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YAYINLARI

**İRAN BETWEEN
THE US AND CHINA**

Mohammadbagher Forough





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Iran between the US and China

ABD ve Çin Arasında Kalan İran

ایران بین چین و آمریکا

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Abbreviations:

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
DSR	Digital Silk Road
HSR	Health Silk Road
IRGC	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JCPOA	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps World Trade Organization
NSR	New Silk Road
MBS	Mohammad Ben Salman
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NYT	New York Times
WSJ	Wall Street Journal



SUMMARY

- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (The JCPOA) should be understood in the geopolitical context of Obama's Pivot to Asia. Obama's Pivot to Asia was meant to contain China and reduce the American involvement in the MENA region.
- China and Iran had a good relationship prior to Trump. With Trump's presidency and his simultaneous pressure on both countries, he unintentionally increased the geopolitical and geoeconomic proximity of the two countries dramatically. This proximity was manifested in 2020 in the 25-Year Deal between Iran and China.
- When it comes to American foreign policy approach to the Middle East in general and Iran in particular (including the JCPOA), the Biden presidency should be understood as a third Obama term.
- Biden's and Rouhani's teams will do their utmost to revive the deal before the Iranian presidential election in June, in which the conservatives are projected to win.

Keywords: Biden, JCPOA, Sino-Iran Relations, 25 Year Agreement with China, Pivot to Asia

ÖZET

- Kapsamlı Ortak Eylem Planı (KOEP), Obama'nın "Asya'ya dönüş" temelli jeopolitik düşüncesi dikkate alınarak değerlendirilmelidir. Obama'nın Asya'ya dönüş fikri, Çin'in kontrol altına alınması ve ABD'nin, Orta Doğu ve Kuzey Afrika bölgesindeki etkinliğinin azaltılması anlamına gelmektedir.
- Çin ve İran, Trump'tan önce de iyi ilişkilere sahipti. Trump'ın başkanlığı döneminde her iki ülkeye eş zamanlı olarak uygulanan baskı politikası ister istemez bu iki ülkenin jeopolitik ve jeoekonomik yakınlığını daha da güçlendirdi. Bu yakınlık 2020'de İran ve Çin arasında düzenlenen 25 Yıllık İran-Çin Anlaşması ile belirginleşti.
- ABD'nin genel olarak Orta Doğu'ya ve özel olarak İran'a (KOEP dâhil) dış politika yaklaşımı göz önüne alındığında, Biden başkanlığı üçüncü bir Obama Dönemi olarak kabul görmektedir.
- Biden ve Ruhani ekiplerinin, muhafazakârların kazanacağı tahmin edilen haziran ayındaki İran Cumhurbaşkanlığı seçimlerinden önce Anlaşma'yı canlandırmak için ellerinden geleni yapmaları beklenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: KOEP, Biden, Çin-İran İlişkileri, 25 Yıllık İran-Çin Anlaşması, Asya'ya Dönüş

چکیده

- برای فهمیدن برجام بایستی به شرایط و سیاست خارجی او باما توجه کرد. سیاست او باما معروف به چرخش به آسیا (Pivot to Asia) این هدف را داشت که حضور رو به رشد چین در دنیا را مدیریت و کنترل کند و در عین حال حضور آمریکا در خاورمیانه را کم رنگتر سازد.
- چین و ایران قبل از ریاست جمهوری ترامپ، رابطه خوبی با هم داشتند. اعمال فشار همزمان بر چین و ایران از طرف ترامپ، به طور ناخواسته نتیجه ای عکس به بار داشته و منجر به افزایش روابط ژئوپلیتیک و اقتصادی پکن و تهران شده است. معاهده ۵۲ ساله استراتژیک ایران و چین در سال ۲۰۲۰ یکی از بارزترین نمونه های رشد این روابط است.
- در مورد سیاست خارجی دولت جدید آمریکا نسبت به خاورمیانه و ایران از جمله برجام، می توان ریاست جمهوری بایدن را در واقع یک دوره سوم ریاست جمهوری او باما فرض کرد. این بدین معناست که بایدن سیاستهای خارجی او باما را ادامه خواهد داد.
- دیپلماتهای دولت بایدن و روحانی تمام تلاش خود را خواهند کرد که برجام را پیش از انتخابات ریاست جمهوری ایران در خردادماه آینده به سرانجامی برسانند.

کلیدواژه ها: برجام، بایدن، روابط چین و ایران، توافق ۵۲ ساله، بازگشت به آسیا



1. Introduction

The world is at a unique historical moment. It currently finds itself caught between the geopolitical and military power of the US and the geoeconomic power of China and other Asian actors. This new unprecedented dynamic is affecting all of the global regions and actors. Europeans are trying to find their place in the geopolitical world by trying to actualize the idea of a European Strategic Autonomy (Lippert et al., 2019), which practically means that Europeans are trying to find ways in which they can develop a foreign policy independent of the US, for instance, in their foreign policy approach towards China and Iran.. Since World War II, European countries have been dependent on the US for their security. ESA is their way of getting out of the security umbrella of the US.

The Middle East is finding itself at a similar crossroad. For decades, the US has been by far the dominant geopolitical and geoeconomic actor in the region. Starting from the first decade of this century, China has come to be a major power in Asia in general and in West Asia in particular. Its rise has been particularly intensified in the second of this century since the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has solidified and given a framework to China's geoeconomic rise in the region (Forough, 2018). The BRI is part of the new geoeconomic and cultural phenomenon in the world known as the 'New Silk Roads' (Frankopan, 2015). China is currently the top trading partner of a majority of the countries in the region. All countries without exception have welcomed the Chinese New Silk Road (aka BRI). Most countries (except Israel) have in one way or another endorsed the Digital Silk Road (DSR) including 5G from Huawei (Arcesati, 2020). Most countries in the region are participating in the idea of the Health Silk Road (Lancaster et al., 2020) by participating, for instance, in Chinese vaccine diplomacy, which includes volunteering for the trial phase of vaccines and Iran is no stranger to the regional and global circumstances and processes discussed above. In the past two decades, especially since the American invasion of Iraq, Iran has risen to become a regional powerhouse. This has geopolitically

pitted it against the US and its allies in the region. Some of the major areas in which this geopolitical rivalry manifests itself are the Iranian nuclear issue, sanctions, and negotiations, which culminated in the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), aka The Iran Nuclear Deal. In the meantime, Iran has been geoeconomically getting increasingly closer to China and uplifting its relations with China to a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' level (Iranian President's Office, 2016). More recently, in the backdrop of the American unilateral hostilities against Iran under the Trump administration, including its unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has more systematically and officially 'pivoted to the East' (Mousavian, 2020), based on the idea of 'Look to the East' doctrine announced by the Iranian Leader's Office (2018). The most significant example through which this doctrine has materialized is the '25-year comprehensive strategic deal' with China, which provides a extensive roadmap for the Sino-Iranian relations for the next three decades.

This report investigates the present day challenges and opportunities of Iran at the intersection of global and regional geopolitics (with a focus on JCPOA) and geoeconomics (with a focus on Iran's Pivot to Asia and 25-year roadmap). The report will unfold subsequently: the next section (2) will investigate the geopolitics of the US-Iran relations (under Obama and Trump) as the background against which the JCPOA has unfolded. The following section (3) will look into the role of China the formulation and implementation of the JCPOA as well as in the Iranian present-day geoeconomic calculations in general. The concluding section (4) will discuss the near-future prospects of the Iranian geopolitical and geoeconomic policies and the near-future of the JCPOA.

2. The Geopolitics of Iran and the US: The JCPOA

Geopolitics is one of the two main dimensions of the Iranian involvement in the region. Upon the formation of the current political system in Iran in 1979, Iran became internationally isolated due to its revolutionary fervor and anti-imperialist attitude (that went against both the Eastern and the Western blocs). Relations with the US soured quickly due



to several reasons including the hostage crisis. Iran, in the meantime, continued working on its nuclear industry that had begun under the previous political system and supported back then by the Western powers including the US. However, the new development under revolutionary Iran was seen as a major threat by the US and its regional allies such as by Israel and Saudi Arabia. A regime of sanctions was introduced in 2006 (UN Resolution 1737) against Iran after the country refused to limit its nuclear enrichment activities. After years of unilateral moves and multilateral negotiations, ultimately Iran and the 5+1 (that is the five Security Council members plus Germany) signed the JCPOA. The agreement was considered by many as the most important foreign policy achievement of both Obama's and Rouhani's presidencies. The deal became nearly undone under Trump and is about to be resurrected under Biden. To understand the JCPOA, and the place of Iran, US, and China in the world today, it is important to understand America's, and particularly the Obama administration's, foreign policy doctrine, the Pivot to Asia, which was the main reason why the US was determined to come to a nuclear deal with Iran.

2.1. The Global Background of the JCPOA: Obama and the American Pivot to Asia

There are numerous historical, political, and economic reasons why Iran and the world powers (especially the US) finalized the JCPOA. Looking into American motives, the following factors all contributed to this deal: first, America's dependency on Middle Eastern oil and gas has been dramatically reduced. In fact, the US has become a net energy exporter in the world today making it less dependent on the region's energy resources. In a way, the US is even competing with the Middle Eastern exporters such as: Saudi Arabia and Iran. In 2019, for instance, 'the United States exported more total energy on an annual basis than it imported it for the first time in 67 years' (US Gov, 2020). Second, since the outset of this century or after 9/11 to be precise, the US got involved in two extremely costly wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, the latter being considered the biggest foreign policy blunder of modern American history. Both wars have cost nearly seven trillion dollars for the coun-

try (Macias, 2019) bringing the country into serious national debt (Peltier, 2020). The American middle classes shrank due to such debt-financed wars (Sullivan et al., 2000). The American population has grown tired of America's involvement in West Asia (DePetris, 2019). In the meantime, and this is the third major reason, China was rising at the global level with an annual GDP growth of about 10% for four decades, unhindered by any systematic containment from the US.

The key to understanding the origins and background of the JCPOA is that Obama came to the office wanting to be the first 'American Pacific President' (Allen, 2009). Hillary Clinton (2011) called this century 'America's Pacific Century'. Obama and his team formulated and implemented a strategy called the Pivot to Asia (Cambell & Andrews, 2013). Obama's thinking was that the previous presidents, especially George W. Bush, had paid too much attention to the Middle East at the cost of ignoring East Asia in general and China in particular. The main target of this policy was indeed to contain the rise of China. The Pivot had military, political, and economic dimensions. However, the most tangible developments happened in the military domain. Not much happened in the economic domain after the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) did not pan out the way Obama envisioned it. The most serious component of the Pivot to Asia was the increased military build-up in the region. Symbolic of this build-up was the military doctrine of Air Sea Battle (Kline & Hughes, 2012), which was publically introduced during the Pivot and became official military doctrine in 2010 (previously it had been a classified doctrine).

To make further military reassignment to the Asia Pacific region, America had to reduce its involvement and costly military interventions in the Middle East. Part of this logic was to come to terms with Iran (in some sort of détente) as a regional power in the Middle East and contain the Iranian nuclear industry by preventing the country from potentially enriching uranium to levels necessary for the production of nuclear weapons. This resulted in the Obama administration seriously entering the multilateral nuclear negotiations with Iran and other world powers to reach a deal to contain Iran's



nuclear industry in exchange for lifting international sanctions on the Iranian economy and banking system. The deal was finalized in the 2015 to much international fanfare. Both the Rouhani and Obama administrations celebrated the JCPOA as their top foreign policy achievement.

The American Pivot to Asia in general and the Iran Nuclear Deal component in particular created major anxiety for the region, especially for Saudi Arabia, Israel, UAE, Jordan, Bahrain, and even Turkey, who were afraid that Iran, without the pressure of the international sanctions, would become emboldened to assert itself as a hegemonic regional power. Obama's response was that the three regional powers (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) should learn to live with each other and share the neighborhood. Basically, Obama's Middle East policy was to reduce the American involvement in the region, 'lead from behind' (such as in Libya or Syria), and not allow any one regional power to completely dominate the region (Goldberg, 2016). This did not sit well with the traditional allies of the US mentioned above, who started talking to each other. Their efforts led recently to the Abraham Accords (Goldberg, 2020). They also simultaneously started looking to Asian powers such as China (Qian and Fulton, 2020) as a strategic hedge against the US potentially abandoning them.

The JCPOA started promisingly, but cracks started showing as time passed by. Iranians were not happy with the speed and half-hearted manner in which the sanctions against the country were being lifted (and in some cases not lifted at all). The general view in Iran both at the state and the nation level is that Iran stood by its commitments under the deal as evidenced by a dozen IEAE reports on the Iranian compliance (IAEA, 2015-2020), but that the Western countries especially the US did not fully abide by their commitments. Despite such strains on the implementation of the deal, the deal was moving forward during Obama's presidency.

2.2. The JCPOA under Trump

With Donald Trump coming to power, the deal seemed doomed from the outset. In his over-exaggerating style and preference for superlatives, he called it the 'worst deal in history'. Trump's most

friendly partners (not only in the region but arguably in the world) were the Saudi de facto leader Mohammed Ben Salman (MBS) and Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel. Trump withdrew from the deal in May 2018 and started the 'maximum pressure' campaign on Iran. This 'maximum' approach produced 'minimum' gains for the US (Tharoor, 2020), in the sense that it did not lead to Iran changing its regional policies or its missile programs and the like. The Saudis and Israelis supported this policy wholeheartedly, whereas most of the rest of the world (including European signatories to the JCPOA together with Russia and China) condemned Trump for having left the deal. These parties scrambled to salvage what was left of the deal. The deal in its bare minimum, it can be argued, survived the Trump era.

This Trumpian policy had numerous consequences. Due to the reinstatement of sanctions, the Iranian economy and currency suffered seriously. The Iranian population was obviously the main victim of this policy as the Iranian currency lost its value dramatically (BBC, 2019) and the costs of living in Iran went through the roof. The other side effect of the deal was the increasing tensions between the Iran and the US (and its allies such as Israel), which manifested itself in the assassination of the top Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, the downing of the American drone by Iran in the Iranian territorial waters, and the attack on Saudi Aramco oil installations among other things. These incidents might suggest small tactical wins here for Iran and there for the US. But a more strategic consequence of this American approach was the increasing strategic proximity that Iran and China developed during the Trump years.

3. Iran and China at the Intersection of Geoeconomics and Geopolitics

When it comes to the role of the Iranian foreign policy, two things are oftentimes ignored in most analyses: first is the role of geoeconomics (as opposed to geopolitics) in the country's foreign policy calculations and second the role of China and its increasing importance in the Iranian global calculations. Geoeconomics can be defined for the purposes of this report as the study of how an



actor's (economic) foreign policy is determined by geographical considerations. If the relations between Iran and the US are defined by geopolitics, the Sino-Iranian relations are more often than determined by geoeconomics. With the American Pivot to Asia, the Chinese political elites come to the realization that the US was intending to contain China by all means possible especially through military means, and that the US leaders did not shy away from publically admitting this (Ford, 2017). In the realm of economy, the US was also trying to exclude China from the TPP negotiations when the Americans thought that TPP had a serious chance. While America was moving to East Asia especially through increasing their naval presence in the region, the Chinese decided to 'go West' through various policies, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the Americans were on sea, the BRI put considerable emphasis on both land and sea, which is to say, it had a land-based component (the belt) and the maritime one (the road). The BRI has six corridors, one of which directly passes through the Middle East and involves Iran; namely, the China Central-Asia West-Asia Corridor ('the CAWA Corridor'). Iran therefore plays a highly central role in this corridor due to several factors including its energy resources, its sizable economy, well-educated middle classes and workforces, and most importantly perhaps, the centrality of its well-connected geography.

3.1. China's Role in the JCPOA

China had a critical and constructive role in the negotiation processes leading to the JCPOA. It supports the principles of non-proliferation. While it is a strategic partner of Iran, China agreed to go along with the UN resolutions that imposed sanctions on Iran, for instance in the cases of Resolutions 1737 (in 2006), 1747 (in 2007), 1803 (in 2008), and 1929 (in 2010), which introduced a diverse array of sweeping sanctions against Iran. According to Thomas Christensen, the former Deputy Assistance Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, China came along with the Resolution 1929 'only after watering them down to protect China's economic interests and to reduce damage to Iran's overall economy' (Almond, 2016). This greatly served the interests of both Iran and China.

One such example in the context of this resolution was China watering down the language (UN, 2010) that was directed at global economic actors interacting with Iran's Central Bank or the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The latter is arguably one of the most (if not the most) significant economic actor in the country. The language has been described as too vague and permissive (Almond, 2016), leaving the space open for everyone to continue interacting with major Iranian banks and economic actors with the condition that, as an economic actor, one is supposed 'exercise vigilance' so that such interactions do not lead to an increased chance of nuclear proliferation:

...the need to exercise vigilance over transactions involving Iranian banks, including the Central Bank of Iran, so as to prevent such transactions contributing to proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities, or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems [...] *calls upon* all States to exercise vigilance over those transactions involving the IRGC that could contribute to Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities or the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems. (UN, 2010)

These are examples of China's subtle, pragmatic, and (geo)economically driven diplomacy and foreign policy that keeps both the Western side and the Iranian side happy. Such diplomacy is ultimately driven by China's (geo)economic foreign policy interests. China also went along with the international sanctions regime against Iran, but refrained from supporting or going along with the unilateral American sanctions against the country as China sees these unilateral sanctions to be against its core principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. China enacts this pragmatic diplomacy when it comes to the Iranian oil sanctions as well. While it reduced its purchase of oil from Iran, it started using a loophole in the sanctions to import 'fuel oil' from Iran, which was not covered under the sanctions regime (Wayne & Tracy, 2013). China's role in the decade leading to the JCPOA was pivotal. In other words, the JCPOA could not have happened without the Chinese participation. The survival of the deal under both the Obama and Trump administrations has been dependent on the Chinese cooperation,



as China's participation in a potential 'snapping back' of sanctions is necessary in the hypothetical scenario of Iran not complying with the terms and conditions of the JCPOA.

3.2. Post-JCPOA: The Sino-Iranian 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership'

Immediately after the JCPOA was signed, Xi Jinping paid Iran a visit, in January 2016, to solidify the Sino-Iranian relations. He was the first head of a world power to visit Iran in the aftermath of the signing of the JCPOA, which showed how important it was for China to solidify its economic interests in the region and how seriously China takes the role of Iran in its geoeconomic calculations. Seventeen economic and trade agreements and MoUs were signed by the two countries during this trip. China and Iran lifted their relations to the level of a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' (Iranian President's Office, 2016). It is important to note that in the Chinese foreign policy relations, this type of comprehensive partnership does not in any way amount to an 'alliance' or system.

In this new level of partnership, the two countries have committed themselves to promoting a multilateral global order (implicating a move away from the US unilateral hegemony), enhancing mutual interaction between the legislative bodies of the two countries, their foreign ministries, cooperation in the security realm, energy, civilian nuclear energy, cultural realm, and finally enhancing communications and exchanges between the arms forces of the two countries (Ibid). Needless to say, the economy takes the centre stage in this partnership in that the two countries aim to boost their bilateral trade to 600\$ billion in 10 years (Motevalli, 2016). This obviously did not pan out, due to the re-imposition of sanctions by the Trump administration, among other reasons.

Iran occupies a unique place in the Chinese geopolitical imagination. It's the only country in the region that is in no special way an ally of the US. Other major actors in the region (such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel, Egypt, and even Pakistan which is a close friend of China) are American and/or NATO allies in one way or another. In the final analysis, their resources, capabilities, and territories

can be used as leverage against China. Iran is in this sense in a unique place in the region in that it is strategically partners with Russia and China and practically independent of any sort of Western alliance. If anything, the main geopolitical partners of Iran are countries in Asia, namely, Turkey, China, Russia, Pakistan, and India. The move towards these countries has been called the Iran's 'look' or 'turn to the East'.

3.3. Iran's 'Turn to the East'

Iran has been cautiously optimistic about its relations with both the Western and Eastern actors such as China, and trying to not become fully dependent on any one country. However, since Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, the US has unintentionally increased the proximity between Iran and China. This comes in the backdrop of the Iranian so-called 'look to the East'. The edict to follow this policy came from the very top, that is, the Iranian supreme leader himself, who, in a speech to the academic elites of the country, advocated for a 'preference for the East over West' in February 2018. Criticizing an overly optimistic attitude towards the West, he outlined a new strategic policy for Iran:

We've witnessed the result of relying on foreign governments during the nuclear deal talks (The JCPOA). During the nuclear negotiations, we trusted them; but we didn't benefit from our trust. [...] In foreign policy, top priorities for us, today, include preferring the East to the West, preferring the neighboring countries to the far reached locations, preferring nations and countries that share our common goals.

The American withdrawal from the JCPOA thoroughly solidified this position. The East and the neighboring countries that Khamenei is talking are those countries which Iran has had a strategic partnership with such as China, Turkey, or Russia, or neighboring countries such as Iraq, Qatar, Oman, or Pakistan or Asian countries with which Iran has historical and economic ties such as India or Central Asia. This policy has political, economic, and even infrastructural components. Through infrastructural development Iran is aiming to become a 'crossroads' of different civilizations at the intersection of Chinese, Indian, and Russian



gloeconomic initiatives (Forough, 2021). It was along these lines that Iran has tried to improve its relations with Turkey, and others in the region. For the same reason, Iran has reached out via different means to the Saudis and Emiratis to address regional issues via direct dialogue among regional actors without foreign (that is 'Western' or American) involvement.

The Gulf countries have not in recent years publically endorsed such an initiative. Along the same lines Iran has introduced the Hurmuz Peace Initiative, as a peace platform for regional actors to work with each other to ensure peace in the Gulf region. The argument behind this initiative is that extra-regional powers (implicating the US in particular) cannot guarantee the peace in the Gulf region. President Rouhani presented this Initiative to the General Assembly meeting of the United Nations in 2019 (TehranTimes, 2020). So far such efforts are not yielding fruitful results in relations with the Saudis and the Emiratis, who so far have resisted such calls for direct exchanges. Instead they have publically gone the opposite way by signing normalization deals with Israel. However, with China, things are different.

3.4. Sino-Iranian 25-Year Strategic Deal

Sino-Iranian relation took a serious turn in 2020 when it was revealed that the two countries had signed a strategic '25-year deal' or 'roadmap' for cooperation. The two countries were rumored to have been involved in negotiations over this deal since Xi Jinping's visit to Iran in 2016, which was discussed above. A text document in Persian purported to contain the content of the deal was leaked online (see the document in Persian on Tabnak, 2020). This deal is supposed to cover practically every major aspect of cooperation between these two countries and is reported to commit China to invest approximately \$400 billion in Iranian energy sector, transport, manufacturing, telecommunications, free economic zones, industrial parks, among other things.

China's investments provide a sense of stability and predictability to the volatile situation that Iran finds itself in. In return, Iran is supposed to provide China with heavily discounted energy resources, that are necessary for the economic growth of

China. This agreement met with intensely positive and negative reactions from both inside and outside the country. Some argued that the deal would make Iran a 'colony' of China (Sadeghi, 2020). Some in the West attributed this deal to the so-called China's 'expansionist policy' and expressed concern over the military dimensions of such a deal becoming a reality. However, this deal is best understood as Sheng Zhang (2020) argues, 'mostly a gesture of friendship and the natural and unsurprising continuation of the relationship between the two states.'

One particular reason for why China and Iran decided to solidify their relations in the framework of this 25-year deal was the hostility that the US showed both countries simultaneously under the Trump administration. In one way, this deal is a gesture of defiance of both countries (particularly China) the US. China is showing the US and the world that it is not afraid of defying the threats of sanctions by the US for its continued economic interactions with Iran especially when they consider the Trump withdrawal from JCPOA to be an illegitimate move. The Trump administration engaged in putting an unprecedented level of pressure on both China and Iran simultaneously. From the perspective of the Trump administration, the two countries are inseparable as 'problems'. A perfect example of this line of thinking from the US is how the US involved Iran as the angle through which it decided to crack down on and sink Huawei as the symbol of a Chinese successful business enterprise. The Trump administration's crackdown on Huawei, and its request for the extradition of Meng Wanzhou, the CFO of Huawei, from Canada to the US, was based on the allegation that Huawei's 'unofficial subsidiary', Skycom, allegedly violated the Iran sanctions by doing business with Iran when Iran was under sanctions (Reuters, 2020).

It is important to note that not everything is rosy in the relationship between China and Iran. Despite the interests that are common between these two actors several challenges still serve as hindrances to the continued cooperation of the two countries. The first and perhaps most important issue is that most of the Iranian population and elites (political, economic, and academic) are more instinctively inclined for better relations with the West. This is an



area of major concern for the Chinese partners of Iran. After the JCPOA was signed in 2015, Iranians were overjoyed about being back in the arms of the so-called ‘international community’. The most significant aspect of the international community for most Iranians is in practice the normalization of relations with Western powers. One piece of evidence for this attitude was the overjoyed celebration of the arrival of Airbus airplanes landing in Iranian airports, which was shown as an instance of national achievement. This concerns the Chinese in the long run.

The Iranians also have their own grievances, namely, that given the international sanctions regimes and American pressure on Iran, the Chinese take advantage of the situation to squeeze Iran for their economic interests. Another grievance among some Iranians is that the 25-year deal can make Iran heavily dependent on China, some even using the term ‘colony of China’ as described above. In the larger picture, however, the positive commonalities and elective affinities between the two countries far outweigh the grievances (Forough, 2020). What is more, given the American approach of connecting its ‘china problem’ with its ‘Iran problem’, the two countries were thrust even closer to each other’s arms, hence, the recently revealed 25-year deal.

4. The Biden Administration and The Current State of Play: A Third Term for Obama

Biden was highly supportive of the JCPOA negotiation processes in the years preceding the signing of the deal. As a presidential candidate, he argued in January 2020 that Trump’s policy towards Iran in general and the assassination of Gen. Soleimani in particular are ‘avoidable escalations’ and that “the only way out of this crisis is through diplomacy – clear-eyed, hard-nosed diplomacy grounded in strategy.” (WSJ, 2020). The question is what kind of ‘strategy’ is the Biden administration is (and will be) following in relation to Iran?

If we accept the Washington DC motto that ‘personnel is policy’ and if we take a deep look at the how Biden has populated the foreign policy positions in his administration, there is no escaping the conclusion that what Iran (and the rest of the

world) is facing is, in a manner of speaking, a third term for Obama. That means that the Biden administration is by all means intent on continuing the Obama doctrine described above at the beginning of this report.

The year 2021, however, is not 2015. Many things are different in the world, in the US, and of course in Iran. The priorities of these actors are different now, particularly the US. America is still licking its (mostly self-inflicted) wounds in the aftermath of four years of the Trump presidency, which at least half of America found extremely unpalatable. The political fallout of the final days of the Trump presidency are still unfolding and are projected to continue in the foreseeable future. Today, the United States seems to be the most disunited it has been in its modern history. Americans are experiencing some of the worst casualties they have ever experienced, this time not in the context of a war, but due to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Half a million Americans have died (NYT, 2021) so far and the number will certainly rise. The economic fallout of the pandemic is putting extreme pressure on the American population and the Biden administration’s ability to govern the country. Since the outbreak reached the US, unemployment rate in the US has been in the double digits and compares to unemployment rates of the Great Depression, in some instances (such as in terms of workers’ unemployment) even surpassing the numbers from 1920s. The US is also experiencing some of the worst cyberattacks on its essential federal institutions. In the final weeks of the Trump presidency, the US was the target of a major hack that had been going on for at least months. The breach is known as the SolarWinds hack, named after one of the companies that was hacked (together with Microsoft and VMware). Through this hack, the attackers gained access to American federal databases. These are only some of the historic priority items on the agenda of the Biden administration, relegating the Iran nuclear file down to the bottom of the list.

Knowing that waiting for the Biden administration to make a move is not the smartest policy at this stage, Iran started raising the stakes by setting a deadline of February 22 for Americans to return



to the deal. Otherwise, Iranian officials threatened, the country would engage in further reducing its cooperation with the IAEA inspections and will enrich Uranium up to 20% levels. Under the deal Iran is not allowed to enrich beyond 4%. Blinken the Secretary of the State has said that the US has left the path of diplomacy open provided that Iran starts complying with the deal first. This did not sit well with the Iranian authorities who think it is the US that did the wrong move by withdrawing from the deal. They don't find the US in a moral or political or technical position to set any conditions for Iran. To show how serious Iran is in its stance, the Iranian Leader has said that if necessary for the country, Iran will be enriching uranium up to 60% (Reuters, 2021) if need be. It became a Mexican standoff, so to speak, with each side waiting for the other side to make a move first. In the meantime, Javad Zarif the Iranian Foreign Minister made a public comment on CNN that what the situation needs is a coordinator, an actor that can coordinate or choreographer the two sides simultaneously the negotiating table. This, according to him, could be the European foreign policy chief.

More recently, Zarif's solution seems to have paid off as the Europeans convened a meeting, in which the Americans participated and expressed their willingness to officially rejoin the deal. In the meantime, the head of IAEA, Rafael Grossi, went to Iran to dissuade Iranians from following up on their threat of reducing IAEA's access to inspections. The result was the following 'temporary technical' plan or arrangement:

Under the plan, for the next three months Iran would hold recordings from monitoring equipment installed at sites by the IAEA but would not release the information unless sanctions were lifted within that timeframe, the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) said. If sanctions remained, the data would be erased, it added. (BBC, 2021)

The removal of sanctions is not going to be an impossible task for the Biden administration now that democrats are controlling both the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the White House. If there is excessive delay in removing the sanctions or if sanctions are not lifted at all it can be con-

sidered an intentional move by Iran given the fact that the excuse that republicans are controlling the Senate no longer applies.

5. Conclusion

Despite all the diplomatic and technical threats that Iran and the US are making against each other, one can safely assume that before the Iranian elections in June, Iranian and American leaders will try to revive the deal in full or at least in part. And that such efforts are likely to pan out. In the Iranian presidential election in June 2020, the conservatives are projected to win. This introduces an unknown factor into the equation for the Biden administration. They will therefore try to come up with a solution for this crisis before Rouhani is out of office. What is certain is that both sides have shown their willingness to resume multilateral diplomacy. China, Russia, and the Europeans are on board and want to revive the JCPOA. All signs show a positive trend in favor of diplomacy and the deal being revived. However, nothing is for certain. International relations, especially when it comes to multilateral diplomacy, are a delicate and fragile business.

There are other developments that seem to support the idea that the Biden administration is indeed a continuation of the Obama administration's policy in the Middle East. Biden has not shown a friendly attitude (for instance in terms of having personal phone calls or favoritst foreign policy approach in the style of Donald Trump) towards the Saudis and the Israelis. Since he arrived in the office, Biden's administration has undone a number of policies that Trump put in place in the final days in favor of Saudis, such as de-blacklisting the Houthis as a terror organization, expressing its desire to rejoin the JCPOA, and continuing to emphasize that East Asia (more particularly China) is the main object of the administration's foreign policy strategy. These are policies that show a return to the Obama doctrine of focusing American resources on the Pacific Ocean and reducing American involvement and policies favoring the Saudis in the Middle East.



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“Tanıtım nüshasıdır, para ile satılamaz.”
“Bandrol Uygulamasına İlişkin Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmeliğin 5’inci maddesinin
2’nci fıkrası çerçevesinde bandrol taşıması zorunlu değildir.”

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Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Turkey, border-sharing, and comprehensive business relations makes it necessary for Turkey to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies (İran Arařtırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Turkey. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.



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