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**Ideology and Pragmatism: A Discursive Constructivist Interpretation of US-Iran Relations  
 under Rouhani  
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**ABSTRACT**

*This study analyses the role of ideology and pragmatism in shaping foreign policy of Iran towards the United States during Rouhani presidency (2013–2021). In post-revolutionary context, foreign policy of Iran is usually understood through a dichotomous lens that distinguishes ideological commitments from pragmatic actions purely based on national interests. This study advances an alternative interpretation by employing qualitative research methods through the theoretical lens of discursive constructivism. Drawing on official speeches, interviews, and state documents, it argues that Iran's foreign policy cannot be adequately understood either through conventional realist frameworks or through approaches that rely solely on ideational explanations. The findings establish that ideology and pragmatism function in a mutually constitutive mode, allowing Iran to engage in selective cooperation with the United States while simultaneously adhering to its revolutionary ideology. This study shows that how in the Rouhani era (2013-21), negotiations with the United States, crystallized in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and were narratively produced as both strategically indispensable and ideologically permissible, enabling a temporary reconfiguration of the boundaries of acceptable foreign policy in Iran.*

**Keywords:** *The Iran Nuclear Deal, Iran's Foreign Policy, Iran-US Relations, The Internal Politics of Iran, Iranian Reformists*

**Introduction**

The bilateral relations between Iran and the United States have remained focus of global community due to persistent rivalry, scarcely disrupted by rare events of engagement since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, foreign policy of Iran towards the United States altered altogether from sustained cooperation and trustworthy allies to arch-rivals suspecting every move of one another. The basis of this antagonism has been a matter of intense scholarly debate, mainly due to the complex and often misinterpreted relation between ideology and pragmatism which shapes Iran's external behaviour. Foreign policy decisions in Iran are influenced by multiple factors. On one hand, pragmatic considerations push for improving economic conditions, strengthening national security and enhancing regional and global influence through geo-political orientation. On the other hand, ideological roots keep the foreign policy decisions anchored to revolutionary principles, religious beliefs, norms and historical experiences. Instead of acting independently, these apparently varying elements operate in ways which complicate conventional analytical models.

The tenure of Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran (2013–2021) provides a classic case for analysing this interplay between ideology and pragmatism. Generally perceived as a pragmatic leader due to his reformist ideas and less confrontational approach than his predecessor Ahmedinejad, Rouhani aimed to mitigate economic woes and improve international standing of

Iran through diplomatic engagement with the United States. His government engaged in intense negotiations concerning nuclear program of Iran which concluded in 2015 with signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA was a multilateral agreement signed by Iran and P5+1 (United States, United Kingdom, Russia, China, France plus Germany), framed to restrict nuclear activities of Iran, particularly Uranium enrichment. In return, economic sanctions on Iran were reduced. The nuclear negotiations and the ultimate signing of JCPOA was widely viewed as a strategic move to reintegrate Iran into the global economy and to address economic sufferings caused to Iranian people by prolonged international isolation. Nevertheless, foreign policy of Iran during Rouhani period cannot be fully comprehended solely through pragmatic perspective. Ideational factors, primarily the founding principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran such as anti-Imperialist and anti-hegemonic stance and opposition to Western dominance remained vital in shaping foreign policy behaviour towards the United States. These ideological commitments were repeatedly voiced by hard-line factions within social and political fabric of Iran, producing a discourse resulting in resistance to diplomatic engagement with the United States.

This research study aims to address the analytical confusion regarding the drivers of foreign policy behaviour of Iran. The existing literature on the subject largely deals ideology and pragmatism as competing variables contesting for dominance which is insufficient to explain the foreign policy of Iran which simultaneously invokes ideological principles and pursues national interests. The multi-layered political system of Iran comprising of President, Supreme Leader and other institutions further complicates foreign policy analyses. Qualitative research methods have been used to examine the interplay of ideology and pragmatism in foreign policy of Iran towards the U.S. as the research focuses on ideational factors and elite perceptions which cannot be properly explained through quantitative methods. Foreign policy objectives of post-revolutionary Iran can be aptly understood through interpretation of ideological beliefs, discourse, and the logic of decision-making.

The main research questions this study aims to address is that how do the interplay of ideology and pragmatism shape Iran's foreign policy towards the United States in the post-revolutionary period, specifically, how did these two dimensions influence and construct Iran's dual-track foreign policy during the period of Hassan Rouhani. This study is based on qualitative research design to analyse the interaction between ideology and pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy towards the United States as the ideational and discursive factors cannot be accurately explained through quantitative methods. The study adopts a deductive approach, while applying the established realist and constructivist theoretical propositions and testing them against the empirical case of US-Iran relations during Rouhani period. Moreover, the case study method is adopted to offer an in-depth analysis of how revolutionary ideology has been institutionalized in Iran for continuity, to prevent ideological dilution witnessed in other post-revolutionary states like the Soviet Union and China. The research is based on both primary sources as well as secondary sources of data. Primary data includes the official documents, speeches, government reports, and elite interviews while secondary data sources include books, journal articles, and newspapers.

The existing literature on foreign policy of Iran is broadly divided into two categories: one school of thought emphasizes on ideology as the primary driver rooted in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Ramazani, 1986; Keddie, 2006; Hunter, 2010), while the other focuses on pragmatism and national interest as the core of policy formulation (Ehteshami, 2007; Maloney, 2015; Katzman, 2020). Realist and neo-realist scholars argue that Iran prioritizes survival, economic and strategic interests, and security, while using ideology as a facade (Morgenthau,

1948; Carr, 1939; Waltz, 1979; Parsi, 2007). Contrarily, the constructivist scholars emphasize on the constitutive role of revolutionary identity, resistance narratives, and anti-imperialism (Wendt, 1999; Onuf, 1989; Nasr, 2006). Although classical, structural, and neoclassical realism explain aspects of power politics and systemic constraints (Waltz, 1979; Rose, 1998), they are insufficient to fully capture the significance of ideology and identity in shaping foreign policy behavior of Iran (Barzegar, 2008; Ansari, 2006). While conventional and sociological constructivism offer insight into identity formation (Wendt, 1999; Fearon & Wendt, 2002), however, it lacks the methodological accuracy to analyze internal discursive contestation and representational practices in Iran (Hansen, 2006; Hopf, 2002). Therefore, discursive constructivism is presented as the most suitable framework to examine how ideological narratives and pragmatic considerations interact, particularly during Rouhani period, in shaping foreign policy towards the United States (Weldes, 1999; Hansen, 2006; Rezaei, 2019). The Iran-US relations have undergone significant changes from strategic cooperation during the Pahlavi era to deep hostility after the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Bill, 1988; Gasiorowski, 1991; Kinzer, 2003). The main events which shaped the historical memory of Iran vis-à-vis the U.S. is marked by the 1953 coup against Mossadeq, hostage crisis, and the rise of Khomeini with the anti-imperialist ideology (Abrahamian, 1982; Takeyh, 2006; Ansari, 2006). Scholars emphasize on how the historical grievances, national pride, revolutionary identity, and mutual misperceptions ingrained antagonism (Parsi, 2007; Maloney, 2015; Hunter, 2010). The limited attempts at rapprochement were constrained by ideological red lines and shifting U.S. policies, including the “axis of evil” statement (Nasr, 2006; Takeyh, 2006; Katzman, 2020).

The literature on foreign policy of Iran under President Rouhani mainly revolves around the significance of the JCPOA and discussions on whether Rouhani represented meaningful reform or continuity within the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic, with many scholars arguing that his pragmatism was constrained by conservative factions and dominant institutions, mainly the Supreme Leader and the IRGC (Czulda, 2014; Shanahan, 2015; Ehteshami, 2020). While some scholars interpret Rouhani’s pragmatism as a sincere attempt for moderation and diplomatic engagement aimed to recover economy and normalize relations with the West (Parsi, 2014; Tabatabai, 2017; Ansari, 2016), others contend that his policies reflected calculated pragmatism shaped by factional contestation and enduring revolutionary red-lines, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump (Afrasiabi, 2019; Rafique, 2021; Vatanka, 2016). Despite extensive empirical analyses of his tenure and the nuclear negotiations, the literature remains divided between ideological and realist interpretations and lacks a systematic discursive-constructivist analysis of how revolutionary identity and pragmatic engagement were simultaneously articulated and negotiated in shaping foreign policy towards the United States (Rezaei, 2019; Hoobler, 2017).

### **Theoretical Debates on Foreign Policy of Iran**

The theoretical debates on foreign policy of Iran revolves around different variants of realism and constructivism. Realism has been dominant in theories of international relations as it provides appropriate notions to explain state behaviour through assumptions of rationality, self-help, survival, and security within an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). However, in case of foreign policy of revolutionary states like Islamic Republic of Iran, the limitations of realism become evident. Foreign policy of Iran, particularly towards the United States, reflects a complex interplay of material interests, ideology, institutional constraints, competing narratives and identity that cannot be fully explained by rationalist or materialist approaches alone.

### **Realist Approaches and Their Limits**

Classical realism, entrenched in human nature and the quest of power (Morgenthau, 1948), assumes that states behave with prudence to achieve egoistic and self-centered objectives. When applied in case of Iran, this emphasis on human nature undermines the ideological and institutional structures which plays significant role in shaping foreign policy decisions. President or Supreme Leader alone, does not possess the absolute authority which classical realism assumes. Foreign policy in Iran is formulated within a dispersed and ideologically anchored institutional system comprising of the Supreme Leader, President, *Majlis* (Parliament) and other factions which derives legitimacy from revolutionary principles instead of personal motivations (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). Therefore, classical realism lacks the theoretical space to address the discursive foundations to demarcate acceptable and legitimate foreign policy behavior in case of Iran.

Similarly, neorealism or structural realism, is also insufficient to analyse foreign policy of Iran. Although, it shifts focus from human nature to the structure of the international system (Waltz, 1979) and describes the external pressures on Iran including sanctions and international isolation, but falls short to explain that why Iran behaves differently under identical systemic conditions, switching between confrontation and cooperation. In case of Iran, threat perception is not merely a function of material capabilities, rather it is built on historical experiences of interventions and manipulation including the 1953 coup against popularly elected nationalist leader of Iran. In Iranian foreign policy discourse, the United States function as a symbol denoted as “the Great Satan”, a character encoded as ideologically hostile and historically established enemy. (Rezaei, 2019).

Neoclassical realism attempts to bridge this gap by including domestic factors like elite perceptions, state-society relations, and regime type to analyse foreign policy behavior (Rose, 1998). Although, it provides a refined framework to analyse foreign policy decision making, it treats domestic factors as intervening variables between systemic pressures and material interests. However, in case of Iran, domestic ideological narratives and identity are not filters but primary drivers that defines interests in the first place. As Ramazani (2013) and Adib-Moghaddam (2014) argue, revolutionary ideology is not an epiphenomenal layer atop national interest, it establishes the very essence of interest. Thus, neoclassical realism is inadequate to explicate that the pragmatic overtures of Rouhani faced resistance not merely due to institutional rivalry but because they contradicted with dominant identity narratives embedded in revolutionary discourse of Iran. Foreign policy of Iran under Rouhani reflects a complex interplay of ideology, identity, discourse and pragmatism which cannot be accurately explained by realism and its variants.

### **Constructivist Interpretation of Foreign Policy of Iran**

Constructivism emerged as a major alternative to realist theories in 1990s which challenged the materialist assumptions of realist theories by emphasizing that interests and identities are socially constructed through ideas, narratives, and shared meanings (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). Wendt’s (1992) argument that “anarchy is what states make of it” condenses the constructivist claim that state behaviour is shaped by social interaction rather than objective material structures. Over time, several variants of constructivism were introduced with each focusing on different dimensions. Conventional constructivism explains long-term identity formation but preserves a state-centric and relatively static notion of identity. Normative constructivism focuses on role of international norms in shaping state behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Sociological constructivism shifts focus on historical experiences, institutional culture, and processes of socialization (Hopf, 2002). Each of these variants partially explain the foreign policy behaviour of Iran. Contrary to these, discursive constructivism offers the most

analytically suitable framework for explicating the foreign policy of Iran towards the United States under Rouhani. It places language, symbols, narrative, discourse and representation at the core of foreign policy analysis (Campbell, 1998; Doty, 1993; Hansen, 2006), and describes how states construct identities through discursive practices that define sovereignty, national interests, and legitimacy. In Iran, representations of the United States as an imperial, hegemonic, and morally corrupt “Other” are not rhetorical embellishments, rather they are constitutive elements of “Self” as opposed to the “Other” which forms national identity. Expressions such as “global arrogance” and “arrogant powers” symbolizes a worldview in which resistance becomes synonymous with moral superiority and national sovereignty. These discursive formations outline the boundaries of permissible action and create the ideological terrain upon which pragmatism was contested during Rouhani period.

### **Revolutionary Ideology and Pragmatism**

The ideological basis of foreign policy of Iran is anchored in the worldview articulated by the revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. His ideology altered the discourse of foreign policy towards the United States and redefined political identity of Iran as opposed to Western domination while embodying the United States as the “Great Satan,” Britain as the “Lesser Satan,” and Israel as an illegitimate entity (Khomeini, 1981). This discourse embedded foreign policy of Iran in a moral universe of oppression and resistance (Campbell, 1998). Khomeini’s political ideology was based on Shia political theology emanating from beliefs, anti-imperialist thought resultant of historical experiences of foreign interventions and intellectual ideas advocated by certain scholars of that time including Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification) and Ali Shariati’s revolutionary reinterpretation of Shiaism (Dabashi, 1993). The core idea introduced by Khomeini was the division between *mustazafin* (oppressed) and *mustakbirin* (oppressors), a binary framework dividing international community into two groups. Ardent support for Palestine, persistent refusal to recognize Israel, and resistance to U.S. hegemony, therefore, function as identity-sustaining practices rather than purely strategic choices.

Interestingly, ideology and pragmatism are not treated as opposites in foreign policy of Iran but are two sides of the same coin. Ideology provides the normative grammar through which pragmatic actions are justified and legitimized. What appears from outside as ideological rigidity, often functions internally as pragmatic identity preservation (Takeyh, 2003). The ideological foundations of Iran are not merely existent in words, policies or rhetoric. Rather, they are a permanent and essential part of constitution on which certain institutions are based. The constitution entrenches revolutionary ideology into the legal and normative foundations of the state, emphasizing opposition to imperialism, rejection of foreign domination, and adherence to Islamic principles (Milani, 1992). Ultimate sovereignty is vested in God, and political authority is derived from religious legitimacy rather than popular will alone. This constitutional framework ensures continuity in foreign policy orientation despite leadership changes. While presidents may advocate pragmatic engagement, core strategic decisions remain adhered to ideological commitments. As a result, foreign policy of Iran shows adaptation without complete transformation, which again highlights the limitations of realist explanations and the analytical significance of discursive constructivism in this case.

### **US-Iran Relations: A Historical Context**

Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran and the United States were close allies. Iran emerged as a significant geo-political actor at the junction of superpower rivalry during Cold War. The U.S. considered Iran as a trusted partner who advanced its national interests in the region. In return, the U.S. provided extensive economic, political, and strategic support to Iran.

Interestingly, the U.S. extended nuclear support to Iran under Atoms for Peace Program. The Shah of Iran extended momentous support to advance U.S. policy of containment in the region. However, the overly pro-Western policies of the Shah sowed seeds of resentment in the general masses. The CIA backed coup against nationalist leader Mossadeq in 1953 further infuriated the people of Iran. For short-term, the coup helped Shah to regain his power, but in long-run it diluted his legitimacy and control over Iran. He was viewed less as a monarch of Iran and more as a guardian of U.S. interests which ingrained deep resentment towards the Shah and the U.S. among the Iranian population. Another factor which catalysed Shah's decline was his ambitious pursuit of modernization agenda in the form of the White Revolution. These reforms apparently aimed to transform Iran into a modern nation through industrialization, land reforms, modern education, women participation, and economic diversification. The U.S. strongly pushed for these initiatives, considering them as a way to contain communist influence. During that period, Iran became one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid and military assistance. Besides cooperation at strategic level, cultural and social cooperation also bloomed with numerous exchange programs. Iranian markets became huge economic potential for U.S. products. Despite this exemplary cooperation, the relations between both the countries were primarily asymmetrical with U.S. being the dominant actor. The United States aimed to contain Soviet Union, acquire control of energy resources and sustain influence in the region. The Shah heavily relied on U.S. support to sustain his rule and portray Iran as a regional power. However, his repressive policies and overwhelming reliance on foreign aid worsened domestic conditions for his rule. The human rights record worsened and internal dissent intensified as political freedoms narrowed and socio-economic inequalities widened (Richard, 1981). Religious leaders, intellectuals, and marginalized groups increasingly viewed the Shah as a symbol of Western dominance rather than a protector of national sovereignty.

The modernization efforts introduced by Shah had wide ranging impact not only at economic and strategic level but on ideological front as well. It began to secularize Iranian society while diminishing religious values and norm. They were aimed to weaken the influence of clergy, and align Iran with Western culture and system of governance (Algar, 1981). The reforms disturbed traditional socio-cultural fabric of Iran and challenged religious authority, infuriating conservative segments of society leading to mass scale resistance. Swift Westernization campaign, combined with coercive political repression enforced by the secret police (SAVAK), pushed broad segments of the population to the corner which further intensified nationalist and religious opposition (Keddie, 1969). The opposition groups eventually rallied around the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who emerged as the most vibrant critic of the U.S.-Shah nexus. Khomeini constructed the narrative of the monarchy as inherently corrupt, illegitimate, and subservient to the Western imperialism. He proposed Shia Islam as an alternative political and moral order to end woes of Iran. The perception that Shah ruled with American support, rather than popular legitimacy, played a critical role in mobilizing revolutionary sentiment.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 marked a crucial event in US-Iran relations which converted a close strategic alliance into an intense hostility spanning over decades. The seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis symbolized the depth of revolutionary fury towards U.S. influence and crystallized mutual antagonism. As described by Gary Sick (1985), the relationship became a "tragic encounter," shaped by deep-rooted misperceptions, mismatched worldviews, and unresolved historical grievances. The revolutionary leadership viewed the United States as the prime architect of past subjugation of Iran, while the U.S.

perceived the nascent Islamic Republic as a destabilizing force in the region and an ideological rival.

### **Iran-US Relations under President Rouhani (2013–2021)**

Election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 was widely viewed both domestically and internationally as a moment of potential change after the years of confrontational presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. During election campaign, he advocated for reformist ideas, moderations and signalled to diplomatic engagement with the United States and the West to get Iran out of economic crisis inflicted by sanctions (Menashri, 2013). However, the multi-layered political structure of Iran made it difficult to hope for a singular narrative to dominate (Parsi, 2013). The electoral victory of Rouhani with more than fifty percent votes and high voter turnout denoted a strong popular desire for economic recovery, relief from sanctions, and end of international isolation. Besides pragmatists and reformists, he was mainly supported ethnic minorities, and younger voters who craved for change. Moreover, support from prominent political figures such as Rafsanjani and Khatami further elevated expectations that Rouhani would pursue pragmatic reforms through diplomacy.

The initial rhetoric of Rouhani based on vocabulary like prudence, moderation, and constructive engagement represented an effort to redefine international identity of Iran, not to dismantle its revolutionary foundations (Campbell, 1998; Hansen, 2006). This discourse aimed to articulate pragmatism within the language of dignity, equality, sovereignty, and resistance, signalling towards continuity and change at the same time. However, competing narratives, especially those promoted by the conservatives and hard-line factions continued to designate the United States as an unreliable adversary which cannot be trusted.

### **Nuclear Issue and the JCPOA**

The nuclear program of Iran evolved during Shah Regime when the U.S. offered nuclear technology for civilian purposes like energy, agriculture and medicine under Atoms for Peace Program initiated by the U.S. President Eisenhower. After the Revolution, the nuclear program, was re-branded as a key symbol of national pride, sovereignty, and resistance. The nuclear activities were temporarily halted after the Revolution; however, they were soon resumed as a necessary deterrent due to the aggressive Iran-Iraq War which inflicted huge losses on Iran. Iran needed to defend itself against regional threats and international isolation which motivated it to advance the nuclear program. With the passage of time, the nuclear program became deeply embedded in strategic and ideological framework of Iran, under the supervision of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who pronounced it as an undisputable national right (Alsulami, 2016). During Ahmadinejad period as president, the vibrant confrontational rhetoric and the advancement of sensitive nuclear facilities intensified sanctions on Iran and worsened international pressure. It exacerbated economic crisis of Iran which fuelled domestic resentment and demand for moderation. Rouhani, during his election campaign, capitalized on this context by prioritizing nuclear diplomacy as the gateway to relief from sanctions and a way forward for economic recovery. He redefined the nuclear dispute as a political and diplomatic issue instead of an exclusively technical one based on strategic goals. He emphasized on addressing the issue at diplomatic level while ensuring legality, transparency and confidence building, though, without shaking the ideological basis of the Islamic Republic.

The reciprocal use of conciliatory language by Obama administration, emphasising mutual respect, dialogue, and the prevention of conflict, created a point of convergence in which both states temporarily re-signified each other inversely from the embedded “enemy” identity. The efforts resulted in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), thoroughly negotiated with the P5+1. The agreement enacted substantial restrictions and monitoring mechanisms on

nuclear program of Iran in return for sanctions relief. The JCPOA emerged not merely as a technical nuclear agreement but as the institutional expression of this short-lived discursive alignment, where pragmatic interests and ideological narratives were momentarily reconciled. The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, used the notion of “heroic flexibility” to define and justify diplomatic engagement with the U.S. in nuclear negotiations. Heroic flexibility was described as a principled form of diplomatic adaptability, the one that allows tactical compromise without abandoning core ideological beliefs. This rhetorical re-framing helped to bridge internal political divides, while legitimizing the diplomatic engagement with the West, despite opposition from hard-line factions (Bozorgmehr, 2015).

The agreement offered economic relief and global legitimacy for Iran without violating its core ideological red lines. While for the United States, it signified a diplomatic pathway to contain proliferation while avoiding another regional conflict. The JCPOA represented an effort to suspend deep-rooted narratives of hostility between the U.S. and Iran. It intended to reconstruct Iran’s image as a rational, compliant and cooperative actor within the international system. Nevertheless, the agreement remained discursively fragile as the hardliners in both Iran and the United States depicted the JCPOA as either capitulation or undue leniency. The U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 decisively defied Rouhani’s pragmatic narrative and certified conservative views that engagement with the West was futile. It mandated the need of reinforcing the revolutionary discourse of mistrust in Iran. Subsequently, ideology and pragmatism re-merged rather than diverged. Pragmatic concessions were allowable only when shaped as tactical necessities for state survival, not for restructuring or redefining the international identity of Iran.

Despite the exemplary rapprochement, relations between the U.S. and Iran remained structurally fragile because the foundational discourse shaping US-Iran relations was not reconstructed. The long-standing revolutionary discourse of betrayal, distrust, resistance to Western domination, anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonic stance, and caution against foreign manipulation persisted in core institutional structures within Iran. Correspondingly, the skepticism about regional ambitions and ideological position of Iran continued to shape U.S. policies towards Iran. Consequently, even at the peak of cooperation, the relations between Iran and the U.S. remained conditional and reversible, reliant on the stability of a narrow discursive space. The Obama period shows how pragmatic engagement can unfold, and yet remain restrained by deeply entrenched ideational structures.

### **Trump and US-Iran Relations**

During second term of Hassan Rouhani as president, the brief détente between Iran and the United States collapsed subsequent to election of Donald Trump as president of the U.S. The policy of diplomatic engagement and normalization was replaced by coercive “maximum pressure” policy characterized by heavy unilateral sanctions, abrupt withdrawal from multilateral agreements, and blatant hostility towards Iran (Belal, 2020). This period became one of the most confrontational phases in U.S.-Iran relations since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The most critical decision taken by the Trump was withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on 8 May 2018, despite repeated validations by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iran was fulfilling the terms of the agreement. The U.S. under Trump justified the decision by terming it incomprehensive citing its inability to contain Iran’s ballistic missile program and to cease its regional and global activities contradicting U.S. interests. Subsequently, the sanctions were re-imposed with more severity and extensiveness the energy, shipping, banking, and industrial sectors of Iran. These measures crumbled Iranian economy, resulting in devaluation of currency, mounting inflation, and

widespread hardship for the general population. Despite of these harsh steps, the U.S. failed to produce the required result of regime change or popular revolt against the existing political system and particularly against the Supreme Leader (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

The U.S. Iran policy under Trump administration was influenced by several factors Firstly, during his election campaign, Trump assured his voters and supporters that he would renegotiate or withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He marked it as a mistake of Obama administration and pledged to reverse it. Secondly, the pressure from regional allies in Middle East particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia inspired him to adopt a confrontational approach towards Iran. Thirdly, the staunch critics of Obama administration and Jewish lobby in the U.S., tuned with the Trump's idea of "Making America Great Again" which required to clearly exclude what was not in the U.S. interests.

Instead of compelling behavioural change, the policy of maximum pressure fortified hard-line factions within Iran. Initially, Iran adopted a policy of "strategic patience," while remaining committed to the JCPOA and expected the European states to take a lead to ease U.S. sanctions on Iran. When this policy failed, Iran shifted to the policy of "maximum resistance" in 2019, incrementally breaching the restrictions imposed by the JCPOA by increasing uranium enrichment, expanding stockpiles, and deploying advanced centrifuges, steps shaped as reversible, but politically symbolic (Belal, 2020). In addition, Iran also capitalized its asymmetric capabilities and utilized regional proxies to impose costs on the U.S. including attacks on shipping resources and Saudi oil facilities through Houthis in Yemen (Wintour, 2020). The tensions further rose when the U.S. designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 further added fuel to the fire. In response, Iran initiated retaliatory missile strikes on the U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria, marking the first direct attack by Iran on U.S. forces since 1979. While escalation was limited, the crisis reinforced hostile identities and contracted diplomatic possibilities.

Besides Iran, the maximum pressure campaign also left significant impact on transatlantic relations. Despite the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, Russia, China, and the European allies of the United States, remained committed to the nuclear agreement and condemned U.S. unilateralism which renounced the significance of other signatory states. Instead of futilely awaiting the restoration of agreement, Iran deepened its relations with Russia and China, culminating in long-term economic and strategic agreements that further dented U.S. efforts to isolate Iran (Khandouzi, 2020). The maximum pressure campaign succeeded in imposing severe economic costs on Iran, however, politically it failed to accomplish its objectives. The policy was counterproductive for non-proliferation as well, as the nuclear program of Iran advanced considerably beyond JCPOA limitations by the end of 2021.

Discursive constructivism explicates how the actions of the U.S. and reciprocal reactions of Iran reshaped the identities, behaviour, and perceived interests of both states. The coercive rhetoric and actions of the U.S. narrowed the discursive space for diplomacy, narrowing room for cooperation while rendering engagement politically illegitimate within Iran. At the same time, Iranian narratives of resistance and betrayal redefined what counted as "pragmatic" behaviour, crafting nuclear escalation and regional expansionism appear as rational and morally justified. Conclusively, ideology and pragmatism operated simultaneously not as competing logics but as mutually constitutive elements within a contested discursive field (Campbell, 1998).

The aggressive actions of Trump administration functioned as rhetorical constitutive acts, not as mere policy instruments. The abrupt unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA re-signified the

United States as an untrustworthy, arrogant, and unreliable interlocutor, endorsing Iranian narratives of betrayal and legitimizing resistance as both pragmatic and moral response (Wendt, 1999; Campbell, 1998). Similarly, the counter-moves of Iran functioned discursively. Resistance rhetoric, nuclear escalation, reinvigorated proxies, and the rise of martyrdom narratives, specifically after the assassination of Soleimani reconstructed identity of Iran as a sovereign nation capable to respond befittingly to its adversaries. The outcome was a mutually reinforcing cycle in which the U.S. coercion reinforced the discourse of hardliners in Iran. Correspondingly, the resistance of Iran validated U.S. threat perceptions. The maximum pressure campaign heightened regional instability and pushed Iran to engage in hostile activities concerning the U.S. interests which narrowed the discursive space for engagement. The US-Iran relations under Trump administration elucidate that how coercive diplomacy, when combined with abrupt discursive ruptures, can obstruct durable rapprochement and restrain future policy options. Therefore, any effort to re-establish US-Iran engagement needs to address not only material incentives but also the rebuilding of identity, trust, and shared meanings.

#### **Us-Iran Relations under Rouhani: Discourse Matrix**

The Rouhani period demonstrates how discourse conditions foreign policy possibilities. His electoral victory with high voter turnout in 2013 elevated hopes of economic revival, moderation and diplomatic engagement. Rouhani's discourse of "constructive engagement" and "prudence and hope" was in stark difference to the confrontational rhetoric of his predecessor Ahmadinejad. His approach temporarily stretched the space for diplomacy, resulting in the JCPOA in 2015. However, even at the height of negotiations, diverging rhetoric and counter-discourses entrenched in revolutionary identity raised concerns about the wisdom of rapprochement. Conservatives and hardline factions depicted engagement with the United States as submission. While the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, despite his reservations, endorsed the negotiations yet warned against trusting the U.S. (Rezaei, 2019). This two-pronged policy represents dual discourse in foreign policy of Iran which on one hand permits negotiations while at the same time reinforces the ideological caution. This ideological vigilance reiterated that any diplomatic progress was shaped as a tactical exception instead of a permanent strategic shift. Therefore, the nuclear agreement developed as a calculated negotiated settlement with minimum discursive legitimacy within the broader political system of Iran.

The unilateral U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018 by President Trump further establishes the role of discourse in shaping policy outcomes. The "maximum pressure" campaign befittingly integrated into existing narratives in Iran regarding American treachery, imperialist hostility and hegemonic arrogance. Hardliners painted the withdrawal as proof that engagement was inherently futile and dangerous. This discursive construction not only weakened Rouhani's reformist stance but also revitalized the ideological narratives that reinforce the Islamic Republic's revolutionary identity. The U.S. withdrawal, therefore, has not only material implications but discursive as well. It has wide ranging implications for internal political contestation in Iran which renewed the politics of conservatives. The withdrawal echoed far beyond the issue of sanctions. It reiterated identity narratives that defined the United States as an inherently antagonistic "Other".

The historical evolution of US-Iran relations establishes the durability of identity-based discourse. The historical experiences of Iran concerning the U.S. are marked by CIA's involvement in the 1953 coup against popularly elected leader, support for the Shah despite his repressive policies against people, tarnishing the religious, social and cultural fabric of Iran, and

continued hostilities after the 1979 Revolution. These events produced a narrative landscape in minds of Iranian people in which mistrust is continually reproduced by even the slightest sense of adversity from the U.S. (Keddie, 2006; Wright, 2001). Constructivist scholars emphasize that historical experiences and past memories become entrenched in identity structures and form long-term foreign policy orientations (Parsi, 2007; Rezaei, 2019). In case of Iran, these memories do not simply influence policy decisions, rather they constitute the very identity of the Islamic Republic and demarcate what types of engagement are considered legitimate.

The moments of cooperation in US-Iran relations further sheds light on the role of identity, discourse, pragmatism and strategic behaviour in foreign policy of Iran. Cooperation with the U.S. in Afghanistan after 9/11, and silence on US-Iraq war in 2003 shows Iran's potential for pragmatic behaviour. However, these events are discursively drawn as tactical deviations compelled by geopolitical contingencies, not as precedents for long-term rapprochement with the ardent enemies. The U.S. rhetoric, including labelling Iran as part of the "axis of evil," reinforced antagonistic narratives and narrowed the discursive space required for sustained cooperation (Ansari, 2006). The JCPOA negotiations driven by president Rouhani's pragmatic approach shows that strategies which lack ground of discursive alignment with identity narratives remain politically susceptible to revision.

### **Conclusion**

The foreign policy of Iran has evolved significantly since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The ideological foundations have integrated the pragmatic and rational considerations in institutional and political structure of Iran which ensures the sustainability of revolutionary principles and aids in pursuit of national interests. rather than abandoning them. The external behaviour of Iran is shaped by its identity which is rooted in Persian nationalism, Shia Islam, and anti-imperialism. The foreign policy of Iran cannot be adequately explained by realist theories that neglects identity and domestic factors. Classical and structural realism emphasizes on material interests, power, and systemic pressures while neglecting the ideological and institutional grounds which shape decision-making in Iran. In case of Iran, threat perception and policy choices are deeply rooted in revolutionary identity, historical memory, and discursive constructions of the U.S. as an ardent adversary. Neoclassical realism also remains inadequate because ideology and identity in Iran do not merely act as sieve for interests, they essentially constitute them. Foreign policy of Iran reflects a complex, multi-layered structure in which ideological preservation, institutional continuity, and factional politics mutually define both the limits of adaptability and ideological redlines which cannot be trespassed. Discursive constructivism provides a precise lens to comprehend and explain the foreign policy behaviour of Iran while placing language, symbols, and narratives at the core of analysis. In Iran, the depiction of the United States as an imperial "Other" is constitutive of national identity, moral legitimacy and defining sovereignty. These discursive boundaries shaped the scope and limitations of pragmatic engagement during the Rouhani period.

Foreign Policy of Iran during Rouhani period indicated that the ideology and pragmatism are not competing opposite forces but interdependent elements of a single unified strategic logic. The Islamic Republic did not abandon its revolutionary identity in pursuit of material gains, nor did it allow ideological commitments to diminish the space for diplomatic engagement. The pragmatism, specifically during the nuclear negotiations was framed and justified within the boundaries of revolutionary principles, sovereignty, and resistance to external pressures. Diplomatic cooperation was constructed as strategic necessity rather than ideological submission. This redefining enabled engagement with the United States while preserving political legitimacy at domestic level. However, at the same time, the persistent narratives of

mistrust, historical grievances, and strategic caution ensured that rapprochement remained restricted and conditional. The interaction between identity, discourse, and material pressures produced a foreign policy that was flexible in method but consistent in ideological orientation. The foreign policy behaviour of Iran during this period demonstrates that national interests and revolutionary ideology can operate together within an integrated decision-making structure.

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