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THE DIALECTIC OF DIPLOMACY AND CONFRONTATION IN US-IRAN RELATIONS: DOMESTIC POLITICS, INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN, AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM (1979-2026)

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Abstract: Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, relations with the United States have seesawed between periods of talk and periods of military tension. This paper tries to understand why diplomatic efforts between these two countries have so often ended without lasting results. The study draws on 20 academic articles, official documents, and policy institute reports. It applies Robert Putnam's "two-level game" theory as its main framework. The central finding is that diplomatic failures in US-Iran relations come less from material interests or ideological clashes than from the way domestic politics consistently overrides international negotiations. The paper looks at five distinct phases: the immediate post-revolutionary period (1979–1988), a phase of cautious engagement (1989–2001), the securitization that followed 9/11 (2001–2009), the JCPOA breakthrough (2009–2017), and the years of maximum pressure and military confrontation (2017–2026). The JCPOA, though carefully built, still fell apart-not because it was badly designed, but because political opposition inside both the United States and Iran proved too strong. The military escalation of 2025–2026 fits the same recurring pattern: coercion and secret diplomacy exist side by side in an uneasy balance. The paper ends by arguing that real stability will require agreements that can survive changes in government and withstand domestic political pressures.

Keywords: two-level game; domestic politics; institutional design; securitization; nuclear proliferation; Middle East geopolitics

1. Introduction

Few bilateral relationships are as consistently strained as that between the United States and Iran. Since 1979, when the revolution turned a former US ally into an anti-Western Islamic republic, the two countries have moved back and forth between hostility and cautious dialogue (Dehnavi, 2024a; Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023). Some scholars describe this as a "dialectic"—a situation where opposing forces interact and shape each other over time (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Several key moments stand out in this history. There was the 1953 CIA-backed coup that removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and returned the Shah to power (Jadidi, 2023; Stachoń, 2022; Abrahamian, 2013). There was the 1979 revolution and the 444-day hostage crisis that followed (Dehnavi, 2024a; Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023). There was the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), where the US tilted toward Iraq (Mohammadyari et al., 2025). There was the reformist period under President Khatami, the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), and its cancellation by the Trump administration in 2018 (Anggitta, 2017; Arslanian, 2023; Shestakova, 2025). Most recently, there was the 2025–2026 military confrontation, with US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear sites and Iranian missile attacks in response (Papyan, 2025; Ahmadzada, 2025; Qodirjonov & Voxidjonov, 2026).

Researchers have looked at many aspects of this relationship: how US presidents have talked about Iran as a threat (Mohammadyari et al., 2025; Dehnavi, 2024b); how sanctions have affected

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Iranian politics and its nuclear program (Arslanian, 2023); how well the JCPOA's verification system worked (Anggitta, 2017); the role of think tanks in shaping US policy (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2025; Papyan, 2025); the use of proxy forces (Dehnavi & Safavipour, 2024; Ahmadzada, 2025); and the potential for secret diplomacy to reduce tensions (Qodirjonov & Voxidjonov, 2026; Al-Mujaini & Al-Hijji, 2026). What is less common is a study that treats the whole relationship as a single ongoing process, where diplomacy and confrontation are not separate stages but two sides of the same coin.

This paper tries to fill that gap. It asks:

Why have diplomatic efforts between the US and Iran so often failed to produce lasting results?

The argument here is that the main reason is not material interests or ideology, but the way domestic politics consistently overrides international negotiations. The 2025–2026 military escalation, though more intense than earlier crises, is not a break from the past—it is the latest turn in the same old pattern (Ahmadzada, 2025).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and sets out the theoretical framework. Section 3 explains the research method. Section 4 presents the findings across five periods. Section 5 discusses what these findings mean. Section 6 responds to possible objections. Section 7 concludes.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1 Historical Context: The 1953 Coup and Its Legacy

To understand US-Iran relations, one has to start with the 1953 coup. Organized by the CIA and Britain's MI6, it removed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and brought the Shah back to power (Abrahamian, 2013). The main reason was oil: Mossadegh had nationalized Iran's oil industry, and this threatened Western economic and political interests. The coup not only ended Iran's brief experiment with democracy but also left a deep distrust of the United States that persists to this day (Jadidi, 2023; Stachoń, 2022; Ponce, 2014).

Stachoń (2022) points to three main causes: the British-Iranian oil dispute, an exaggerated fear of communist influence (the Tudeh Party), and internal opposition within Iran's political elite. The coup succeeded, she argues, because all three came together (Stachoń, 2022). Ponce (2014) highlights the role of CIA propaganda in turning public opinion against Mossadegh. Soghomonyan (2022) describes the coup as a joint British-American intelligence operation, planned and carried out with help from Iranian royalists.

The 1953 event shaped everything that followed. It created a cycle of mistrust: Iranian leaders justified their actions in terms of resistance and revolutionary legitimacy, while US policy swung between containment and limited engagement. This history has come up again and again—during the 1979 hostage crisis and during the 2015 nuclear talks, when Iranian negotiators pointed to 1953 as a reason not to trust American promises (Abrahamian, 2013; Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023).

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Two-Level Game Theory

This study uses Robert Putnam's (1988) "two-level game" theory. Putnam's idea is that leaders in international negotiations play on two levels at the same time. The central rule of this framework is that an international deal can fail even if the negotiators themselves reach an agreement, provided the domestic audience does not approve. The leader has to sell the deal at home (Level II) as well as abroad (Level I). In adversarial bilateral environments, the domestic "win-set"—the size of acceptable agreements to domestic constituencies—is often narrowed significantly by domestic veto players, political polarization, and institutional resistance, making lasting cross-border institutionalization remarkably fragile.

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2.3 Securitization Theory and Dialectic

This paper also draws on securitization theory from the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998). It looks at how US presidents have presented Iran as an existential threat in areas like security, politics, economics, and cyberspace (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Mohammadyari et al., 2025). The numbers are striking: 83.77% of US presidential statements about Iran between 1979 and 2021 were securitizing. Only 14.38% tried to reduce the focus on Iran as a threat to the state, and only 1.85% did so for the Iranian people.

Mohammadyari et al. (2025) find two main patterns in US presidential rhetoric. One is a Realist approach, used from Carter through Clinton and again by Biden, which treats Iran as a unified state and talks about threats in geopolitical terms. The other is a Constructivist approach, used by George W. Bush through Trump, which draws a line between the Iranian government—seen as oppressive and illegitimate—and the Iranian people.

The idea of dialectic comes from Hegel and has been used in international relations to show how diplomacy and confrontation are not separate stages but two forces that coexist and shape each other. Dehnavi and Fiedler (2024b) make a similar point: US policy toward Iran is shaped both by practical concerns—like Gulf security and energy—and by deeper ideological narratives, such as American exceptionalism. These interact in a dialectical way. Shestakova (2025) talks about a "JCPOA spirit"—a set of norms and practices that grew out of the interaction between pressure and cooperation. This paper brings these approaches together to analyze US-Iran relations across five periods, focusing on the structural factors that have repeatedly undermined diplomatic efforts (Papyan, 2025).

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach. It is based on analysis of documents and historical materials. The research takes an interpretivist view, which means it assumes that political meaning is created through social interaction and depends on the specific context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The analysis is carried out from an independent scholarly perspective, without any institutional ties to the governments or political bodies discussed.

3.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search was carried out using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search terms included "US-Iran relations," "securitization," "JCPOA," "maximum pressure," "Iran nuclear deal," and "Middle East diplomacy." The search covered publications from 1953 through 2026. The initial search returned 247 articles. After checking for relevance to the research question, removing duplicates, and limiting to English-language sources, 32 articles remained. Reading the full texts further reduced this to 15 peer-reviewed articles that directly addressed US-Iran relations. By checking the references of these articles, five additional relevant sources were found, making a total of 20.

3.3 Data Sources

The analysis draws on three types of primary sources. First, 20 academic articles and book chapters: Abrahamian (2013); Jadidi (2023); Stachoń (2022); Ponce (2014); Anggitta (2017); Arslanian (2023); Al-Mujaini and Al-Hijji (2026); Pashayi and Kodaman (2023); Shestakova (2025); Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025); Papyan (2025); Ahmadzada (2025); Qodirjonov and Voxidjonov (2026); Dehnavi (2024a, 2024b); Dehnavi and Fiedler (2024a, 2024b, 2025); Dehnavi and Safavipour (2024); and Dehnavi and Tabatabaei (2021). Second, official documents: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, 2015); United Nations Security Council resolutions; US National Security Strategy reports; presidential speeches; and State of the Union addresses. Third,

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reports from think tanks and international organizations: Chatham House, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the RAND Corporation, and the International Crisis Group.

3.4 Selection Criteria

Sources were selected based on two main criteria. First, they had to be directly relevant to US-Iran relations, diplomacy, or confrontation. Second, they had to be published in reputable academic or analytical outlets. For articles, this meant being indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, DOAJ, or KCI. For reports, this meant being produced by established think tanks with recognized policy expertise.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a four-stage process, based on the approach outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2015).

Stage 1: Open coding. All sources were read carefully and systematically. Key concepts were identified from the material itself, without imposing pre-existing categories. These included: "securitization," "diplomacy," "confrontation," "sanctions," "nuclear negotiations," "proxy warfare," "domestic politics," "ideology," and "historical grievance."

Stage 2: Axial coding. The open codes were then grouped into five chronological periods: (a) the post-revolutionary rupture (1979–1988); (b) the era of cautious engagement (1989–2001); (c) the post-9/11 securitization (2001–2009); (d) the diplomatic breakthrough (2009–2017); and (e) the maximum pressure and military escalation era (2017–2026).

Stage 3: Comparative analysis. Each period was analyzed for the balance between diplomacy and confrontation, the structural factors driving each tendency, and the key actors and events that shaped outcomes.

Stage 4: Synthesis. The findings were then integrated into a dialectical framework that captures the cyclical pattern of US-Iran relations across the entire period.

3.6 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relies entirely on publicly available documents and does not include interviews with policymakers or diplomats. This means it cannot capture the internal decision-making processes that shaped key moments. Second, the analysis is qualitative and interpretive in nature; it does not provide formal statistical hypothesis testing. Third, the analysis relies significantly on the work of Dehnavi and his co-authors (seven out of 20 sources). This concentration may introduce potential bias, although efforts were made to cross-verify findings with other independent sources. Fourth, the coding process was carried out by both authors, but no formal inter-coder reliability testing was performed. Finally, the quantitative data on US presidential rhetoric (the 83.77% securitization figure) comes from a single study (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

4. RESULTS: FIVE PERIODS OF THE US-IRAN DIALECTIC

4.1 Period 1: The Post-Revolutionary Rupture (1979–1988)

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a clear break in US-Iran relations. As Pashayi and Kodaman (2023) observe, the revolution changed Iran's foreign policy from pro-Western Persian nationalism to anti-Western political Islam, summed up in the slogan "Neither East nor West, Islamic Republic." The new regime rejected both US and Soviet influence, positioning Iran as an independent force in the Cold War.

The 1979 hostage crisis, when Iranian students took over the US embassy and held 52 American diplomats for 444 days, deepened the hostility between the two countries (Dehnavi, 2024a). As Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) show, President Carter's response was what they call "reactionary securitization"—he presented Iran as a security threat but also tried to avoid pushing the

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country toward the Soviet bloc. This reflected the Cold War context, where US policymakers feared that Iran might align with the USSR.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) made the divide even deeper. The US tilted toward Iraq, providing intelligence and logistical support to Saddam Hussein's regime while also engaging in naval confrontations with Iranian forces in the Persian Gulf (Mohammadyari et al., 2025). The shooting down of Iran Air Flight 655 by the USS Vincennes in 1988, which killed 290 civilians, remains a powerful symbol of US hostility toward Iran (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Throughout this period, confrontation dominated over diplomacy. Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) show that Reagan's first-term approach to Iran was relatively low-key, while his second term saw a more intense focus on Iran's military and economic threat. The only significant diplomatic opening—the Iran-Contra affair, where US officials secretly sold arms to Iran in exchange for hostages—was conducted through backchannels and quickly exposed, further damaging trust (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Key structural factors: Cold War geopolitics; revolutionary ideology; the legacy of the hostage crisis; and the Iran-Iraq War.

4.2 Period 2: Cautious Engagement and Containment (1989–2001)

The end of the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 created conditions for a partial opening. President Rafsanjani pursued pragmatic economic policies, seeking to rebuild Iran's war-damaged economy and reintegrate into the international system. President Clinton, while maintaining sanctions, also signaled openness to dialogue (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) describe Clinton's first term as the beginning of "structured securitization"—a deliberate, multi-sectoral framing of Iran as a threat. Clinton portrayed Iran as a military threat to other states, a sponsor of terrorism, and a pursuer of weapons of mass destruction. However, he also left room for reducing the focus on Iran as a threat, expressing willingness to engage diplomatically.

The election of reformist President Khatami in 1997 created new possibilities. Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations," and Clinton responded cautiously. As Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) show, Clinton's second-term approach was more selective—he continued to present Iran as a threat in National Security Strategy reports but avoided public attacks. He also recognized signs of positive change in Iran and supported diplomatic engagement.

However, domestic politics in both countries constrained progress. Conservative forces in Iran opposed Khatami's reforms, while the US Congress passed sanctions legislation that limited Clinton's room to maneuver (Mohammadyari et al., 2025). The failure to achieve a breakthrough during this period reflected a recurring pattern: diplomatic openings are consistently undermined by domestic polarization and institutional resistance (Papyan, 2025).

Key structural factors: Reformist politics in Iran; US congressional sanctions; and institutional inertia.

4.3 Period 3: Post-9/11 Securitization (2001–2009)

The September 11, 2001 attacks transformed US foreign policy and intensified the securitization of Iran. Although Iran cooperated with the US in Afghanistan following the Taliban's defeat, President George W. Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" speech—which named Iran alongside Iraq and North Korea—ended any prospect of rapprochement (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) identify this period as the emergence of a "Constructivist" approach, which drew a distinction between the Iranian government and the Iranian people. Bush portrayed the government as oppressive and illegitimate while appealing to the Iranian

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people as potential allies. This represented a shift from the Realist approach that had dominated earlier administrations.

Bush's securitization of Iran was the most intense among all presidential terms examined (Mohammadyari et al., 2025). He characterized Iran as a rogue state and a member of an "axis of evil," claiming that its ideology of radicalism provided a recruitment base for terrorism. This framing left little room for dialogue, as diplomacy was portrayed as appeasement of an evil regime (Dehnavi, 2024b).

The Iraq War (2003) further complicated the dynamic. While Iran viewed the US presence in Iraq as a threat, the two states also shared interests in stabilizing the country. Backchannel communications occurred, but mistrust and ideological rigidity prevented meaningful cooperation (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2024a).

Key structural factors: The 9/11 attacks; the "Axis of Evil" framing; the Iraq War; and domestic polarization in both countries.

4.4 Period 4: The Diplomatic Breakthrough (2009–2017)

President Obama's election in 2009 created new possibilities for US-Iran engagement. Obama signaled openness to diplomacy without preconditions, and his administration pursued a dual-track strategy of sanctions and negotiations (Shestakova, 2025). The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented the high point of US-Iran diplomacy.

4.4.1 The Institutional Design of the JCPOA

As Anggitta (2017) demonstrates, the JCPOA's verification mechanism was unprecedented in its scope. Four advanced safeguards measures—broader monitoring, access with a deadline, the procurement channel, and prohibition of weaponization activities—were designed to ensure compliance. The deal was supported by nuclear non-proliferation experts who called it "a strong, long-term, and verifiable agreement" (Anggitta, 2017).

The JCPOA's institutional design consisted of the following key mechanisms:

*First, **broader monitoring** allowed the IAEA to observe Iran's entire nuclear fuel cycle for 25 years, making it harder to hide clandestine activities. Second, **an access with a deadline** provision gave the IAEA the right to inspect suspicious sites within 24 days, ensuring timely responses to potential violations. Third**, a procurement channel** was established to control exports of nuclear-related goods to Iran, preventing covert purchases. Fourth, the agreement explicitly **prohibited activities** that could contribute to nuclear weapons development, effectively closing the pathway to a nuclear bomb.*

Arslanian (2023) explains how economic sanctions contributed to Iran's decision to negotiate. Sanctions affected both the supply side (constraining Iran's nuclear program) and the demand side (impacting domestic politics). Arslanian argues that the demand-side pathway played a more decisive role: sanctions created a broad coalition that sidelined hardliners and pursued negotiations.

Shestakova (2025) analyzes the JCPOA as part of a unique negotiation system characterized by what she calls the "JCPOA spirit"—a set of formal and informal norms, principles, and organizational practices. This included shuttle diplomacy, differentiated negotiation formats, and the principles of "unity of purpose" and "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." Trita Parsi (2017), in his detailed account, documents how the secret Omani-mediated talks were essential to overcoming the initial mistrust between the American and Iranian delegations.

However, the JCPOA was vulnerable to domestic politics in both countries. In the US, Republican opposition to the deal was fierce, with critics arguing that it did not address Iran's ballistic missile program or regional activities. In Iran, hardliners viewed the agreement with suspicion, and the Supreme Leader's endorsement was conditional (Arslanian, 2023). As Arslanian (2023) notes, the

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agreement's longevity depended on political will—and when the Trump administration withdrew in 2018, the institutional framework collapsed.

Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) identify Obama's second term as the only period in which efforts to reduce the focus on Iran as a threat exceeded efforts to present it as a threat. They introduce the concept of "Positive Securitization"—using securitizing discourse to justify diplomacy. Obama argued that even extreme military or economic measures would not effectively address Iran's nuclear threat, making diplomacy the only viable solution. This represented a departure from traditional securitization.

Key structural factors: Obama's leadership; Iranian pragmatism under Rouhani; sanctions pressure; and the JCPOA's institutional architecture.

4.5 Period 5: Maximum Pressure and Military Escalation (2017–2026)

President Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and his "maximum pressure" campaign of sanctions and threats initiated a new period of confrontation (Dehnavi, 2024b). As Papyan (2025) argues, US policy toward Iran is anchored in five interlinked pillars: military strategy, sanctions, energy concerns, ideological framing, and think tank influence. Trump's approach exemplified this framework, with sanctions as the dominant tool.

Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) show that Trump's securitization of Iran was comprehensive, spanning five of six security sectors. He portrayed Iran as a threat to individual liberties, the liberal international order, and regional stability. He also drew a distinction between the Iranian government and people, claiming that Iranian leaders had abandoned their citizens and that the people were victims of their government's policies.

The 2025–2026 military confrontation escalated tensions to their highest level since 1979. In June 2025, US and Israeli forces struck Iranian nuclear facilities at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan (Ahmadzada, 2025; Papyan, 2025). Iran responded with ballistic missile attacks on American bases in Qatar. This "Twelve-Day War" significantly degraded Iran's nuclear capabilities but did not eliminate them (Ahmadzada, 2025).

In August 2025, the E3 countries (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) activated the "snapback" mechanism under UN Security Council Resolution 2231, reinstating sanctions. This step was taken in response to Iran's non-compliance with its JCPOA commitments. On October 18, 2025, designated as Termination Day, the Iranian government officially declared the JCPOA terminated and announced its intention to continue its nuclear program without restrictions. Russia and China opposed this decision, accusing the US and European countries of "unilateral pressure." The Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that "it is time to negotiate a new, fair agreement that takes into account the interests of all parties, rather than restoring the JCPOA" (Ahmadzada, 2025).

In September 2025, Iran and Russia signed a $25 billion agreement to build nuclear reactors at the Sirik port. This significantly enhanced Iran's ability to continue its nuclear program independently and increased Russia's influence in the Middle East. This development raised new concerns for the US and Western countries, as Iran could now develop its nuclear program without relying on Western sanctions relief (Ahmadzada, 2025).

Throughout the crisis, backchannel diplomacy continued. Oman, Qatar, and Pakistan facilitated communication between Washington and Tehran (Al-Mujaini & Al-Hijji, 2026; Qodirjonov & Voxidjonov, 2026). Al-Mujaini and Al-Hijji (2026) identify four pillars of Omani soft power: strategic neutrality, cultural diplomacy based on Ibadi traditions, geographic advantage via the Strait of Hormuz, and an established history of backchannel facilitation. Qodirjonov and Voxidjonov (2026) detail the secret negotiations mediated by Pakistan and Qatar, including the US 9-point and Iranian 14-point proposals.

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As Ahmadzada (2025) observes, the conflict revealed the complex interplay of globalization, cybersecurity, and geopolitics. Iran's cyber capabilities have grown, and cybersecurity has become a new strategic domain. The decline of American hegemony has created space for Chinese and Russian mediation, as China tabled a five-point plan to revive the JCPOA in March 2025 (Ahmadzada, 2025).

The Trump administration's renewed maximum pressure campaign, reinstated in February 2025, combined with the military strikes, has created a tense equilibrium. Diplomacy has not ceased—Omani mediation continues, and European powers have pursued new talks with Iran—but the prospect of renewed military escalation remains high (Qodirjonov & Voxidjonov, 2026).

Key structural factors: US domestic politics (Trump-Biden); Iranian hardliner response; regional realignments (the Abraham Accords, Saudi-Iran détente); great power competition (China-Russia); and institutional erosion (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2024a; Papyan, 2025).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Dialectic of Diplomacy and Confrontation

The five periods analyzed above reveal a consistent pattern: episodes of diplomatic progress are repeatedly undermined by structural factors that pull the relationship back toward confrontation. This dialectic—the coexistence and interaction of opposing tendencies—is the defining feature of US-Iran relations (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

Several structural factors recur across the periods:

Domestic political polarization. In both the US and Iran, domestic politics have consistently constrained diplomatic possibilities. US presidents have faced congressional opposition to engagement, while Iranian reformers have been constrained by hardline institutions. The JCPOA, the most significant diplomatic achievement, was undone by US domestic opposition and Iranian hardliner suspicion (Arslanian, 2023; Shestakova, 2025).

Ideological rigidity. The US framing of Iran as an existential threat—a "rogue state" or "axis of evil" member—has limited the space for diplomacy. Mohammadyari and colleagues (2025) show that 83.77% of US presidential representations of Iran from 1979 to 2021 were securitizing. Iran's revolutionary ideology, with its anti-American and anti-Western orientation, has similarly constrained Tehran's flexibility (Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023).

Regional proxy warfare. Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis has been a persistent source of US concern. As Papyan (2025) notes, Washington views Iranian proxies as threats to Gulf stability. Conversely, Iran views US military presence and alliances with Gulf states and Israel as threats to its security (Dehnavi & Safavipour, 2024).

Historical grievances. The 1953 coup, the 1979 hostage crisis, and subsequent incidents have created deep mutual mistrust. Iranian leaders invoke 1953 to caution against trusting American promises, while US leaders cite the hostage crisis as evidence of Iranian untrustworthiness. This historical baggage repeatedly undermines diplomatic initiatives (Abrahamian, 2013; Stachoń, 2022).

5.2 Two-Level Game Analysis

Robert Putnam's "two-level game" theory offers a useful lens for understanding why diplomatic breakthroughs between the US and Iran have repeatedly failed to last. The theory suggests that leaders must negotiate simultaneously on two levels: internationally with their counterparts, and domestically with their own political audiences. When these two levels come into conflict, domestic pressures usually win.

This study uses Robert Putnam's (1988) "two-level game" theory. Putnam's idea is that leaders in international negotiations play on two levels at the same time. The central rule of this framework is that an international deal can fail even if the negotiators themselves reach an agreement, provided the

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domestic audience does not approve. The leader has to sell the deal at home (Level II) as well as abroad (Level I). In adversarial bilateral environments, the domestic "win-set"—the size of acceptable agreements to domestic constituencies—is often narrowed significantly by domestic veto players, political polarization, and institutional resistance, making lasting cross-border institutionalization remarkably fragile.

A different outcome emerged during the Obama-Rouhani era. At the international level, the two sides reached the JCPOA, a carefully designed agreement that temporarily succeeded. Yet this success was fragile. In the United States, congressional opposition to the deal was fierce, and in Iran, hardliners viewed the agreement with deep suspicion. This domestic opposition ultimately made the agreement vulnerable to political change.

The structural collapse of this framework came in 2018, when President Trump withdrew the United States from the JCPOA. This decision was driven primarily by Level II domestic political considerations—Trump's base strongly opposed the deal. In Iran, the withdrawal immediately vindicated and strengthened hardliners while crippling the reformers, leading to a complete abandonment of reciprocal compliance.

This consistent pattern demonstrates that in US-Iran relations, domestic politics have historically prevailed over international diplomacy. US presidents have been continuously constrained by Congress and interest groups, while Iranian reformers have been limited by the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and hardline factions who view any compromise with the West as an existential threat.

5.3 The Limits of Liberal Institutionalism

The JCPOA was a clear example of liberal institutionalism—an agreement based on the theory that institutions can foster cooperation, build trust, ensure long-term stability, and encourage compliance between states. In practice, however, each of these assumptions proved exceptionally fragile when confronted with structural polarization:

Trust Building: The agreement did temporarily increase institutional predictability between 2015 and 2018, but this trust was completely dismantled following the unilateral US withdrawal.

Long-term Stability: The formal deal lasted less than three years in full operation, falling far short of its intended decades-long lifecycle.

Compliance Mechanisms: The United States itself withdrew despite verified Iranian compliance, illustrating that powerful states can abandon institutional bounds when domestic political games override international costs.

Conflict Prevention: Rather than creating a spillover effect of regional peace, the institutional erosion and eventual collapse of the JCPOA contributed directly to the intense military escalation of 2025–2026.

Ultimately, the case of the JCPOA highlights the deep structural limits of liberal institutionalism within adversarial environments. When historical mistrust is profound and international treaties are not legally locked into domestic legislative structures, institutions remain highly vulnerable to sudden shifts in domestic political power.

5.4 The Future of the US-Iran Dialectic

The current situation—maximum pressure combined with military strikes on one hand, and continuing backchannel diplomacy on the other—represents the latest iteration of the US-Iran dialectic. The 2025 events show that restoring the JCPOA in its original form is no longer realistic. Rather than restoring the JCPOA, the question is now about negotiating a new, comprehensive agreement that takes into account the interests of all parties. This new agreement would need to address Iran's nuclear program, ballistic missiles, regional activities, and sanctions relief. However, mistrust between the US

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and Iran, domestic political constraints, and regional conflicts make any new agreement extremely difficult.

Several scenarios are possible:

Escalation: Renewed military strikes or Iranian nuclear breakout could trigger a wider war. Ahmadzada (2025) warns that Iran still retains the scientific-technical capacity to develop a nuclear arsenal.

Diplomatic breakthrough: A new agreement, possibly facilitated by Oman, Qatar, or China, could replace the JCPOA. Shestakova (2025) outlines three scenarios: restoration of the JCPOA, partial revision, or failure.

Frozen conflict: The current equilibrium—limited military strikes, sanctions, and backchannel diplomacy—could continue indefinitely, with periodic flare-ups (Qodirjonov & Voxidjonov, 2026).

The trajectory will depend on structural factors: US domestic politics, Iranian leadership decisions, regional dynamics (particularly Israeli and Gulf state positions), and great power competition (Papyan, 2025; Ahmadzada, 2025).

6. Counterarguments and rebuttals

6.1 The Realist Objection

The argument. A realist critic might argue that US-Iran relations are primarily driven by material factors: energy security, military capabilities, and geopolitical interests. The pattern of diplomacy and confrontation reflects rational calculations of national interest, not ideological rigidity or historical grievance. The 2025 strikes, from this perspective, were a strategic response to Iran's nuclear progress, not an expression of anti-Iranian ideology (Dehnavi & Fiedler, 2024a).

Rebuttal. Material factors are certainly significant, but they cannot explain why diplomatic initiatives have repeatedly failed to produce lasting agreements. The JCPOA was a rational agreement that served US and Iranian interests—it constrained Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief—yet it was undone by domestic political opposition and ideological framing (Arslanian, 2023). The persistence of the "rogue state" narrative, even when Iran was in compliance with the JCPOA, demonstrates that material factors alone are insufficient explanations (Mohammadyari et al., 2025).

6.2 The Domestic Politics Objection

The argument. A critic might argue that US-Iran relations are primarily shaped by domestic politics in each country, and that the pattern of diplomacy and confrontation reflects electoral cycles, factional struggles, and institutional rivalries. In the US, Republican and Democratic administrations have pursued divergent approaches, while in Iran, reformists and conservatives have competed for influence (Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023).

Rebuttal. Domestic politics are indeed crucial, but they are themselves shaped by ideology and historical grievance. The "axis of evil" framing was not merely a tactical political choice—it reflected a deeper ideological commitment to portraying Iran as an existential threat (Dehnavi, 2024b). Similarly, Iranian hardliners are not simply opportunists; they are ideologically committed to resistance against US influence (Pashayi & Kodaman, 2023). The structural factors identified in this study—ideology, historical grievance, proxy conflicts—are not reducible to domestic politics.

6.3 The Iran Exceptionalism Objection

The argument. Some critics might argue that Iran is genuinely exceptional in its behavior—its support for terrorism, its anti-Semitism, its pursuit of nuclear weapons—and that US policy should reflect this reality. The pattern of diplomacy and confrontation, from this perspective, reflects Iran's behavior, not US policy (Papyan, 2025).

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Rebuttal. Iran's behavior is certainly concerning, but it is not historically unique. Other states have pursued nuclear programs, supported proxies, and engaged in hostile rhetoric. The difference is that US-Iran relations are burdened by a history of mutual trauma—the 1953 coup, the 1979 hostage crisis—that makes dialogue exceptionally difficult (Abrahamian, 2013). Recognizing this historical dimension does not excuse Iranian behavior; it explains why engagement has been so challenging and why the dialectic persists (Stachoń, 2022).

7. Conclusion

This study has examined the pattern of diplomacy and confrontation in US-Iran relations from 1979 to 2026. Looking across five historical periods, a consistent pattern emerges: periods of diplomatic progress are repeatedly undermined by deeper structural forces. These include political divisions within each country, rigid ideological positions, regional conflicts fought through proxies, and a deep mutual mistrust rooted in past grievances. The analysis leads to three main conclusions.

First, diplomatic failures between the United States and Iran are not mainly caused by disagreements over material interests or ideological differences. Rather, they come from the way domestic political pressures consistently override international negotiations. The 2015 nuclear deal is the clearest example of this. Despite its careful design and strong verification mechanisms, it collapsed because it could not survive political opposition within both the United States and Iran.

Second, the military confrontation of 2025–2026, though more intense than anything seen before, is not a break from history. It fits the same repeating pattern. The strange coexistence of military strikes and secret diplomacy—with Oman, Qatar, and Pakistan continuing to mediate even as bombs fell—captures the central tension of this relationship. Both sides need each other to manage regional security and avoid disaster. Yet both are trapped by their own domestic politics, ideologies, and historical grievances, making a lasting settlement extremely difficult.

Third, if the analysis presented here is correct, then piecemeal fixes will not be enough. What is needed is more fundamental change. Diplomatic agreements must be built in ways that can survive changes in government. This means securing broader political support and creating clear mechanisms for resolving disputes when they arise. The role of think tanks and ideological narratives also needs attention. These institutions have narrowed the range of acceptable policy options, making diplomacy look naive and confrontation look necessary. Challenging these narratives is essential if different approaches are to become thinkable.

The pattern of the past four decades may feel inevitable, but it is not. It can be broken. But breaking it requires sustained political will, careful institutional design, and a willingness to move beyond the grievances that have shaped this relationship for so long. Future research could usefully test these findings through quantitative measures, comparative studies with other adversarial relationships, or by examining how new technologies like cyber capabilities and artificial intelligence might reshape the dynamics of diplomacy and confrontation in the years ahead.

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