



# How Competing Schools of Grand Strategy Shape America's Nonproliferation Policy Toward Iran

Raphael BenLevi



America's policy toward Iran's nuclear program has shifted over the past two decades from an exclusive reliance on coercive measures to an emphasis on diplomatic measures and then back again to coercion. What explains the different policies that the United States adopted during this time? Drawing on interviews with former officials and recently published memoirs, this article disentangles two factors that have influenced policymakers when it comes to Iran's nuclear program: the objective constraints faced by any administration, and the worldviews embodied in the alternative schools of grand strategy represented in each administration. This survey provides an indispensable guide for policymakers who will inevitably face similar dilemmas in dealing with this ongoing security challenge.

**W**hat explains the different policies that the United States has adopted toward Iran's nuclear program over the past two decades? Previous research has addressed in broad contours why great powers choose to oppose, ignore, or assist a state's efforts toward proliferation.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have also categorized the various policies that are available when a great power chooses to oppose proliferation, including legal/normative, coercive, and assurance policies.<sup>2</sup> What they have not addressed is why an administration would tend to prefer one policy for opposing a country's nuclear program over another.

In the case of Iran, beginning with the revelation of its secret uranium enrichment facilities in mid-2002, which brought the issue to the forefront of the international security agenda, U.S. policy has shifted a number of times. From 2002 to 2008, the United States adopted a coercive policy, rejecting out of hand the idea of any significant nuclear infrastructure in Iran. Later, in 2009, America's policy underwent a shift to a combined policy of conciliatory diplomacy that integrated coercive tools

as well. By 2013, the policy shifted once more, placing a much greater emphasis on conciliatory diplomatic measures, distancing itself from previous coercive elements and moderating its bottom line to accept large-scale enrichment capacity as long as Iran's pathway to a nuclear weapon could be blocked for the next decade. Finally, from 2017 to 2020, America returned to a coercive policy, unilaterally withdrawing from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and reinstating macroeconomic sanctions.

Drawing on interviews with former U.S. officials and recently published memoirs, I investigate these changes in policy by differentiating which elements of U.S. policy toward the Iranian nuclear program can be explained by material factors alone, and which elements require turning to factors rooted in ideas and worldviews.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, this article provides an original analysis of U.S. policy on a major and ongoing issue of international security, while demonstrating how the literature on alternative schools of thought on grand strategy in the United States can complement the literature on great-power nuclear nonproliferation policy. It is also an important test case for the broader ques-

1 M. Elaine Bunn, "Force, Preemption, and WMD Proliferation," in *Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Future of International Nonproliferation Policy*, ed. Nathan E. Busch and Daniel H. Joyner (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 156–74; Peter D. Feaver and Emerson M. S. Niu, "Managing Proliferation: Condemn, Strike, or Assist?" *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (June 1996): 209–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600957>; Matthew Kroenig, "Force or Friendship? Explaining Great Power Nonproliferation Policy," *Security Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2014.870863>; Or Rabinowitz and Nicholas L. Miller, "Keeping the Bombs in the Basement: U.S. Nonproliferation Policy Toward Israel, South Africa, and Pakistan," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (2015): 47–86, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00207](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00207); and Rachel Elizabeth Whitlark, "Nuclear Beliefs: A Leader-Focused Theory of Counter-Proliferation," *Security Studies* 26, no. 4 (2017): 545–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1331628>.

2 These terms are from Francis J. Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 9–46, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00205](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00205). See also Michal Onderco and Wolfgang Wagner, "Of Hawks and Doves: Mapping Policies Toward Iran and North Korea," *The Nonproliferation Review* 19, no. 2 (2012): 177–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2012.691020>.

3 In terms of international relations theory, this type of model is in line with neoclassical realism. See Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

tion of how great powers select a particular nuclear nonproliferation policy toward an adversarial proliferator. Finally, it carries implications for other policy spheres where, similar to the dilemma of nonproliferation, the need to assess potential future threats increases the effect of worldviews on decision-making.

Briefly stated, I argue that the material facts of the case alone provide a satisfactory explanation for why at no point between 2002 and 2020 did Washington seriously consider executing a preventative strike against Iran. Material factors also explain why the United States could not simply ignore the progress of Iran's nuclear capabilities. However, material factors are insufficient for explaining the shift from an exclusive reliance on coercive measures toward emphasizing diplomatic measures, and then back again to coercion. I argue that the specific nonproliferation policy adopted by each administration is best explained by the school of grand strategy adhered to by that administration. I demonstrate this by tracing the causal pathway from broader grand strategy to the specific nonproliferation policy employed.

In the next section, I review the literature on nonproliferation, outlining the policies that could be adopted toward a proliferating state. I then lay out the competing grand-strategic schools of thought in the United States and their respective attitudes toward nonproliferation. Following that, I address the methodology that I use to differentiate between the material factors that influence policymakers and those rooted in ideas. I then present the *a priori* material considerations that any administration would face, regardless of the strategic ideas that it held. The core of the analysis follows, in which I apply this model to U.S. policy in each of the three relevant administrations: George W. Bush (2001–2008), Barack Obama (2009–2016), and Donald Trump (2017–2020). For each period, I trace how the debates surrounding competing ideas of grand strategy within the foreign policy executive led it to adopt a specific policy and then follow up by assessing the influence of the specific material constraints that were present at the time.

## Nonproliferation Policy Options

Previous studies have outlined the broad categories of nonproliferation policy that are open to a great power when it is faced with a state that is pursuing nuclear capabilities. Matthew Kroenig discusses the widest range of policies, including opposition, inaction, and active assistance.<sup>4</sup> Applying his findings to the case of Iran, both of the theories he tests — political relationship theory and power-projection theory — suggest that America would adopt a policy of opposition. But neither of these theories explain what specific strategies of opposition the United States would then pursue. Other typologies focus on strategies aimed at limiting the extent of proliferation (setting aside assistance). Michal Onderco and Wolfgang Wagner explore the attitudes of experts in multiple states, distinguishing between a strategy of confrontation and a strategy of accommodation. But they do not explain why the United States would tend toward either strategy in practice, nor do they analyze actual U.S. policy.<sup>5</sup> Peter Feaver and Emerson Niou do analyze U.S. policy, but they distinguish only between very broad policy options, including military strikes, actions that fall within the framework of the Nonproliferation Treaty, or strengthening the safety of the emerging nuclear arsenal.<sup>6</sup> Rachel Whitlark focuses specifically on the decision of whether or not to engage in preventative war.<sup>7</sup>

Francis Gavin provides a more highly differentiated typology of potential nonproliferation policies, which informs the current analysis, but he does not attempt to explain why any particular policy is preferred over the others.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on policies aimed at inhibiting proliferation, he distinguishes between three types: policies that are legal/normative in nature and use diplomatic tools, including the pursuit of arms control treaties; policies that are coercive in nature, including sanctions, sabotage, and preventative strikes; and — in the case of a friendly state proliferator — policies of assurance that offer alternative pathways for the friendly state to increase its security, such as a formal security guarantee.<sup>9</sup> As policies of assurance are only relevant for friendly state proliferators, I will leave them aside here. For adversarial proliferators, I assert that it is the assumptions of various schools of

4 Kroenig, "Force or Friendship," 2.

5 Onderco and Wagner, "Of Hawks and Doves," 191.

6 Feaver and Niou, "Managing Proliferation," 209–33.

7 Whitlark, "Nuclear Beliefs."

8 Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition," 46.

9 Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition," 25.

grand strategy that ultimately determine whether an administration adopts a strategy that emphasizes taking coercive measures or one that emphasizes taking legal/normative and diplomatic measures.

I further argue that the nature of nonproliferation policy, which is essentially an attempt to address a threat that has not yet materialized, requires policymakers to make assumptions about the severity of the future threat. The result is an increase in the relevance of the policymakers' subjective worldviews. Put differently, the predicament of being faced with an adversarial proliferator amplifies the uncertainties inherent in the classic security dilemma. In their restatement of the security dilemma literature, Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler state:

Weapons are the material reality that set up the security dilemma, because they are inherently ambiguous symbols. The psychological reality derives from one set of decision-makers trying to get into the minds of others, and understanding their motives and intentions (future as well as present) with regard to the weapons they possess.<sup>10</sup>

How much more difficult is it to understand, with any certainty, the future motives and intentions of an adversary regarding weapons *it does not even yet possess*? This is precisely the dilemma of nonproliferation policy. The adversary itself may not even be entirely clear about its own intentions and how it may behave under the new circumstances that will emerge once it possesses nuclear weapons. A state's intentions regarding weaponry that it is already in possession of may be open to misperceptions, but insight can be gained by collecting intelligence and researching elite discourse within the adversarial state. Nonproliferation, on the other hand, requires getting into the adversary's future head. Perhaps, after careful investigation, it may

be concluded that the adversary has, at present, adopted a defensive strategy. But by what means could one confidently conclude that once the adversary possesses a significant increase in destructive power it will retain that defensive posture?<sup>11</sup>

This inherent ambiguity means that decision-makers must make some estimation as to the motivations of the proliferator and this exercise necessarily invites the influence of the grand-strategic worldview of the decision-maker. Nonproliferation policymaking necessitates making an assessment of the severity of the threat that would be posed by the adversary state were it to possess nuclear weapons. Differing schools of thought within a state will reach different assessments of this prospective threat. Moreover, after this assessment of the future threat is made, policymakers must deal with the dilemma of how to respond,<sup>12</sup> and here, too, causal and principled beliefs are likely to sway the direction of policy.<sup>13</sup> For a more immediate and self-evident military threat, there would likely be greater consensus across competing schools of thought about the necessity of meeting that threat with military measures. When faced with a case of nuclear proliferation, however, the threat is never immediate or self-evident and, therefore, legal and diplomatic tools more clearly present themselves as reasonable alternatives to military force.

### **Competing Grand-Strategic Schools of Thought and Nonproliferation**

There is extensive literature analyzing the competing grand-strategic schools of thought in the United States and various typologies have been offered.<sup>14</sup> Though all the existing typologies have significant overlap, they differ from one another according to the parameter that is emphasized and how various subcategories are treated. Regardless,

10 Ken Booth and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1. While Booth and Wheeler have produced the most recent literature on this topic, previous statements include John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (January 1950): 157–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009187>; and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

11 The literature has identified that the acquisition of nuclear weapons may change a state's foreign policy orientation in a multitude of ways. Mark Bell has identified six various and conflicting foreign policy behaviors that nuclear weapons may facilitate, including aggression, expansion, independence, bolstering, steadfastness, and compromise. See Mark S. Bell, "Beyond Emboldenment: How Acquiring Nuclear Weapons Can Change Foreign Policy," *International Security* 40, no.1 (2015): 87–119, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00204](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00204).

12 Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 4.

13 For a categorization of types of beliefs, see Judith Goldstein and Robert O. Keohane, eds., *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 8. In their classification of sets of ideas that are critical for foreign policy decision-making, "principled beliefs" mean normative views about what methods are legitimate or not and "causal beliefs" refer to beliefs about which type of action leads to which results.

14 See Colin Dueck, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Benjamin Miller and Ziv Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Henry R. Nau, *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy Under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/1997): 5–53, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.5>; and Jonathan Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in American Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Table 1: Grand Strategic Schools of Thought in the United States (1990–2020)

	Primacy	Realism	Assertive Internationalism	Progressive Internationalism	Neo-Isolationism
<b>Grand Strategic Paradigm</b>	Predominance of American power brings stability; benign hegemony; unilateralism	Balance of power brings stability; national interest; use force with caution	Use American power to bolster international institutions; use force multilaterally	International institutions before national interest; global problems require global solutions	Minimize overseas deployment (all); national interest limited in scope (nationalist-libertarian); American power threatens others; cosmopolitan human rights (Left)
<b>Political Party (1990s +)</b>	Republican	Republican; some Democrat	Democrat; some Republican	Democrat	Republican & Democrat
<b>Closely Aligned Think Tank</b>	PNAC; AEI; FDD, Heritage	CSIS; RAND; Hudson; Hoover	Brookings; Carnegie; WINEP	Center for American Progress; Center for a New American Security	CATO; Institute for Policy Studies; Quincy

all of the various attempts at classification retain an element of arbitrariness and there is no way to objectively decide which is most correct. In this section, I present an adaptation of previous typologies to best capture the approaches that are relevant to the time period under consideration. As these schools of thought have been described in detail by previous scholars, my primary goal is not to repeat the description of each school but rather to apply them to the analysis of nonproliferation policy. I therefore provide a brief definition of my terms and a statement on their basic orientation toward nonproliferation. In Table 1, I summarize each strategy.

The grand strategy of primacy seeks to retain the preeminent position of power enjoyed by the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> Advocates of primacy believe that peace and world order will be upheld by the unilateral assertion of American power along with the reassurance

of its nature as a benign hegemon.

The grand strategy I refer to as realism emphasizes preserving stability by a careful maintenance of the balance of power between great powers.<sup>16</sup> Its adherents are animated first and foremost by national interest, broadly conceived, but add to this a strong element of caution and moral pragmatism.

The strategy of assertive internationalism denotes those who advocate a form of cooperative security that emphasizes the use of American power to uphold international institutions.<sup>17</sup> Its adherents believe that the United States must maintain the liberal world order and, indeed, play a leadership role, but must do this by working through international institutions and multilateral cooperation. Paramount for them is the idea that, although America should maintain its vast hard power, in the long term it is in its own interests to accept the constraints imposed by rules that apply equally to all states.

15 In terms of previous classifications, this school of thought aligns most closely with: "hardline unilateralists" (Dueck, *Age of Iron*), "militant nationalism/primacy" (Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*), "primacy" (Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions"), "new conservative mainstream" (Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*), and both "offensive realism" and "offensive liberalism" (Miller and Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy*).

16 To be sure, both primacy and neo-isolationism are also informed by philosophical principles of realism. In terms of previous classifications, this school of thought aligns most closely with: "conservative internationalism" (Dueck, *Age of Iron*; Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*), "Hamiltonianism" (Mead, *Special Providence*), "selective engagement" (Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions"), "Kissingerian realists" (Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*), and "defensive realism" (Miller and Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy*).

17 In terms of previous classifications, this school of thought aligns most closely with: "liberal internationalism" (Dueck, *Age of Iron*; Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*), "Wilsonianism" (Mead, *Special Providence*), "cooperative security" (Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions"), and "robust liberal internationalism" (Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*).

A similar strategy, one that coalesced mainly within the two Obama administrations, can be called progressive internationalism.<sup>18</sup> The difference between assertive and progressive internationalism is a fine one but it is highly relevant in the case of Iran. Though both strategies emanate from the tradition of Wilsonianism, these two internationalist orientations differ with regard to their attitudes toward force. Progressive internationalists believe deeply in the power of multilateral diplomacy to resolve conflicts and promote stronger global governance as the solution to global problems. They are more egalitarian in their conception of America's place in the international community. They are also more concerned than assertive internationalists that the very existence of vast American military power will encourage it to pursue military solutions. Both approaches oppose nuclear proliferation but whereas the primary concern of assertive internationalists is upholding the structure of the Nonproliferation Treaty, for the progressive wing the primary concern is pursuing nuclear disarmament.

The final grand strategy has been widely referred to as neo-isolationism.<sup>19</sup> In the American context, this school is comprised of two groups whose broader political worldviews diverge greatly but nevertheless converge in their predisposition against the United States taking military actions abroad. One group's broader political ideology is a form of libertarianism rooted in a strong national identity. Its isolationist tendency grows out of a deep belief in American exceptionalism and support for the non-coercive spread of American values in a world comprised of independent nation-states. The other group is found on the political left and is rooted in a cosmopolitan political identity (as opposed to a national one). The latter's isolationist tendency grows from a more pacifist attitude toward the use of force, explicitly rejects American exceptionalism, and believes that American power should be reined in by stronger global institutions at the price of sacrificing elements of national sovereignty.

### **Methodology for Differentiating Between Material Factors and Factors Rooted in Ideas**

Policymakers subscribing to any of the grand-strategic schools of thought tend to present their actions as the product of objective constraints alone. But greater insight can be had by being aware of how our fundamental beliefs inform our assessments of various policy alternatives. At the same time, often there really are objective constraints that apply regardless of the fundamental beliefs of the policymakers. Therefore, the ability to differentiate between the two factors is the key to arriving at a balanced account of past policies and to assessing alternatives looking forward.

A number of conditions must be met in order to establish the influence of ideas in decision-making.<sup>20</sup> First, a researcher needs to identify what can — and cannot — be explained *a priori* by material factors alone. Second, it must then be established that the decision-makers did, in fact, subscribe to the specific set of ideas that one claims to have been influential. I identify which grand-strategic worldview the primary decision-makers in a given administration most closely aligned with based on classifications from previous literature. It is important to note that this is based on each administration's position on broader questions of American grand strategy, independent of its position on the Iranian nuclear issue, as I argue that it is the broader grand-strategic assumptions that eventually led to the preferred policies toward the Iranian nuclear program.

The third condition is to demonstrate that these ideas affected the substance of the policy deliberations through some mechanism. To establish this, I use process tracing methods, drawing on interviews with former U.S. officials and published memoirs. For each major policy decision, I present the scope of the policy debate within each administration and the reasoning of each side, demonstrating how more general strategic ideas informed the policy debate on Iran.

Lastly, it is necessary to show that the adopted

18 Seeking to distinguish his own strategic worldview from that of mainstream Wilsonians, John Kerry uses this very expression: John Kerry, *A Call to Service: My Vision for a Better America* (London: Penguin, 2004), 39. In terms of previous classifications, this school of thought aligns most closely with: "progressive" (Dueck, *Age of Iron*), "defensive liberalism" (Miller and Rubinvitz, *Grand Strategy*), and "dovish Democrats" (Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*).

19 In terms of previous classifications, this school of thought aligns most closely with: "noninterventionism" (Dueck, *Age of Iron*), "Jacksonian" (Mead, *Special Providence*), "America First nationalism" (Miller and Rubinvitz, *Grand Strategy*), "minimalist nationalism" (Nau, *Conservative Internationalism*), "neo-isolationism" (Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions"), and "old conservative establishment" and "progressive post-colonialism" (Rynhold, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict*).

20 These points on methodology are drawn from Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell, *Neoclassical Realist Theory*, in particular chapter 5; as well as Alan M. Jacobs, "Process Tracing the Effects of Ideas," in *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*, ed. Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Nina Tannenwald, "Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 13–42, <https://doi.org/10.1162/1520397053630619>.



policies that I claim are rooted in ideas did not simply coincide with material pressures that were present in the decision-making context. This can be established in a few ways. First, when discussing each administration below, I explore divisions within the decision-making body. All of the members of the deliberative body are exposed to the same international systemic pressures. If they nevertheless disagree regarding the optimal policy, this points to the influence of their broader strategic worldviews. Second, during the 20-year

tion is not imminent, there are strong material costs attached to either of the most extreme policy positions: preventative strikes or accommodation. Therefore, any administration is likely to try to avoid pursuing either one for as long as it can. Preventative strikes would be a high-risk venture in which the possibility of Iran retaliating against U.S. installations in the Middle East or a large-scale military confrontation breaking out would constitute a serious material cost. In addition, undertaking such an operation has opportunity costs because it could divert resources that would be better used against larger-scale threats posed by great-power competitors. Therefore, even someone predisposed to a policy of forceful prevention would face strong pressure not to act immediately until the country in question is on the brink of possessing a nuclear weapon.

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period the leadership changed a number of times, with representatives coming from all of the various schools of thought, and this allows for variation of the independent variable. If the schools of thought had only changed once, between Bush and Obama, it would be more difficult to establish that the divergence in their policies toward the Iranian nuclear program was the product of the differences in worldview between them and not of external conditions. The fact that the represented schools of thought changed for a second time, beginning with Trump in 2017, allows one to assess to what extent the policy shift toward conciliatory diplomacy under Obama was an inevitable product of external conditions or dependent on the worldview of the foreign policy executive at the time.

On the opposite end of the policy spectrum is accommodation, followed by the establishment of a stable deterrence policy (in this case, toward a nuclear Iran). This, too, entails high objective material costs. The emergence of a nuclear-armed adversarial state would constitute a great loss in relative power for America and would impede its ability to project power into the region.<sup>21</sup> It would also raise the likelihood of additional countries seeking nuclear weapons, a prospect that would create even greater loss in relative material power for the United States. Therefore, even someone predisposed to accommodation would face strong material pressure to resist this scenario.

Any administration, regardless of its grand-strategic worldview, is unlikely to adopt either of the above policies as long as the proliferator was not “racing toward a bomb.” That leaves a policy that emphasizes coercive measures and one that emphasizes conciliatory diplomacy, or a combination of the two — a choice that is entirely left open to non-material factors. It is therefore the strategic ideas that are dominant in the foreign policy executive at any time that determine which of these middle policies is pursued.

However, in a situation where weaponization seems imminent, the effect of material factors would change. Decision-makers would be forced to choose between initiating a strike or accommodating a nuclear Iran. As either scenario entails high material costs, it is impossible to determine *a priori* which is most likely to be adopted, or ob-

**Establishing the Material Baseline**

In order to clearly delineate the role of ideas in determining U.S. policy toward Iran, I will first address the objective material considerations that are at work regardless of the schools of thought represented in an administration. For a great power such as the United States, the first material factor to consider is the state of the adversary’s nuclear program. Here, one must distinguish between the presence of nuclear capabilities and a situation where weaponization is imminent.

In the first scenario, in which the proliferator’s nuclear capabilities are growing but weaponiza-

tion is not imminent, there are strong material costs attached to either of the most extreme policy positions: preventative strikes or accommodation. Therefore, any administration is likely to try to avoid pursuing either one for as long as it can. Preventative strikes would be a high-risk venture in which the possibility of Iran retaliating against U.S. installations in the Middle East or a large-scale military confrontation breaking out would constitute a serious material cost. In addition, undertaking such an operation has opportunity costs because it could divert resources that would be better used against larger-scale threats posed by great-power competitors. Therefore, even someone predisposed to a policy of forceful prevention would face strong pressure not to act immediately until the country in question is on the brink of possessing a nuclear weapon.

21 Kroenig, "Force or Friendship," 32.

Table 2: Policy Options and Associated Material Considerations

	When weaponization is not imminent	When weaponization is imminent
<b>Preemptive military strike</b>	Strong material pressure against	High material costs; inconclusive when balanced against costs of accommodation
<b>Coercive measures: sanctions, threat of force, sabotage</b>	No clear material constraints	Not relevant
<b>Legal/normative measures: conciliatory diplomacy, operate through international institution</b>	No clear material constraints	Not relevant
<b>Accommodation and stable deterrence</b>	Strong material pressure against	High material costs; inconclusive when balanced against costs of military strikes

jectively assess which costs were greater.

In line with the theory of offensive realism,<sup>22</sup> a material argument could be made that as a preeminent superpower with vast military capabilities and military bases in the Persian Gulf, the United States has the ability to undertake an airstrike campaign in Iran, whereas Iran can, at most, impose costs on U.S. military assets in the region but cannot significantly retaliate against the U.S. homeland. In this view, the loss of relative power posed by a nuclear Iran would be perceived as far outweighing the risks and costs associated with a military strike. Alternatively, in line with the theory of defensive realism, the opposite material argument could be made that, given the vast conventional power difference and great geographical distance between the United States and Iran, even a nuclear-armed Iran would not constitute a dramatic change in the balance of power. The case could be made that a nuclear Iran would be deterrable and, in this view, the risks of initiating military action would be far greater than the material risks of losing relative power due to a nuclear Iran.<sup>23</sup> This analysis is summarized in Table 2.

At no point in the period in question was Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon assessed to have been imminent, thus neither of the extreme policies — preemptive strikes or accommodation — were pursued. Consequently, U.S. administrations have shifted between the more moderate poli-

cies in accordance with the worldviews that were dominant in each administration.

I now turn to the core of the analysis broken down by administration. For each period, I present the debates that occurred within the foreign policy executive and informed the major decisions and actions that were taken. I then address the specific material pressures that were present at the time, regardless of the national leadership's predispositions.

### **Bush and Zero Enrichment in the Shadow of Iraq: 2002–2009**

#### **Debate and Policy Outcome**

The Bush administration's principal policymakers were most closely aligned with the grand strategies of primacy and realism. Bush himself began his presidency closer to realism, but after the attacks of September 11 he shifted toward adopting a paradigm of primacy. Among the Bush administration's main national security policymakers, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Richard Cheney, and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz were closer to primacy, while first-term Secretary of State Colin Powell, second-term Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and second-term Defense Secretary Robert Gates were closer to realism in their out-

22 See John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 129; and Kroenig, "Force or Friendship," 32.

23 This line of thought has been advocated by Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (July/August, 2012): 2–5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23218033>.





look.<sup>24</sup>

The secret Iranian enrichment facilities at Natanz and Arak were revealed publicly in August 2002, making Iran's nuclear program a crucial security issue for the first time. Prior to the discovery of these facilities, the Bush administration had been opposed to the Iranian nuclear program and pressured Russia to forestall its support of Iran's nuclear energy facilities.<sup>25</sup> After the revelations of the undisclosed enrichment facilities, however, the issue took on a new urgency, and the different strategic worldviews within the administration held differing preferences regarding how to proceed.

Those in the primacy camp, led by Cheney and Rumsfeld and supported by Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton, compared Iran in 2002 to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In their view, Iran had placed itself as the leader of a bloc opposing America, and the West in general, and was attempting to expand its regional influence. The primacists sought to support the dissident movement within Iran in the hope that it would eventually grow into a counter-revolution, similar to that which led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> They rejected direct negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue and pushed for a policy based solely on coercive measures, including sanctions and a willingness to use force to prevent Iran from enriching uranium.<sup>27</sup> This group contemplated the use of force not only to strike nuclear facilities but also to strike targets

that would destabilize the regime itself.<sup>28</sup> They assessed that regimes such as Iran would never agree to a deal that would meet America's minimum requirements and so there was nothing to be gained by negotiating.<sup>29</sup>

The realists in the Bush administration — led by Powell, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and, later on, Gates — also held a highly negative view of Iran and its intentions. In his memoir, Powell had previously expressed the view that Iran was a “fundamentalist regime implacably opposed to us to this day.”<sup>30</sup> Armitage also perceived Iran's regional actions as aggressive. They both argued that Iran should not be allowed to have independent enrichment capabilities, but they also felt that there was nothing to lose by engaging with the country diplomatically.<sup>31</sup> They did not dismiss the idea of eventually using military force against the program either, insisting only that it should be done at the correct time. Armitage states, “We certainly could set the known nuclear program back any time we want ... . So, I would allow the known nuclear program to become much more robust and cost the Iranians a lot more before I ever took it out.”<sup>32</sup>

Bush took the unequivocal position that Iran should not be allowed to retain any independent enrichment capabilities.<sup>33</sup> In 2002, he leaned toward the primacy position and was not willing to even entertain entering into negotiations.<sup>34</sup> He believed that Iran's continuous rejection of European offers to support Iran's civilian energy program in

24 For secondary sources characterizing the grand-strategic thinking in the Bush administrations, see Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Colin Dueck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 365–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30035780>; James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (London: Penguin, 2004); Miller and Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump*; and Jonathan Monten, “The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy,” *International Security* 29, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 112–56, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.29.4.112>.

For primary sources, see George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown, 2010); Dick Cheney, *In My Time: A Personal and Political Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011); Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016); Douglas J. Feith, *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism* (New York: Harper, 2008); Robert Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Random House, 2014); Colin Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995); Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011); “Interview with Condoleezza Rice,” Hoover Institution, Feb. 22, 2012, YouTube, accessed March 31, 2022; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzu\\_QZaUbPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bzu_QZaUbPQ); Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (London: Penguin, 2011); and Stephen J. Solarz et al., “How to Overthrow Saddam,” *Foreign Affairs*, 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 160–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20049265>.

25 John Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option: Defending America at the United Nations and Abroad* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 134.

26 Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 638.

27 Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option* 132, 136; and Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 158.

28 David Wurmser (special assistant to John Bolton and Richard Cheney, 2001–2007), in interview with the author, November 2019.

29 Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 637.

30 Powell, *My American Journey*, 243.

31 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 158; and Richard Armitage, “Interview with Richard Armitage,” *PBS Frontline*, July 12, 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/yanah7ag>.

32 Armitage, “Interview with Richard Armitage.”

33 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 164.

34 Armitage, “Interview with Richard Armitage.”

exchange for cessation of enrichment meant that “Iran was enriching uranium to use in a bomb.”<sup>35</sup> As first-term national security adviser, Rice was initially drawn to the position of pursuing unrelenting coercion on Iran but eventually came to adopt the realist approach.<sup>36</sup>

After the public revelation of the secret facilities in August 2002, Bush decided that the United States would not negotiate with Iran, but before taking any independent action, he sought to take the issue to the U.N. Security Council. In October 2003, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, known as the EU3, secured Iran’s agreement to temporarily suspend enrichment and to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty’s Additional Protocol. In Rice’s view, Iran had no legitimate need to enrich and reprocess uranium, but she also thought that it should be given a face-saving way out of the crisis by offering a route to civilian nuclear energy.<sup>37</sup>

By 2005, Rice felt that the lack of success in Iraq had demonstrated the fallacy of the strategy of primacy in general and that America’s absolute refusal to participate in negotiations with Iran left Washington at a dead end. Now secretary of state, she decided that, in order to construct a strong sanctions regime, a U.N. Security Council resolution was necessary.<sup>38</sup> However, neither she nor Bush would support entering into negotiations while Iran continued to enrich uranium.<sup>39</sup>

Joining the Bush administration in 2006, Gates was the most cautious realist in the foreign policy executive. He agreed that Iran “posed a huge threat to the stability of the entire region,” but he was the strongest voice for moderation and argued to significantly raise the bar for use of force against Iran, primarily because he felt that while the United States was engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan it

could not initiate another conflict.<sup>40</sup>

By mid-2006, Bush, too, had moderated his position toward the realist approach and was willing to have America participate in talks on the condition that Iran would first agree to suspend its enrichment program. He did not write off using force, but felt it was not yet necessary.<sup>41</sup> Cheney and Rumsfeld were not enthusiastic about this shift, but they did not significantly push back against it either.<sup>42</sup> Bush also instructed the CIA and Defense Department to accelerate plans for covert action aimed at delaying Iran’s capabilities.<sup>43</sup> Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams is certain that in a scenario referred to as a “breakout,” in which Iran began to take the final steps necessary to attain a nuclear warhead, Bush would have taken military action.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, the United States was pursuing a U.N. Security Council resolution that would put both sanctions and the use of force on the table, but this proved unattainable.<sup>45</sup> Eventually, the two security council resolutions that were adopted called for Iran to end uranium enrichment and placed sanctions of a highly limited scope, focusing on Iran’s missile program and assets of individuals who were connected to the program.<sup>46</sup> The resolutions did not call for use of force and the sanctions did not constitute an attempt to apply serious pressure on Iran’s economy as a whole.<sup>47</sup> However, parallel to the U.N. track, in 2006 the Bush administration began to impose unilateral sanctions on Iran through the Treasury Department. The sanctions targeted Iranian banks and international corporations that were doing business with Iran.<sup>48</sup> Demonstrating the coercive nature of this project, from the outset this initiative aimed to go well beyond the U.N. sanctions and sought to place maxi-

35 Bush, *Decision Points*, 416.

36 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 164.

37 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 422.

38 Rice, *No Higher Honor*.

39 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 463.

40 Gates, *Duty*, 192.

41 Bush, *Decision Points*, 416.

42 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 463.

43 Gates, *Duty*, 190; and Michael V. Hayden, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror* (London: Penguin, 2017), 291.

44 Elliott Abrams (deputy national security adviser, 2005–2009), in interview with author, September 2019.

45 Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option*, 324.

46 U.N. Security Council Resolution 1737, United Nations, Dec. 23, 2006, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/681/42/PDF/N0668142.pdf?OpenElement>; and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1747, United Nations, 1747, March 24, 2006. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N07/281/40/PDF/N0728140.pdf?OpenElement> were adopted under U.N. Charter Chap. VII, Article 41 (which allows for sanctions) but not under Article 42 (which allows for the use of force). See also Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 536.

47 Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option*, 340; and Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 536.

48 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 521.



mum pressure on Iran's economy as a whole.<sup>49</sup>

In the final year of Bush's second term, the United States imposed additional unilateral sanctions on Iran through the Treasury Department and through executive orders with the aim of pressuring Iran to choose between suspending its nuclear activities and facing greater economic isolation.<sup>50</sup> The administration also continued to support the Iranian dissident movement.<sup>51</sup> By 2008, Iran had begun to produce small amounts of enriched uranium and the administration was not prepared to accept this activity. But, while Bush would not reject a military strike out of hand and continued to encourage planning for such a scenario, he did not feel the situation was urgent enough to justify taking military action.<sup>52</sup>

the program before using force.<sup>53</sup> As long as the administration thought its window for the use of force against the facilities was not about to close, it calculated that America's capabilities for military measures were vast enough that it could afford to go through the motions of going to the U.N. Security Council before taking action.<sup>54</sup> There was also hope that the dissident movement in Iran might actually bring about change internally, especially if assisted by the United States.<sup>55</sup>

The second external factor that pressured the Bush administration not to opt for immediate military action was that by the time the extent of Iranian covert facilities became clear in 2002, the United States was deployed in Afghanistan and had already decided to pursue the war in Iraq. To be sure, the military resources required for a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities could have been made available, but the attention and priorities of the administration were not focused on Iran. In Bush's second term, Iraq remained the primary focus of his attention, and accumulating war fatigue made it increasingly difficult to countenance initiating a confrontation with Iran.

This explains why the administration moderated its position in 2006 and became willing to enter negotiations if Iran would meet the precondition of suspending enrichment. But, despite this change in approach, the administration's willingness to negotiate was linked to a precondition, and it also initiated direct sanctions and covert sabotage in parallel, making this still a fundamentally coercive policy. The ongoing war in Iraq, while a great constraint on resources, was not so overwhelming as to predetermine a shift to conciliatory diplomatic measures, nor did it make acceptance of Iranian enrichment capabilities inevitable. The material constraints notwithstanding, a range of feasible policies remained open, including both coercive and conciliatory policies. It was grand-strategic assumptions that led the Bush administration to retain a fundamentally coercive approach.

**By the end of 2009, Obama reassessed his approach and decided that, because his willingness to engage positively had been rebuffed, he could now pursue applying economic pressure.**

### Material Factors

Although the United States was the preeminent superpower during the two Bush administrations and certainly had the capabilities and willingness, in theory, to take military action against Iran, a number of factors worked against pursuing this course initially.

The first was that, in October 2003, about a year after the exposure of Iran's enrichment facilities, the country agreed to postpone the production of enriched uranium. This lowered the sense of urgency surrounding the issue and allowed the United States to let the EU<sub>3</sub> lead. Although the administration had adopted a unilateralist doctrine in general, given the lack of urgency it preferred to secure U.N. Security Council resolutions against

49 Former Bush administration official, in interview with author, September 2019. The individual spoke under the condition of anonymity.

50 Rice, *No Higher Honor*, 628.

51 Bush, *Decision Points*, 418.

52 Abrams, interview with author.

53 Feith, *War and Decision*, 233.

54 Bolton, *Surrender Is Not an Option*, 136.

55 Wurmser, interview with the author; and Feith, *War and Decision*, 233.

## **Obama Moves to Outreach, Dual Track, and Compromise: 2009–2016**

The Obama administration's principal foreign policymakers were most closely aligned with the grand-strategic worldviews of assertive and progressive internationalism,<sup>56</sup> while Obama himself was more in the camp of the latter. Within the two terms of his administration, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction Gary Samore, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and Special Assistant to the President in the National Security Council Dennis Ross were more closely representative of assertive internationalism. Secretary of State John Kerry, Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting Ben Rhodes, Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power, Deputy National Security Adviser Dennis McDonough, and National Security Adviser Susan Rice were closer to progressive internationalism.<sup>57</sup> On Iran policy, the assertive internationalists emerged as dominant in the first term, whereas the progressive internationalist camp came to set the tone during the second term.<sup>58</sup>

### **Debate and Policy in Obama's First Term**

During his election campaign for his first term, Obama advocated for direct engagement with the highest-level Iranian leadership. Although he was

aware that his overtures toward Iran may not result in any change in the relationship, he believed in the possibility that they could have the desired effect, and therefore felt he was duty bound to give outreach a real attempt. The hope for rapprochement was strongly supported by his closest advisers in the progressive internationalism camp, including Rhodes, McDonough, Power, and Rice, who all felt that it must be tried before implementing any coercive measures.<sup>59</sup> Obama hoped that a more cooperative relationship with Iran would not only allow the United States to pivot away from the Middle East but could also lead to more stability in the region and serve to counter radical Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda and, later, the Islamic State.<sup>60</sup>

During his first months in office, Obama wrote four letters to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to communicate his change in approach, emphasizing that the United States was not seeking regime change in Iran and indicating a willingness to negotiate on the nuclear issue.<sup>61</sup> In late 2009, the administration supported an initiative for then-Sen. John Kerry to visit Tehran to hold a dialogue, but Iran was unresponsive.<sup>62</sup> These steps were a genuine attempt to adopt a conciliatory posture and avoid using any threatening rhetoric toward Iran.<sup>63</sup>

The assertive internationalists in Obama's administration, on the other hand, believed that Iran was intent on attaining nuclear weapons and therefore believed that American pressure must be applied to prevent this from happening. They were highly skeptical of the potential for a significant change

56 Save for realist holdover Gates.

57 For secondary sources characterizing the grand-strategic thinking in the Obama administration's worldview see Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland, eds., *The Obama Doctrine: A Legacy of Continuity in US Foreign Policy?* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Susan B. Glasser, "How Does Obama's Foreign Policy Look a Year Into Trump?" *Politico*, Jan. 15, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ybvaek6b>; Martin S. Indyk, Kenneth G. Lieberthal, and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Scoring Obama's Foreign Policy: A Progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 3 (May/June, 2012): 29–43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23217964>; Robert G. Kaufman, *Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); and James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (London: Penguin, 2012).

For primary sources, see William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (New York: Random House, 2019); Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016); Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2 (November/December 2007) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2007-11-01/security-and-opportunity-twenty-first-century>; Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/hyokvh9>; Kerry, *A Call to Service*; John Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006); Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020); Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (London: Penguin, 2014); Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2019); Susan Rice, *Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019); Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The US-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); and Wendy Sherman, *Not for the Faint of Heart: Lessons in Courage, Power and Persistence* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

58 Obama's first and second terms are divided into two subsections here because the greater activity on this issue over the course of his tenure requires a higher-resolution analysis. The following discussion of material factors covers both terms.

59 Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 55.

60 Robert Einhorn (State Department special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, 2009–2013), in interview with author, September 2019.

61 Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 55.

62 See also Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), 242.

63 Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 55.



in the relationship with Iran under the current regime. Clinton expressed suspicion toward the idea of direct engagement during her election campaign, warning that it risked raising Iran's international status.<sup>64</sup> The assertive internationalists went along with the outreach initiative because they understood that, in order to increase pressure on Iran, America would need cooperation from other powers and outreach was a way of demonstrating that the administration had given a more congenial approach a chance.<sup>65</sup> But, in contrast to Bush's position, the assertive internationalists were willing to have direct diplomatic contact with Iran without preconditions.<sup>66</sup> In August 2009, Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov agreed to offer Iran a guaranteed supply of enriched uranium for its power plant and research facility, as part of an overall agreement under which Iran would uphold the U.N. Security Council resolutions by abandoning all its enrichment activities. But the Iranian leadership was quick to reject this arrangement.<sup>67</sup>

By the end of 2009, Obama reassessed his approach and decided that, because his willingness to engage positively had been rebuffed, he could now pursue applying economic pressure. Whereas in his first year in office, Obama had shifted U.S. policy strongly in the direction of conciliatory diplomacy, by the outset of 2010, while retaining the same basic conciliatory posture, he was now willing to pursue a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for stronger sanctions with the aim of pushing Iran to the negotiating table, what is called a "dual track" approach.<sup>68</sup> In many ways, the dual track approach brought U.S. policy into alignment with Bush's policy during his second term. However, this time there were no preconditions for entering negotiations, and there was a strong rhetorical shift away from any mention of regime change.

Throughout his first term, Obama aimed to uphold the previous U.N. Security Council resolutions that prohibited any enrichment facilities on

Iranian soil. At the same time, the administration assessed that it would eventually be necessary to concede some sort of limited enrichment capacity. Samore imagined a symbolic enrichment capacity — a "museum of centrifuges" at a single site that would be subject to inspections — that could be offered as a face-saving concession.<sup>69</sup> Ross similarly envisioned that this symbolic capacity would eventually be offered at the final stages of a negotiation, as a deal-closing concession, but certainly not at the outset as a way to get Iran to the table. Ross thought that if Iran would be willing to close down all of its other enrichment infrastructure, this would demonstrate that it was no longer actively pursuing weapons and, therefore, allowing symbolic enrichment capacity at a single facility could be tolerated.<sup>70</sup>

In June 2010, a new U.N. Security Council resolution was adopted that placed additional sanctions on Iran's financial transactions, forbade the sale of arms or any dual-use technology to Iran, and opened the door for stronger unilateral sanctions by the United States and other countries.<sup>71</sup> Obama had the Treasury Department continue developing direct sanctions,<sup>72</sup> and additional sanctions were placed on Iran's petrochemical industry in December 2011.<sup>73</sup>

The effort to build a macroeconomic sanctions regime continued to progress through 2012, though not all of America's sanctions were initiated by the Obama administration. A group of legislators took the initiative to increase the pressure on Iran by passing the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act in 2010.<sup>74</sup> This went beyond previous actions by introducing secondary sanctions: The United States would now sanction any entity doing business with the targeted Iranian company. In July 2012, the Senate passed legislation that strengthened the sanctions on Iranian oil exports by blacklisting the Iranian central bank through which its foreign oil transactions

64 Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 173.

65 Gates, *Duty*, 327.

66 Clinton, "Security and Opportunity."

67 Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 426; and Gates, *Duty*, 390.

68 Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 415.

69 Gary Samore (White House coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction, 2009–2013), in interview with author, September, 2019.

70 Dennis Ross (special adviser to secretary of state 2009; national security council staff, 2009–2011), in interview with author, September, 2019.

71 "U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929," United Nations, June 9, 2010, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1929-%282010%29>; and Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 434.

72 Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 195.

73 Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 439.

74 *Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010*, HR 2194, 111th Congress, 2009–2010, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/house-bill/2194>. See also, Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 200.

are processed.<sup>75</sup> The third major unilateral action pushed forward by Congress was to begin publicly pressuring the European Union to eject Iran from the SWIFT payment network that processes international transactions. It did this by drafting legislation in February 2012 that would place sanctions on SWIFT if it did not eject Iran.<sup>76</sup> The legislators and independent think tanks behind these initiatives believed strongly in taking coercive measures, assessing that pressure on the Iranian economy should be raised to a maximum and kept there until a satisfactory deal was concluded.<sup>77</sup>

While the assertive internationalists in the administration were inclined toward applying maximum economic pressure, the progressive wing, which emphasized conciliatory diplomacy, was concerned that too much economic pressure could undermine the prospects of achieving a negotiated resolution.<sup>78</sup> In the conciliatory view, a certain amount of pressure was necessary to convince Iran to come to the negotiating table, but the goal should not be to devastate the Iranian economy, as the oil sanctions and SWIFT rejection were meant to do. As well, according to this view, once Iran was willing to negotiate, raising the pressure any further would be tantamount to antagonization, which would undermine the spirit of the negotiations, lead Iran to break off the talks, and preclude the possibility of an improved relationship later on. For them, sanctions were seen more as a way of getting Iran to negotiate than as a tool to extract concessions in the context of a negotiation.<sup>79</sup>

During this period, Obama insisted publicly that he had not foresworn the use of force to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, he directed the Department of Defense to make sure he had the ability to use military means and this meant developing the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, which provided a strike option against the underground enrichment facility at Fordow.<sup>81</sup> Obama also kept two aircraft carriers in the Persian

Gulf as deterrence and a show of U.S. determination,<sup>82</sup> but he never articulated clearly what the American reaction would be in the case of nuclear breakout. Indeed, there was internal disagreement regarding what Washington should do in such a scenario.<sup>83</sup>

### Debate and Policy in Obama's Second Term

After Obama's reelection, the balance of the competing strategic worldviews represented in the foreign policy executive shifted. Kerry took over from Clinton as secretary of state, Susan Rice took over from Donilon as national security adviser in June 2013, Samore departed in 2013, and Ross had left by the beginning of 2012. This change in personnel decreased the influence of the assertive internationalists who had been dominant in crafting America's Iran policy in the first term and increased the influence of the progressive internationalists.

It seemed to the administration that a confrontation with Iran was becoming inevitable. The harshest economic sanctions ever put on a state had been placed on Iran and yet it seemed unwilling to negotiate or compromise in any significant way, and its nuclear capabilities continued to grow.<sup>84</sup> After his reelection, Obama began to consider attempting to break the stalemate by signaling to Iran upfront that the United States would be willing to agree to Iran retaining limited enrichment capabilities (with various constraints), while also holding off on any additional sanctions. This was supported by Rhodes, McDonough, National Security Council Special Assistant to the President Puneet Talwar, and National Security Council Director for Iranian Affairs Richard Nephew. Once Kerry entered office in early 2013, he became the dominant voice arguing forcefully to concede limited enrichment upfront in order to avoid the alternative, which was seen as inevitably leading to military conflict.<sup>85</sup>

On the other hand, Samore and Donilon were skeptical and expressed the problems that they

75 *Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012*, HR 1905, 112th Congress, 2011–2012, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/1905/text>. See also, Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 200.

76 *Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012*. See also, Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 202.

77 Mark Dubowitz (executive director of Foundation for Defense of Democracies), in interview with author, September 2019.

78 Dan Shapiro (U.S. ambassador to Israel, 2011–2017), in interview with author, September 2019; and Ross, interview with author.

79 Former Obama administration official, in interview with author, September 2019. The individual spoke under the condition of anonymity.

80 Mark Landler, "Obama Says Iran Strike Is an Option, but Warns Israel," *New York Times*, March 2, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/03/world/middleeast/obama-says-military-option-on-iran-not-a-bluff.html>.

81 Ross, interview with author.

82 Shapiro, interview with author.

83 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 368.

84 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 350.

85 Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 493.



perceived in making such a move, as Clinton had before leaving her post as secretary of state.<sup>86</sup> Donilon and Ross had wanted to see more signs that Iran was serious before talking about enrichment. They were concerned that, once enrichment was mentioned, Iran would capitalize on it and demand more concessions.<sup>87</sup> Clinton had also been skeptical that Iran was seriously interested in negotiating a deal and was concerned that shifting away from the dual track approach toward a stronger reliance on conciliatory diplomacy would make the United States appear too eager to make a deal.<sup>88</sup>

Divergent assessments on a number of issues lay at the divide over the potential approaches to Iran's nuclear program. The assertive internationalists felt that it was premature to conclude that economic pressure was not going to induce Iran to modify its position. The most serious sanctions had only been put into place in 2012, and there was no doubt that they were having a devastating effect on the Iranian economy.<sup>89</sup> They assessed that the international sanctions could be maintained much longer and that the United States could maintain its unilateral sanctions without the agreement of foreign governments. So, in their view, there was no urgency to break the stalemate. The assertive wing also judged that the only reason Iran would agree to negotiate was because of the devastating sanctions. Washington, therefore, should not be concerned about Tehran walking out of a negotiation, because it was the pressure that would have brought them there in the first place. This faction in the administration believed that the United States had the upper hand and that it was Iran who needed the negotiations more than America. The U.S. negotiators could exploit the desire in Congress to place even greater sanctions as leverage to extract concessions from Iran and without having to change any substantive U.S. positions.<sup>90</sup> The assertive internationalists were also convinced that Iran's intentions never ceased to be the attainment of nuclear weapons and that it would only curtail

this goal as a result of pressure.<sup>91</sup>

The progressive internationalists had a different assessment of all of the above points and, led by Kerry, this is the view that became dominant in the administration in 2013. This group held that the United States was under great time constraints because the international sanctions regime was stretched to its limits and could not be effectively maintained for very much longer. They concluded that the United States must act while the pressure was at its strongest by making a renewed effort at conciliatory diplomacy.<sup>92</sup> They also felt that the zero-enrichment position was unreasonable and that the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany (known as the P5+1) already believed that it was a forgone conclusion that Iran would retain some of its enrichment facilities.<sup>93</sup> Regarding the prospect of U.S. military action, the progressive view was that, were Iran to retaliate, it would inevitably lead to a large-scale regional war.<sup>94</sup> Obama and Kerry felt that it was their duty to demonstrate that this issue could be resolved through diplomacy and without force.

The progressive group also had an alternative understanding of Iran's intentions and how to conduct negotiations, once begun. This faction believed that it was urgent that the United States make diplomatic progress and calculated that Iran was more willing than they were to break off contact. They consequently felt that the sanctions were best used to induce Iran to come to the negotiating table but, once there, adding more pressure would be counter-productive and antagonistic and would lead Iran to walk out.<sup>95</sup>

In addition, Kerry, and to a slightly lesser extent Obama himself, had an optimistic view of the potential for a more fundamental change in the U.S.-Iranian relationship that could arise after settling the nuclear issue.<sup>96</sup> Neither man believed that this was inevitable, but they nevertheless felt that it was a possibility. This hope strengthened their determination to attain a diplomatic agreement. Reflecting on the negotiations that were eventu-

86 Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 178.

87 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 357; and Ross, interview with author.

88 Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 493.

89 Samore, interview with author.

90 Ross, interview with author.

91 Samore, interview with author.

92 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 355.

93 Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 492.

94 Samore, interview with author; and Shapiro, interview with author.

95 Shapiro, interview with author.

96 Einhorn, interview with author; and former Obama administration official, interview with author.

ally held between 2013 and 2014, negotiator Wendy Sherman describes this sentiment: “The most important facets of the Iran deal were the higher principles we sought and the reimagining of the world that it took to make the deal happen ... . It was anchored by a common wish to make peace.”<sup>97</sup>

Lastly, the progressive internationalists were not at all convinced that Iran was intent on attaining nuclear weapons. Everyone understood that, prior to 2003, Iran had taken steps to develop weapons. But it was argued that Iran had since shelved those plans and was not certain to return to them. Hence, the progressive internationalists in the administration concluded that the United States should refrain from acting in a way that would push Iran to actually make the decision to weaponize.<sup>98</sup>

In January 2012, Kerry (who was still a senator at the time) made a trip to Oman to explore the possibilities of a direct negotiation track. He went beyond the White House’s position by indicating to Iran, through Oman, that America would be willing to accept Iran having some amount of enrichment capacity. Rhodes later stated: “Kerry was actually talking substance with the Omanis ... . We were very careful to make clear that we were not taking negotiating positions ... . Kerry actually was, in his non-official capacity, floating proposals, talking about things like enrichment.”<sup>99</sup> In July 2012, National Security Adviser to the Vice President Jake Sullivan and Talwar were sent to Oman to continue exploring this avenue but were instructed to show no flexibility on the issue of enrichment.<sup>100</sup> They returned with the impression that Iran was not yet ready to engage seriously.<sup>101</sup>

After his reelection, Obama sought to break the stalemate by operating through the Omani channel. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns relates that in February 2013, he was instructed to indicate to the Iranians “that if they were prepared to accept tight, long-term constraints on their nuclear program, with heavily intrusive verification and monitoring arrangements, we would be pre-

pared to explore the possibility of a limited domestic enrichment program as part of a comprehensive agreement.”<sup>102</sup> The message was first officially delivered in March 2013, but it did not lead to an immediate breakthrough.<sup>103</sup> However, after Hassan Rouhani was elected president that summer, he showed interest in pursuing negotiations. The Obama administration saw Rouhani as a moderate Iranian leader who was interested in making a deal. It believed that America needed to provide sanctions relief in order to strengthen Rouhani’s status domestically, which would make it easier for him to make concessions.<sup>104</sup>

In November 2013, the Joint Plan of Action interim deal was signed by the P5+1 states and Iran. According to the agreement, Iran would not advance its program for six months and would allow new inspections in exchange for the release of some Iranian funds that were frozen by the sanctions. The plan stipulated that, in the long term, Iran would be allowed a certain amount of enrichment capabilities in exchange for tighter inspections.<sup>105</sup> For Obama, the Joint Plan of Action was a way of exploring the path of conciliation while leaving open the possibility of a return to pressure.<sup>106</sup> Although most of the sanctions remained in place, at this point Washington shifted to emphasizing a conciliatory policy and came to view any additional pressure as counter-productive.<sup>107</sup>

The only major concession that the United States made in signing the interim deal was to offer allowing small-scale enrichment capabilities in exchange for stronger inspections. Thus, when the negotiations for a comprehensive deal began, America was still demanding the closure of the underground facility at Fordow and the heavy water reactor at Arak, and it was not willing to lift the limitations on ballistic missile development and arms trade with Iran put in place by the U.N. Security Council resolutions.<sup>108</sup> As negotiations progressed over the next year, the major disagreement lay in the extent of enrichment capabilities that were to remain

97 Sherman, *Not for the Faint*, xix.

98 Einhorn, interview with author; and Samore, interview with author.

99 Quoted in Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 243.

100 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 351; and Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 495.

101 Clinton, *Hard Choices*, 438.

102 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 357.

103 Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 496; and Burns, *The Back Channel*, 368.

104 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 370.

105 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 379; and Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 244.

106 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 370.

107 Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 252.

108 Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 323; Einhorn, interview with author; Hayden, *Playing to the Edge*, 308; and Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 251.



in Iran. Washington considered its acceptance of small-scale enrichment to be a major concession and expected Iran to significantly reduce the number of centrifuges in its possession in return. The United States called for a maximum of 500 centrifuges while Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif would not agree to anything below 9,000.<sup>109</sup> By November 2014, America had agreed to 1,500 centrifuges, but negotiations remained at an impasse.<sup>110</sup> Khamenei's position was that Iran could not accept a merely "decorative, caricaturistic nuclear industry."<sup>111</sup> But a symbolic enrichment capacity was precisely what the United States had envisioned when it first offered to explore the idea of limited enrichment in 2013.

Obama certainly had limits to what he was willing to concede, but in order to keep the process alive, the acceptable goal was now redefined as extending the time needed for Iran to accumulate the amount of fuel necessary to produce a warhead to at least one year while maximizing the access for inspectors.<sup>112</sup> This redefined bottom line meant that the United States had agreed that Iran would retain a large-scale enrichment infrastructure — and not merely a symbolic one — as long as inspections and other limitations ensured that it could not break out to weaponization in less than a year.

The final agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, limited Iran to retaining 5,060 centrifuges for 10 years and limited its low-enriched uranium stockpile to 300 kilograms for 15 years. For its part, Iran committed not to build any new enrichment facilities. The United States conceded that the underground facility at Fordow would not be closed down, but rather its centrifuges would remain in place and could be used for research and development purposes but not to enrich uranium. The Arak facility would also remain but would be redesigned so as to preclude its being used to produce weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>113</sup> Iran agreed to various inspections to ensure the above conditions. This allowed the U.S. team to attain its goal of limiting Iran's breakout time to one year and guaranteed this limitation for the next 10 years.

## Material Factors

What, if anything, had materially changed for the

United States between the Bush administration and the Obama administration that could explain this change in approach to Iran? The fundamental material position of the United States in terms of power predominance in the global system had not changed significantly between Bush's second term and Obama's first term. Like Bush, Obama had all of America's hard power at his disposal and it was clear to all involved that the United States would ultimately prevail in any conflict with Iran. The material interest in preventing the emergence of an adversarial nuclear power remained unchanged as well. At the same time, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan remained a priority in Washington, making it difficult for any president to justify initiating a military confrontation with Iran.

One significant difference in the external context between the two administrations was the fact that Iran had begun to accumulate enriched uranium. Bush had the option to insist on zero enrichment as a precondition for talks, while hoping that the offer of support for Iran's civilian program and the threat of sanctions would induce Iran to eventually agree to suspend enrichment. After Bush's final two years in office, during which Washington continued to insist on its precondition and began imposing sanctions, it did not seem that Iranian capitulation was close at hand. By 2009, it was becoming more difficult to continue with this approach, as it did not seem to be working. Therefore, it seems likely that any administration would have dropped the precondition for engaging in talks.

However, at the beginning of Obama's first term, the above material pressures served only to push the administration toward a willingness to participate in negotiations without preconditions. These pressures did not necessitate the campaign of outreach that Obama pursued, nor did they necessitate the arousal of hopes for significant change in the relationship between the two countries. Rather, Obama's outreach initiatives are best explained by the difference in strategic worldview that his team brought to the White House. This is demonstrated by the fact that his administration was divided, with the assertive internationalists on Obama's team feeling that the outreach was doomed to fail.

Although the shift in Iran policy between the Bush and Obama administrations was tangible, Obama's adoption of the dual track approach in 2010 signi-

109 Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, 501.

110 Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, 264.

111 Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, 266.

112 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 370; Shapiro, interview with author; Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, 278.

113 Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, 259. For more details see *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>.



fied that he was continuing many elements of the Bush administration's policy. The more significant change in policy, in fact, occurred between the first and second Obama administrations.

It was in the second term that the debate began within the administration between the assertive internationalists, who sought to hold out for the sanctions to have an effect, and the progressive internationalists, who sought to break the stalemate by agreeing up front to allow Iran to retain a small-scale enrichment capacity. The best indicator that the position that the Obama administration eventually adopted was not a forgone conclusion is the very fact that the assertive internationalist wing was not in favor of it. The sense of urgency to break the stalemate only became a consensus view within the administration after the personnel change in 2013. Therefore, I assert that, in terms of the objective material constraints that were acting on the United States at the time, either of the two policy directions was feasible. Neither was obviously untenable and the choice between them rested on many unknowns and uncertainties. Precisely for this reason, the preferences and assumptions embodied in the strategic worldviews of the policy-

makers became the determining factor in deciding which path to pursue. I will now offer a few points to demonstrate that the policy of conciliatory diplomacy that was eventually adopted was not a necessary outcome of the material constraints.

It is difficult to know whether the diplomatic stalemate was as unsustainable as the progressive internationalists asserted. The assessment of how sustainable the sanctions regime was inherently open to debate. Nevertheless, the heaviest sanctions, including those having to do with SWIFT and the Iranian central bank, were only put in place in 2012 and I submit that it seems likely that their sustainability would have lasted more than a year. In addition, just as the United States had earlier pressured Russia and China to agree to the sanctions by threatening that the alternative would be a military strike (either by the United States or Israel), there is no compelling reason to assume that this would no longer be a viable lever of influence to keep the sanctions in place.

Another point that casts doubt on the idea that Iran would have persisted in its refusal to enter negotiations is that Rouhani was elected in June 2013 having campaigned on the promise that he would



negotiate with the United States to get sanctions lifted.<sup>114</sup> Burns states that Rouhani understood the economic toll that the sanctions were taking and persuaded the supreme leader that Iran must “explore a more serious nuclear negotiation and consider some real compromises.”<sup>115</sup> This indicates that the sanctions were, indeed, having the desired effect. Rouhani pursued reopening negotiations immediately upon entering office. It seems that his willingness to negotiate was a direct result of the economic disruptions caused by the sanctions.

The undesirability of the military option was a central consideration that led the Obama administration to pursue conciliatory diplomacy. In terms of the fundamental balance of power, there could be little doubt about Washington’s ability to conduct a successful strike and ultimately prevail in a large-scale conflagration. Iran had the ability to extract a price on U.S. installations in the Middle East, but it could not significantly threaten the American homeland. In addition, although Iran may have sought to escalate, it also had many good reasons not to do so. These include the knowledge that the United States had an overwhelming advantage militarily, the fact that America could indicate that it was not going to escalate further if Iran would not provoke it, and the fact that Iran itself was highly dependent on the oil exports that would have been disrupted by a conflict in the Persian Gulf.<sup>116</sup> Despite Iran having had many objective reasons to limit its response to military actions that would be under the threshold of escalation, the administration adopted a working assumption that any military action on its part and, later on, any break-off of the negotiations, would inevitably result in a large-scale war.

Further insight can be gained by the fact that, once out of office, the principal decision-makers from the Bush administration did not support the shift to a conciliatory posture and the level of enrichment capacity that was eventually accepted. In 2012, Condoleezza Rice, who had been among the moderate voices in Bush’s second term, held to her position, stating: “We’ve got them in a corner,

I think the military option is becoming more likely and at this point the only deal you take with the Iranians is total suspension for good.”<sup>117</sup> Likewise, throughout 2014, Bush National Security Council member Michael Singh continued to argue that the “shift away from a zero-enrichment negotiating position is misguided and unnecessary.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, looking at the same material facts, these former officials publicly asserted their disagreement with the direction in which the Obama administration was headed, indicating that the shift was not simply the result of material constraints.

An even stronger indicator that the shift was not a product of objective constraints is that, in the final weeks of negotiations of what has come to be known as the “Iran deal,” some of the officials who led Iran policy during Obama’s first term sent him a letter expressing their concern that the emerging deal “may fall short of meeting the administration’s own standard of a ‘good’ agreement.”<sup>119</sup> After the deal was finalized, Ross and Gen. David Petraeus publicly stated that, without additional steps to strengthen the U.S. position — which Obama was not willing to take — they could not support the deal.<sup>120</sup>

The above points demonstrate, at a minimum, that, at the outset of 2013, material pressures against a policy of continued pressure without concessions existed, but they were not overwhelming. Structural constraints, therefore, allowed for — but did not necessitate — the shift toward conciliatory diplomacy. Instead, this shift was the result of the different weight that different strategic worldviews assigned to the various unknowns. The policymakers in Obama’s second term assigned heavier weight to the risk of using force than to the risk of allowing Iran’s large-scale nuclear infrastructure to remain in place in the framework of a deal. This weighting was, in turn, informed by the strong preference for diplomatic solutions over military ones, alongside the assumption that Iran was not necessarily intent on pursuing nuclear weapons.

114 Parsi, *Losing an Enemy*, 200; and Rhodes, *The World as It Is*, 248.

115 Burns, *The Back Channel*, 368.

116 For a detailed analysis of this scenario, see Matthew Kroenig, *A Time to Attack: The Looming Iranian Nuclear Threat* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2014), 192.

117 Rice, “Interview with Condoleezza Rice”; and Cheney and Cheney, *Exceptional*, 186.

118 Michael Singh, “The Case for Zero Enrichment in Iran,” *Arms Control Today* 44, no. 2 (March 2014): 12–14, <https://tinyurl.com/y3xvpofm>. See also Michael Singh, “A Better Iran Deal Is Within Reach,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 15, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2019-11-15/better-iran-deal-within-reach>.

119 David E. Sanger, “Ex-Advisers Warn Obama that Iran Nuclear Deal ‘May Fall Short’ of Standards,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y3esoy7b>.

120 Dennis Ross and David H. Petraeus, “How to Put Some Teeth Into the Nuclear Deal with Iran,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 25, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/yxetazsl>.

## **Trump 2017–2020: “America First” — Caught Between Realism and Primacy**

### **Debates and Policy Outcome**

Summarizing the balance of strategic worldviews in the Trump administration, it can be said that, during the first third of Trump's term in office, the debate was between the neo-isolationist tendencies of Trump and his closest advisers, including White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon and Senior Adviser to the President Stephen Miller, on the one hand, and the realists, including Defense Secretary James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster, on the other. Following the personnel changes that brought in John Bolton and Mike Pompeo, as national security adviser and secretary of state respectively, the debate came to center around Bolton and Pompeo's attempts to follow a more assertive playbook dictated by a strategy of primacy and Trump's desire to strengthen American power without applying it unnecessarily.<sup>121</sup>

The tension between the views of the realists and Trump's inclinations toward neo-isolationism was brought into clear focus within the first months of the administration. Mattis believed strongly in the post-World War II *status quo*, according to which it is in America's interest to maintain forward deployment and a web of alliances across the globe.<sup>122</sup> He and Tillerson attempted to convince the president that America derives great value and stability from having strong relationships with allies and from the forward presence of troops, arguing that if America's authority as a world leader were to diminish,

this would embolden China, Russia, and Iran.<sup>123</sup> Upon assuming the presidency, Trump's view was strongly opposed to this *status quo*, asserting that America's current overseas military presence was unsustainable and calling for the end of “ninety percent of our commitments” abroad,<sup>124</sup> especially in the Middle East.<sup>125</sup>

The conflicting views on grand strategy within the administration informed the differing preferences on Iran policy. The realists did not have favorable views of Iran or of the Iran deal. But Mattis believed that if Iran upheld its commitments under the deal, it was in the national interest for the United States to do so as well. He and Tillerson shared the belief that once America “gave its word” in an international deal, it must uphold it because overturning a deal made by a previous administration would undermine American credibility.<sup>126</sup> Mattis also thought, in line with realist thinking, that America's primary threats were the great powers — China and Russia — as well as nuclear-armed North Korea, while Iran was merely a “fourth-tier” threat.<sup>127</sup>

McMaster, too, had a highly negative view of the Iran nuclear deal, but he also felt that simply withdrawing carried significant disadvantages. These included concerns that if the withdrawal was perceived as unjustified, re-imposing sanctions would be difficult and international attention would be diverted from Iran's nefarious activities. Instead, he proposed remaining in the deal while at the same time sanctioning Iran for behavior not included in the deal, such as missile development and support for terrorism. This route, he argued, would grant the United States leverage to garner

121 For secondary sources characterizing the grand-strategic thinking in the Trump administration, see Elliott Abrams, “Trump the Traditionalist: A Surprisingly Standard Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July/August 2017): 10–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44823887>; Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018); Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, “Does Donald Trump Have a Grand Strategy?” *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September 2017): 1013–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix161>; Dueck, *Age of Iran*; Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2 (March/April 2017): 2–7, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44821699>; Miller and Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump*, 226–47; Barry R. Posen, “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-13/rise-illiberal-hegemony>; Randall Schweller, “Three Cheers for Trump's Foreign Policy: What the Establishment Misses,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-14/three-cheers-trumps-foreign-policy>; and Stephen M. Walt, “Has Trump Become a Realist?” *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/17/has-trump-become-a-realist/>.

For primary sources, see John Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2020); Sarah Huckabee Sanders, *Speaking for Myself: Faith, Freedom, and the Fight of Our Lives Inside the Trump White House* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020); Robert C. O'Brien, *While America Slept: Restoring American Leadership to a World in Crisis* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016); H.R. McMaster, *Battlefields: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper, 2020); Michael R. Pompeo, “Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration's Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 6 (November/December 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>; and Guy M. Snodgrass, *Holding the Line: Inside Trump's Pentagon with Secretary Mattis* (London: Penguin, 2019).

122 James Mattis, “Distinguished Voices Series,” Council on Foreign Relations, Sept. 3, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/event/distinguished-voices-series-jim-mattis-0>.

123 Snodgrass, *Holding the Line*, 69.

124 Snodgrass, *Holding the Line*, 168.

125 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 39.

126 Snodgrass, *Holding the Line*, 133.

127 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 373.



support for fixing the deal's flaws, specifically for implementing proper inspections and applying additional sanctions.<sup>128</sup>

Trump, supported by Bolton (who would assume the lead of the National Security Council in April 2018), believed that the problems with the deal were so great that it was not worth maintaining. They also believed that the president should not be bound by what the previous administration had agreed to if he assessed it to be detrimental to U.S. interests. Trump and Bolton agreed that the United States must reinstate macroeconomic sanctions on Iran, a step not possible if America were to remain in the deal, while other signatories would be forced to cooperate with the sanctions. Bolton explains his position thus: "There was no way ongoing negotiations with the UK, France, and Germany would 'fix' the deal; we needed to withdraw and create an effective follow-on strategy to block Iran's drive for deliverable nuclear weapons."<sup>129</sup>

The result was that every 90 days there was renewed debate over whether Trump should recertify to Congress that remaining in the deal was in America's interest. In April and July 2017, under pressure from Tillerson, Mattis, and McMaster, the president agreed to try to rectify the deal's perceived shortcomings by applying only the limited sanctions that were possible under the terms of the deal.<sup>130</sup> By the next certification deadline in October 2017, the administration announced a broad change in approach toward Iran. A compromise was made between the competing views within the administration to refrain from certifying the deal but not to withdraw yet, while calling on other nations to address the deal's defects and join the United States in sanctioning Iran's support for terrorists and militias.<sup>131</sup> According to the new policy, America would refocus on neutralizing Iran's destabilizing influence and aggression in the Middle East, strengthening regional alliances, working to deny funding to the regime and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, countering Iran's ballistic missile threats, and denying Iran a path to a nuclear weapon.<sup>132</sup> Though it had not yet left the deal, and the sanctions placed were of highly limited

scope, the United States had clearly begun to shift back to a fundamentally coercive policy, similar to that of the Bush era.

By spring of 2018, Trump had decided to replace McMaster with Bolton, and Tillerson with Pompeo. Their entry signified a change in the balance of power within the administration regarding both strategic worldviews and organizational influence. The National Security Council and State Department now became the leading organizations on Iran policy, whereas up until this point this had been the Department of Defense. This change led to a new dynamic where primacists — Bolton and Pompeo — were pushing for a more aggressive policy while Trump and Mattis became the voices of restraint.

It would take over a year before the fundamental frictions between primacy and nationalist neo-isolationism would become abundantly apparent in the administration. These two strategic worldviews are compatible in the sense that they both call for muscular capabilities and a willingness to act unilaterally and aggressively pursue American interests. But for neo-isolationists, American interests are much more narrowly defined than for primacists. Bolton described a dynamic in which both he and Trump sought to build up the U.S. capability to project power, but most of the time Trump did not want to actually project it.<sup>133</sup> On Iran, both sides agreed that maximum pressure should be applied and that force should be used in the case of a breakout. Their diverging preferences, however, were brought into stark relief when it came to the question of negotiating a new deal with Iran after applying pressure and threatening force. For Trump, applying maximum pressure was a way to strengthen America's position in anticipation of eventually entering negotiations and reaching an agreement in accordance with American demands — a form of coercive diplomacy.<sup>134</sup> For Bolton and Pompeo, maximum pressure was more of an end in itself, a way to push back against Iran's bid for regional hegemony, in the hope that the pressure might ultimately destabilize the Iranian regime. In his memoir, Bolton states: "Whether or not it was our declared 'end state' ... there would be no 'new'

128 McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 293.

129 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 48.

130 McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 296–99.

131 Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "Trump Disavows Nuclear Deal, but Doesn't Scrap It," *New York Times*, Oct. 13, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html).

132 "Remarks by President Trump on Iran Strategy," Trump White House Archives, Oct. 13, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-iran-strategy/>.

133 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 68.

134 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 69.

Iran deal and no 'deterrence' established as long as Iran's current regime remained."<sup>135</sup>

Within a month of Bolton and Pompeo joining the cabinet, and despite Mattis' disapproval,<sup>136</sup> in May 2018 the United States officially withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and initiated the process of reimposing macroeconomic sanctions on Iranian banks and Iran's oil industry. Pompeo announced the updated policy in which the United States demanded that Iran meet 12 conditions in order to avoid sanctions, including rolling back its nuclear capabilities as well as ceasing regional activities.<sup>137</sup>

### Within a month of Bolton and Pompeo joining the cabinet, and despite Mattis' disapproval, in May 2018 the United States officially withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and initiated the process of reimposing macroeconomic sanctions on Iranian banks and Iran's oil industry.

By the beginning of 2019, Mattis had left the Defense Department and the administration was ready to move forward with adding new sanctions. In April 2019, it took the step of designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization, a move that Mattis had earlier opposed.<sup>138</sup> Over the following year, Iran responded with a series of actions to threaten U.S. facilities in the region and target U.S. allies, such as the May 2019 strike on oil tankers belonging to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and a Norwegian company.<sup>139</sup> The debate over America's response to these actions also ex-

posed the grand-strategic fissure in the administration: Bolton wanted strong retaliation, whereas Trump was willing to act only if Iran killed American servicemembers. The president also reiterated his desire for a full withdrawal from the Middle East.<sup>140</sup> After Iran shot down two American drones in the Persian Gulf in June 2019, Trump initially agreed to a military retaliation but called it off at the last minute, stating that the planned action was not proportionate and demonstrating a hesitancy to escalate in a way that risked American forces in the region if he felt it was unnecessary.<sup>141</sup>

Another point of contention arose in the summer of 2019. Trump felt that after almost a year of new sanctions it was time to explore whether Iran may be willing to renew negotiations. Over the next few months, he explored three different avenues to this end, all opposed by Bolton and Pompeo out of concern that these openings would have the effect of undermining the maximum pressure campaign.<sup>142</sup> In June 2019, Trump allowed prominent libertarian neo-isolationist Sen. Rand Paul to explore an opening with Zarif.<sup>143</sup> Trump also sent Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Iran to test the waters. However, he made it clear that sanctions would only be removed at the conclusion of a deal and not at the outset.<sup>144</sup> Finally, at the G7 meeting in August, when French President Emmanuel Macron apparently attempted to initiate a direct meeting between Trump and Zarif, Trump expressed an interest. The very prospect of holding this meeting led Bolton to consider resigning.<sup>145</sup> Bolton summarizes Trump's thinking as follows:

Trump thought Iran was dying and had to make a deal. He wanted to meet with them immediately ... . Of course, Trump was also

135 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 393. See also page 74.

136 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 69.

137 Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," Remarks at the Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018, accessed at the U.S. Department of State, April 4, 2022, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/iran-strategy/index.html>.

138 Edward Wong and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Designates Iran's Revolutionary Guards a Foreign Terrorist Group," *New York Times*, April 8, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4w6fj5b6>. See also, Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 27, 363.

139 Vivian Yee, "Claim of Attacks on 4 Oil Vessels Raises Tensions in Middle East" *New York Times*, May 13, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/5n83r7ax>.

140 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 380.

141 Michael D. Shear et al., "Strikes on Iran Approved by Trump, then Abruptly Pulled Back," *New York Times*, June 20, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y3r85vfg>.

142 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 386.

143 Maya King, "Trump: Sen. Rand Paul to Help with Iran Negotiations," *Politico*, June 19, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2f3w7j6k>.

144 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 357; and Ben Dooley, "Shinzo Abe's Latest Diplomatic Long Shot: Peacemaking in Iran," *New York Times*, June 12, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yxlgtpmo>.

145 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 422.

Table 3: Represented Grand Strategies and U.S. Policy Toward Iran

	Bush (2001–2004)	Bush (2005–2008)	Obama (2009–2012)	Obama (2013–2016)	Trump (2017–2020)
<b>Dominant Grand Strategy</b>	Primacy	Realism	Assertive Internationalism	Progressive Internationalism	Neo-isolationism
<b>Secondary Grand Strategy</b>	Realism	Primacy	Progressive Internationalism	Assertive Internationalism	Realism and Primacy
<b>Perceptions of Iran</b>	Iran is an aggressive, potentially irrational nuclear power; fallout of strike would be limited; nuclear Iran is worse than fallout of strike	Iran is aggressive but not suicidal or irrational; nuclear Iran would be destabilizing	Iran is a hostile actor and rejects liberal world order; not necessarily irrational but nuclear Iran would undermine NPT; will compromise under great international pressure	Distinguish between hardliners vs. moderates who must be strengthened; Iran is currently hostile but could evolve if needs are met; nuclear Iran would undermine disarmament	Iran is aggressive but not America's primary threat; can be negotiated with from position of strength
<b>Preferred Nonproliferation Policy toward Iran</b>	Coercive measures only; zero nuclear capabilities; prevention by force	Emphasize coercive measures; allow negotiation but insist on prevention of capabilities; forceful prevention before accommodation	Combine coercive measures with negotiations; work through international institutions; open to compromise but prevent capability for nuclear weapons	Conciliatory diplomacy; coercion ends when negotiations begin; prevent war and prevent weaponization	Return to emphasis on coercive measures; but refrain from getting drawn into new war in Middle East

totally prepared to go to war if he had to, and Iran should understand that; if they [Iran] didn't, they would never make a deal.<sup>146</sup>

By the end of the summer, it became clear that there was no opening for negotiations and the United States continued to apply sanctions while managing lower-level confrontations with Iran in the region. The most significant action taken was the assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Gen. Qasem Soleimani in January 2020.<sup>147</sup> In November 2020, it was reported that Trump had again considered a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities but had decided to hold off.<sup>148</sup>

### Material Factors

While the United States remained the strongest global power by far during the Trump administration, it can be said that its position of absolute predominance was waning, relative to the two previous administrations. Russia and China grew in relative power and asserted themselves within their respective regions in 2014 and 2015 while, at the same time, in terms of defense spending the United States continued to invest an amount equal to that of the next eight states combined.<sup>149</sup> Thus, the global balance of power can be described as being in an ambiguous zone, somewhere between

146 Bolton, *The Room Where It Happened*, 386.

147 Isabel Coles and Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Strike Ordered by Trump Kills Key Iranian Military Leader in Baghdad," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 3, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/5n85myb6>.

148 Eric Schmitt et al., "Trump Sought Options for Attacking Iran to Stop Its Growing Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yxhddx2b>.

149 Pieter D. Wezeman et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2018," *SIPRI*, April 2019, 3, <https://doi.org/10.55163/UFDK7864>.

unipolarity and great-power parity.<sup>150</sup> This loss of preeminent power can help to explain why even those advocating a strategy of primacy did not go so far as to propose that the United States force regime change in Iran but merely advocated applying strong economic pressure in the hopes that it might destabilize the regime. Another material factor that allowed the United States to consider taking a neo-isolationist approach to the Middle East was its decreasing dependence on energy from the region, which served to lower the strategic priority of the region relative to the great powers in Eurasia.

The second material consideration was the state of Iran's nuclear program. This dimension had undergone a change since Obama's second term in the sense that although Iran retained a vast nuclear infrastructure, it had given up much of its stockpile of low-enriched uranium as a result of the Iran deal. One might argue that Trump could only return to coercion because the deal had rolled back the amount of enriched uranium in Iran's possession, thus decreasing the urgency of the situation. That is, it could be argued that if Trump were to have faced a situation similar to 2013, when Iran was accumulating uranium while under sanctions, he would have likely reduced coercive measures and pursued a deal similar to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. However, if the increase in urgency that results from the accumulation of uranium were to inevitably lead Washington to adopt a policy of conciliatory diplomacy, then why, come the end of 2019, when Iran had begun to accumulate low-enriched uranium again, did the United States retain its strategy of maximum pressure and raise its coercive measures by assassinating Soleimani? Indeed, in November 2020, when the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iran had accumulated 12 times the amount of enriched uranium allowed under the Iran deal,<sup>151</sup> Trump's response was not to make concessions that would open negotiations, but rather to raise the prospect of military action. How effective this approach is is beside the point. The point is that the Trump administration's shift back to coercion makes clear that what ultimately determines whether the United States adopted a coercive or conciliatory strategy toward Iran, lies in the realm of ideas.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that objective material considerations are sufficient to explain why the United States has neither undertaken a preventative strike against Iran's nuclear facilities nor been willing to ignore Iranian nuclear proliferation and accept a nuclear deterrence regime. However, these material factors alone are insufficient to explain why America has shifted back and forth from coercive measures — including sanctions, threat of force, and covert sabotage — with a bottom line that rejects Iran retaining any enrichment capabilities, to conciliatory diplomatic measures — such as lowering sanctions at the outset of negotiations and playing down the threat of force — with a bottom line that concedes to Iran retaining vast nuclear capabilities. I proposed that the specific strategy of opposition that any administration adopts will depend on the fundamental ideas of grand strategy held by the foreign policy executive.

Applying this to each administration, I traced the process by which diverging views on fundamental questions of grand strategy informed the debates on nonproliferation policy toward Iran. These views include the extent of America's core interests in the world, the legitimacy and efficacy of taking unilateral versus multilateral actions, the causal beliefs about the expected efficacy of taking coercive versus diplomatic measures, the principled beliefs regarding under what circumstances the use of force is justified, and the assessment of the severity of nuclear proliferation. For each period, I then addressed the material factors present in the specific circumstances and assessed to what extent they constrained policy.

The entire period from 2001 to 2020 is summarized in Table 3. I found that Bush began with a coercive policy aimed at eliminating any significant nuclear infrastructure in Iran, but refrained from taking immediate action to implement it. This can be understood as the result of the inherent risks of preventative military strikes, constraints arising from the priority that was given to Iraq, and the lowered urgency resulting from Iran's suspension of enrichment between 2003 and 2006. In Bush's second term, his policy moderated toward a willingness to negotiate if Iran were first to cease enriching uranium, but it remained a fundamentally coercive strategy, reflecting the predispositions of the primacist and realist schools of thought that were present in his administration.

In 2009, the United States underwent a brief

150 Miller and Rubinovitz, *Grand Strategy from Truman to Trump*, 237.


151 David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Andrea Stricker, "Analysis of November 2020 IAEA Iran Verification and Monitoring Report," Institute for Science and International Security, Nov. 12, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8ce8ca>.



shift to conciliatory diplomacy and then settled on a combination of coercive measures alongside the pursuit of a negotiated agreement, following the preferences of the assertive internationalists in the Obama administration who dominated the crafting of Iran policy at the time. By 2013, the policy shifted once more, with the administration placing a much greater emphasis on conciliatory diplomatic measures and distancing itself from the coercive elements of its previous policy. Reflecting progressive internationalist assumptions, it conceded the retention of Iran's industrial-sized nuclear infrastructure, assessing that precluding Iran's ability to weaponize for a decade while avoiding the use of force was the best possible outcome.

Finally, under Trump, a combination of realist, neo-isolationist, and primacist views led the administration to withdraw from the Iran deal, return to a coercive policy of maximum pressure, and threaten the use of force while remaining cautious about applying that force before it was absolutely necessary.

The issue of nonproliferation policy is one that contains considerable uncertainty, as heavy risks are associated with any of the possible policies. The formation of nonproliferation policy toward an adversarial state forces one to weigh the risks of initiating a conflict in the near future — with great uncertainty as to the potential fallout — against the threat of an emerging and hostile nuclear power whose behavior cannot be predicted with any certainty. The relative weight that decision-makers place on the various considerations in the balance of risk is, indeed, a product of their broader worldview. When faced with such a high-stakes dilemma, where every avenue of action is shrouded in uncertainty, subjective factors such as strategic worldviews are more likely to influence policy.

Further research could compare the case of Iran with America's policy toward additional cases of proliferation, such as North Korea, which played out over much of the same period or with the nonproliferation policies of other great powers. More broadly, I propose that the idea that strategic worldviews are more influential when a state must address an emerging threat that has not yet fully materialized can be extended to other policy realms where similar inherent uncertainties lie. For example, the question of how to treat a rising China today is dependent on our assessment of Chinese aspirations and how the country will behave if it attains a military capacity equal to that of the United States. For policymakers, becoming more conscious of their own worldview and attaining greater understanding of the alternatives can only be a positive factor for shaping effective policies. 

**Dr. Raphael BenLevi** is an Azrieli International Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Political Sciences at University of Haifa and lectures at the Israeli Defense Force Military Command Academy. He has been a visiting researcher at Georgetown University, a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies, and has served as an officer in the Israeli Defense Force Intelligence Branch. His research has been published in the journals *Comparative Strategy*, *The Nonproliferation Review*, and *Israel Affairs*.

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