the so-called 'Arab

⁴ Remarks by President Obama to the Muslim world, delivered on June 4 2009, at Cairo University. White House. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning>.



Spring', which began in Tunisia in 2010. At the time President Obama pretty much sympathized with demonstrators in many of the Arab countries where protests and street manifestations were taking place and accepted what seemed to be their claims for democracy and human rights. One of the most striking signals of this posture was how quick he was in pressuring a long-standing U.S. ally, President Hosni Mubarak from Egypt, to step down from office in February 2011 and seemed to fully accept the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in that country, which reached its highest point with the election of President Mohamed Morsi. This was somewhat surprising for many given the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood had always had, and still has, an anti-western discourse. He also called for an open dialogue with countries such as Iran (Trager, 2011).

On what concerned Iraq as was the case with Afghanistan the central preoccupation was to end those two wars as soon as possible. In much of 2011 the focus of Obama's presidency remained very much to withdraw from Iraq as was also promised forcefully on September 6 2012 during his re-election campaign. However, in the end Obama's strategy towards Iraq swung between U.S. engagement and retrenchment albeit with engagement decreasing in 2011-12. Although President Obama had already declared a formal end to U.S. combat operations in Iraq in August 2010 there were still U.S. forces present in that country for security and stabilization purposes. These were part of a three-year security agreement that had originally been negotiated by President George W. Bush and Iraq's Shi'a Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2008 just before the end of his presidency (Indyk, Lieberthal & O'Hanlon, 2012: 76). In 2011 it was also time to renegotiate the U.S.-Iraqi security agreement—a new Status of Forced Agreement (SOFA)—that would lead to maintaining some U.S. forces in the country and under certain specific circumstances (Mason, 2012). However, that became a problem as Obama was also preparing to run for re-election and that obviously came into collusion with his election promises. Ultimately, only about 10,000 U.S. military were left in Iraq, a number that was considered insufficient for the task at hand and a considerable risk for the security of Iraq and to U.S. security interests (Nasr, 2013: 148-150).

The military intervention in Libya in 2011, albeit not just involving the United States, also failed to take into consideration that those types of operations—particularly with a view to regime change—cannot be undertaken lightly and with the least involvement possible in the hope that locals are able to stabilize the situation in a peaceful and straightforward manner following military intervention (Hehir & Murray, 2013). In fact, after defending intervention in Libya in 2011 the state of confusion and chaos that ensued afterwards was responsible for many of Obama's hesitations concerning Syria, most notably with regards to military action as he later admitted. Overall, the specific case of Syria is also illustrative of Obama's friendly and optimistic approach to foreign policy but also of his sudden policy shifts. At the beginning of his presidency there was the hope of establishing a working relation with President Bashar al-Assad believing that he could be helpful in brokering peace negotiations with Israel, particularly related to the Palestinian problem. However, this did not prove to be very fruitful or propitious (Indyk, Lieberthal & O'Hanlon, 2012: 167-168). Later, the situation swung to an idea of regime change and the need for Assad to step down (Dueck, 2015: 85). Following that in August 2011 Obama announced the famous "red line" that would lead to military intervention if chemical weapons were to be used by the Assad regime against civilians. But that was as far as he went on that matter. The failure to act based on what seemed to be the evidence at



the time was considered by many to have caused severe damage to U.S. credibility in the region and possibly well beyond. In the meantime, Iran—Syria's long-standing ally at the time—continued to maintain if not even increase its presence in the country.

Assessing Trump's Middle East foreign policy

The speech by President Trump at the 73rd United Nations General Assembly on September 25 2018 and at the 8362nd Security Council meeting the following day—as he chaired the Security Council meeting given that the presidency of the Council was being held by the United States of America—placed particular emphasis on Iran. To a large extent it also set the tone of his approach. According to President Trump Iran had been and continued to be a promotor of international terrorism, to engage in illicit actions promoting violence, and in developing its ballistic missile program. There were several other items on President Trump's speeches that were mentioned but Iran clearly took centre stage and was one of the top priorities. In his own words at the United Nations Security Council Briefing on Counterproliferation: "The regime is the world's leading sponsor of terror and fuels conflict across the region (referring to the Middle East) and far beyond. A regime with such a track record must never be allowed to possess a nuclear weapon".⁵ He also stated that these were the reasons why the U.S. decided to withdraw earlier in the year from the JCPOA. Following that the United States decided to impose sanctions on Iran, which went into full effect by early November. Further to that additional sanctions were announced that should be even stronger and more dramatic to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities and to change its behaviour. This line of reasoning came on top of a series of comments and actions directed against Iran since President Trump took office on January 20 2017 that basically condemned the Iranian regime. Overall, this was in sharp contrast to what was a more conciliatory approach adopted by President Obama.

Indeed, Iran was the main focus of Trump's policy towards the Middle East with the country considered responsible for most of the existing problems in the region and for funding terrorist activities (Nasr, 2018: 108). In this regard by focusing on Iran as a threat President Trump was by no means an exception amongst U.S. Presidents, quite the opposite as noted above. In addition, besides the fact that President Trump's opinions on Iran were well-known several other members if not most of his administration also tended to hold a very hard-line on Iran. Vice-President Mike Pence, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and National Security Advisor John Bolton, among many others were all in favour of a hard line on Iran. Somewhat differently Secretary of Defence James Mattis considered that the U.S. should stay in the JCPOA and often times took a softer stance on Iran compared to other members of the Trump administration but overall was also considered to be a hard-liner on Iran. At the same time there was also a will to strengthen relations with the Arab countries in the region with a view to a future normalisation of relations with Israel.

For some this policy change—among others above mentioned—was considered as a means to make up for a lack of strategy (Zenko & Lissner, 2017). While it is true that

⁵ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-United-nations-security-council-briefing-counterproliferation-new-york-ny/>.



Trump reversed many of his predecessor's decisions this is not uncommon between presidents of the United States. In fact, nearly most of the presidents during the Cold War repudiated their predecessor's strategy and often considered it inadequate to deal with the challenges at the time (Gaddis, 2005). In that respect much of the difference between those previous occasions with their specific circumstances and this one, which is significant, concerned to a large extent the style adopted.

Significantly, Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East began to take form shortly after the beginning of his presidency with his first foreign visit, which was to Saudi Arabia in April 2017. This visit was symbolic because it showed the Trump's administration commitment to strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia—with a total of \$350 billion in deals that were signed in Riyadh—but also in terms of military equipment given that \$110 billion were in American-made weapons. The arms component was particularly significant because it indicated that a military reinforcement of Saudi Arabia's military capabilities was a priority to the United States given the perceived threat posed by Iran. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile noting that Saudi Arabia had been fighting the Houthis in Yemen and so increasing its military capabilities was also a priority. Notwithstanding, the overall stability of Saudi Arabia was very important to Saudi Arabia and the U.S. given the existing economic and financial links between them. In fact, it was no less important to the U.S. than to Saudi Arabia. Broadly speaking Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East was consistent with the notion of "calibrated strategies" attempting to balance the necessity of growth and strategy with the environment's reality and the necessary pragmatism concerning implementation. Within that context, Trump's Middle East foreign policy would seem to follow a model of multilateral leadership accompanied by diplomatic negotiations (Dombrowski & Reich, 2017: 1036).

President Trump also tried to generate enthusiasm within six Gulf Arab states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE) plus Egypt and Jordan for the creation of a security and political alliance to counter Iran's expansion known as Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). The creation of MESA was somewhat of a further development of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, this proved to be a difficult task given that the latter had been in somewhat of a crisis since 2011 notably due to a number of events related to political, religious, economic, and social divergences between many of its members. And the situation if anything seemed to have gotten worse particularly due to tensions related to Qatar. Indeed, "In the summer of 2017, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), widely regarded as one of the most stable regional organizations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was hit by the gravest crisis since its formation" (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018: 613).

Despite that President Trump announced in early August 2018 that a meeting about MESA would take place on October 12-13 although the meeting was postponed due to the Middle East disputes involving Qatar. Comments issued by Qatar, notably over Israel, Iran, Hamas, and accusations of links to terrorism were not well received by several Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, and generated tensions with the Trump administration. But other difficulties existed due to different security perceptions by many of the Gulf Arab states. Be that as it may, irrespective of how events unfolded all seemed geared towards the objective of trying to isolate Iran and reorganize the region through the development of military partnerships. This was to be carried out through the increase in



defence capabilities that would prevent threats on the part of Iran and would significantly diminish its capacity to intervene in the region.

The U.S. support to Saudi Arabia in Yemen began in late March 2015 well before Trump becoming the 45th President of the United States. Then, there were some unofficial justifications connecting the U.S. participation to obtaining the Gulf monarchies' leaders support to the Iran deal. This was a time when the U.S. was working towards signing the JCPOA and some sort of acceptance on the part of Saudi Arabia was needed to avoid matters getting off-track. The U.S. support to Saudi Arabia was deemed necessary in order to reconcile Saudi Arabia with the idea of the signing of the JCPOA given that Iran was helping rebels in Yemen in an area that was strategically critical for Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, there was some scaling back towards the end of Obama's mandate.

However, after Trump's election U.S. support to Saudi Arabia increased again consisting of arms sales and various types of technical and logistics support. And this happened with the benefit of a majority vote by the U.S. Senate following a previous attempt to put an end to that support by some U.S. Senators. Despite that there were some warnings against Saudi Arabia by the international community when force was employed against innocent civilians such as the strike at a school bus that killed forty children. All in all, the main justification for the overall support of Saudi Arabia by the U.S. would seem to have been to prevent Iran from gaining further influence in the region while providing assistance and support to a traditional allied state.

On August 16 2018 there was also the announcement of the creation of the Iran Action Group led by Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook with a view to address what the current U.S. administration considered to be the security threat that the Iran regime presented (Pompeo, 2018). The role of the Iran Action Group was essentially to coordinate actions among various U.S. agencies on matters related to Iran and to coordinate policy with the nations that shared the U.S. understanding of the threat that Iran posed. It seems that there was a clear intention to stimulate and coordinate some type of collective thinking on Iran that militated towards its isolation. This strategy was not without risks given that it could push Iran even further towards Russia, India, and China. In fact, that became evident with Iran's participation as an observer state at the 18th meeting of the Council of Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Qingdao in June 2018 while the annual G7 Summit was also taking place in Canada, more specifically in Charlevoix. Since then, in addition to Iran being a member of the SCO "Today, Russia and China effectively shelter Iran from complete isolation and provide it with political support, defence assistance, and economic ties that it cannot receive elsewhere" (Esfandiary & Tabatabai, 2018: 2). Given those risks the policy adopted provided further support to the idea that the strategy was to weaken Iran as much as possible, and probably to lead to regime change. Finally, in order to try to further stabilise and bring peace to the Middle East President Trump facilitated the Abraham Accords in 2020 with the objective of normalising diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states.

For some at a discourse level Iran has played a significant role within U.S. foreign policy over time and often times that has even tended to amplify the security concern given that Iran does not pose a direct danger to the U.S. that matches the level of attention that it attracts (Villar, 2016). However, within the economic circumstances between the



U.S. and Saudi Arabia then it is easy to understand the hype about Iran. Nevertheless, the fact is that under President Biden the situation did not change much with respect to Iran due to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza.

Obama and Trump's policy choices towards Iran: a comparison

The objective of signing the JCPOA was to counter Iran's development of nuclear infrastructures and capabilities that were considered a threat to international security (Joyner, 2016). Previously, at the time of the George W. Bush Administration there had been negotiations, but they were often at a standstill (Guldimann, 2007). At the time the negotiations were frequently instrumentalised and led to misperceptions and misunderstandings that could have led to confrontation (Jervis, 2013; Maleki & Tirman, 2014). However, this was neither the only nor the main reason for the failure of the negotiations then. In fact, well before 2013 Iran attempted to diplomatically solve disputes on several occasions. One such example occurred in March 2003 with Iran offering a comprehensive deal—which later became known as the "Great Bargain"—in order to try to have sanctions removed. However, that proposal was rejected by the U.S. for reasons not yet fully understood (Leverett & Leverett, 2013: 122-124). Also, in 2005 Iran had again tried to have sanctions removed given their negative effects on its economy and for that purpose even approached representatives of the European countries namely France, Germany and the UK, which had joined the U.S. in the negotiation process. But again, this was rejected and according to some European officials it was the responsibility of the U.S. (Axworthy, 2013: 384; Parchami, 2014).

Obama's approach to Iran followed a totally different path from President Bush. Coming through the war in Iraq and the intervention in Libya he was in a position of weakness. As a result, he decided to engage with the EU, Russia and China as a way to stabilize the Middle East and contain Iran's nuclear programme (Parsi, 2012). It was a way of partnering to promote U.S. goals and interests. The approach was also welcome by U.S. partners considering that Obama's diplomatic approach was more likely to yield positive results with Iran differently from Bush's refusal to engage in diplomacy (Parsi, 2017: 10-11). The agreement also fitted Iran's foreign policy goals under President Rouhani (Zarif, 2014: 58). Ultimately, the agreement was signed and began to be implemented in January 2016.

President Obama's idea was to prevent or at least delay to a significant extent Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the end result became unacceptable to many countries in the Middle East, most notably Israel and Saudi Arabia having been weary of the JCPOA from the very beginning and having never accepted the decision to negotiate with Iran (Rezaei, 2016; Kaye, 2016). Others in the U.S. considered the signing of the JCPOA as an example of bad policy given that they considered that the U.S. had made all the concessions at a time when Iran was heavily sanctioned but got all it wanted (Singh, 2016: 24-25).

Trump adopted a different tactical approach, which was more forceful and based strongly on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. He considered the signing of the JCPOA a threat to the U.S. and the Middle East region as a whole in terms of stability and regional security. At the same time, he abandoned the previous multilateral approach



involving the EU, Russia, and China, and also threatened Russia and China with sanctions given that they were—and still are—strategic rivals of the U.S. (NSS 2017; NDS 2018). Both countries were considered to be empowered under the whole negotiation process. Trump worried that the JCPOA would not prevent Iran from acquiring the nuclear bomb, which ultimately would force war between the U.S. and Iran, but he also worried about the reaction of Iran's neighbouring countries, in particular, Israel and Saudi Arabia (Simon, 2023: 360-2). The latter had showed some interest in acquiring nuclear power for economic purposes although not for military ones. That situation could change with the existence of the JCPOA.

Seen in a broader perspective, hostility towards Iran also seems to be what provided the cement that supported the relations between all the Gulf States and a country like Israel that was not known to be one of their main allies or partners, particularly given the Palestinian conflict. It is within that context that it can be understood that the JCPOA was also considered by the Trump administration to be a terrible deal, in fact, "the worst deal ever" (Nasr, 2018: 108). This was particularly the case with regards to the 'Sunset Clause'. This also explains why President Trump promised to dismantle it and made it his top priority (Allin & Simon, 2017: 42).

It itself this marked a considerable shift from Obama's policy in the region that is considered as a strategic adjustment to a change in structural conditions and that is consistent with NCR. From an international relations theory perspective, the signing of the JCPOA caused a change in the external environment, which was considered a threat that led to a policy response. Within this context it is worthwhile recalling some of the other main differences between Obama's foreign policy in the Middle East and Trump's that also provide support to this idea: 1) Obama pressured Israel on the Palestinian conflict favouring a 'two-state solution' and causing significant anxiety and nervousness among some Israelis. Nevertheless, he also generated some disappointment among Palestinians given that, ultimately, his policy was heavily skewed towards Israel (Ruebner, 2016). Differently, Trump appointed David Friedman as Ambassador to Israel, someone who held very conservative positions on Israel and had always been opposed to the 'two-state solution'; 2) Obama was considered unfriendly towards Israel whereas Trump had been extremely friendly and supportive of Israel as corroborated by his relationship with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; 3) Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the U.S. Embassy in Israel moved there from Tel Aviv. The relocation to Jerusalem occurred on May 14 2018 to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. Obama delayed its implementation on the basis of national security interests as had been the case with several other previous U.S. presidents; 4) Obama was open to signing an agreement with Iran while Trump rejected it and even told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel that Iran would never be allowed to have nuclear weapons. All these contrasting policy decisions are above all a tactical shift that may belie a strategic shift in U.S. thinking.



Conclusion

This article has several purposes as was outlined at the outset. President Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East was not simply a mere reversal of President Obama's policies as a way to make up for a lack of strategy. In fact, his policy reversal was a response to a perceived threat generated by his predecessor, which is consistent with neoclassical realism from an international relations theory perspective. Following his policy decisions Trump had a well-established policy that intended to isolate Iran within the region in order to preserve America's interest and establish security in the region. Obama adopted a more conciliatory policy towards Iran engaging the EU, China and Russia. His main objective was to withdraw as quickly as possible from the region, sign the JCPOA and allow for events to unfold, and for the region to somehow stabilize considering that U.S. interests would be met.

Trump adopted a different tactical approach more forceful and based strongly on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. He intended to lead those allied states in the Middle East in isolating and weakening Iran in order to safeguard U.S. interests and somewhat control events in the region. Following the choice of a number of very hard-liners on Iran belonging to his administration Trump was quick to strengthen U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and to display full support towards Israel. That included recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moving the U.S. Embassy there while making negative comments and remarks about the Iran's regime. In addition, a number of policy actions such as the creation of the Iran Action and the tentative set-up of MESA all point in the same direction, which is to reinforce an alliance to rebalance against Iran and reorganize the region. The support of Saudi Arabia in Yemen is just an addition to the remaining policy actions. Other decisions and actions in relation to other policy areas also provide support to the idea of an existing foreign policy strategy (Kroenig, 2017).

For some Trump's foreign policy marked a distinct breakup from the postwar western internationalist consensus (Stokes, 2018). After the dissolution of the Soviet Union following the end of the Cold War we witnessed the emergence of a unipolar international order with the U.S. surging as an unrivalled state in terms of preponderance and capabilities (Ikenberry, 2003). With the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the Iraq War in 2003 the U.S. was called by some an empire (Cox, 2004; Rosen, 2003). And on several occasions, particularly with the Bush doctrine, we saw unilateralism taking over.

However, there are distinct features associated with Trump's unilateralist policy, a new twist as it were, compared to other U.S. presidents with unilateralist tendencies. Many of Trump's policy decisions such as the withdrawal of the U.S. from the TPP, the rebuttal of the Paris Agreement and most significantly the decision to refute the JCPOA marked a unilateralism that seemed concerned with U.S. interests alone independently of any other impact and consequence on other states, even allies and partners. It has always been about U.S. interests, but not necessarily with a total disregard for other states' interests. It goes well beyond the decision-making process.

But beyond mere consequentialist concerns there was also a cost-benefit approach that seemed new in U.S. foreign policy and to be a radical departure from the more general internationalist approach that had informed U.S. foreign policy until Trump's election. Differently from others Trump's foreign policy did not wish to deepen a rules-based order,



but instead to pursue a self-centred and highly nationalist foreign policy. However, ultimately it is probably more of a different tactic rather than a different strategy.

References

- Alden, C. & Aran, A. (2017). *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches*. Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Al-Rasheed, M. (2002). *A History of Saudi Arabia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Allin, D. & Simon, S. (2017). «Trump and the Holy Land – First, Do No Harm». *Foreign Affairs* 96(2): 42.
- Axworthy, M. (2013). *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beasley, R., Kaarbo, J., Lantis, J., Snarr, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Foreign policy in Comparative Perspective – Domestic and International Influences on State Behavior*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Bianco, C. & Stansfield, G. (2018). «The intra-GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011». *International Affairs* 94(3): 613.
- Breuning, M. (2007). *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Comparative Introduction*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cafiero, G. (2024). A year ago, Beijing brokered an Iran-Saudi deal. How does détente look today?. *Atlantic Council*. Available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-saudi-arabia-china-deal-one-year/>. [Accessed on: 18.07.2024].
- Cox, M. (2004). «Empire, Imperialism and the Bush Doctrine». *Review of International Studies*, 30(4): 585-604.
- Dombrowski, P. & Reich, S. (2017). «Does Donald Trump have a grand strategy?». *International Affairs* 93(5): 1013-1037.
- Drezner, D. (2011). «Does Obama have a Grand Strategy?». *Foreign Affairs* 90(4). Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2011-06-17/does-obama-have-grand-strategy>.
- Dueck, C. (2015). *The Obama Doctrine – American Grand Strategy Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dueck, C. (2010). *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Esfandiary, D. & Tabatabai, A. (2018). *Triple Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- Gaddis, J. (2005). *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Post American National Security Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Gasiorowski, M. & Byrne, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Guldimann, T. (2007). «The Iranian nuclear impasse». *Survival*, 49(3): 169-178.
- Halliday, F. (2000). *Nation and Religion in the Middle East*. London: Saqi Books.
- Halliday, F. (1979). *Iran: Dictatorship and Development*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hehir, A. & Murray, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hill, C. (2003). *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ikenberry, J. (2003). «Is American Multilateralism in Decline?», *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(3): 533-550.
- Indyk, M., Lieberthal, K. & O'Hanlon, M. (2012). *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign Policy*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Jash, A. (2023). Saudi-Iran Deal: A Test Case of China's Role as an International Mediator. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. Available at <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2023/06/23/saudi-iran-deal-a-test-case-of-chinas-role-as-an-international-mediator/>. [Accessed on: 18.07.2024].
- Jervis, R. (2013). «Getting to Yes With Iran». *Foreign Affairs*, 49(3): 105-115.
- Joyner, D. (2016). *Iran's Nuclear Program and International Law: From Confrontation to Accord*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaye, D. (2016). «Israel's Iran Policies After the Nuclear Deal». Rand Corporation. DOI: 10.7249/PE207. Available at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE207.html>. [Accessed on: 20.04.2023].
- Kindsay, J. (2011). «George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the Future of US Global Leadership». *International Affairs*, 87(4): 765-779.
- Kroenig, M. (2017). «The case for Trump's Foreign Policy – The Right People, the Right Positions». *Foreign Affairs* 96(3): 30-34.
- Leverett, F. & Leverett, H. (2013). *Going to Tehran: Why America must accept the Islamic Republic of Iran*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- Lobell, S. (2009). «Threat assessment, the state, and foreign policy: a neoclassical realist model». In *Neoclassical Realism, The State, and Foreign Policy*, edited by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman, & Jeffrey Taliaferro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maleki, A. & Tirman, J. (2014). *US-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Mann, J. (2012). *The Obamians: Struggle Inside the White House to redefine American Power*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Mason, C. (2012). «Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA): What Is It, and How Has It Been Utilized?». Congressional Research Service 7-5700 www.crs.gov RL34531, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RL34531.pdf>.



- Mintz, A., Derouen Jr., K. (2010). *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Nasr, V. (2018). «Iran Among the Ruins – Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East». *Foreign Affairs* 97(2): 108-118.
- Nasr, V. (2013). *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Neack, L. (2019). *Studying Foreign Policy Comparatively: Cases and Analysis*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Parchami, A. (2014). «American culpability: the Bush Administration and the Iranian nuclear impasse». *Contemporary Politics*, 20(3): 315-330.
- Parsi, T. (2017). *Losing an Enemy – Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Parsi, T. (2012). *A Single Roll of the Dice – Obama's Diplomacy with Iran*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Pompeo, M. (2018). Remarks on the Creation of the Iran Action Group. Remarks to the Press. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/remarks-on-the-creation-of-the-iran-action-group/>
- Rahnema, A. (2015). *Behind the 1953 Coup in Iran: Thugs, Turncoats, Soldiers, and Spooks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ripsman, N., Taliaferro, J., & Lobell, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Neoclassical Theory of International Politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rosen, S. (2003). «An Empire, If You Can Keep It». *The National Interest*. Available at <https://nationalinterest.org/article/an-empire-if-you-can-keep-it-947>. [Accessed on: 20.04.2023].
- Ross, D. & Makovsly, D. (2009). *Myths, Illusions, and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ruebner, J. (2016). «Obama's Legacy on Israel/Palestine». *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 46(1): pp. 50-64.
- Simon, S. (2023). *Grand Delusion: The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*. New York: Penguin Press.
- Singh, R. (2016). *After Obama: Renewing American Leadership, Restoring Global Order*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, S., Hadfield, A., & Dunne, T. (Eds.). (2016). *Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stokes, D. (2018). «Trump, American hegemony and the future of the liberal order». *International Affairs* 94(1): 133-150. DOI: 10.1093/ia/iix238.
- Trager, E. (2011). «The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood – Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt». *Foreign Affairs*, 90(5): 114-26.
- Villar, P. (2016.) «The Role of Villain: Iran and U.S. Foreign Policy». *Political Science Quarterly*, 131(2): 365-386. DOI: 10.1002/polq.12479.



- Waltz, K. (1986) «Reflections on *Theory of International Politics*: A Reply to My Critics» In *Neorealism and its Critics*, Robert Keohane (Ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Waltz, K. (1996). «International politics is not foreign policy». *Security Studies*, 6(1), 54-57.
- Waltz, K. (1993). «The Emerging Structure of International Politics». *International Security*, 18(2): 44-79.
- Waltz, K. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Waltz, K. (2008). *Realism and International Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Zarif, M. (2014). «What Iran Really Wants - Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era», *Foreign Affairs* 93(3): 49-59.
- Zenko, M. & Lissner, R. (2017) «Trump is going to regret not having a grand strategy», *Foreign Policy*, 13 Jan. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/13/trump-is-going-to-regret-not-having-a-grand-strategy/>. [Accessed on: 18.07.2024].