

LEADERSHIP TRAITS AND FOREIGN POLICY CHANGE: AN ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENT OBAMA'S ROLE IN NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY WITH IRAN

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Submission date: 02/07/2023 Acceptance date: 21/09/2023 Publication date: 01/10/2023

Abstract:

This article examines the role that decision-makers can play in effecting a substantial change in a state's foreign policy. Drawing on Charles Hermann's concept of leader-driven change, which emphasizes the determined efforts of a political leader to drive policy transformation, this study focuses on the case of President Barack Obama and the shift in US foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), specifically regarding engagement and diplomacy in addressing the nuclear program. The analysis reveals that President Obama emerged as the central agent of change in shaping the US approach. His leadership traits elucidate his unwavering commitment and perseverance in pursuing a diplomatic resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue rather than resorting to military intervention. This ultimately led to the culmination of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Nuclear Deal. The JCPOA, signed by the US and five other major world powers, aimed to curtail Iran's nuclear weapons program and prevent the development of nuclear weapons. President Obama's conviction that previous policies had failed to achieve a peaceful solution to the Iranian nuclear issue served as the driving force behind his pursuit of an alternative direction. The paper finally assesses Obama's determination to explore diplomatic avenues that underscored his belief in the potential for negotiation and dialogue to yield fruitful outcomes. This confirms the transformative impact a decision-maker can have in shaping a country's approach to critical international issues.

Key words:

US Foreign policy change, the JCPOA, decision-maker, Barak Obama, Iran, nuclear program

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Introduction:

This article focuses on examining how a political leader can initiate a substantial change in foreign policy. As a case study, it specifically investigates President Obama's engagement policy towards Iran's nuclear program. The research hypothesis is that President Obama was the main agent of foreign policy change toward Iran and his leadership traits were major factors that helped him solve the nuclear standoff peacefully without resort to the use of force.

The descriptive and qualitative research methods have been used. Studying American-Iranian relations requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account both historical and political factors of the relationship in order to make a thorough description and analysis of the relationship as far as the nuclear program is concerned. The qualitative research method has been employed in content analysis of official documents such as agreements, speeches, and policy statements from both the U.S. and Iran; these sources could highlight the official positions, goals, and strategies of each country.

The article's primary objective is to understand the diplomatic approach taken by the Obama administration in dealing with Iran's nuclear program by examining the negotiation strategies, diplomatic channels used, and the overall framework of engagement with Iran. Analyzing Obama's nuclear diplomacy with Iran provides an opportunity to identify lessons for future diplomatic engagements and negotiations. The examination of the successes, failures, and challenges from the Obama administration's diplomatic process can inform and shape future strategies in dealing with comparable complex international issues.

Theoretical Framework

The field of International Relations (IR) has witnessed the emergence of a distinct area of research known as Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), encompassing two primary subfields: international politics and foreign policy. Foreign policy specifically examines the external behaviors of governments, with a particular emphasis on their authorized representatives, who act on behalf of states within the international system¹. Historically, studies on foreign policy have predominantly focused on continuity and stability, paying limited attention to the phenomenon of change².

However, since the end of the Cold War, there has been a notable increase in scholarly interest in foreign policy change. What has become even more significant is the recognition of the pivotal role played by decision-makers in driving such changes. Previously, the role of the

decision maker was often overlooked, as research primarily centered on structural factors influencing change, such as shifts in international or domestic political circumstance³.

Examining change in foreign policy entails a perspective that originates from either the state or individual level. This perspective considers how foreign policymakers redefine the state's interests⁴. Individual leaders' significance in this context has gained prominence after being overlooked in the past. In certain instances, these leaders exert such a commanding influence that specific state foreign policies become indistinguishable from their own persona⁵.

The decision-making approach (DMA) in foreign policy has brought human decisionmakers to the forefront in the realm of IR studies. As elucidated by Snyder and his associates, the state is defined as "its official decision-makers," and its actions are "taken by those acting in the name of the state"⁶. This behaviorist revolution in IR studies emphasizes the significance of the human agent in the foreign policy process, allowing for empirical examination rather than relying solely on the abstract concept of the state. Valerie Hudson commends Snyder's novel perceptions, highlighting the importance of integrating the human element in IR theories and studies to avoid a portrayal of a stagnant world devoid of change, creativity, persuasion, and accountability⁷. The "actor-specific focus" in *Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA)* posits that all interactions between and among nations are rooted in the decisions made by human agents, either individually or collectively⁸.

This article focuses on examining how a political leader can initiate a substantial change in foreign policy. It specifically investigates President Obama's engagement policy towards Iran's nuclear program to reflect on the role of the individual in the analysis by prioritizing it. The article is theoretically grounded in Charles Hermann's concept of leader-driven change which encompasses the determined efforts of an authoritative policy-maker, frequently, the head of government, who imposes his own vision of the basic redirection necessary in foreign policy⁹. The investigation of the impact of individuals on policy change is a growing area of scholarly inquiry, as evidenced by the increasing number of comprehensive studies on leader-driven foreign policy change (Aronoff¹⁰, 2001; Farnham¹¹, 2001; Gustavsson¹², 1999; Jian¹³, 1996; Stein¹⁴, 1994; Ziv¹⁵, 2011, 2013).

Charles Hermann's Paradigm Exemplified by Obama's Leader-Driven Approach:

Charles Hermann, a distinguished scholar and the Brent Scowcroft Chair Emeritus at the Bush School of Government and Public Service,

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

Texas A&M University, is widely recognized as one of the pioneers advocating for a focus on change in the field of foreign policy studies. In his seminal work, Hermann offers a comprehensive definition of foreign policy, describing it as “a goal-oriented or problem-oriented program by authoritative policymakers (or their representatives) directed toward entities outside the policymakers’ political jurisdiction”¹⁶.

Building on this foundation, Hermann further categorizes foreign policy change into levels and agents. The levels of change identified by Hermann encompass adjustment, program, problem-goal, and international orientation changes. These categories provide a framework for understanding the various dimensions of changes in foreign policy. He also identifies different agents of change, including leader-driven change, bureaucratic advocacy, domestic restructuring, and external shocks¹⁷. By conceptualizing foreign policy change in a comprehensive manner, Hermann's framework offers valuable analytical tools for studying and understanding the dynamics of foreign policy transformations.

Program change in foreign policy refers to a strategic plan or program that aims to address a specific problem or achieve a particular goal through actions involving foreign entities¹⁸. Examining Obama's foreign policy shift towards Iran can be characterized as a program change, as the overarching objective of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons remained consistent. However, the change occurred in the approach taken, specifically in the conditions and instruments of statecraft employed. Instead of relying on military force, Obama pursued a diplomatic path to resolving the nuclear issue with Iran. This strategic change demonstrates a change in the program aspect of US foreign policy.

President Obama's altered foreign policy on Iran's nuclear program predominantly stems from his leadership-driven approach. While maintaining the objective of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, he opted for a change in the approach. The signing of the 2015 Nuclear Deal can be attributed to his leadership traits, which significantly contributed to effectively managing the nuclear crisis and achieving a peaceful resolution.

The Dilemma of Iran's Nuclear Program: Negotiations, Sanctions, and International Concerns

The Iranian nuclear program gained great prominence in global affairs following the 2002 revelations by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an exiled Iranian opposition group. The NCRI exposed the construction of two undisclosed nuclear facilities, namely the

Natanz enrichment facility and the Arak heavy-water reactor, which were not reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)¹⁹. According to the terms of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) signed by Iran in 1970, the country is obligated to declare any newly constructed nuclear facilities to the agency²⁰. These disclosures caused great concern in the United States and Western Europe, triggering alarm and raising questions about Iran's intentions and the scope of its nuclear program.

Efforts to resolve the nuclear standoff with Iran through a peaceful solution have led to a protracted path for negotiations. The first round of talks took place in 2003 between the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) and Iran. Subsequently, from 2006 onwards, negotiations were conducted between Iran and the P5+1 (or EU3+3) group. The P5+1 group comprise five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—along with Germany. The United States joined the talks later in 2006, conditioning its participation on Iran's complete suspension of all uranium enrichment activities and full compliance with the IAEA demands²¹. Despite Iran's official assertion that its nuclear program was solely for civilian purposes, the revelations deepened mistrust of Iran's intentions and the actual scope and capabilities of the program. Consequently, Iran faced international pressure to demonstrate the benign motives behind concealing the undeclared facilities.

As part of the European initiative, the Tehran Agreement was signed on October 21, 2003. Iran agreed to sign the Additional Protocol²², and as a confidence-building measure, voluntarily suspended all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities²³. This move would have granted the IAEA greater inspection authority and verification of Iran's nuclear program²⁴. The protocol was not presented to the Iranian parliament for ratification as Iran applied it as a goodwill symbol from 2004 to February 2006²⁵. On August 5, 2005, the E3/EU presented a package of offers to Iran calling for the termination of all nuclear fuel cycle activities, including uranium conversion, enrichment, and reprocessing. However, Iran rejected the proposal, citing contradictions with previously agreed-upon terms, which included a limited enrichment program and the establishment of "objective guarantees" for the program's peaceful use²⁶. The Iranian government went as far as considering the European offer an affront, necessitating an apology²⁷.

Following a series of proposals²⁸ and counterproposals between Iran and the P5+1, Iran was deemed non-compliant with the requirements of the UN and IAEA. Consequently, the IAEA Board of Governors referred

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

Iran's case to the UNSC, which passed Resolution 1737 on December 23, 2006, imposing sanctions²⁹ on Iran for its failure to suspend enrichment-related activities³⁰. Since 2006, the P5+1 approach to Iran's nuclear program has followed a dual-track strategy, combining proposals for a negotiated solution with the imposition of tougher multilateral sanctions in response to Iran's unresponsiveness and non-compliance³¹.

The IAEA Board of Governors justified its decision to transfer Iran's case to the UN by citing the agency's inability to conduct a comprehensive and accurate assessment of Iran's program after more than three years. Consequently, the agency could not definitively determine the absence of a military dimension in the program or the absence of undeclared nuclear materials or activities within Iran, which were prerequisites for the Board of Governors to conclude that the program had an exclusively peaceful purpose³².

The Strained US-Iran Relations and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis under the Bush Administration: Confrontation and Unresolved Tensions

It should be acknowledged that the relationship between the United States and Iran has been tense since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Consequently, diplomatic connections between the two nations were severed and successive American presidents pursued a consistent strategy of containing and isolating the Iranian regime through diplomatic and economic means, with sanctions playing a significant role. These measures were justified as punitive actions against Iran due to its involvement in terrorism, opposition to the Middle East peace process, human rights violations, and pursuit of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)³³.

During his tenure from 2001 to 2008, George W. Bush's foreign policy was marked by a strong emphasis on military actions and a lack of interest in diplomatic solutions. Military campaigns in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 had far-reaching consequences on global affairs and significantly affected the standing of the United States in the international community. In the case of the Iraq invasion, the decision to engage in military action was based on intelligence, which was later revealed to be flawed or possibly manipulated, leading to the destabilization of a sovereign nation and the subsequent challenges faced in the aftermath of the war.

*Regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, President Bush pursued a policy characterized by using confrontational language and issuing repeated warnings of the possibility of military action to address Iran's nuclear threat. In his memoir, *Decision Points*, Bush openly acknowledges that he*

instructed the Pentagon to assess the necessary measures for a potential strike aimed at temporarily halting Iran's nuclear progress, stating the intention to "stop the bomb clock, at least temporarily"³⁴. Despite this, Bush did not completely disregard his administration's willingness to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem diplomatically³⁵. Additionally, the diplomatic efforts pursued by his administration, particularly within the P5+1 framework, did not yield any significant breakthroughs. These talks were hindered by the administration's insistence on Iran completely suspending all uranium enrichment activities, which clashed with Iran's insistence on preserving its right to enrichment.

Despite an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration in Afghanistan's stabilization between Tehran and Washington, this prospect was shattered following the Karine A³⁶ incident. Subsequently, President Bush delivered his renowned "Axis of Evil" speech, grouping Iran, Iraq, and North Korea together as nations pursuing weapons of mass destruction and posing a threat to global peace. The 2002 revelations regarding Iran's covert nuclear facilities diminished Bush's inclination to engage in P5+1 negotiations, resulting in the United States delayed participation in these talks until late 2008. The administration remained firm in its decision not to grant any form of "legitimacy" to the Iranian regime³⁷. Colin Dueck, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and Ray Takeyh, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), explained that the Bush administration regarded the notion of direct bilateral negotiations with Iran as a "great concession"³⁸.

Both the implementation of sanctions and the absence of negotiations with Iran yielded no successful resolution to the nuclear crisis, compelling the Bush administration to contemplate a potential shift in its policy towards Iran. In July 2008, despite Iran's ongoing enrichment activities, William Burns, the US Under-Secretary for Political Affairs, participated in talks with the P5+1 group³⁹. As Bush's second term drew to a close, Iran experienced a significant increase in its regional power and status, primarily due to the removal of two of its longstanding adversaries, Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, as a consequence of Bush's military engagements⁴⁰. Iran persisted in its uranium enrichment efforts despite the imposition of UN sanctions⁴¹. Consequently, the Iran dossier remained unresolved under Bush's administration, with Iran growing more defiant and displaying a reduced willingness to compromise on the nuclear issue.

Obama's Diplomatic Outlook on Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Issue: Challenging the Status Quo

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

President Obama's approach to Iran marks a clear departure from the previous administration's approach of isolation, threat rhetoric, and sanctions. Upon assuming the presidency, Obama took a more proactive role in instigating a policy shift towards Iran, prioritizing engagement and diplomacy. This shift was prompted by the escalating standoff concerning Iran's nuclear program as Obama demonstrated reluctance to resort to military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. His primary objective was to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, particularly considering expert assessments that indicated Iran could achieve breakout capability within a year or even months⁴².

Recognizing the ineffectiveness of more than three decades of non-recognition, isolation, confrontational rhetoric, and coercive diplomacy, Obama voiced his interest in a fresh policy approach centered on engagement and unconditional negotiations. During his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama openly declared his intent to move forward with Iran on the basis of mutual respect and also recognized that Iran "should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty"⁴³. He also rejected the preconditions set by the Bush administration for talks with Iran and expressed his willingness to engage in direct diplomacy with Iranians without any prerequisites⁴⁴.

The standoff regarding Iran's nuclear program reached a critical stage when the United States and Israel openly expressed their willingness to consider a military option, thereby acknowledging the possibility of a new war in the highly volatile region of the Middle East. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that crises can sometimes catalyze foreign policy change, as the urgency and fear associated with such situations create opportunities to introduce reforms⁴⁵. The perceived threat arising from Iran's potential acquisition of a nuclear weapon, combined with the limited time available to prevent it, prompted Obama to abandon previous approaches and actively pursue diplomatic solutions regarding the nuclear issue.

Analysts who hold a more alarmed perspective on Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons argue that such an outcome would diminish America's ability to safeguard its interests and its allies in the region. Additionally, they suggest that it could spark perilous competition between Iran and Israel, potentially escalating into a first strike and leading other Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, to pursue their own nuclear programs⁴⁶. Besides, assessments from the intelligence community and expert analyses concluded that Iran's development of

nuclear weapons depended on political decisions. In an interview with Israeli Channel 2 TV, President Obama stated that his administration believed it would take Iran “over a year or so” to achieve nuclear weaponization⁴⁷. While emphasizing that all options remained on the table, he reiterated his commitment to diplomatic efforts and expressed the view that there still existed a “window of time” for resolving the nuclear issue through diplomatic means⁴⁸.

Obama’s Engagement with Iran: From New Year Messages to Secret Correspondence and Nuclear Negotiations

After assuming office, President Obama initiated a shift in his foreign policy approach towards Iran through groundbreaking action on March 20, 2009. On the occasion of Nowruz, the Persian New Year, he delivered a video message where he explicitly affirmed his administration's dedication to diplomacy and condemned the use of threats⁴⁹. Additionally, Obama engaged in covert communication with Iran’s highest authority, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, having sent at least four letters since assuming office in 2009⁵⁰. The initial letter, dispatched in May 2009, conveyed Obama’s intention to seek a resolution to the nuclear crisis surrounding Iran’s nuclear program⁵¹.

The response from Iran’s official quarters to Obama’s outreach conveyed mixed messages to Washington, with differing views expressed by the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad. In a speech broadcast live on state television, Khamenei exhibited skepticism regarding the possibility of substantial change, emphasizing the need for the United States to make policy change in areas such as releasing Iranian assets, lifting sanctions, ceasing accusations against Iran and its officials, and demonstrating unconditional support for Israel⁵². Conversely, President Ahmadinejad responded more positively and indicated an inclination to reciprocate Obama’s offer. During a speech commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, Ahmadinejad expressed Iran’s readiness to engage in talks in “a fair atmosphere with mutual respect”⁵³.

The Obama administration undertook covert bilateral negotiations with Iran while the P5+1 negotiation process was ongoing. Oman was entrusted with the task of mediating and facilitating Iran's participation in negotiations aimed at resolving the nuclear issue. Sultan Qabous conveyed Obama’s message to the Supreme Leader, who initially expressed distrust towards the Americans. However, under Qabous’s insistence, he eventually agreed to participate. Oman served as the host for the initial secret bilateral meetings between the US and Iranian officials in July 2012. It is noteworthy that these talks occurred during

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

*President Ahmadinejad's administration and prior to the election of Hassan Rouhani*⁵⁴.

*The Obama administration's initial involvement in nuclear diplomacy with Iran was prompted by Iran's appeal to the IAEA in June 2009, seeking assistance in acquiring fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR), which was projected to deplete its fuel reserves by late 2010*⁵⁵. *In April, Iran was formally invited to rejoin nuclear negotiations, and on October 1, 2009, the United States participated in the negotiations for the first time*⁵⁶. *These negotiations led to the formulation of the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) fuel swap proposal, marking the highest-level bilateral engagement between the United States and Iran since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution*⁵⁷. *Regrettably, Iran declined the proposal, and its counteroffers were dismissed by the P5+1 group, resulting in the implementation of a series of UN sanctions.*

*Despite the change in language and approach, President Obama's first term concluded with limited progress in addressing the nuclear issue. Iran continued to expand and advance its nuclear program. In response, President Obama resorted to sanctions. On July 10, 2010, he enacted the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act (CISADA)*⁵⁸. *Additionally, the Obama administration secretly authorized cyber-attacks on Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities, known as the Olympic Games, which originated from a collaborative effort between the United States and Israel, originally initiated during the Bush administration in 2007. Reports on the virus surfaced in the summer of 2010*⁵⁹. *Security experts code-named this cyber weapon Stuxnet, estimating that it caused a setback of approximately two years to the Iranian nuclear program*⁶⁰. *This marked the first publicly disclosed cyber-attack heralding a new era of warfare.*

*President Obama reaffirmed the US commitment in his last international speech to the UN General Assembly on 25 September, 2012, to resolve the nuclear issue through diplomatic means but emphasized that there were limitations to the amount of time available*⁶¹. *Eventually, at the conclusion of President Obama's second term, Tehran and Washington achieved a breakthrough and reached an agreement.*

The Power of Negotiations: Obama's Legacy in Resolving the Nuclear Issue with Iran

Obama's strong dedication to finding a diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem without relying on military force was unquestionable. He persisted in his commitment to negotiations despite the absence of an agreement during his initial term in office. During his second

inauguration speech, Obama expressed his intention to peacefully resolve disagreements with other nations, emphasizing that “engagement can more effectively alleviate mistrust and apprehension”⁶².

Hassan Rouhani’s election as Iran’s president in 2013 marked a notable shift in the country’s approach. Rouhani, known for his strong support of negotiations, aimed to end years of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Prior to his presidency, Rouhani held the position of Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, which was responsible for appointing the Iranian delegation to engage in nuclear talks with the P5+1. He also played a key role as a negotiator with the EU-3 between 2003 and 2005. Rouhani openly criticized the regime’s insistence on pursuing enrichment, which resulted in Iran being referred to the UN and the subsequent imposition of tougher sanctions that further impacted the well-being of the Iranian people⁶³.

Nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 had been previously conducted by a delegation, led by Saeed Jalili, that was selected by the Supreme National Security Council, a group appointed by and answerable to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei⁶⁴. However, once Hassan Rouhani assumed the presidency, he assigned the task to his Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, who took over as the lead nuclear negotiator. Zarif officially joined the P5+1 group in October 2013⁶⁵. Eventually, these negotiations between Tehran and the P5+1 resulted in the 2015 JCPOA, also known as the Nuclear Deal. The agreement entailed Iran agreeing to a significant reduction in its low-enriched uranium stockpile by 98%, a measure that would be enforced for the next 15 years. Additionally, Iran consented to restrict its uranium enrichment to 3.67%, a level suitable for civilian nuclear power but inadequate for the production of nuclear weapons⁶⁶.

Following the conclusion of the agreement, President Obama commended the peaceful resolution achieved through negotiations with Tehran, highlighting the transformative impact of American diplomacy. He stated that this outcome demonstrated the ability of diplomacy to bring about tangible and big change, enhancing the safety and security of both the United States and the world. Obama stressed the effectiveness of multilateralism in addressing the Iranian nuclear issue, emphasizing that the United States and its negotiating partners exemplified the remarkable accomplishments that can be attained when there is a shared vision of peacefully resolving conflicts⁶⁷.

Understanding Obama’s Leadership Style: Margaret Hermann’s

Perspective

Margaret Hermann is a distinguished political scientist who has made noteworthy contributions to the study of leadership traits and behavior. One of her remarkable works is the Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) framework, which she developed to understand and assess the leadership qualities of individuals in various political contexts. The LTA framework identifies certain leadership traits that are important for effective leadership. The combination of these traits forms a leader's behavior, decision-making, and effectiveness. Leaders with different trait profiles may display distinct leadership styles and approaches based on their relative strengths and weaknesses in each trait.

By scrutinizing leaders' media interviews rather than scripted speeches, it is possible to identify the traits of political leaders. Interviews are considered "spontaneous material" in contrast to speeches that are typically prepared on their behalf. Hermann's concept of leadership style encompasses how leaders engage with their constituents, advisors, and other leaders, as well as the manner in which they establish and conduct interactions, guided by certain rules and principles⁶⁸.

Hermann identifies seven traits that are valuable when evaluating leadership style. They include (1) the belief that one can influence or control what happens, (2) the need for power and influence, (3) conceptual complexity or the ability to differentiate things and people in one's environment, (4) self-confidence, (5) the tendency to focus on problem solving and accomplishing something versus maintenance of the group and dealing with others' ideas and sensitivities, (6) an individual's general distrust or suspiciousness of others, and (7) the intensity with which a person holds an in-group bias⁶⁹. These traits will provide relevant information to assess political leaders' response to the constraints in their environment, the way they process information, and their motivations to action. Understanding the extent to which leaders perceive their ability to exert influence and their level of power seeking provides insights into whether they will confront or respect constraints they encounter in any given situation. Leaders' levels of conceptual complexity and self-confidence will determine their receptiveness to information. Additionally, examining factors such as in-group bias, general distrust towards others, and preference for problem-solving over group maintenance helps shed light on what drives leaders⁷⁰.

The researcher used the Leadership Traits Analysis (LTA) scores assigned to Obama, as calculated by Backhaus and Stahl (2015)⁷¹. Obama's scores reflected an average belief in his ability to control events

(0.4), an average need for power (0.23), high self-confidence (0.54), average conceptual complexity (0.62), average task focus (0.61), average in-group bias (0.16), and average distrust of others (0.08)⁷². These scores are going to be interpreted according to Margaret Hermann's model in order to illustrate how President Obama's leadership qualities played a role in initiating and implementing a foreign policy change concerning Iran's nuclear program.

Pragmatism and Flexibility: Obama's Leadership Traits in Engaging with Iran

Belief in one's ability to control events (BACE) refers to the perception that individuals and governments have the capacity to influence outcomes. Obama's score on this trait was average. Leaders who exhibit moderate levels of belief in their ability to control events and power (PWR) are influenced by their other characteristics and their assessment of contextual demands. As a result, their behavior may involve either challenging or respecting constraints, depending on the circumstances⁷³. Leaders who challenge constraints "are skillful both directly and indirectly in getting what they want". Leaders who respect constraints, on the other hand, opt for building consensus and compromise in order to reach their goals⁷⁴.

Obama demonstrated both characteristics during his dealings with Iran and its nuclear program. His inclination to challenge constraints can be illustrated by the Stuxnet attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, when negotiations reached an impasse, and Iran continued its enrichment activities. As a covert action, it is unlikely that Russia, China, or any other P5 member was informed of it. Conversely, Obama's respect for constraints became evident after unsuccessful negotiations with Iran. With the absence of an agreement, he aimed to convince Russia and China that Iran was unresponsive to offers and continued to defy the resolutions of the UNSC and requirements set by the IAEA. Recognizing that the approval of tougher sanctions by Russia and China was crucial, Obama chose to work within the framework of the P5+1 group, engaging in consensus-building rather than unilateral action. In his memoir, he described his efforts to seek Russia and China's consent for additional UN sanctions, considering their cordial diplomatic and commercial relations with Iran. Obama firmly believed that a forceful international response backed by Russia's agreement was necessary to achieve a diplomatic solution with Iran⁷⁵. In fact, Obama's policy was fruitful as a series of UN sanctions penalizing Iran were passed by the UNSC.

Self-confidence (SC) refers to an individual's perception of their own significance and belief in their ability to effectively handle various

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

elements and individuals in their surroundings. On the other hand, conceptual complexity (CC) pertains to the extent to which an individual demonstrates the ability to differentiate and articulate various aspects of people, places, policies, ideas, or things. Individuals with a high level of conceptual complexity can consider alternative perspectives, embrace ambiguity in their environment, and exhibit adaptability in their interactions with objects and ideas⁷⁶.

A leader's elevated level of self-confidence indicates that he demonstrates consistency in his actions and is not easily swayed or influenced by external circumstances. He maintains stable behavior that remains resilient in the face of events or incentives from the surrounding environment⁷⁷. Obama scored high in the trait of self-confidence. Despite attempts by Israel and Saudi Arabia to provoke the Obama administration into considering a military action towards Iran, Obama remained dedicated to pursuing diplomatic solutions. Leaked US diplomatic cables reveal instances where Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah persistently urged the United States to launch military strikes against Iran's nuclear program⁷⁸. Former US Secretary of State John Kerry mentioned the strong opposition from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu towards any agreement with Iran, as he pressured President Obama to undertake military action against Iran prior to the 2015 nuclear deal⁷⁹.

The trait of openness to contextual information plays an important role in understanding a leader's self-other orientation, or his attitude towards others. This emerges from a combination of self-confidence and conceptual complexity. Together, these two traits shape leaders perception of themselves and their relationship with others, indicating their receptiveness to input from others and the broader political environment. In Obama's case, his self-confidence was rated high while his conceptual complexity was average. By comparing these two traits, it becomes apparent that Obama's conceptual complexity outweighs his self-confidence. This suggests that he possesses openness to contextual information and is receptive to others' perspectives. Leaders who exhibit openness are characterized by their practicality and responsiveness to others' interests, needs, ideas, and demands. They base their actions on what they perceive to be acceptable within the current circumstances, taking situational cues into account.

In the case of Obama, openness is evident in his willingness to engage with enemies and adversaries, including Iran. This represents a notable departure from the isolationist stance of the previous administration,

particularly towards hostile regimes such as Iran, which President Bush referred to as an “axis of evil”. Obama, in contrast, demonstrated a more pragmatic approach by rejecting Bush’s viewpoint as ridiculous and officially offering to engage in full negotiations with Iran regarding its nuclear program, both during his candidacy and throughout his presidency. He also considered Iran’s insistence on its right to enrichment under NPT terms, viewing it as a compromise necessary to reach an agreement that would halt Iran’s progress towards nuclear weaponization, if the IAEA was unable to verify the program’s scope and capabilities. The outcome of these efforts was the signing of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Margaret Hermann presents two distinct sets of motivations for individuals seeking office. These motivations include the drive to guide the group towards accomplishing tasks and solving problems as well as the desire to maintain group morale and foster relationships. A leader’s emphasis on tasks reflects their prioritization of addressing governmental challenges rather than solely focusing on the sentiments and requirements of influential constituents. On the other hand, leaders who prioritize building relationships and group maintenance recognize the importance of securing constituent loyalty and fostering a positive morale within the group. Regarding the trait of motivation for seeking office, Obama scored moderately in task focus, indicating that his motivation for seeking office stems from both problems and relationships, depending on the context. As Hermann explains, such leaders are “charismatic” as they focus “on the problem when that is appropriate to the situation at hand and on building relationships when that seems more relevant”⁸⁰.

Obama demonstrated a keen interest in exploring various approaches to achieving a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. He employed a combination of diplomacy, sanctions, and cyber-attacks. He also emphasized the importance of obtaining Russian and Chinese approval for additional UN sanctions in response to Iran’s lack of responsiveness. During the negotiations conducted within the framework of the P5+1, Obama displayed a willingness to moderate his demands in order to maintain a functioning relationship between the United States and Iran, thereby avoiding a complete breakdown. He firmly believed that Iran would not relinquish its right to enrichment under any circumstances. By accepting the notion of Iranian enrichment for civilian purposes, limited to levels below 5%, Obama demonstrated willingness to compromise and prevent negotiations from reaching an impasse.

Examination of a leader’s motivation toward the global stage necessitates an understanding of two crucial aspects: in-group bias and

Leadership Traits and Foreign Policy Change: An Analysis of President Obama's Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran-----

distrust of others. These traits offer insights into whether a leader's actions are primarily driven by perceiving threats or problems, or by recognizing opportunities for cooperative relationships. In-group bias reflects leaders' inclination to prioritize their own group, whether social, political, or ethnic, at the forefront of their worldview. On the other hand, distrust entails a tendency to question the intentions and actions of others, accompanied by a general sense of unease or uncertainty. Leaders who exhibit low levels of in-group bias perceive the world as a realm that presents both opportunities and threats. They recognize the possibility of win-win agreements and emphasize the importance of fostering relationships in international politics. They believe in the feasibility of cooperation with other actors in certain international arenas, acknowledging the need for adaptability in their responses⁸¹.

Obama's scores in terms of both in-group bias and distrust were both average. His relatively moderate distrust score indicated that he maintained a balanced perspective when it came to mistrusting others. Unlike viewing the world as an "us vs. them" scenario and adopting a zero-sum mentality, Obama recognized the potential for cooperation and did not completely dismiss the possibility. This mind-set elucidates his flexibility in handling the nuclear issue. As he explained, "We give nothing up by testing whether or not this problem can be solved peacefully," highlighting his belief in the value of peaceful resolutions. Obama emphasized that the tough rhetoric from Washington alone could not effectively resolve problems. Instead, he attributed the success of addressing the nuclear problem with Iran to diplomacy and effective leadership⁸². Under Obama's leadership, despite nearly 30 years of strained relations, Tehran and Washington engaged in diplomatic negotiations and achieved a breakthrough agreement on one of the most contentious issues between them.

Conclusion:

Dealing with Iran and its nuclear program presented one of the most formidable challenges in Obama's foreign-policy agenda. Before his assumption of office in 2009, Tehran and Washington had been estranged diplomatically for several decades, with a relationship characterized by hostility and antagonism. The prevailing approach of the administrations preceding Obama was to isolate Iran, making it the preferred policy option. However, Obama viewed Iran's nuclear program as a critical foreign policy priority in the Middle East. What sets Obama's approach apart is his unwavering commitment to diplomacy over military power in managing complex nuclear issues. Recognizing the need for a peaceful

resolution, he pursued negotiations with Iran that demanded tremendous patience and persistence. This demonstrated his leadership traits, which played a pivotal role in guiding the process towards a successful outcome.

After protracted and challenging negotiations, the United States, under Obama's leadership, achieved a significant foreign policy shift in its relationship with one of its historic adversaries. This transformative journey culminated in the signing of the 2015 Nuclear Deal. The signing of this agreement marked a milestone in international relations, as it addressed the concerns surrounding Iran's nuclear program and laid the groundwork for ongoing monitoring and compliance. The accomplishment of the 2015 Nuclear Deal can be attributed to Obama's leadership traits, which enabled him to persevere in the face of obstacles and remain committed to his goals. By leveraging his diplomatic skills, strategic thinking, and ability to navigate complex negotiations, Obama succeeded in achieving a breakthrough that had seemed elusive for decades.

Obama's handling of the Iran nuclear issue exemplified his effective leadership and showcased the potential of diplomacy to resolve longstanding conflicts. His approach, guided by a commitment to cooperation and focus on long-term solutions, demonstrated the power of dialogue and negotiation in achieving significant foreign policy outcomes. The legacy of his leadership in dealing with Iran's nuclear program is a testament to the importance of strong leadership traits in shaping transformative and impactful international relations and implementing successful foreign-policy initiatives.

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