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STRATEGIC CONTINUITY AMIDST TACTICAL VOLATILITY: UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS AND IRAN NUCLEAR POLICY, 2002–2022

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ABSTRACT

The United States' responses to Iran's nuclear programme between 2002 and 2022 present a puzzle of strategic continuity amidst tactical volatility. While the core objective of preventing a nuclear-armed Iran remained consistent across four presidential administrations, the policy instruments employed fluctuated significantly between coercive isolation, institutionalised diplomacy, unilateral maximum pressure, and constrained diplomatic re-engagement. This article examines how presidential transitions shaped these variations in policy instruments while preserving strategic continuity in United States policy toward Iran's nuclear programme. Using a qualitative case study design based on process tracing and documentary analysis, the study analyses policy developments across the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden through the analytical lens of Neoclassical Realism. The article argues that presidential transitions constituted the principal mechanism driving tactical variation in United States policy toward Iran during this period. It demonstrates how systemic imperatives were filtered through leadership ideology, executive decision-making styles, and domestic political constraints to produce divergent policy outcomes despite a stable strategic objective. Although all four administrations sought to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, they differed sharply in their preferred instruments of statecraft. The Bush administration pursued coercive multilateralism rooted in post-9/11 securitisation; the Obama administration institutionalised diplomatic engagement through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA); the Trump administration adopted unilateral maximum pressure following withdrawal from the agreement; and the Biden administration pursued constrained diplomatic re-engagement amid heightened domestic polarisation and diminished strategic trust. The article concludes that the instability of United States–Iran nuclear policy reflects the structural vulnerability of executive-dominated diplomacy within polarised political systems where international agreements lack legislative entrenchment, thereby limiting the durability of negotiated non-proliferation settlements across presidential transitions.

Keywords: United States foreign policy; Iran nuclear programme; Neoclassical Realism; presidential transitions; JCPOA; coercive diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear programme has remained one of the most enduring and consequential challenges in contemporary international security. Since the disclosure of previously undeclared nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak in 2002, the Iranian nuclear issue has occupied a central position within debates on nuclear non-proliferation, coercive diplomacy, regional security, sanctions policy, and the effectiveness of international institutions. Beyond its immediate implications for the Middle East, the dispute has become an important case for understanding how major powers manage persistent security challenges through a combination of military deterrence, diplomacy, economic coercion, and multilateral governance. Consequently, United States policy toward Iran has attracted sustained scholarly attention because it provides a valuable opportunity to examine how foreign policy evolves under conditions of prolonged strategic rivalry (Kroenig, 2012; Takeyh, 2021).

Across four presidential administrations between 2002 and 2022, the United States consistently pursued the strategic objective of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. Yet while this overarching objective remained remarkably stable, the policy instruments employed varied substantially. Successive administrations alternated between coercive multilateral sanctions, institutionalised diplomacy through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), unilateral "maximum pressure," and more limited diplomatic re-engagement. This coexistence of strategic continuity and tactical volatility presents an important theoretical puzzle in foreign policy analysis. Understanding why long-term strategic objectives remained constant while policy instruments changed considerably is essential not only for explaining United States-Iran relations but also for advancing broader debates concerning presidential leadership, foreign policy continuity, and the durability of international agreements.

Existing studies provides important insights but offers only partial explanations for this pattern. Structural realist accounts correctly identify the enduring strategic incentives underpinning United States opposition to Iranian nuclearisation, particularly concerns regarding regional balance of power, alliance credibility, and nuclear proliferation (Kroenig, 2012; Waltz, 1979). However, realism alone struggles to explain why diplomatic accommodation emerged during the Obama administration despite relatively stable structural conditions. Liberal institutionalist scholarship emphasises the role of multilateral institutions, negotiated verification mechanisms, and international cooperation in reducing uncertainty and facilitating agreement (Keohane, 2005; Parsi, 2017). Nevertheless, institutionalist explanations frequently underestimate the vulnerability of international agreements when domestic political support weakens. Constructivist studies demonstrate how historical memory, identity, and competing threat narratives continue to shape United States-Iran relations (Behrang, 2012; Takeyh, 2021), yet they often provide limited explanation for the timing and sequencing of major policy reversals across presidential administrations.

Recent studies have further refined these debates by demonstrating that changes in United States policy toward Iran cannot be explained solely through shifts in the international balance of power. Instead, increasing attention has been given to the mediating effects of domestic political coalitions, leadership perceptions, institutional constraints, and executive decision-making on foreign policy implementation (Pham, 2026; Lobell et al., 2022). Similarly, assessments of the JCPOA and its aftermath suggest that the long-term durability of nuclear diplomacy depends not only on effective verification mechanisms but also on sustained domestic political legitimacy, bipartisan political support, and strategic trust among negotiating parties (International Crisis Group, 2022; Beasley & Mehvar, 2025). Although

these studies have significantly advanced understanding of individual aspects of United States-Iran relations, much of the existing literature continues to examine realism, institutionalism, and constructivism as competing rather than complementary explanations. Furthermore, relatively little research has systematically examined how structural security pressures, domestic political dynamics, and leadership transitions interacted over the full period from 2002 to 2022 to produce both continuity in strategic objectives and variation in policy instruments.

This gap is significant because contemporary foreign policy decisions increasingly emerge from the interaction of international, domestic, institutional, and ideational factors rather than from any single level of analysis. Consequently, explaining United States policy toward Iran requires an analytical framework capable of integrating these multiple influences into a coherent account of policy continuity and change.

Against this background, the main objective of this article is to explain why United States policy toward Iran's nuclear programme exhibited enduring strategic continuity alongside significant tactical variation between 2002 and 2022. Specifically, the study examines how presidential transitions mediated the translation of relatively constant systemic pressures into different foreign policy strategies. Drawing primarily upon Neoclassical Realism, while incorporating complementary insights from Liberal Institutionalism and Constructivism, the article argues that leadership ideology, executive decision-making style, domestic political coalitions, bureaucratic competition, and institutional constraints shaped how successive administrations interpreted identical strategic imperatives and selected different policy instruments.

The article advances three principal arguments. First, the continuity of United States strategic objectives across administrations reflected enduring systemic concerns regarding regional balance of power and nuclear proliferation. Second, tactical volatility resulted from presidentially mediated interpretations of those structural pressures operating through domestic political institutions and leadership perceptions. Lastly, the fragility of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action demonstrated the structural vulnerability of executive-centred diplomacy within polarised presidential systems where major international commitments lack legislative entrenchment.

By integrating structural, domestic, institutional, and ideational perspectives within a Neoclassical Realist framework, this article contributes to the growing literature on theoretical pluralism in foreign policy analysis. It also provides a longitudinal explanation of United States-Iran nuclear diplomacy spanning four presidential administrations, thereby extending existing scholarship that has often focused on individual administrations or isolated episodes of the nuclear dispute.

The remainder of the article proceeds in six sections. The first reviews competing theoretical explanations of United States policy toward Iran and identifies limitations within existing scholarship. The second develops the Neoclassical Realist framework employed in the analysis. The third outlines the methodological approach and evidentiary base. The fourth analyses policy variation across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. The fifth discusses the broader theoretical implications for foreign policy analysis and executive-centred diplomacy. The conclusion reflects on the implications for international security and the durability of negotiated non-proliferation regimes.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS AND THE LIMITS OF EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

Structural Realism and Strategic Imperatives

Realist studies provide the foundational explanation for the continuity of the United States opposition to Iranian nuclearisation. From a structural realist perspective, states seek survival within an anarchic international system, compelling great powers to prevent the emergence of regional challengers capable of altering strategic balances (Waltz, 1979). Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability threatened not only the United States regional dominance but also the security architecture underpinning the United States alliances in the Middle East. Offensive realist scholars argue that a nuclear-capable Iran would embolden proxy networks, weaken deterrence credibility, and trigger regional proliferation pressures among states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt (Kroenig, 2012).

However, structural realism struggles to explain variation in tactical responses across administrations. If systemic incentives remained relatively constant, realism alone cannot adequately explain why the Obama administration pursued diplomatic accommodation through the JCPOA while the Trump administration dismantled the same agreement despite largely unchanged structural conditions. Realism predicts continuity in strategic objectives but offers weaker explanatory leverage regarding executive-level policy variation.

Recent developments in Neoclassical Realism similarly argue that systemic incentives alone rarely determine foreign policy outcomes, as leaders interpret external pressures through domestic political institutions, elite coalitions, and ideological beliefs (Pham 2026; Lobell et al., 2022).

Liberal Institutionalism and the JCPOA

Liberal institutionalist scholarship emphasises the role of institutions, verification mechanisms, and negotiated interdependence in mitigating security dilemmas (Keohane, 2005). The JCPOA is frequently presented as evidence that institutionalised monitoring and multilateral diplomacy can constrain proliferation behaviour even among adversarial states. Parsi (2017) demonstrates how sustained diplomatic engagement and secret bilateral negotiations facilitated unprecedented nuclear restrictions and verification procedures.

Yet institutionalist approaches often underestimate the domestic political fragility of international agreements. The collapse of the JCPOA following unilateral United States withdrawal in 2018 illustrated that institutional design alone cannot ensure policy durability when agreements lack bipartisan legitimacy and legislative codification. Institutional mechanisms proved insufficient to constrain executive reversal under conditions of intense partisan polarisation. Contemporary analyses of the post-JCPOA environment likewise conclude that effective verification mechanisms cannot compensate for weak domestic political commitment or declining strategic trust among negotiating parties (International Crisis Group, 2022; Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Constructivism and Threat Narratives

Constructivist approaches focus on identity, discourse, and historical narratives in shaping strategic interaction. United States–Iran relations remain heavily conditioned by mutual mistrust rooted in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, and competing ideological identities (Takeyh, 2021). United States political discourse frequently framed Iran as a "rogue state," while Iranian elites portrayed the United States as an imperial adversary seeking

regime change. These narratives reinforced reciprocal threat perceptions and constrained diplomatic flexibility.

Recent studies further demonstrate that identity narratives continued to shape both Iran and United States strategic behaviour even during renewed diplomatic engagement, suggesting that historical memory remained an important constraint on policy flexibility throughout the Biden administration (Tabatabai, 2020; Takeyh, 2021).Constructivist scholarship contributes important insights regarding the ideational foundations of hostility, but it often lacks a clear account of why similar threat narratives produced divergent tactical outcomes across administrations. Identity-based explanations illuminate persistent mistrust but less effectively explain tactical transitions from coercion to diplomacy and back again.

Neoclassical Realism and Leadership Mediation

Neoclassical Realism addresses these limitations by integrating systemic incentives with domestic intervening variables (Lobell et al., 2009; Rose, 1998). Structural pressures establish broad strategic constraints, but policymakers interpret and operationalise those pressures through ideological frameworks, institutional contexts, and domestic political calculations. Foreign policy outcomes, therefore, emerge from the interaction between external constraints and internal political mediation.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical Realism departs from structural realism by arguing that systemic pressures do not directly determine foreign policy outcomes. Instead, leaders interpret systemic incentives through cognitive, ideological, and institutional filters (Rose, 1998). Foreign policy behaviour, therefore, depends not only on material power distributions but also on how decision-makers perceive threats and mobilise domestic political support. Contemporary Neoclassical Realist scholars increasingly emphasises that leadership perceptions, elite consensus, bureaucratic competition, and domestic coalition politics constitute critical intervening variables linking systemic incentives to foreign policy behaviour. These developments strengthen the explanatory capacity of Neoclassical Realism by demonstrating how continuity in strategic objectives can coexist with substantial variation in policy implementation across successive administrations (Pham, 2026; Lobell et al., 2009).

Leadership ideology shaped threat perception and strategic prioritisation across administrations. President Bush's neoconservative worldview interpreted Iran through the lens of regime hostility and terrorism sponsorship. President Obama's liberal internationalism prioritised institutional engagement and negotiated constraints. President Trump's populist nationalism emphasised unilateral leverage and rejection of multilateral commitments. President Biden's pragmatic centrism attempted cautious re-engagement while avoiding domestic political backlash.

Executive decision-making styles also influenced policy implementation. President Bush favoured conviction-driven decisiveness following the September 11 attacks. President Obama employed deliberative and highly institutionalised decision-making processes. President Trump relied heavily on personalised and transactional approaches to foreign policy, while President Biden adopted incremental and risk-averse strategies shaped by concerns regarding domestic political fragmentation.

Domestic political constraints further conditioned policy sustainability. Congressional polarisation, bureaucratic rivalry, lobbying pressures, and electoral incentives shaped the range of politically viable policy options. The JCPOA's vulnerability stemmed partly from its

implementation through executive authority rather than treaty ratification, rendering it susceptible to reversal following presidential transition.

The central theoretical claim advanced here is that executive-centred diplomacy within polarised presidential systems produces structurally fragile international commitments when agreements lack bipartisan institutional entrenchment.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs qualitative process tracing to analyse the United States-Iran policy between 2002 and 2022. Process tracing is particularly appropriate for identifying causal mechanisms linking systemic pressures, leadership perceptions, and tactical policy variation (George & Bennett, 2005). The study draws upon documentary analysis of official speeches, National Security Strategies, congressional records, International Atomic Energy Agency reports, United Nations Security Council resolutions, presidential statements, sanctions legislation, and secondary scholarly literature.

The analysis focuses on four successive United States presidential administrations: President George W. Bush (2002–2008), President Barack Obama (2009–2016), President Donald J. Trump (2017–2020), and President Joseph R. Biden Jr. (2021–2022). These administrations are examined as sequential episodes within a continuous strategic rivalry between the United States and Iran. This structured chronological comparison enables the identification of both continuity in the overarching strategic objective of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability and variation in the tactical instruments employed by successive administrations. Particular attention is given to how each administration interpreted the Iranian nuclear challenge, prioritised policy instruments, and navigated domestic political constraints. The article does not attempt to explain Iranian nuclear decision-making comprehensively. Rather, the focus remains on variation within United States policy responses. This analytical delimitation permits closer examination of executive-level mediation within United States foreign policy institutions.

PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS AND TACTICAL VARIATION IN UNITED STATES-IRAN POLICY

The Bush Administration and Coercive Multilateralism

The Bush administration approached Iran's nuclear programme through the broader strategic logic of post-9/11 securitisation. The 2002 National Security Strategy articulated a doctrine of preemption, asserting the legitimacy of preventive action against emerging threats (The White House, 2002). Iran's nuclear ambitions were interpreted within this framework as part of a wider nexus involving terrorism sponsorship, regional destabilisation, and weapons proliferation.

President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech publicly linked Iran with Iraq and North Korea as regimes threatening international security through weapons of mass destruction and support for terrorism (Bush, 2002). This rhetorical framing reinforced the administration's preference for coercive containment rather than diplomatic accommodation.

The administration pursued coercive multilateralism by supporting European diplomatic initiatives while simultaneously expanding sanctions pressure. The United States successfully pushed for United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1696, 1737, 1747, and 1803, which imposed restrictions on Iran's nuclear and missile activities (United Nations, 2006a, 2006b,

2007, 2008). Treasury-led financial sanctions further targeted Iran's integration into global banking networks (Katzman, 2010).

The Bush administration, therefore, established the coercive infrastructure that was later inherited by subsequent administrations. From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, this approach reflected how post-9/11 threat perceptions and neoconservative ideology shaped the interpretation of systemic pressures. Although the strategic objective of preventing Iranian nuclearisation remained constant, the administration's ideological lens prioritised coercion over diplomacy.

The Obama Administration and Institutionalised Diplomacy

The Obama administration fundamentally reoriented the United States tactical strategy while preserving the core strategic objective of preventing Iranian nuclearisation. Obama rejected regime-change rhetoric and emphasised diplomatic engagement alongside sanctions pressure. His administration viewed negotiated constraints and intrusive verification mechanisms as more sustainable alternatives to indefinite coercion or preventive war.

President Obama's Cairo speech in 2009 signaled a rhetorical shift toward engagement with the Muslim world and conditional diplomacy with Iran (Obama, 2009). Although domestic unrest following Iran's disputed 2009 election complicated early diplomatic efforts, the administration maintained a dual-track strategy combining intensified sanctions with backchannel negotiations.

These efforts culminated in the 2015 JCPOA. Subsequent scholarship has characterised the JCPOA as one of the most significant diplomatic achievements in contemporary non-proliferation, emphasising the importance of sustained back-channel negotiations, multilateral coordination, and reciprocal confidence-building measures in achieving the agreement (Burns, 2019; Odeigah et al, 2026).

The agreement imposed substantial restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme, including enrichment limits, centrifuge reductions, stockpile reductions, and enhanced International Atomic Energy Agency verification procedures (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2016). In return, Iran received phased sanctions relief and reintegration into global financial markets.

From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, President Obama's strategy reflected a distinct interpretation of systemic incentives. Rather than viewing coercion alone as sufficient, the administration concluded that verifiable diplomatic constraints offered a more sustainable mechanism for delaying Iranian breakout capacity. Leadership perception, therefore, shaped the tactical preference for institutionalised diplomacy despite continuity in strategic objectives.

Nevertheless, domestic political opposition severely constrained the agreement's institutional durability. Congressional Republicans, pro-Israel lobbying organisations, and regional allies criticised the JCPOA's sunset clauses and narrow focus on nuclear issues. Crucially, the agreement was implemented through executive authority rather than Senate treaty ratification, leaving it vulnerable to future reversal.

The Trump Administration and Maximum Pressure

President Trump's election produced the most dramatic tactical reversal in the United States-Iran policy during the study period. The administration rejected the JCPOA as fundamentally flawed and interpreted diplomacy as evidence of strategic weakness. President Trump's 2017

National Security Strategy characterised Iran as a revisionist and destabilising regime threatening regional order (The White House, 2017).

In May 2018, President Trump formally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA despite repeated International Atomic Energy Agency verification of Iranian compliance (Trump, 2018). The administration subsequently launched the "maximum pressure" campaign, reimposing sanctions and targeting Iran's oil exports, banking sector, and international commercial relationships. Recent evaluations suggest that although the campaign imposed significant economic costs on Iran, it failed to produce the broader strategic concessions anticipated by policymakers and instead accelerated aspects of Iran's nuclear programme while increasing regional instability (International Crisis Group, 2022; Congressional Research Service, 2024; Beasley & Mehvar, 2025).

The strategy sought not merely nuclear concessions but broader behavioural transformation, including restrictions on ballistic missile development and regional proxy activities. Secondary sanctions severely constrained European and Asian commercial engagement with Iran, contributing to substantial economic contraction (World Bank, 2020). Yet maximum pressure failed to produce renegotiation on the United States terms. Instead, Iran gradually violated JCPOA restrictions by increasing enrichment levels, expanding centrifuge deployment, and reducing International Atomic Energy Agency monitoring access (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2021).

The Trump administration, therefore, illustrates how leadership ideology and executive decision-making style can radically alter tactical implementation despite continuity in strategic objectives. Trump's highly personalised and transactional approach prioritised coercive leverage while rejecting institutional continuity and multilateral diplomatic frameworks.

The Biden Administration and Constrained Re-engagement

The Biden administration entered office seeking a partial restoration of the JCPOA framework. However, the strategic environment had changed substantially. Iranian nuclear capabilities had advanced considerably, domestic political polarisation in the United States had intensified, and mutual distrust between the United States and Iran had deepened.

The administration supported indirect negotiations in Vienna aimed at restoring mutual compliance with the agreement (U.S. Department of State, 2021). However, negotiations stalled over sequencing disputes, sanctions relief, and the status of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Recent scholarship attributes the limited progress of the Vienna negotiations not only to technical disagreements but also to declining political trust, expanded Iranian nuclear capabilities, domestic political constraints in both countries, and uncertainty regarding the durability of future United States commitments (International Crisis Group, 2022; Congressional Research Service, 2024; Beasley & Mehvar, 2025).

Domestic political constraints significantly narrowed diplomatic flexibility. Republican opposition to renewed engagement remained intense, while regional allies expressed continued scepticism regarding diplomacy. Simultaneously, Iran's expanded enrichment activities reduced the strategic value of simply restoring the original agreement.

The Biden administration, therefore, adopted a hybrid approach combining rhetorical commitment to diplomacy with continued sanctions enforcement and regional deterrence measures. From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, this reflected how domestic political

fragmentation constrained the administration's capacity to pursue meaningful diplomatic restoration despite recognition of the strategic limitations of maximum pressure.

DISCUSSION: EXECUTIVE-CENTRED DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGIC INSTABILITY

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the United States-Iran policy exhibited substantial tactical volatility despite strategic continuity. Across administrations, the underlying objective of preventing Iranian nuclearisation remained remarkably stable. However, presidents diverged sharply regarding the appropriate instruments for achieving that objective.

Neoclassical Realism explains this variation by highlighting the mediating role of leadership perceptions and domestic politics. This finding is consistent with recent developments in Neoclassical Realism, which increasingly view foreign policy as the product of interactions between structural incentives, domestic political institutions, leadership beliefs, and bureaucratic mediation rather than systemic pressures alone (Pharm, 2026; Lobell et al., 2009). Structural pressures alone cannot account for the transition from Bush-era coercion to Obama-era diplomacy, nor for President Trump's subsequent reversal. Tactical shifts reflected changing presidential interpretations of how best to preserve the United States strategic interests under varying domestic political conditions.

The analysis also reveals a broader structural vulnerability within executive-centred foreign policy systems. International agreements negotiated primarily through executive authority remain highly vulnerable to partisan reversal when domestic political consensus is absent. The JCPOA's collapse, therefore, reflected not merely President Trump's personal preferences but deeper institutional weaknesses within the United States foreign policy-making.

These findings carry broader implications for international security and alliance politics. Adversaries may increasingly question the credibility of the United States commitments when agreements lack bipartisan institutionalisation. Similarly, allies may become less willing to invest political capital in agreements perceived as contingent upon electoral cycles rather than durable national consensus. More broadly, these findings reinforce contemporary debates in foreign policy analysis that advocate theoretical pluralism and greater attention to the interaction between systemic, domestic, and ideational variables when explaining continuity and change in state behaviour (Pham, 2026; Beasley & Mehvar, 2025).

More broadly, the article contributes to debates regarding the relationship between domestic political polarisation and international order. Polarised presidential systems may generate increasing volatility in the implementation of foreign policy even where strategic objectives remain relatively stable.

CONCLUSION

This article argued that presidential transitions constituted the principal driver of tactical variation in the United States-Iran nuclear policy between 2002 and 2022. While systemic pressures generated a stable strategic imperative to prevent Iranian nuclearisation, successive administrations interpreted and operationalised that imperative differently according to ideological preferences, executive decision-making styles, and domestic political constraints.

The Bush administration pursued coercive multilateralism grounded in post-9/11 securitisation. President Obama institutionalised diplomatic engagement through the JCPOA.

President Trump reversed that approach through unilateral maximum pressure. President Biden attempted a constrained diplomatic restoration under increasingly adverse domestic and strategic conditions. Tactical volatility, therefore, reflected the interaction between enduring structural incentives and presidentially mediated foreign policy choices.

The article advances a broader theoretical claim regarding the fragility of executive-centred diplomacy in polarised political systems. International agreements lacking legislative entrenchment remain vulnerable to reversal following leadership transition, undermining the long-term credibility of negotiated security arrangements. This dynamic extends beyond the United States–Iran case and may increasingly shape the stability of international cooperation under conditions of domestic political fragmentation.

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