

## Securitizing The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Comparative Analysis Of Us Foreign Policy Under Obama, Trump And Biden (2015-2022)

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**Abstract:** Based on the Copenhagen school of thought, the securitization theory is applied to examine the framing of the Iranian nuclear deal as a security threat to the United States (US). The paper examines the transition from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to the Maximum Pressure Campaign under the Trump administration and the subsequent re-engagement efforts by the Biden administration. The research utilizes the theoretical framework of securitization to understand the securitizing actors, referent subjects, referent objects, audience, and context involved in the securitization process of the Iran nuclear deal. The paper also explores the implications of US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program for global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and its wider impact on US foreign policy in the Middle East. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the complexities and challenges of US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program, which is a key issue in international relations and nuclear non-proliferation efforts.

**Key Words:** Securitization, Desecuritization, Iran Nuclear Deal, US Foreign Policy

### Introduction

The diplomatic relations between the US and Iran have traversed a labyrinthine path, marked by a plethora of challenges and opportunities. The contentious issue of Iran's nuclear program, which has sparked waves of international concern, lies at the core of their intricate relationship. The US has expressed concerns about the potential for Iran to build nuclear weapons and has over the years implemented a variety of initiatives to address this urgent matter. One

of the most significant diplomatic endeavours to tackle Iran's nuclear program was the inception of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. The accord, which the US and other major international countries were a part of, sought to restrict Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for the relaxation of economic sanctions. However, the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, citing concerns about Iran's non-nuclear activities, and implemented a

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maximum pressure campaign, which involved imposing strict economic sanctions on Iran. The Biden administration has since re-engaged in talks with Iran regarding the JCPOA, and in November 2021, a new agreement was reached. This renewed focus on diplomacy and re-engagement with Iran highlights the ongoing challenges and complexities of US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program.

The US administrations of Obama and Trump developed policies to thwart Iran's objectives and alter its regional behaviour. Both administrations used a combination of incentives and penalties, but Trump's approach was more aggressive, while Obama's was more conciliatory. However, both administrations shared the same strategic thinking of avoiding a military solution and pursuing a "pressure and engagement" strategy to address Iran's nuclear and missile programs. Obama's approach involved a combination of diplomatic, political, and economic pressures, while Trump's approach focused on maximum pressure to force Iran to negotiate. Despite variations in tactics, the overall objectives of American policy towards Iran have remained constant. Achieving a genuine *détente* with Iran has been hampered by regional allies' attitudes, particularly those of Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as domestic political constraints and considerations. Therefore, the foreign policy of the US's previous administrations towards Iran does not signal a change from the US's established approach to Iran.

In recent years, the United States' foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program has represented a fundamental shift, marked by the transition from the Iran Nuclear Deal to the implementation of the Maximum Pressure Campaign. To comprehensively understand the rationale behind these policy changes and their implications, it is essential to analyze them

within a theoretical framework that sheds light on the securitization and de-securitization processes. This research area aims to provide an overview of US foreign policy (2015-2022) towards Iran's nuclear program, from the negotiation of the JCPOA to the maximum pressure campaign and the Biden administration's re-engagement efforts. It will examine the benefits and criticisms of the JCPOA, the impact of the maximum pressure campaign, and the prospects for future cooperation on Iran's nuclear program. Additionally, the research area will explore the implications of US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program for global nuclear non-proliferation efforts, as well as the wider implications for US foreign policy in the Middle East. The methodology to carry out the above research would involve conducting a comprehensive literature review of academic and policy sources related to US foreign policy towards Iran's nuclear program. The research aims to identify in what way did the foreign policy of President Obama, Trump and Biden shape the process of securitization and de-securitization of the Iranian nuclear program?

### **Theoretical Framework**

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Over the past few decades, the field of International Relations (IR) has experienced a notable evolution with the emergence of novel theoretical frameworks. These frameworks have broadened the scope of studying state relationships and behaviours beyond the conventional lenses of realism and liberalism. By offering fresh perspectives and insights, these new frameworks delve into the intricate nature of international politics, questioning established assumptions and presenting alternative viewpoints that enhance our understanding of global affairs.

In the 1990s, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies developed the theoretical framework for Securitization. In IR, securitization is the elevation of a political issue into a matter of security. Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde sought to challenge the existing traditional approach to security by focusing on how security issues are socially constructed rather than being fixed and objective. In 1998, Buzan along with de Wilde and Waever published 'Security: A New Framework for Analysis' to widen and deepen the concept of security by shifting the focus to another level of analysis and developing the concepts of

securitization and desecuritization (Buzan, Wæver, de Wilde, 1998). Since the 1990s, the securitization theory has become a significant approach in security studies. The core idea behind securitization theory is that security is not an inherent quality of certain events or objects but is rather a process that occurs when a particular issue is constructed as an existential threat. The theory of securitization emphasizes the role of speech acts and discursive practices in transforming a non-security issue into a security issue, thereby justifying exceptional policies and measures.

**Figure 1**

*The Process of Securitization*

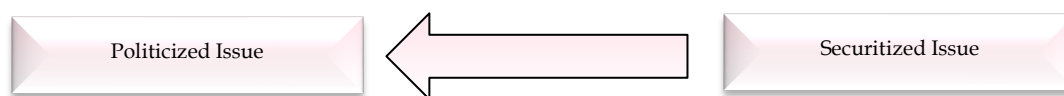


Desecuritization is the conceptual twin of securitization. Buzan, de Wilde and Waever have explained de-securitization as moving the securitized issues back into the normal sphere of politics. An issue is securitized by

the actor for different reasons, Atland states that the process of de-securitization occurs when a securitized threat is weakened or disappears to the extent that it is no longer taken as an existential threat.

**Figure 2**

*The Process of Desecuritization*



Balzacq (2011) in his article 'Securitization revisited: theory and cases' challenged the traditional focus on military threats and proposed a modern approach to security studies by including new subjects such as religion, energy, environment, identity, cybersecurity and global health. He gave key concepts for securitization theory including the securitizing actors, the referent subjects, the referent object, the audience and the context and adoption of

distinctive policies (Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016). The *Securitizing actors* are the actors who frame and articulate the issue as a security threat. In the case of US foreign policy against the Iran nuclear deal, the securitizing actors would include key government officials, policymakers, and influential interest groups who play a significant role in shaping the discourse around the nuclear program of Iran. The *referent subjects* are the entities that are

portrayed or securitized as being in need of protection. In this context, the US, its allies in the Middle East and global stability are the referent subjects. The discourse of securitization may emphasize the potential risks posed by the nuclear program of Iran to these referent subjects. The *referent object* is the problem or issue that is being securitized. In this case, Iran's nuclear program is presented as a threat by the securitizing actor to justify the need for extraordinary measures to mitigate or counter this threat. The *audience* refers to the target of the securitizing discourse, whose support and perceptions are crucial for the success of the securitization process. In the case of US foreign policy options against the Iran nuclear deal, the audience would include international allies, domestic

constituencies and the broader global community. The *context and adoption of distinctive policies* consider the broader social, political and historic context within which the securitization process unfolds. In the case of the Iran nuclear deal, this aspect analyzes the withdrawal of the US from the agreement and subsequent implementation of a maximum pressure campaign involving sanctions or other coercive measures against Iran. By employing the securitization theory and its core concepts, we can analyze how the securitizing actors framed the nuclear program of Iran as a security threat. This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens to understand the dynamics of the US foreign policy against the Iran nuclear deal within a securitization framework.

**Table 1**

*Application of the Securitization Theory to the Iran Nuclear Deal*

<b>Key Concepts</b>	<b>Application to the Iran Nuclear Deal</b>
Securitizing actors	Key government officials, policymakers, and influential interest groups shaping the discourse on Iran's nuclear program
Referent subjects	The US, its allies in the Middle East, and global stability
Referent object	Iran's nuclear program presented as a threat to justify the need for extraordinary measures
Audience	International allies, domestic constituencies, and the broader global community
Context and adoption of distinctive policies	Analysis of the US withdrawal from the agreement and subsequent implementation of the maximum pressure campaign

**US Foreign Policy towards Iran Nuclear Deal under Obama, Trump and Biden Era**

Iran's nuclear program started in the 1950s with the assistance of Western nations, notably the US as part of the "Atoms for Peace" programme. The initial focus of Iran was on developing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes including medical research and electricity generation. The

program gained momentum during the rule of Shah Mohammed Pahlavi, who envisioned Iran as a major player in nuclear technology. Following the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in the wake of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the nuclear program faced setbacks and disruptions. The new Islamic regime has mixed views on nuclear energy but the 1980-1988 period of the Iran-Iraq war further impeded progress in the

nuclear sector. During the 1980s and 1990s, Iran began seeking assistance from other countries, primarily China and Russia to revive its nuclear program. However, concerns began to emerge internationally about Iran's nuclear ambitions, amid suspicions that it was covertly pursuing nuclear weapons capabilities ("North Korea's Missile and Nuclear Programme," [2019](#)). After the 9/11 attacks, the US foreign policy focused on the Global War on Terror and the rogue states that would assist these terrorists to pose a threat to the national security of the US. In 2002, a group of Iranian dissidents revealed the existence of a secret nuclear facility at Natanz and a heavy-water production plant at Arak. This revelation raised global concerns about Iran's nuclear intentions. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) launched an investigation, leading to increased scrutiny of Iran's nuclear activities. As international pressure mounted, Iran engaged in negotiations with the P5+1 countries (the United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany) to address concerns about its nuclear program.

Under the administrations of President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden, the United States' foreign policy towards the Iran Nuclear Deal has experienced significant shifts. Here is a detailed analysis of each administration's approach:

### **Obama's Foreign Policy Era: Iran and P5+1 Nuclear Deal**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was officially announced in Vienna on July 14, 2015, was the result of a diplomatic approach taken by the Obama administration towards Iran's nuclear programme. A historic nuclear agreement between Iran and six other powerful nations lifts sanctions in return for limits on Iran's nuclear programme. After a thirteen-year standoff, the deal was reached between Iran

and P5+1 countries and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, JCPOA was adopted unanimously by the Security Council and was considered legally binding on the seven countries that negotiated the deal. The JCPOA imposed strict limits on uranium enrichment in Iran, implemented enhanced monitoring mechanisms and reduced its stockpiles of enriched uranium (Robinson, [2022](#)). Iran and the P5+1 deal were defined to be a major breakthrough in world politics. A majority of states hailed the interim agreement as a positive move for promoting peace and stability in the Middle East region. The agreement was to end Iran's political estrangement and isolation in the world.

Under the Obama administration, the deal was considered to be a success for Iranian diplomacy that revived the legitimacy of the country in global politics. Iran made major concessions to secure the deal by agreeing to conditions including not producing highly enriched uranium, giving up 98% of its existing uranium stockpile, and removing two-thirds of its centrifuge etc. The major powers had economic interests to promote Iran and viewed Iran's cooperation as indispensable in stabilizing the Middle East. The Iranian Objective to sign the Nuclear deal was first to recognize its right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to give the country capability to develop nuclear power in future. Secondly, to lift the financial, economic or trade sanctions to gain access to around \$100 billion in frozen assets. Iran wanted to restore its oil export that had been slashed by two-thirds and receive major inflows of technology and investment, especially in the gas and oil sector. Thirdly, to lift the missile and arms embargoes within a short time and lastly restore its status as a normal state to legitimize its national interests (Mousavian & Mousavian, [2018](#)).

## **Trump's Foreign Policy Era: Maximum Pressure Campaign**

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During the era of Trump's foreign policy, the "Maximum Pressure Campaign" took centre stage. The Trump administration's approach to the Iran Nuclear Deal was marked by a significant departure from the multilateral diplomacy and engagement pursued by the preceding Obama administration. In January 2017, Trump took office and he repeatedly labelled the deal as the 'worst deal ever negotiated' and accused Iran of not living up to the spirit of the nuclear agreement (Lantis, [2019](#)). Trump criticized the deal for not including the ballistic missile program of Iran and its support of groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon. He further quoted the deal as a political and economic lifeline for the Iranian dictatorship. In May 2018, the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed economic sanctions on Iran. This move by Trump signalled his approach of "America First" policy to international agreements. This also led him to withdraw the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Paris climate accord. The Trump administration pursued a maximum pressure policy on Iran, seeking to isolate the country diplomatically and economically. As part of the maximum pressure campaign, the US announced additional sanctions designed to cripple the Iranian economy, ended the waivers that allowed some countries to purchase Iranian oil, designated the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist group, and even deployed B-52 bombers to the region to send a clear message to the Iranian regime to not challenge the US. The US administration also sought to form a united front with regional allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia against the regional influence of Iran. The Trump administration attempted to invoke a provision within the JCPOA that allowed for the reapplication of UN

sanctions if Iran violated the terms of the agreement. However, this move faced opposition from other signatories, including European countries, who argued that the United States had withdrawn from the deal and, therefore, no longer had the authority to initiate the "snapback" mechanism. Throughout his presidency, President Trump emphasized the need for a new and improved deal with Iran (Pop, [2020](#)). The administration laid out several conditions for any future agreement, including the permanent restriction of Iran's nuclear program, addressing its ballistic missile program, and curbing its regional influence. However, negotiations for a new deal did not materialize during Trump's tenure.

## **Biden's Foreign Policy Era: Re-engagement Efforts**

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The Iran Nuclear Deal, officially known as JCPOA has been a focal point of the Biden administration's foreign policy approach towards Iran. In January 2021, Biden took office and expressed his intention to explore possibilities for a return to the JCPOA and re-engage with Iran. The US administration engaged in indirect talks with Iran to revive the JCPOA which was abandoned by the US under the Trump administration in 2018. The negotiations to achieve this have taken place indirectly, with diplomats from the United States, Iran, and other signatories of the deal (China, France, Germany, Russia, and the UK) meeting in Vienna. The discussions aim to address the steps needed for the United States to lift sanctions and for Iran to return to its nuclear commitments. The negotiations in Vienna have faced challenges and delays, primarily due to the complexities surrounding the sequencing of actions and the extent of sanctions relief. The United States has called for Iran to return to full compliance with its nuclear obligations before lifting sanctions, while Iran insists on receiving sanctions relief first. Moreover,

Iran insisted that the Biden administration guarantee that no future leader can withdraw from the deal. These divergent positions are continually postponing any settlement and have made it difficult to find a mutually agreed-upon pathway to revive the JCPOA (Maloney, 2023).

The Biden administration faces a balancing act in its approach to the Iran Nuclear Deal. On one hand, there is a desire to restore the

agreement, which is seen as a diplomatic achievement that can potentially prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the administration recognizes the concerns raised by critics and seeks to address them through follow-on agreements and negotiations. This approach attempts to strike a balance between reestablishing the JCPOA and addressing broader security concerns.

**Table 2**

*Comparative analysis of US foreign policy towards the Iran Nuclear deal*

Category	Obama Era	Trump Era	Biden Era
Approach	Diplomatic engagement	Maximum Pressure Campaign	Re-engagement efforts
Securitization	Limited Securitization efforts	Emphasis on maximum pressure	Shifts towards de securitization
Key Actions	- Announcement and implementation of the JCPOA - the imposition of sanctions relief	- Withdrawal from the JCPOA - reimposition of economic sanctions	- Indirect talks to revive the JCPOA - aim to restore the agreement
Objectives	- Promote peace and stability in the Middle East	Pursue an "America First" policy	- Restore the JCPOA as a diplomatic achievement - Prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons
Challenges and Opposition	Criticisms and opposition from US politicians	- Opposition from European countries - Challenges in invoking the 'snapback' mechanism	- Divergent positions on sequencing of actions and sanctions belief

### **Challenges and Future of US-Iran Relations**

The nuclear issue remains a significant challenge in the US-Iran relationship. While

the JCPOA was a significant diplomatic achievement, its future is uncertain. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA under the Trump administration, followed by Iran's partial non-compliance, has strained the

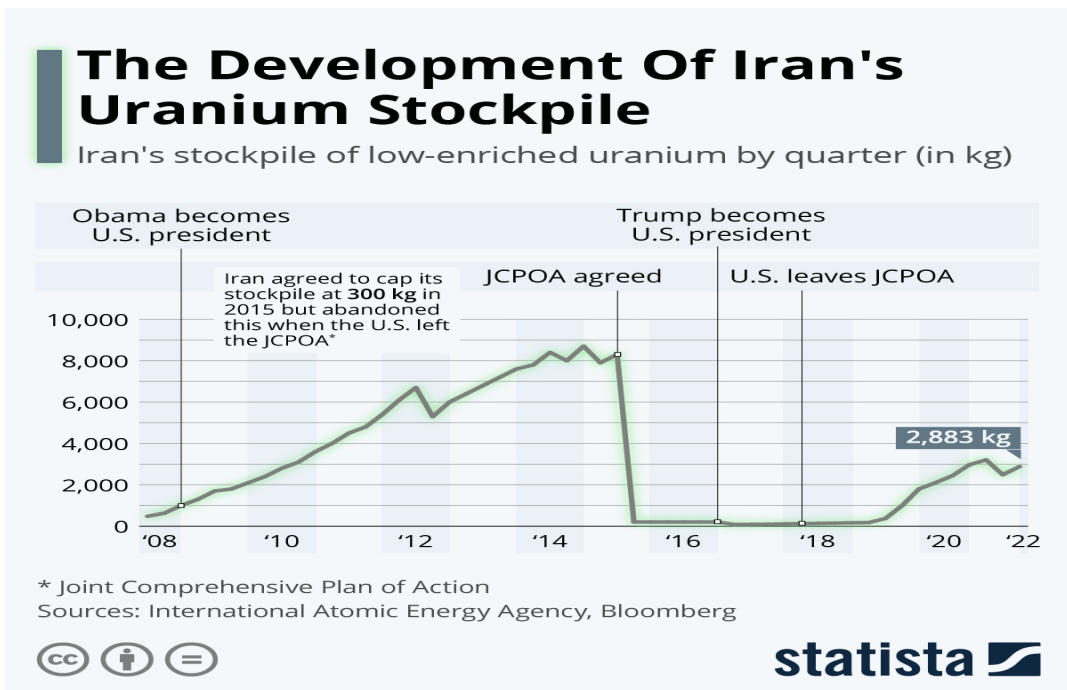
agreement. Restoring and preserving the JCPOA, including addressing concerns and building mutual trust, will be crucial for the future of US-Iran relations.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US would like to tap Iran for oil deliveries by placing the deal back on the table after embargoing Russian oil. The IAEA has reported a significant growth in the nuclear stockpiles of Uranium after the limit of 300 kg as agreed in the JCPOA deal which was

abandoned by the Trump administration. Iran has insisted that the development of the nuclear program is purely for peaceful purposes. The level of uranium has surpassed ten times the agreed limit in the 2015 JCPOA. The IAEA has criticized the explanations of Iran for storing nuclear material at undeclared sites. The chart below illustrates Iran's stockpile of uranium which declined drastically with the 2015 agreement of JCPOA, from 8300 kg to 200 kg (Buchholz, 2022).

**Figure 3**

*Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium by quarter*



The Iran Nuclear program has remained a looming threat to Washington. In January 2023, the UN nuclear watchdog, IAEA, found traces of uranium enriched to 83.7 per cent which is very close to weapons-grade purity (Bell & Gritten, 2023). The list of consequences of the US withdrawal is not complete, it goes on. For instance, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin

Salman has pledged that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb, then they could do the same. Therefore, the JCPOA provided a perfect opportunity to contain nuclear proliferation in the region while simultaneously IAEA could monitor the nuclear activities of Iran. But the US simply did not take advantage of this opportunity.



## Implications of US Foreign Policy in the Middle East

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The implications of US foreign policy in the Middle East are multifaceted and have far-reaching consequences for the region. The policies implemented by the West towards Iran, particularly in the context of the nuclear program (JCPOA) have serious implications for regional geopolitics. Here are some key implications:

Firstly, the US Foreign Policy decisions in the Middle East have significant implications for regional stability and security. By propagating the idea that Iran is a threat, Israel has aligned itself with countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The US has a major role in ensuring the security of its allies in the region such as the Gulf states and Israel. The US arms sales, military presence and security partnerships have influenced the deterrence and balance of power in the region (BALKAN-ŞAHİN, 2020). Conversely, disengagement or abrupt policy changes can lead to increased instability and regional power shifts. In the case of the Iran nuclear deal, the US foreign policy has implications for the perceptions of the US reliability and commitment as an international actor and negotiating partner.

Secondly, the Middle East is a complex web of geopolitical conflicts and rivalries, and the US foreign policy has a considerable impact on these dynamics. The US actions and alliances have shaped the regional balance of power. Furthermore, the US has been involved in managing regional crises such as the Iran-Saudi rivalry, the Iran-Palestine conflict and the fight against terrorism. With the US withdrawal from the deal, Iran resorted to expanding its ties with Russia and China. The long-term economic, political and social agreement known as the '25-year Cooperation Program' between Iran and China would facilitate hundreds of billions of dollars of investment in the economy of Iran (Vaisi, 2022). Iran's new policy of pivoting to the East has gained the

credibility to combat the US hostilities and hegemony in the region.

Thirdly, the Middle East region has remained the focal point in the US-led global war against terrorism. The US foreign policy had implications for counterterrorism efforts in the region including intelligence sharing, military operations and diplomatic engagement. The US has targeted terrorist organizations such as ISIS, and Al-Qaeda through drone strikes, military interventions and support for local allies. However, these actions have also raised concerns about radicalization, civilian casualties, and the long-term effectiveness of military-centric approaches.

Fourthly, the US foreign policy has influenced the social and political dynamics in the Middle East. The US interventions in internal affairs or support for authoritarian regimes have generated both resentment and support among the population. The Pro-democracy movements such as the Arab Spring have called for more democratic governance and criticised the involvement of the US in the region. The US policy choices regarding democracy promotion, human rights, and engagement with civil society have shaped the perceptions of the US among the Middle East people.

Lastly, the Middle East is the hub for global energy markets. The US foreign policy in the region has implications for economic interests and energy security. The stable supply of Middle East oil and gas is vital for the global economy, and the US sought to protect its economic interests by ensuring access to energy resources. The energy-related decisions such as sanctions on Iran can have ripple effects on the economic stability and global energy markets.

## Conclusion

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The Iran nuclear deal has been a subject of controversy and has faced challenges since its inception, with the US withdrawing from

the agreement in 2018, and Iran taking steps to exceed its nuclear enrichment limits. The application of securitization theory helps reflect an understanding of how certain issues become securitized and are framed as threats to national security. By applying the securitization theory, we can gain insight into different foreign policy approaches taken by the Obama, Trump and Biden administrations towards the Iran nuclear deal. The securitization of the Iranian nuclear program was not as pronounced in Obama's administration, however, it was still framed as a potential threat to global non-proliferation efforts and regional stability. The negotiations leading up to JCPOA were based on the idea that amicable means of diplomacy are the best way to address the issue. While the securitization of the Iran nuclear deal took a different turn during the Trump era. The Trump administration framed the issue as a direct threat to the US national security interest and its allies in the region. This

securitization of this issue led to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the exertion of maximum pressure to isolate Iran. Whereas, the Biden administration reflects a reversion of the securitization process initiated in the Obama era. The Biden administration has expressed a willingness to return and take steps to re-engage with Iran regarding JCPOA to revive it. The intention behind this action is to address concerns and restore diplomatic efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, thereby potentially leading to a de-escalation and de-securitization of the Iranian nuclear program. Biden's foreign policy seeks to rebuild international consensus, promote regional stability and alleviate tensions. The future of US-Iran relations remains uncertain. Restoring and preserving the JCPOA, addressing broader security concerns, and building mutual trust is crucial for the future of the relationship.

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