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## **Energy Security, Regional Power, and Pragmatic Diplomacy: Rethinking U.S.–Iran Relations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the role of Iran in the foreign policy of the United States and why it should be considered as a strategic ally even though there has been a long history of hostility and ideological differences between the two countries. It provides an overview of the historical development of U.S.-Iran relations, noting that confrontation, sanctions, and isolation have not had any sustainable results. The paper examines the geopolitical positioning of Iran, its dominance of major maritime routes, its immense reserves of energy, and its massive presence in the region, which shows that the U.S. interests regarding regional security, international energy security, counterterrorism, and non-proliferation of nuclear arms cannot be met without involving Iran. The specific focus is on nuclear diplomacy, in particular, the influence of negotiated agreements in proliferation prevention and the threat of conflict reduction. The article also evaluates the shortcomings of forced policies and provides a focus on diplomacy, dialogue, and selective cooperation as the means of U.S.-Iran relations management that may work better than coercive policies. Finally, the article concludes that the United States does not require Iran as a partner but as one who has to be considered in regional and international systems in order to guarantee stability and security in the Middle East in the long term.

**Keywords:** U.S.–Iran Relations, Energy Security, Middle East Geopolitics, Regional Power, Pragmatic Diplomacy, Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Economic Sanctions, Regional Stability

### **Introduction**

The US-IR relations have been one of the most intricate and disputed relationships in modern international politics. The relationship is mostly characterized by hostility, mistrust, sanctions, and periodic crises that have characterized the relationship ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Nevertheless, Iran is a core player in the Middle East, and U.S. strategic interests in the region cannot be fully comprehended and effectively realized without Iran being considered <sup>[1]</sup>. In sharp contrast with the popular belief that the U.S. policy towards Iran is a purely confrontational stance, there are strong strategic, geopolitical, or economic factors as well as security-related factors why the U.S. requires



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Iran to be an interlocutor and, possibly, even a partner in few but essential matters. The thesis put forth by this article is that the United States requires Iran, not as an ideological alignment or alliance, but as a necessary regional player whose cooperation, or, at minimum, attention, is crucial to regional stability, global energy security, counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, and long-term correction of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Through historical analysis of Iran geopolitically, its energy resources, its influence in the region, its nuclear diplomacy, and overall international impacts, this paper will present the reasons why the continued interaction with Iran has been a strategic requirement in the United States <sup>[2]</sup>.

### **Historical Background of U.S.–Iran Relations**

To appreciate why the United States is in need of Iran, one has to appreciate the relationship between the two countries. Before 1979, Iran was among the closest allies of Washington in the Middle East. During the Cold War, Iran was a U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf as it stood as an ally against Soviet influence as a pillar of the U.S. strategy under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Iran was having the backing of the United States politically, economically, and militarily as a stable force in an unstable region <sup>[3]</sup>. This relationship was changed radically in 1979 with the Islamic revolution. The Shah was overthrown, and an Islamic Republic was formed under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that brought in a new ideological aspect in the Iranian foreign policy, which was highly suspicious of American power. The hostage situation at the U.S. embassy (1979-1981) cemented mutual hatred and established negative attitudes toward one another <sup>[4]</sup>. The next decades were characterized by sanctions, proxy wars, and diplomatic isolation. Nevertheless, there are also instances of indirect cooperation in history. In Afghanistan, which was the focus of the U.S. intervention following the attack of 9/11, Iran was a silent accomplice in the fight against the Taliban, a mutual. These episodes indicate that ideological hostility notwithstanding, practical coincidence of interest can occur—and occasionally must occur <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **Iran's Geopolitical Significance**

Iran is strategically located at the border of the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Caucasus. It is a country that shares borders with seven countries and both the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. More importantly, Iran ignores the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime passageway that is narrow and constitutes a major route through which much of the oil to the world is channeled <sup>[6]</sup>. To the United States, which has long felt uneasy over the issue of providing freedom of navigation and stability in the world energy markets, Iran cannot be left out due to its geographic location. Any significant crisis in the Strait of Hormuz, be it through conflict or escalation of sanctions, or even through a slip of the toe, would have dire short-term effects on world oil prices and economic stability, the United States and its allies among them. Moreover, due to its proximity to such conflict-prone regions as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and the Persian Gulf monarchies, Iran is at the heart of almost all security concerns in the greater Middle East. U.S. strategic interests in these states cannot be fulfilled without considering the role of Iran <sup>[7]</sup>.

### **Energy Resources and Global Markets**

Iran has some of the best reserves of oil and natural gas globally. Iran has the potential to be a major energy source to the global markets despite its limited production and export capabilities due to sanctions that have been imposed over many years. Considering an American outlook, stable and diversified energy reserves are important to the economic



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well-being of the nation as well as the stability around the world <sup>[8]</sup>. Even though the United States has been producing more energy over the recent years, the country is highly integrated with the international markets. Prices in the world can be influenced by energy shocks in any part of the world. The inclusion of the Iranian energy resources into the global market under the conditions of control and openness would possibly stabilize the supply, decrease the fluctuations in prices, and make the occurrence of the conflicts based on the energy source less probable <sup>[9]</sup>.

Besides, the reentry of Iran into the international economy may help lessen its dependence on illegal trade circles and shady economic ploys, which will bring its interest closer to the global standards. In the case of the United States, it would be a strategic advantage because it would decrease the probability of economic coercion and confrontation within the energy industry <sup>[10]</sup>.

### **Regional Security and Balance of Power**

The country of Iran is one of the most powerful in the Middle East. It has political, military, and ideological influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, among others. Iran has managed to make itself the heart of the power game in the region through a series of state and non-state supporters. What is seen as the American point of view—ignoring or trying to wholly marginalize Iran—has not been effective. The American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq are an unwelcome boost to Iranian power through the removal of hostile regimes and left power gaps. This saw Iran become a significant investor in post-conflict politics. The interaction with Iran would provide the United States with the chance to control the rivalry in the region better. Discussion and minimal collaboration may help avert conflicts that may turn into a physical confrontation. To illustrate, in Iraq, U.S. and Iranian interests have at one point been aligned to the stability of the state and the recovery of extremist groups like ISIS. Instead of seeing Iran as the only destabilizer in the region, U.S. policymakers are slowly realizing that Iran too can be a stabilizer, though, of course, with some conditions being met. This duality has to be handled through involvement and not solitude.

### **Counterterrorism and Shared Threats**

Regardless of the radical differences in the ideologies, the United States and Iran have a common enemy: extremist Sunni militants, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS. These organizations have also been focusing on American and Iranian interests and have aimed at bringing down the states in the region <sup>[11]</sup>. Iran contributed immensely to the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, usually via local allies and militias. Although the techniques and the long-term plans of Iran's involvement are more controversial, the fact is that Iranian activities brought the defeat of the territorial ISIS. In the case of the United States, the manifestation of common security threats provides entry to pragmatic coordination, however indirectly. One of the domains where the partial cooperation, or at least the deconfliction, will mitigate risks, use fewer resources, and provide greater stability to the region is counterterrorism <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Diplomacy**

The problem of nuclear non-proliferation is one of the most crucial motives why the United States should have Iran. The nuclear program in Iran has been a major focus of U.S. foreign policy over the decades. Having a nuclear Iran creates the threat of an arms race in the region, more instability, and undermining global non-proliferation standards. The example of diplomatic interactions exemplified by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of



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Action (JCPOA) in 2015 revealed that negotiated deals could be quite efficient in limiting the Iranian nuclear processes to be subjected to international monitoring<sup>[13]</sup>. The agreement may have encountered political hurdles and was subsequently sabotaged, but nonetheless, it stands out as a major positive influence in how diplomacy could be used to attain the needs of security even without the use of a military force. In the case of the United States, long-term interaction with Iran is needed in order to avoid nuclear buildup. Military solutions are associated with colossal risks and unpredictable results, whereas diplomacy will create a way of verification, transparency, and slow trust-building<sup>[14]</sup>.

### **Sanctions, Pressure, and Their Limits**

The U.S. has been using economic sanctions as the main instrument of policy against Iran. Even though the Iranian economy has incurred a huge cost because of sanctions, the sanctions have not met all their political goals. They have in other instances strengthened the hardline stands in Iran and diminished chances of compromise. Strategically, the United States needs to understand when to stop coercion<sup>[15]</sup>. Overuse of sanctions will isolate allies, motivate other financial systems that will circumvent the influence of the U.S., and diminish American bargaining ability in the long term<sup>[17]</sup>. The involvement of Iran, coupled with a measured pressure, enables the United States to influence Iranian behavior in a better manner. Washington is able to promote incremental change by providing believable incentives and definite repercussions to protect its fundamental interests<sup>[16]</sup>.

### **The Changing Middle East and U.S. Strategy**

The Middle East is changing drastically. The U.S. is slowly shifting its strategic focus in Asia and Europe by gradually decreasing its military presence in the region. In this respect, sustainable regional arrangements are gaining more significance<sup>[18]</sup>. Iran is a big regional force that should be included in any long-term security system in the Middle East. Inclusion of Iran in the diplomatic structures means endless turmoil and wars. Several of these reasons include Iran, even under conditional and limited inclusion, which improves the likelihood of long-term solutions<sup>[19]</sup>. The interest of the United States in working with Iran is also a means of decreasing the cost of direct military participation. Diplomatic options are cheaper, more sustainable, and in line with long-term strategic considerations<sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows that an entirely confrontational policy of the United States toward Iran has not led to long-term stability or significant transformation. The strategic location of Iran, its domination of major energy pipelines, the large reserves of hydrocarbons, and a profound engagement in Middle Eastern politics all contribute to the fact that it is an inevitable player in Middle Eastern security. Iran has been tried to be isolated or marginalized, which has usually intensified hardline standpoints and instability of the region instead of diminishing it. A more practical strategy, based on selective participation, diplomacy, and cooperative action by issues, has greater possibilities of promoting the American interests. Counterterrorism, energy security, and nuclear diplomacy experiences, especially the JCPOA, have demonstrated that negotiated structures can diminish the risks of conflict and more effectively promote transparency than just coercion. After all, the United States does not require Iran as an institutional ally, yet it should appreciate Iran as a key regional interlocutor without whose participation there can be no long-term stability, security, and balance in the Middle East.



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