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Chair of Geopolitical scenarios and political risk

**The Future of the JCPOA:
The interests behind the 2015 deal and possible strategies for a new agreement**

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Abstract: *The JCPOA signed in 2105 was a successful multilateral agreement aiming at solving the Middle-East most pressing issues. The deal scaled back Iran’s nuclear limiting it to civilian use. The agreement concluded by the permanent members of the Security Council, plus Germany and Iran was a milestone of diplomacy. This work examines the interests behind the agreement, looking at every member's approach to the Iranian issue, the relations with the Islamic regime, and the latest development. This work has found that all the parties experienced positive outcomes after the signing of the agreement. However, the US withdrawal has questioned the deal’s survival. The latest developments suggest that the deal is close is collapsing and that its future relies on the US and Iran's future intentions.*

INTRODUCTION

The JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran Deal, was signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015, by the members of the Security Council plus Germany, Iran, and the European Union (P5+1). The main aim of the agreement was to scale back Iran's nuclear program steering it away from nuclear armaments. The JCPOA mainly revolves around Iran's stockpile and enrichment of uranium. In particular, Iran was required to renounce 97% of its enriched uranium and was allowed enrichment only up to 3.67%, which is less than it would be needed for medical research purposes (20%) or for weapons production (90%) (The Obama White House, 2015). Moreover, Iran is required to reduce the number of centrifuges it owns and to comply with UN inspections of its facilities. Lastly, the US, EU, Russia, and China were required to relieve Iran from the economic sanctions previously imposed. However, the United States' President Donald J. Trump withdrew from the agreement on May 8, 2018, creating a crisis and endangering its survival.

Before becoming the JCPOA, the Iran Deal had to pass through different stages of negotiations which reflected the difficult dynamic between the parties. Between 2003 and 2005 the EU led by Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (E3) was the main negotiator trying to convince Iran to comply with IAEA's provisions. This proved to be a failure as the Iranian elections of 2005, with the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and not the expected Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. By 2006 Iran, guided by the conservative faction, started enrichment again. A new agreement sponsored by the US, UK, Russia, and France was proposed in 2009/2010 which would enable Iran to enrich uranium up to the level necessary for medical research. However, oppositions inside Iran and against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made the signing of the agreement impossible. By 2012 US and the EU had imposed unilateral sanctions (Cronberg, 2017, 246-250). The sanctions greatly impacted Iran's economy and politically isolated the country. The election of President Rouhani in 2013, coming from the green party, as well as, the economic crisis Iran was facing brought the country back to the negotiating table, resulting in the signing of the 2015 JCPOA. The deal was set to be a medium-term solution to the problem, giving the parties 15 years to review the issue and find a permanent solution. However, the 2018 US withdrawal from the agreement effectively led the JCPOA to a crisis, questioning its survival. Between 2018 and 2020 the EU, China, and Russia have

continued to express their commitment to the agreement but failed to meet its requirements. As of January 2021, Iran has resumed its enrichment program, furtherly weakening the already critical condition of the deal. The following works try to examine the interests that lie behind each country's decision to join the deal. The first chapter is reserved for the Islamic Republic of Iran, analyzing its institutional structure and the constraints it imposes on the foreign policy-making of the country. Subsequently, the chapters focus on the geopolitical role played by Iran, its interests in the Middle-East, its nuclear ambition, as well as, the factors that have led the country to join the deal. Chapter two is centered around the United States, examining the foreign policy approach adopted by the American power with regards to the Middle-East and its interests. Lastly, the chapter focuses on Trump's presidency, recent development, and possible future scenarios following the election of President Biden in November 2020. The third chapter considers the European Union's foreign policy approach, its limitations, and the role it has played in the Middle-East and its interests. Afterward, the chapter focuses on the bilateral relations between Iran and the EU and the most recent development. The fourth chapter is reserved for the People's Republic of China, its foreign policy approach and global ambitions, as well as, the country's role within the Middle-East and the new "Belt and Road" initiative. Subsequently, the chapters examine the bilateral relations between China and Iran and China's current stance. Lastly, the fifth chapter takes into examination the Russian Federation, its approach towards the Middle-East in the context of its broader global ambitions. By doing so, a reflection on the role Iran plays within Russia's global strategy is presented concluding with recent development and the countries' interests in the JCPOA. Most recent developments have endangered the survival of the agreement, which will be addressed in the conclusions. Certainly, the newly elected President Biden's position will likely decide the future of the agreement. However, this work can only take notice of the President's declared intentions during his presidential campaign. Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted the priorities of all parties to the agreement the effect of which is yet to be seen.

CHAPTER 1

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran Deal, was brokered between the five members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany, and Iran. While the negotiation process lasted several years, working through different phases and dealing with different governments' stances, it concluded in 2015, effectively halting Iran's ambition with regards to building a nuclear arsenal and ensure the lifting of key sanctions on the country. Naturally, the first chapter of this work must be reserved for Iran, understanding what has brought this rising regional power to accept the terms of the deal and the possible incentives to stay in it. Born in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a relatively young actor in the international sphere, although the country has a long history, going back centuries through monarchies and empires, the current regime in a relatively new personality within the international community. Many internal and external aspects guide the decision-making process within the country, ranging from its founding principles, its institutional structure, the economic need of the country to its geopolitical interests, allies, and foes within the region. The following is an analysis of those aspects and their influence in the making of the JCPOA and its future.

The Rise to power of the Islamic Regime

Almost two decades after the Second World War, the proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union, in addition to decolonization, gave rise to nationalist sentiments throughout the world, with Iran being no exception. After decades of foreign direct influence within the country, the negative sentiments of the population towards foreign powers quickly spread and ultimately gave rise to the Islamic Revolution. The principles and forces that led to the Islamic Revolution remain at the core of today's Iran and have shaped its domestic policy as well as its foreign policy agenda, influencing its leaders and major actors in the state. Although, coming to fruition in 1979 the Islamic

Revolution's origins can be traced back to 1953, when a coup d'état, orchestrated by the United States and the British government, reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah as leader of the country thus, restoring the monarchy and ensuring Western influence within Iran. By giving power to the Shah, the United States, and Great Britain aimed at keeping tight control over their interests in the country. In particular, though its Cold War perspective, the United States saw the coup as a preventive measure, ensuring that no other states in the region, and in particular other oil-rich countries, would be enchanted by the idea of steering away from western influence. As it was at the time, the US relied heavily on oil imported from the Middle-East thus, keeping tight control over the petroleum market was of paramount importance for them. Similarly, the United Kingdom's main goal was to guarantee the economic benefits coming from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in Iran, considered to be an economic necessity for the UK (Abrahamian, 2018, 122). Iranian-American historian, Ervand Abrahamian, in his work, a History of Modern Iran, highlights the negative impact – and subsequent failure - that the 1953 coup had over the perception of the new monarch among Iranian citizens who ended up associating the US and British backing of Reza Shah as effectively having themselves the power over the country and, by doing so, allowing them to exploit Iran's resources (Abrahamian, 2018,125). The revolutionaries were able to exploit the growing negative sentiments within the citizens to further their agenda. There are three main elements on which the revolutionaries focused on to gain public support, elements that remain of utmost relevance in today's Iran. Firstly, they took exception with the way of governing of the Shah and in particular, with the effects the White Revolution had on the country (Amineh and Eisenstadt, 2007, 131). During his rule the Shah had tried to modernize the country, aiming for social and economic development, through a series of reforms ranging from land, education, gender, and fiscal reforms. However, the trickle-down theory-based measures undertaken by the Shah, resulted in an excessive focus on the urban areas and a subsequent impoverishment of the agricultural sector thus, widening the gap between the rich and the poor and giving rise to social tension within the country (Abrahamian, 2018, 135-143). Secondly, from a political point of view, the revolutionaries opposed the Shah's secular and anti-Islamic based propaganda and policies which had the effect of alienating a key section of society, including the powerful ulama, meaning the clergy and the bazaar, the traditional economic exponents of the country, who saw their influence

diminishing under Shaw's new western-like policies. Lastly, most notably, the Islamic revolution was born under the premises of being a counteract to western powers' meddling and exploitation of Iran, effectively making foreign powers the enemy of the revolution (Abrahamian, 2018,125).

Eventually, the distrust and disillusionment towards the monarch led to the rise in popularity of the revolutionary ideals and in particular of two main figures, charismatic leaders who embodied the opposition to the Shah and western powers: the social-scientist Ali Shariati and the future leader of the country Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Amineh and Eisenstadt, 2007, 131) (Abrahamian, 2018, 146-). By 1963, the opposition became an organized revolt which, was brutally suppressed by the military and resulted in the forced exile of Khomeini in Turkey. His role in the revolt and subsequent exile made Khomeini a martyr-like figure and the main protagonist of the revolution (Amineh and Eisenstadt, 2007, 146-147). The year 1963 and the revolt that took place, became a turning point for the revolution, and although, their ultimate rise to power came in 1979, this year was a cornerstone for Iran. The revolutionary ideals spread through the country and became the foundation for the success of the revolution.

In February 1979 the Islamic Revolution was a success, the revolutionaries took control of the country and gave rise to the current regime. Their ideology was rooted in Shiite ideas as demonstrated by the newly written constitution, backed by the traditional ulama and bazaar factions. Khomeini, from the main protagonist of the revolution, became the Supreme Leader of the country, acquiring for all intent and purposes almost unlimited power to "determine the interests of Islam, set general guidelines for the Islamic Republic, supervise policy implementation and mediated between the executive and the judiciary" (Abrahamian, 2018, 168).

The institutional structure of Iran and the influence over foreign policy

The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran reflects the revolutionist ideas, primarily based on Shia Islam. It also incorporates some secular democratic institutions and allows

for elections of such institutional bodies. Most notably, the constitution set out the creation of a parliament, made of the majlis, and the presidency, allowing the regime to gain legitimacy both from God and from its citizens (Amineh and Eisenstadt, 2007, 153). Therefore, the Islamic regimes is a sui generis political system, it embodies both the characteristics of a democracy as well as of a totalitarian regime, based on Islam but not entirely encompassed by its religious inclination (Chehabi, 2001, 51, 54) (Khalaji, 2011, 135). Similarly, to a totalitarian regime, it retains its power by controlling the life of its citizens, exploiting religion, controlling the economic resources of the country while, at the same time, allowing for elections and a sample of democracy by ensuring a basic level of competition between political parties. Arguably, the most accurate way of defining Iran's form of government is as an oligarchy ruled by a fundamentalist clerical elite with constitutional rules and institutions that, although somewhat binding, cannot be compared with those of a democracy (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 200). In fact, the representative institutions, allowed by the constitution, are far from being an expression of Iran's democratic aspiration, rather they allow for the absorption within the system of competing factions. The goal is to control them, ensuring none of them would gain supremacy over the other (Kandil, 2016, 1). However, even though today's regimes appears to be homogeneous and coherent, in 1979 the revolution was made up by different groups, thus, the constitution needed to reflect, at least in part, such diversity while also keeping it under the strict control of the Islamist group (Chehabi, 2001, 55). To this end, the constitution allows for the parliament, competing parties during elections, and the office of the Presidency. Even though the Islamic State aims to exert control over many aspects of its citizens' life, those aspects vary greatly based on the faction in power and while, the state must follow the Supreme Leader's understanding of Islam, the country is in no way comparable to a totalitarian regime (Chehabi, 2001, 55) (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 203-208). Moreover, Islam itself is based on different interpretations and criticism of the Koran and the Prophet's teaching (Chehabi, 2001, 59), this aspect cannot be underestimated, it suggests that Iran's ideas and positions, including its foreign policy stance - while based on Islam - are susceptible to change, open to different influences and making difficult to impose total control over its political elite and population. In particular, the political institutions, established through the Constitution, play an important role in channeling the cleavages between political parties thus, making the

government of the country susceptible to short-term changes while the overall (long-term) principles and strategies remain embedded in the ideals of the Islamic revolution (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 200).

Contrary to expectations the Iranian institutional structure does not afford the Supreme Leader the total and unquestionable control of the country. Far from resembling a system of checks and balances typical of a democracy, the Iranian Constitution has nonetheless created a power structure where no person, not even the Supreme Leader, has total control over the state (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 201). Thus, the Supreme Leader, arguably the most prominent political figure in Iran, can be removed from power if the country's elite so wishes, his executive, legislative and judicial power, would not be sufficient to ensure the stability and longevity of his reign. (Kazemzadeh, 2017. 201). While no Supreme leader has ever been deposed, this provision within the institutional structure of the country, suggests that the decision-making process, including foreign policy strategy, relies heavily on the support of the country's elite and in particular of the clergy. Other aspects, within the institutional structure of the country, are relevant with regards to the JCPOA, those being the institutionalization of religion, the role of the Supreme Leader, the Presidency, and the growing political power of the Islamic Revolutionary Corps (IRGC). Firstly, the Institutional structure of the country relies heavily on the exploitation of religion for its survival and legitimacy. In fact, the religious faction (ulama), that came to power with the Revolution, was able to make Islam the foundation of the State through Khomeini's understanding of the sacred scriptures and the "Theory of Guardianship" (Velayat-e faqih). The institutionalization of the Theory of Guardianship, according to which the Supreme Leader is the head of the Shiite Jurists, has guaranteed the Supreme Leader almost unlimited power within the country. To this end, the Theory of Guardianship ensures that the leader's fatwas (interpretation of Islam), orders, and opinions cannot be undermined by any other Shiite Jurist. Thus, Shiite Jurists were able to maintain influence only over personal matters and rituals, while being subordinated to the leader on state matters (Khalaji, 2011, 135). Theoretically, the Velayat-e faqih gives the Supreme Leader the possibility to reduce/increase the extent to which the country should adhere to Islam and how to interpret scriptures, from a practical standpoint the Supreme Leader can decide on issues such as, the role women can assume in society, to what extent other religions can be accepted and how the country should perceive different

ways of life. The ultimate aim of The Theory of Guardianship is to control the powerful clergy, the religious message and to avoid dissidents by managing seminars, instituting a Special Country for the clergy, and utilizing the Iman Jafar Brigade (Khalaji, 2011, 140). Therefore, religion has historically been at the service of the different government factions and the state in general. It is one of the most powerful tools at the disposal of political actors to be able to control the citizens and to justify foreign policy decisions within the country.

The Supreme Leader

The analysis on the Institutional Structure of Iran cannot be complete without mentioning in further detail the role and powers of the Supreme Leader.

As previously mentioned, following the Theory of Guardianship, the Supreme Leader is considered to be the most prominent religious figure in the Country. In a system built so that his fatwas and orders are considered absolute and to represent the will of God, he seemingly has complete power and influence over the Islamic Republic (Rizvi, 2012, 113). The duties and powers of the Supreme Leader are clearly stated in the Constitution, as written in 1979, and were strengthened with the 1989 reforms. As stated in Art. 4 of the Iranian Constitution and in Art 57, all legislations need to conform with the principles of Islam and the Supreme Leader has total control over all branches of government: legislative, executive, and judiciary. (Iran Chamber Society, n.d.), confirming his primacy over all other political figures in the country. Moreover, the Supreme Leader has full authority and ultimate decision-making power with regards to foreign policy, defense, and national security. Formally, it is within his jurisdiction to appoint or dismiss critical political figures, including the President, if the latter is found guilty, by the Supreme Court, of not abiding by his legal duties (Rizvi, 2012, 114). Informally, the Supreme Leader has been able to remove President's from power through political pressure and by relying on opposing political factions. To date, there have been only two Supreme Leader in the country, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. While appointed to the same office, the two figure presents differences that well represent the inconsistency within the country's institutional structure. Former Supreme Leader, Khomeini was a leading

theologian (Marja) and his role as the religious leader was never put into question. On the other hand, today's leader Ali Khamenei, appointed in 1989 after Khomeini's death, is not considered a marja within the country and has been criticized for his lack of religious knowledge. The institutional shift was wanted by Khomeini himself, he believed that a more practical and realist leader was necessary for Iran. After pushing for the constitutional reforms of 1989, Khomeini was able to ensure Khamenei's appointment, who he believed was the most suitable successor. Khamenei has been responsible for the shaping of the Iranian Regime as we know it today. His governance of the country has been characterized by his conservative views while also adopting a realistic approach, in particular with regards to foreign policy. Khomeini's changing political positions are clearly reflected by the way he has influenced the different presidents that served under him, insisting on more conservative positions or giving them almost free reign over state matters.

The Presidency, foreign policy and the Influence of the Supreme Leader

The role and powers of the President cannot be understood without taking into consideration his subordination to the Supreme Leader, particularly when looking at foreign policy decisions. As previously mentioned the President is elected by the citizens of Iran, he represents the executive power in the country and the agenda setter whether it concerns domestic policy or foreign policy (Chehabi, 2001, 64). In addition, as stated in the Constitution the President has the power to dismiss members of his cabinet (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 201). In reality, from a hierarchical perspective, the presidency is under the Supreme Leader's rule, which has historically affected the decision-making power of the President, undermining its domestic and foreign policy decisions. Thus, for instance between 1989 and 1992 almost all foreign policy decisions were taken by the President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, (1989 -1997) with the silent consent of the Supreme Leader. At the time, the President's foreign policy decisions were characterized by a realistic approach based on national interests rather than religious adherence. On the contrary, from 1992 to 1996 the Supreme Leader retracted his support for the President, ostracizing his agenda in favor of the more conservative faction. Similarly, between 1997 and 2005, President Mohammad Khatami's foreign policy decisions were often

undermined by the Supreme Leader who was in conflict with the President (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 201) (Rizvi, 2012, 117-119). More recently, between 2005 and 2011, the Supreme leader has shown ambivalence with regards to President Ahmadinejad's foreign policy, supporting him at times while also opening opposing him in 2010-2011. The conflict between the two key political figures ended up in the political defeat of the President who had to fully comply with the Supreme Leader's conservative perspective, effectively leaving the president with little to no powers (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 201). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that, when elected in 2013, President Hassan Rouhani had initially little influence over foreign policy matters. The JCOPA and overall openness of Iran to the international community between 2013 and 2017 come as a result of the ability of the President to persuade the Supreme Leader of the necessity for a more realistic approach (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 201). However, as shown by his ambivalent positions, the Supreme Leaders' foreign policy approach remains rooted in conservatives' ideals adapting to a more realistic approach when he personally perceived it as needed. This has resulted in continuing shifts in Iran's foreign policy, making the country seem unreliable to foreign allies and also, constituting an instability factor within the Middle-East as shown by more recent events, which will be presented later in this work.

The Islamic Revolutionary Corps rise to power

From the early 1980s to today, a new key actor, The Islamic Revolutionary Corps (IRGC) has gained political power in the country. Supported and controlled by the Supreme Leader, today they are the single most influential political entity within the state and will, most likely, be responsible for future foreign policy decisions, including the fate of the Iran Deal. The primary role of the Guard, as found in the Constitution, is to defend the Revolution and its ideals. This role, which started from protecting officials and public facilities, gradually grew until the Iraqi war. During the course of the war, the IRGC became a branch of the regular armed forces but keeping its independence from the regular army (Kandil, 2016, 12). From the 1980s, the Revolutionary Guard became one of the most important players in the power struggle within Iran, they have been capable of influencing elections and undermining the power of several presidents. For instance,

during Prime Minister Bazargan's effort to open dialogue with western powers which, ended up with the occupation of the United States Embassy (1979-1981), an attack believed to be orchestrated by the Revolutionary Guard (Kandil, 2016, 16). Today's many members of the IRGC are part of the hard-liner faction which, has strongly opposed any re-alignment with the US including the signing of the JCPOA, and have helped the emergence of bellicose personalities and elements within Iran's oligarchy (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 205). The popularity of the IRGC, following recent tensions between the US and Iran, as well as, the economic improvement following the signing of the JCOPA, has endangered the Iran deal. Changes in the current Supreme Leader's foreign policy positions (realistic) or his death might bring the IRGC to power, with negative consequences to Iran's new re-alignment policy (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 210).

Political factions and foreign policy strategy

Political parties, or factions, are particularly important with regards to foreign policy decisions in Iran as the countries' international stances are deeply influenced by the faction in power. Despite, the Supreme Leader's supremacy with regards to foreign policy, the recurrent election of different parties have influenced the foreign policy strategy of the country and in particular with regards to the relationship with foreign powers thus, understanding the different factions and the country's tendency with regards to elections allows for a comprehensive overview of Iran foreign policy and possible future developments.

Generally, the unique institutional structure of Iran, as well as, its deep-rooted ideological belief has shaped the foreign policy strategy of the country since the Revolution. As has been already mentioned, one of the catalysts of the Iranian Revolution has been the opposition to foreign powers' influence within the country (Abrahamian, 2018,125). Thus, while having different approaches, all the parties subscribe to the revolutionary ideal of wanting total independence and autonomy from other countries, specifically from western countries, while advancing national interests (Ehteshami, 2002, 283-285).

Arguably, the main differences between the parties come from the declination of these principles, ranging from total rejection of cooperation with foreign countries to a more pragmatic approach based on the needs of the state. Nonetheless, all the parties must adhere to the religious belief and principles as understood by the Supreme Leader (Dobbins et al, 2011, 13). This is arguably the most relevant aspect of the foreign policy-making of the country, while parties have different views on how foreign policy should be approached, they all subscribe to the revolutionary ideals of complete independence and have to work within the limits and the approval of the Supreme Leader (Ehteshami, 2002, 284). It is relevant to understand the different foreign policy beliefs of the Supreme Leaders and how some parties were able to influence his opinion, seemingly resulting in an incoherent foreign policy strategy but remaining true to the countries' ideological roots. The JCPOA and its future will likely depend on the position undertaken by the party in power and by its ability to persuade the Supreme Leader of its importance.

Historically, the political body of the Islamic Republic has consisted of three main factions: the expedients, the reformist, and the hard-liners (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 203). The first decade of the Iranian regime was characterized by the centrality of the Supreme Leader, with regards to foreign policy, and the strong support he received from the most conservative political factions and particularly from the traditional business sector (bazaar). During this time the focus was on exporting the revolution and exerting influence on other Islamic Shiite groups throughout the region. To this end, Iran has supported movements such as Hezbollah who, from their part have recognized the Supreme Leader as their own leader (Dobbins et al, 2011, 13). Parties' influence became more prominent after the appointment, in 1989, of the new Supreme Leader (Ehteshami, 2002, 289). Concerning foreign policy, from 1989, the main differences between the parties have been with regards to the country's relations with the US, to other western countries, the approach towards other regional powers, like Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the countries' regional role and the nuclear program (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 203). Different parties in power have meant significantly different approaches to those issues and have also characterized Iran's foreign policy as unstable and not trustworthy. From 1989 till 1997 the party in power was the expedient faction, with President Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Khatami (1997-1995), whose main objectives were related to the economic development of the country, avoiding a confrontational attitude

towards foreign powers whilst maintaining the countries distance and independence. The ultimate goal was to ensure the survival of the regime domestically and protecting it from western influence or direct actions (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 203) (Ehteshami, 2002, 292, 299). Thus, Iran's foreign policy strategy was based on a realistic approach which, favored nationalist interests over exporting the revolution. It was characterized by the normalization of the relationship between Iran and western countries and an opening up to new economic ventures and possibilities (Dobbins et al, 2011, 13) (Ehteshami, 2002, 292, 299). Rafsanjani was also a key figure in the election, in 2013, of President Rouhani which led to the signing of the JCPOA (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 203). Exemplary, of the 1989-2005 period was the Iraq-Kuwait conflict, during which Iran decide to remain relatively neutral and to support the decisions taken within the United Nations, aligning its position with those of western countries. In parallel, during the Israeli-Arab conflict, while not supporting the Madrid Process, Iran adopted a non-interventionist stance, deeming the risk of losing its influence throughout the region not worthy of positioning itself against foreign powers (Ehteshami, 2002 301-302). However, the Supreme Leader and consequently the party in power, foreign policy approach changed drastically with the new millennium. Khamenei, which still remains strongly tied to conservative ideals, pushed for a foreign policy more in adherence with the principles of the revolution. Thus, the 2000s saw the rise to power of the hard-liners, who believed that Khatami and Rafsanjani's approaches were detrimental to Iran and that, the crisis the country was undergoing was a direct consequence of those decisions. However, it is important to notice that hard-lines themselves are divided into different factions with slightly different foreign policy approaches (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 205). Generally, they believe in the exportation of the revolution and stricter adherence to the values of the Islamic Revolution. They support Iran's nuclear program, including the development of nuclear weapons to ensure the survival of the regime. Moreover, they do not believe that the US would take direct military actions and that halting Iran's nuclear ambition is only the first request of the United States, which would be followed by the rising of other issues relating to the regime's support of other Islamic movement and recognition of Israel (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 205). However, hard-liners differ on how to deal with the US and western powers, the most fervent hard-liners oppose any talks with the US while more moderate hard-liners believe remain open to negotiation with the US and western powers

in general (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 205). Supreme Leader Khamenei can be considered a more moderate hard-liner as his approval of the JCPOA demonstrates but, the support for more pragmatic policy stems from his belief of what is better for the country thus, it is a position that can quickly change. A case in point of his shifting position has been his initial refusal of any negotiation with the US, while later recognizing its necessity for the country's development. Concerning, the JCPOA and Iran the early 2000s were a period of slow progress and many set-backs to the negotiation. Although, the plan and talks for nuclear development had already started in the 1950s, in the early 2000s, with the hard-liners in power, the tension between Iran, the US, as well as, neighboring countries escalated (COÅKUN, 2009, 194) (Kamel, 2018, 712) ending up with a decade of sanctions and failed negotiations.

A new shift from the hard-liners to the expedient faction (moderates) came with the 2013 elections and the victory of the Green Movement, led by Hassan Rouhani who became the new President (Kandil, 2016, 6). The decades of sanctions from the US and the European Union had severely deteriorated the economic condition in Iran. In fact, according to data from the International Monetary Fund, FAO, and IRI central Bank 2012, the GDP had contracted by 6.6% and continued at a rate of 1.9% in 2013. There had been an increase of people living on or under the poverty line, from 2000 to 2008, peaking at 6.6% in 2006, and lowering from 2009 with an estimate of 5,1% in 2014. An absolute number of 4 million people were living under the poverty line in 2014 (Kamel, 2018, 716) (Khoshnood, 2019, 63). The crisis in which Iran found itself by 2013 explains the shift from a conservative stance to a more moderate and pragmatic strategy with Rouhani who, albeit still following the teachings of the Iranian Revolution, realized the need to normalize the relationship with western powers with the aim of lifting sanctions to facilitate the economic growth (Kamel, 2018, 717). Although, Khamenei has the power to oppose Rouhani's policies, at least till 2017 he had recognized the need to re-align with western powers, the economic crisis and subsequent loss of popularity of the regime within the country, had pushed the Supreme Leader to change its position once again (Kazemzadeh, 2017, 207-208). The evolution of the relationship with the US since 2017, might bring a new shift in Khomeini's stance. Moreover, as will be discussed with regards to the US, the increasing tensions between the US and Iran have increased the influence of more strict hardliners and a more bellicose faction of the party, making the future of

the JCPOA uncertain. What remains certain is that the institutional structure, the power it has given to the Supreme, and Khamenei's seemingly inconsistent foreign policy approach, have made it difficult to foresee possible future scenarios. What has emerged so far, is that the president's political ability to persuade the Supreme Leader has been fundamental in the shaping of Iran's foreign policy as its tendency to resort to a more pragmatic and realist approach when in a crisis situation. As many non-democratic states in the world, the main objective of the regime is its survival, which has made it more susceptible to the political consequence of crisis (economic, political, etc) thus, ensuring public support remains vital. On the other hand, a comprehensive view of Iran's foreign policy decision-making process, and especially with regards to strengths and quickness, has to include an analysis of the geopolitical situation of the country.

Geopolitics and the Nuclear Program

The Islamic Regime's focus on survival is not a new phenomenon in foreign policy. After the Second World War, with the Cold War and the decolonization process, many non-democratic regimes rise to power in newly independent states, many of whom have sought nuclear weapons to ensure their survival. Arguably, the most prominent and somewhat comparable example has been the communist regime in North Korea. While superficially comparable, the Iranian case is very different from North Korea's situation. Iran's peculiarity comes from its geographical position, the resources it controls, and the absence of a powerful ally in the region. Geographically, Iran is situated in one of the most relevant and contentious regions in the world. The Middle-East is one of the most oil and natural gas-rich region in the world, a characteristic which has ensured the attention of foreign actors. The country sits in an area between the Middle-East, Central and South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea (COÅKUN, 2009, 180). According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, Iran is rich both in crude oil and natural gasses. The country is ranked fourth for its crude oil reserves, preceded only by Venezuela, Saudi-Arabia, and Canada. It was also ranked second in terms of its natural gas reserves, controlling 17% of the world's reserves of natural gas and preceded only by

Russia (EIA, 2019, 1-9). Thus, by considering only its natural resources Iran is one of the key players in the world, giving the country good leverage within the international community. As will be presented later, all of the countries party to the JCPOA have a vested interest in Iranian natural resources, both in terms of acquiring them or ensuring the stability of the energy market. Additionally, Iran's only access to the open sea is through its southern borders, where it has retained the control of the northern part of the Hormuz Strait, a major economic and communication zone within the region, connecting Africa, Asia, and Europe (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016, 125). The Hormuz Strait, because of its geographical importance and the great number of natural resources located in its proximity, has been the center of tensions between Iran and other powers in the region such as neighboring Iraq and the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016, 126). Moreover, the Hormuz Strait plays a key economic role for western countries, as well as, for eastern states, considering that a substantial amount of oil and natural gas is transported through the canal daily. By controlling the northern part of the Hormuz Strait Iran has been partially able to manage the influx of oil and gas from the Middle-East to western and eastern countries, which has provided the regime with a strong negotiating leverage including, during talks regarding sanctions and its nuclear program (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016,127). On the other hand, with regards to its eastern borders, Iran has strategic interests with neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. For instance, Iran, before 9/11 and President Bush's "Axis of Evil speech", was a convenient energy trade partner for India. Buying energy resources from the Islamic Regime made it possible for India to avoid acquiring them from Pakistan. However, the changing US' approach in the Middle-East, following the terrorist attack on 9/11, brought India outside the sphere of influence of Iran, through the signing of the HIDE agreement in 2010 with the USA (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016, 130). Iran's failed partnership with India is exemplary of the powerful yet limited influence that control over a considerable amount of natural resources has afforded the regime, with the growth of the US energy market, Iran is set to lose part of its importance, thus weakening the effectiveness of its arguably strongest asset. Thus, while control over natural resources is a great leverage over countries (or regions) with scarce energy resources, like the EU, it is by no means enough to tilt possible negotiations or afford it the ability to act with total independence. Lastly, to the north, the country borders Central Asia and the Caucasus. For those

countries, Iran represents a transit country both to reach the open sea and to export their energy goods. The centrality Iran plays for Central Asia and Caucasus countries have allowed the regime to sign several bilateral agreements concerning multi-lateral gas lines that reach European countries. Thus, ensuring stability within Iran is of paramount importance for Iran's northern neighbors (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016, 134). Arguably, Iran lacks a strong allies network that could support the country in dealings with western powers. Iran's main power in the region is non-state allies, specifically Islamist groups such as Hezbollah, who were meant to be Iran's tool used to influence other countries in the region. However, while they have been able to exercise limited strong power within the region, they are dependent on Iran for financial resources and have cost the country considerable credibility within the international community. The only State allies within the Middle-East are Iraq and Syrian but, both countries do not have the means to back Iran against western powers. Outside the Middle-East, Iran seems to be close to Russia and China. However, as future chapters will highlight, both alliances have not brought the desirable results, and still have a relatively low weight when compared to the Israel-US alliance. (Barzegar and Divsallar, 2017, 42). Thus, one of Iran's biggest weakness is its, de facto, isolation within the region and lack of support in the international community, this seems to have been both the result of the country own approach to foreign policy, based on the opposition to the US and the western world, as well, as being perceived as destabilizer in the region. A decisive factor in Iran's foreign policy has been its nuclear program which has led to tension within the region and with the most relevant actors in the international community.

Rouhani's presidency has been defined by his foreign policy strategy and in particular with regard to the Iranian Nuclear Programme. Rouhani's foreign policy has been much more realistic compared to some of its predecessors, seemingly postponing some of Iran's security interests in favor of economic growth and internal stabilization (Barzegar and Divsallar, 2017,46). This had led the president to side-line Iran's historical nuclear ambitions. Iranian interest in nuclear technology started in the 1950s through a US-sponsored program, in line with the "Atoms for Peace" initiative championed by President Eisenhower, followed in 1974 by the official creation, of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization and the building of the necessary nuclear reactors (Naveed et al, 2018, 386). When in 1979 the Islamic Regime was established, Khomeini did not have

any interest in developing nuclear technology, he would argue that it was not in line with the ideals of the revolution, as nuclear development was started with the assistance of western powers which, would have implied depending on them for technological information. Furthermore, he believed that nuclear ambitions were not in line with Islamic principles and the Sharia (Rezaei, 2017, 26). Kept alive by nuclear and chemical arms supporters such as future President Rafsanjani, future Supreme Leader Khamenei, and the Revolutionary Guards, the project was officially reintroduced in 1989 after Khomeini's death (Rezaei, 2017, 27-30). A second important step in Iran's nuclear development come about with the involvement of Russia in 1995, which agreed to a contract that provided assistance to Iran in the building of two new reactors (Bruno, 2010, 4). In addition, Iran decided to resume the Darkhovin project and to seek technological aid from Pakistan, China, and North Korea. By the middle of the 1990s, there were already reports of Iran working on uranium enrichment and plans for the building of a nuclear weapon (Bruno, 2010, 4). Strategically, Iran's nuclear development follows the principles of the revolution as stipulated by the Constitution. Considering, the geographical and geopolitical positioning of Iran, as well as his foreign policy agenda, the decision to build nuclear plants and weapons is in line with the objective to ensure the survival of the regime and to reach total independence from foreign countries. Iran's potential development of nuclear weapons would change the balance of power in the Region. Taking into account that the only bordering or nearby countries with nuclear warheads are India, Pakistan, and Israel, a nuclear Iran has could rival Israel and, more importantly, threaten the US' control in the region (sipri, 2020,326). From the Iranians perspective obtaining nuclear weapons is both a matter of fulfilling the objective of the revolution, by becoming the leader of all Muslim countries, as much as, a matter of survival. Nuclear warheads would be Iran's insurance against possible US attempt to overthrow the regime (Dobbins et all, 2011, 25), as well as, to even the field with opposing countries such as Israel and Saudi-Arabia. From the point of view of foreign powers, Iranian's conventional military capabilities, combined with the possibility of the country acquiring nuclear weapons and Iran's interests in exporting the revolution or at least to guide other Islamic countries and organizations have become one of the most pressing issues for other states in the region, such Israel and Saudi-Arabia, as well as, for western powers like the USA and the EU. (Sardashti and Ahmadi, 2016, 126-127). By

2003 Iran's nuclear ambitions had become a prominent issue at the world stage, with sources ranging from Iranian opposition groups to State Department reports and a zero-tolerance policy implemented by the US after 9/11, Iranian high capabilities came under the spotlight. This coupled with Iran's own admission of having hidden important details about their program prompted the IAEA to further investigate the matter (Bruno, 2010,5) (Kamel, 2018, 713). Following the IAEA's findings of irregularities in Iran's nuclear program and the enrichment of uranium the international response was mixed. The Bush administration wanted to implement strict sanctions on the country whereas, the European Union favored a more diplomatic solution. 2003 became the year of the official beginning of the negotiations which have led to the JCPOA in 2015 (Naveed et al, 2018, 394) (Bruno, 2010, 6) (Kamel, 2018, 713-714). However, before coming to an agreement in 2015, the negotiations faced many setbacks. In particular, in the first decade of the new millennium, the party in power (conservatives) believed in the strict adherence to the revolution's principles including the distrust and general opposition relations with western powers and in particular with the US. Therefore, after agreeing in 2004 to halt the enrichment of uranium, Iran quickly resumed its program in 2005 and refused to sign an agreement with the UN Security Council and the EU (Kamel, 2018, 714). At the end of 2006, the members of the Security Council decided to impose sanctions on Iran, with the aim of stopping the selling and passing of technological information to the country. Following in 2008 with additional provisions on travels and companies, as well, as the EU's sanctions on individuals (Bruno, 2010, 6, 7). By 2012 the tensions were high, the Security Council and the EU decided to implement a wide range of sanctions on the export of several goods which brought Iran to, de facto, political isolation and economic crisis (Kamel, 2018, 715).

The Economic Factor

While the geopolitical factors remain of utmost importance, the economic crisis born from the imposition of sanctions on the country is pertinent to the analysis of the factors that have led to the signing of the JCPOA and possible future scenarios. The economic analysis can be summarized and divided into three main topics: dependency on energy

sources, sanctions, and opportunities. Iran's economy is highly dependent on oil and natural gas exports. As previously mentioned Iran is the fourth country for crude oil reserves and data from 2017 suggest that it has surpassed Russia and became the first in terms of natural gasses (Dudlák, 2018, 465). However, the growing population and general development of the country have increased the domestic demand for those goods. Data concerning the period of time 1982-2004 suggest an increase in energy production of 8.3% and a final energy consumption 3.5 times higher than before. Thus, Iran's nuclear program was meant to diversify the country's energy mix, to be able to meet the internal energy demand, and reduce the impact on exports of oil and natural gas (COŞKUN, 2009, 193). In particular, energy shares, derived from gas, have risen greatly since the 1990s, when the share of natural gas on total consumption equaled 15%, far lower if compared to 2011 when gas made up 54,67% of total consumption (Dudlák, 2018, 467). The rise in consumption and the subsequent need for the regime to prioritize supplies for the domestic market resulted in higher import of gas than in exports (Dudlák, 2018, 467). In addition, domestic demand sanctions imposed by the international community have negatively impacted the economy of the country. In particular, sanctions imposed by the Security Council and the EU since the early 2000s have had the most impact on Iran's economy and especially on the energy sector (Dudlák, 2018, 468). Since the introduction of the sanctions, in 2012 and loss of access to the international market, Iran's GDP has shrunk by 9% (2012 -2014), the country has lost around 160 billion dollars in oil revenues, the Rial has devalued by over 60% and inflations reached 45% in 2013 (Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018, 154). While an estimated 4 million people living under the poverty line (Khoshnood, 2019, 63). President Rouhani's long-term economic policies depend on the possibility of Iran accessing the international market and attract foreign investors. Thus, Iran's willingness to reach an agreement in 2015 is consistent with the President's realistic approach and the protection of national interests (Khoshnood, 2019, 63-64). The last element to take into consideration is Iran's economic opportunities, meaning the possible improvement and challenges brought by the agreement. Iran needs to be able to access the international market and attract foreign investments. Data from the lifting of the nuclear sanctions in 2015 is definite proof of the opportunities derived from the signing of the JCPOA. The GDP grew by 15% in 2017, with the IMF estimating a growth rate of 4%, exports rose to 50 billion dollars in 2017 compared to 20 billion in 2012, dependency

on oil revenue lowered to 23% of the GDP, inflation lowered to 9.8% (2017) and several trade agreements have been signed since the 2015 deal (Mehdi-Zadeh, 2018, 155). However, what Iran needs most is time to resolve its internal deficiencies. In fact, when in 2017 Iran had started its economic development, through a liberalization process and re-alignment with the international community, many weaknesses still needed to be addressed. Iran has been able to attract a comparatively small amount of FDI (\$43 billion) compared to other countries like Turkey (\$209 billion), the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index of 2015 has placed Iran 130th out of 189 countries, it ranks 111th out of 131 states in the protection of property rights, according to the Property Alliance Group, it ranked 136th out of 174, in the 2014 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and lastly it was ranked, by the World Economic Forum, as the 83rd out of 144 countries (Amir-Mokri and Biglari, 2015, 27-28). What the index has shown is the amount of work Iran needs to do to meet international standards. Combined with the opportunities given by the lifting of sanctions and the worrying economic situation in which, Iran has been previous to 2015, have been exemplary of the cost of political isolation.

CHAPTER 2

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States is arguably the most relevant party to the agreement besides Iran, many political commentators have described the JCPOA more as a bilateral agreement between the USA and Iran rather than a multilateral agreement within the Security Council. While this assessment is over-simplistic and indeed incorrect, the important role played by the US is unquestionable, without the support and approval of the Obama administration it is doubtful that a deal would have been reached. To understand the United States' involvement in the JCPOA is it necessary to analyze its strategies and the objectives in the Middle-East, including through a closer look at the Obama administration's foreign policy stance and the role of Israel in US politics. Subsequently, this chapter will analyze the USA's foreign policy strategy towards the Islamic Republic, President Trump's policies towards the Middle-East, and concluding with possible future scenarios following the election of Joe Biden as the next President of the United States. The US's foreign policy strategy towards the Middle-East is comprised of four main objectives: ensuring the and free flow of oil and energy resources, preventing nuclear proliferation, the fight against terrorism, and democratization (Bayman, 2016, 2) (Tilovska-Kechedji, 2018, 102). To achieve them, the USA has sought to maintain the stability of the region through a realistic approach.

The United states main interests in the Middle-East

Free flow of oil and market stability

While, all of the above-mentioned interests are at the core of the US foreign policy agenda, ensuring the free flow of oil and stability of the oil market has historically been the most prominent objective of any US administration, with the only exception of George

W. Bush's Presidency, since the end of the second world war. Until, President Bush (2001-2009), the US's foreign policy strategy in the Middle-East had been characterized by a realist approach, while there were efforts put towards projects involving democratization, the main objective has always remained the access to natural resources and the stability of the oil market (Atlas, 2012,355). The United States presence in the Middle-East dates back to the end of the Second World War, when under President Truman's leadership the US was trying to limit the spread of communism, by stabilizing Greece and Turkey, to ensure control over the entire region (Pagliarulo, 2016,3) (Westad, 2017, 92). At the same time, the US's petroleum companies were signing several economic agreements to secure access to the enormous natural resources in the Middle-East, including with Kuwait, Saudi-Arabia, Bahrain, and even Iran (Tilovska-Kechedji, 2018, 101). Since the end of the second world war, following a sharp increase in energy consumption, the US has not been able to meet its domestic demand relying only on its oil and gas resources thus, the Middle-East has been the United States' main supplier of energy goods for more than 50 years. Therefore, protecting and ensuring access to the region has naturally become the most prominent US interest in the Middle-East (Pagliarulo, 2016, 2) (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 101). To this end, the US has always opted for a realist approach and has historically adopted foreign policy strategies that would protect these key national interests. For instance, in 1955 the US-brokered a deal with Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran for the creation of the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), also known as the Bagdad Pact Organization, with the aim to keep such countries outside the influence of the Soviet Union (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 101). Even more significant has been the US' approach during the Suez Canal crisis in 1956. When the Egyptian leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, sought to take control of the Suez Canal, through which most of the oil resources traveled in the region. At the time, Great Britain and France decided to opt for a military response, while the US was trying to negotiate a diplomatic resolution. In the midst of the Cold War, the US did not want to be seen as an opposer to nationalist movements throughout the world. In fact, President Eisenhower's main objective, at the time, was to avoid any possible growth of influence of the Soviet Union within the region which, could have happened if newly independent states were to perceive the US as their enemy and, as a by-product, risking the US' access to oil and natural gas resources (Pagliarulo, 2016,3) (Westad, 2017, 272-273). In this case, access

to free oil meant pushing European countries to accept their loss of control over the Suez Canal. This approach continued to be central in the US foreign policy strategy in the Middle-East for many years after the end of Eisenhower's administration, resulting in the US becoming the dominant foreign power in the region (Pagliarulo, 2016, 16). Since then, the US strategy concerning oil has consisted of two main components, the free flow of oil, meaning having access to the resources in the region, and the stability of the oil market, the latest has become more prominent with time since the US has progressively become more energy independent and is becoming an exporter rather than an importer of energy resources. The first oil crisis of 1973 was the first obstacle the US had to face in ensuring stability in the oil market. The crisis ensued in the form of a political retaliation towards the US's backing of Israel in the Yom Kippur War. It was initiated by Libya through an embargo on the export of oil and was quickly followed by most of all the other Arab energy-exporting countries. Thus, leading to an enormous increase in the price of oil which, in turn, had deep economic consequences particularly for western countries. The price of oil increased by 10%, the price elasticity reached minus 0.29 and the real GNP fell by 2.9% (Byman, 2016, 8) (Westad, 2017, 466). Consistent with its role, the United States became the main actor in the peace-making process, the Nixon and Ford administrations, in spite of the Senate's disapproval, decided to pressure Israel to withdraw (Westad, 2017, 466). Despite, the Senate opposition and the conservative party willingness to support Israel aspirations, President Nixon understood that to ensure the protection of US' interests in the region the US had to follow a "twin pillar" strategy which involved firstly, cooperating with regional powers (such as Saudi-Arabia and Iran) with the aim of bringing stability by providing them with the necessary military capabilities. Secondly, the US had to maintain its supremacy over the other Middle-Eastern countries (Pagliarulo, 2016, 16). Nixon's strategy resulted in fifteen years of US's cooperation with several different regional regimes which, has guaranteed the US control in the region, as well as, a relatively small military presence. Subsequently, in 1979, following the Iranian revolution, the US, decided to support Saddam's regime in Iraq until the 1990/1991 Gulf Crisis, during which George H. W. Bush administration tried to overpower Iraq's forces with the aim of bringing about the collapse of Saddam's regime (Pagliarulo, 2016, 8). Ensuring market stability and the free flow of oil, was the ultimate goal even if that meant often shifting their position towards a country, which has de facto

brought more instability in several Middle-Eastern countries rather than stabilizing them. Arguably the US realist approach lacked the foresight needed to ensure true stability. In fact, the US wanted to achieve a regime change in Iraq, instead, the relation with the country worsened, reaching its apex during the 2003 war and it also forced the US to maintain a considerable military presence in the region. However, the difficulties in executing its strategy, did not drive the USA away from its realist approach. Instead, the aim of ensuring the free flow of oil through a realistic approach led the country to forego close cooperation with non-long-term allies like Israel. In fact, in 1993 the strategy of ensuring stability by enlisting allied states as watchdogs seemed to have failed, the US decided to adopt a containment strategy towards Iraq and lost the possibility for the latter to become a major oil exporter to the USA (Pagliarulo, 2016, 8). The containment strategy, as well as, the maintaining of significant military presence in the Middle-East remained the cornerstone of the US's foreign policy strategy towards the Middle-East until the Bush administration in 2001. To achieve their goal of market stability and free flow of oil the US decided to act as the Middle-East guardian. The realist approach was in full force, while in other parts of the world the US would opt for policies based on exporting democracy or supporting the rise of democratic regimes, those ambitions were never part of the strategy regarding the Middle-East. After the 1980s conservative revolution in the US and the end of the Cold War, not even the newly elected Democrat, Bill Clinton, was willing to change the US' strategy towards the Middle-East. Instead, he consolidated his predecessors' work by widening the containment strategy to include Iran thus, strengthening the United States' belief that they had the capability to restrain "rogue" countries, and guarantee the free flow of oil and market stability (Pagliarulo, 2016, 9).

Nuclear Proliferation

Among the five US' objectives in the Middle-East, only two have been consistent through time, firstly the free flow of oil and the stability of the market, as discussed previously. Secondly, the US has been active opposers to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, with the only exception of Israel. Nuclear proliferation has become an especially important issue for the USA since the rise to power of the Islamic Regime in Iran. The long

negotiation process that led to the signing of the JCPOA is clear proof of the centrality of this issue for several administrations. The US' reasonings for opposing nuclear proliferation are straightforward. Firstly, countries in possession of nuclear warheads are able to engage in coercive diplomacy with states that do not have them thus, the US opposition to nuclear proliferation in the Middle-East is due to their interests in maintaining their ability to influence the decision-making process within the region's governments to ensure the adoption of policies that would favor them (Wolf, 2018, 23). Additionally, the mere possibility of one country acquiring nuclear weapons could lead to a chain reaction of other states trying to develop their own nuclear warheads. Lastly, the US opposition to nuclear proliferation within the region finds further reasoning in the "stability-instability paradox" meaning the belief that the acquisition by an enemy country of nuclear weapons would bring to the destabilization of the whole region thus, becoming an incentive to engage in lower scale actions or conflicts with the potential for full-scale wars (Wolf, 2018, 23). The US's long-term strategy in the Middle-East well represents the above-mentioned approach. In particular, the US has been preoccupied mostly by the first and second possible outcomes of nuclear proliferation in the Middle-East as proven by their approval of the Israeli development of nuclear weapons. The US is concerned more by the negative outcomes of nuclear proliferating within enemy states rather than the issue in general otherwise, they would have negatively considered Israel's development of nuclear weapons. Even though, Israel is an ally that does not mean that they do not engage in potential lower-scale acts and conflicts. Subsequently, the US' position on the issue of nuclear proliferation in the Middle-East is another example of the adoption of a realist approach. According, to this approach since Israel is an ally, its potential acts of destabilization would not be done in the event of them being against the US's interests. However, this notion is extremely fragile as it will be explained later in this chapter. On the other hand, in the Iranian case, all three issues regarding nuclear proliferation have been of concern for the US. Firstly, a nuclear-armed Iran would strengthen the stability (or at least the survival) and independence of the regime, since foreign countries would be reluctant to military engage with it. In addition, having nuclear capabilities would give Iran enormous influence in the region shifting the current balance of power (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009,125). Secondly, Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and the subsequent shift in the power balance in the region would encourage

other countries to seek such military capabilities (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009,125). In particular, the US is concerned with possible nuclear proliferation in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey who are currently partly dependent on the US for military protection and for the supply of weapons, a very useful dependency for the USA (Bayman, 2016, 12). For instance, the fear of an Iraqi invasion of Saudi-Arabi has meant the constant US military presence in the country since the 1990s. Moreover, Saudi-Arabia is an important US client, having sold around \$29.4 billion in weapons to the Saudis. Losing this economic and security partnership would be detrimental for the US, they would lose part of their influence over the country, resulting in having less control over the region. Similarly, since 1987 the US has invested more than \$1.3 billion a year in Egypt for military security purposes (Bayman, 2016, 4-5). Maintaining control over such countries is of paramount importance for the success of the United States' strategy in the Middle-East. Furthermore, following the "stability-instability paradox", the risk that a nuclear Iran would destabilize the region through lower scale actions, seems to be a legitimate concern. The regime is already involved with destabilizing forces, in particular with religious extremist groups, and has engaged in acts leading to lower-scale conflicts. Iran's intervention in Afghanistan, in the Lebanese civil war, its involvement in the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis by supporting Hamas, and also its support for an organization such as Hizballah have all proven the legitimacy of the US' concerns (Sanati, 2014,128). Therefore, the centrality of the Iranian problem in US politics is not without merit, owning nuclear weapons might give Iran the confidence to engage in even more detrimental actions around the Middle-East thus, leading to instability, the possibility of war, and the weakening of US's control in the region.

Terrorism

The United States' priorities in the Middle-East and its overall strategy have only changed momentarily during G. W. Bush's Presidency following the terrorist attack on 9/11. President Bush's statement "you are either with us or the terrorists" perfectly summarizes the "War on Terror" (Atlas, 2012, 356). The "War on Terror" meant a shift in the United States' approach in the Middle-East, going from a pure realist strategy towards a more ideological one, where the use of force is seen as an appropriate tool not only to safeguard

US' interest but also to protect its ideological beliefs (Atlas, 2012, 359). After the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, the US' approach in the Middle-East changed. In fact, if in the years prior to the attack the strategy was either based on encouraging regional allies to take the lead during conflicts or to adopt a containment strategy, in the first years of the 2000s President Bush opted for a more direct approach based on military intervention and unilateral operations (Saltzman, 2017, 52). The US's intervention in Afghanistan and the War in Iraq is the product of the above-mentioned approach. Arguably, the focus on terrorism and the strategy adopted to counter it during Bush's administration served two main purposes. Firstly, it allowed the US to resolve the long-standing Iraqi problem with the removal of Saddam's regime (Pagliarulo, 2016, 9) Secondly, by weakening regional terrorist groups it aimed at reducing possible destabilizing factors in allied countries. For instance, since the attack on 9/11, the US has clearly focused on fighting terrorist groups such Al-Qaeda, responsible for the attack on the World Trade Centre. More recently, the US has focused on the fight against DAISH, also known as the Islamic State (Sanati, 2016, 134). An organization such Al-Qaeda, not only has directly attacked the US but, has also supported insurgencies in countries like Algeria, Iraq, and Yemen. Whereas the Islamic States has been linked with movements in North Africa and Afghanistan (Bayman, 2016, 20). In the end, the ideological approach served very realistic purposes but is also changed the perception of the US and led to great instability in the region. On the other hand, the Obama administration approach to the Middle-East was characterized by a shift back to the traditional realistic approach and the emergence of the issue of democratization. Considering, that direct threats to the United States seem to have lessened, as suggested by the weakening of Al-Qaeda following the death of Bin Laden, the absence of further terrorist attacks on American soil, and the effects of the Arab Spring in 2011, the situation required a different approach in dealing with historical issues and new ones like the democratization problem (Bayman, 2016, 20) (Krieg, 2016, 107).

Democratization

The issue of democratization was not present during Bush's administration but, the chosen ideological approach required the President to exploit the US traditional role as the exporter and defender of democracy to legitimize his agenda. Previously, the US has

always embraced a more realist strategy in the Middle-East and thought of the region as an exception to their global standing as the promoters and supporters of democracy. The belief was that the Middle-East was not fertile soil for any democratic movement and that the stability of the region was more valuable than promoting democracy (Bayman, 2016,15). After the relative failure in democratizing Iraq and the Bush Presidency's endeavors in the region, the Obama's administration side-lined the issue of democratization favoring the US' traditional goal. Interest in supporting democratic movements resurfaced with Arab Springs in 2011 (Bayman, 2016,15). Obama's foreign policy strategy was the polar opposite of that of the Bush administration, turning away from Bush's transformational and interventionist policies instead, aligned more with the realistic approaches of previous Presidents (Gerges, 2013, 300). The 2009 financial crisis and the general discontent of the American public towards the protracted war in Iraq, led President Obama to focus more on domestic issues than on foreign policy thus, his strategy was very much informed by the internal demands of the country. Concerning the Middle-East, this translated into a shift in strategies going from direct military intervention and presence to focus more on soft power, multilateralism, and support for regional allies (Krieg, 2016,103). During his first mandate, President Obama's primary focus in the Middle-East became the normalization of the US' relationship with the Muslim world, which had been severed by the Bush administration. To this end, Obama gave several speeches on his willingness to restore a positive perception of the US in the region, as was the case during the famous 2009 speech in Cairo (Gerges, 2013, 303-304). However, as the Middle-East became of secondary importance with regards to domestic issues, it also was not the priority in the President's foreign policy agenda. With the exception of, disengagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration primary focus was on South-East Asia and the rising tension there thus, the US's focus in the Middle-East went back to there and original and constant interest in the free flow of oil and stability of the market, supposedly done through different mediums which, ideally did not include direct engagement (Krieg, 2016, 105). This has meant delegating combatting terrorist groups to regional allies, and also cooperating with perceived enemy countries, such as Iran, on issues in which the US was not willing to directly intervene. For instance, the US has delegated to Iran's Revolutionary Guards the fight against ISIS in Iraq (Krieg, 2016, 106). The issue of democratization become more prominent during

the Arab Spring but was always overshadowed by Obama's central-realistic approach and the focus on the free flow of oil and market stability. Arguably, democratization became an instrument of the Obama administration to ensure stability in the region rather than an ideological objective. As previously mentioned, the US has always regarded the Middle-East as an exception in their foreign policy approach which, usually includes the exportation of democracy. This has led the US to back autocratic regimes in order to achieve stability and protect access to energy resources (Gerges,2013, 307). Observing the events that took place during the Arab Springs in 2011 and President Obama's strategies, conclusions could be made that there had been a shift in the realist approach but, as further analysis has shown, this has not been the case. In particular, the case study of Egypt and Bahrain sustain this argument. Egypt could be misinterpreted as an example of the US moving away from autocrats and supporting democratic movements on an ideological basis. However, since the 1970s, the autocratic regime in Egypt, led by leader Hosni Mubarak, had been a close ally of the US in the region, it ensured stability, collected intelligence on terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda, and sustained the United States' position towards Iran (Atlas,2012, 364). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that during the 18 days of unrest in Egypt the US did not take an active role in supporting citizens' demands for democracy. (Gerges,2013, 307). The Obama administration was more preoccupied with the possible instability that the fall of Mubarak could bring to the US's longstanding ally. Support for the democratic movement was given only after the fall of the regime seemed inevitable. It came from the fear of backlash for not having supported it and resulting potential loss of Egypt as a close ally. Thus, the US choice of cutting ties with Mubarak was not, as it was perceived, the historical US promotion of democratic movements, but it originated from a realistic approach and the assumption that the regime would have fallen, and that the US had to be on the side of the winner. Subsequently, when the time was right the US through hard and soft power means ultimately backed the democratic movements, demanding Mubarak to resign and for calling for free election (Atlas,2012, 365) (Gerges,2013, 307-308). The Obama administration had realized the inevitable success of the democratic movement. Therefore, the President needed to ensure a positive relationship between the United States and Egypt, failure to do so could result in making the newly elected President Morsi, from the Muslim Brotherhood movement, resent the US thus, losing one of the US longest standing ally in the Middle-

East. As the most populous country in the region, and considering its geopolitical importance, the US could afford to not have a productive relationship with the newly elected government (Atlas,2012, 366). Therefore, supporting democratization seems to have been a strategic choice to ensure the stability in the region, once again the Obama administration had pursued a realist approach hiding behind ideological reasoning.

Obama's realist approach becomes even more apparent in his dealing with Bahrain during the Arab Springs. For the last 200 years, Bahrain has been ruled by a Sunni monarchy that has reigned over a majority Shi'ite population. In fact, Shi'ite citizens account for 70% of the total population. When in 2011 Shi'ite protestors were met with brutal repression, with the aid of Saudi Arabia, the United States found itself at a crossroad, either defending human rights by condemning the Monarchy or pursue national interest and stability. (Atlas,2012, 375-377). Although, it is a small country Bahrain has a fundamental strategic role in the region. it is an important factor in the Arabia-Iran ongoing acrimony and it is a military hub for the US by hosting the Fifth Fleet (Atlas,2012, 375-377). The potential rise to power of the Shi'ite faction could lead to a shift in the country alignment, bringing it on the side of Iran. Subsequently, it would have meant the loss of control over important oil reserves. Thus, the Obama administration favored a realistic approach over an ideological one. After a short embargo, as a response to the brutal repression of the protests, the US continued their amicable relations with Bahrain as proven by the signing of a deal for the export of American military weapons worth 53 billion dollars. Ultimately, the Obama Presidency was characterized by a realist approach with a focus on stability and improving US image in the Middle-East, democratization was a tool to achieve those objectives.

Therefore, with the only exception of the Bush administration in the early 2000s the USA strategy in the Middle-East has been quite consistent. It involved protecting its main interest in the free-flow of oil thought maintaining stability. US' efforts in opposing nuclear proliferation in the region have also been instrumental to the protection of their primary interests, as was the case with their objectives in combatting terrorism and aiding democratic movements. Thus, the United States position regarding the JCPOA must be understood in light of these interests and as a policy adopted to achieve them. The USA has historically adopted a realistic approach, augmenting the US' role in the agreement thought ideological lenses would be inconsistent with the US' strategies.

The alliance with Israel

Another important factor in understanding the United States' position with regards to the JCPOA is its historical alliance with Israel. Israel has been both an important ally and has played a fundamental role in the US' Middle-East strategy. The close relationship between the two countries dates back to the 1960s and the protection of the Jewish State remains one of the key US interests. In fact, the alliance between the US and Israel serves two main purposes, one based on ideological reasoning and the other on the well-known US' realist approach. From an ideological stand-point, the alliance with Israel is rooted in the shared values between the two countries. The United States has historically considered Israel a natural ally in the Middle-East on the basis that the Jewish State is the only country they consider to be a proper democracy (Bayman, 2016, 13). Secondly, based on a more realist view, both countries have historically found commonality in the recognition of enemies in the region. In the 1960s they both opposed pro-Soviet regimes, like Egypt, while in more recent years they have agreed on the threat posed by Iran and on the rise of several Islamic terrorist groups (Bayman, 2016, 13). Thus, Israel represents an important ally in opposing US' enemies in the Middle-East, while at the same time it involved a great sense of responsibility for the US, who should be ready to assist their long-term ally in the region in the event of conflicts. Arguably, the US has thought of Israel as a possible stabilizing force in the region, a counterbalance to other regimes but, assisting Israel in maintaining its standing has required considerable efforts. Israel's involvement in the Palestinian conflict and alleged violation of international treaties has put the alliance under pressure. Nevertheless, the United States' commitment towards Israel remained incredibly consistent, they have maintained a close security relationship with the Jewish State and ensured the military supremacy of the latter in the region. To this end, defense companies from both countries took part in various cooperation programs, such as the Arrow and Arrow II projects, as well as, worked together to create the "Iron Dome" system, including the stockpiling of US materials on Israeli's soil and the have shared weaponry systems (Bayman, 2016, 6). Despite, any possible issue arising from Israel's behavior in the region the close alliance has been also guaranteed through the work of extremely influencing pressure groups within the United States. The alliance with Israel has become so consequential in American politics, facilitated by the work of

Jewish lobbyist groups, that no president has been able to distance itself from the country. President Obama's backlash after the signing of the JCPOA is an example of how deep-rooted the friendship between the two states is. In particular, some electorate groups have been deeply influential in strengthening the relations between the two countries, namely the American Jewish Community, with its close relationship with the Republican party, and the white evangelical electorate, the combination of these two powerful entities has ensured enduring support for the Jewish State through the years (Bayman, 2016,13). The strength and endurance of the alliance with Israel have been made particularly clear during the first term of the Obama administration. In President Obama's foreign policy agenda, the changes to the US 'approach in the Middle-East also included a shift in the country's relationship with Israel. The focus on multilateralism, the will to mend the relationship with Arab states, and the overall central-realist approach resulted in the President involved in the peace-keeping process between Israel and Palestine, as well as, his willingness to sign an agreement with the Islamic Regime in Iran (Saltzman, 2017, 52). Particularly, in light of the President's effort to restore the US' reputation with Arab states and the Muslim world, the privileged relationship between the US and Israel was seen as detrimental to the US engagement and efforts in the Middle-East. Thus, the Obama administration's strategy was to pressure Israel to accept a peaceful two-state resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to appease the Arab allies, which, predictably raised concerns and discontent with the Jewish State (Saltzman, 2017, 52). During his first mandate, President Obama was able to obtain some positive results, in particular with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel had accepted to participate in a round of negotiations. Nevertheless, with the Democratic Party's loss of control of the Congress, the administration failed to achieve any meaningful results with regards to the peace-making process. In particular, the ongoing negotiating process with Iran has played an important role in Israel's reluctance to go forward with the peace-making process. At the same time, pressure from both side of the Isle, in particular by the Republican Party and the Jewish Community, has led to the failure of President Obama's strategy towards Israel and only led to the eroding of the bilateral relationship between the two countries (Strategic Comments, 2016,2). The strong popular and political support for the alliance has played a considerable part in the rejection and in the unpopularity of the deal, especially within republicans. The belief in the commitment of the US towards Israel is

so deep-rooted in American politics that, any attempt, being it direct or indirect, to undermine or weaken such alliance is seen as contrary to the US' values and has given rise to strong opposition from both parties. In addition to that, President Obama's foreign policy agenda in the Middle-East, especially his focus on Arab countries and the pressure put on Israel has made the JCPOA the perfect target for criticism. The signing of the deal was made to be a political tool exploited by directly linking the US' involvement in the deal with anti-Israel stances. The countless negative articles written by media platforms, especially those associated with the Republican Party, like the well-known Fox News, with titles such as "Trump killing deeply flawed Iran deal is the right move" or "Iran Nuclear Deal much worse than experts predicted", played a part in the instability of the agreement and ultimately led to the US withdrawal.

The United States, Iran and the JCPOA

For the United States, the JCPOA is the result of several years of negotiations, setbacks, and strong opposition from Congress. As previously mentioned, the Obama administration's failure to reach a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the resulting tension between the two countries was cleverly exploited by the Republican Party and the interested lobbyist groups, in order to undermine the negotiation process and the validity of the deal with Iran. This had led Iran to deal to be viewed as a foreign policy loss rather than a diplomatic achievement (Strategic Comments, 2016,2). However, the Obama administration's agenda towards Iran and the JCPOA are well in line with the realist approach historically followed by the United States. The relations between Iran and the USA have been characterized by the confrontational approach of both parties. Since 1979 both countries have been at odds with each other with Iran being the main US' source of concerns in the Middle-East. Whether, in terms of securing the free flow of oil, the stability of the oil market, the non-proliferation objective, or the fight against terrorism, Iran has been at the center of the United States foreign policy agenda. Thus, since the Islamic revolution, Iran has been perceived as a threat to the US' interests. The biggest US concern with regards to Iran is their inability to control the regime's choices, the USA does not have any influence over the decision-making process of the

Islamic Regime. In fact, Iran was the first real independent actor in the Gulf region, it has strongly rejected foreign influence and has identified the US as its natural enemy (Sanati, 2014, 127-128). This had led several US administrations to adopt a containment strategy based on economic sanctions and the political isolation of the regime (Sanati, 2014,128). In addition to, being an independent actor in the region, Iran has access to considerable oil and natural gas reserves while its geographical positioning makes the country a potential threat to the free flow of oil and the stability of the oil market. In addition, Iran has supported terrorist groups in the Middle-East, such as Hamas and Hizbollah, and has shown intentions to develop nuclear weapons. (Özcan and Özdamar, 2009, 125). Therefore, Iran is a threat to all the United States' interests in the Middle-East thus, finding a solution to the problem became of prominent importance. Despite, both states have perceived the other as enemies, this has not prevented the two countries from engaging in negotiations and cooperating on strategic issues such as the stabilization of Iraq, the fight against ISIS in Syria and the Taliban's in Afghanistan, as well, anti-drug trafficking efforts (Sanati, 2014, 134). The realist approach of several US administrations has made cooperation possible despite the ideological disagreements. The signing of the JCPOA relied on this framework of understanding of foreign policy regarding the Middle-East. Since neither the US nor Iran can afford a war with each other, cooperation and finding a diplomatic solution has been the US chief option (Sanati, 2014, 134). Therefore, while President Obama's foreign policy focus has shifted towards South-East Asia, the US' interests in the Middle-East remained unchanged. Additionally, after the US' military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan during Bush's administration, direct military intervention in the region became an undesirable option for President Obama, while maintaining stability in the region remained of primary importance. Thus, the JCPOA became a valuable option for the Obama administration in the absence of other solutions. Moreover, even though new technologies have ensured the US energy self-reliance, the importance of the Middle-East resources will keep growing with time. As developing countries will demand more energy such as, in the case of China and India, the Middle-East is expected to provide around 70% of world export of oil by 2040, while the US is predicted to lower its dependence on the region by 50% in 2035. In addition, the USA is expected to become an important exporter of energy goods. Thus, as global dependence on OPEC countries will grow, as well as, the US interest in becoming an exporter, the

stability of the energy market and the Middle-East in general, will continue to be the main US' interests in the region (Bayman, 2016, 7). Therefore, another important aspect that has led to the signing of the JCPOA resided in the long-term US' expectation regarding the role of Middle-Eastern countries and the US future role in the energy market. The JCPOA, from the United States' perspective, is a way to control one possible instability factor in the region, namely Iran's nuclear development. In fact, the agreement is only concerned with the halt of the enrichment of uranium and does not take into consideration any other foreign policy disagreement between the parties and it is a way to start the process of normalization of the relations between the US and Iran since the rising of tension since the beginning of the 2000s. Considering the important role Iran has played in the USA foreign policy agenda through the decades and the domestic issues President Obama had to face during his terms, the signing of the JCPOA is consistent with the US historic approach (Strategic Comments, 2016,2). However, it also emphasizes the relevance the domestic climate in the USA plays in its foreign policy decision-making. Arguably, President Trump's strategy answers to the same logic as the Obama administration's chosen direction, it relied on domestic constraints while keeping in line with historic interests.

President Trump foreign policy strategy

The analysis of the interests and approaches adopted by various administrations have brought to light the remarkable consistency in interest and approaches that consecutive US administrations have maintained with regards to the Middle-East, but it has also highlighted the decisive role the President may have in defining the overall strategy, as was the case during the Bush administration. This has had remarkable consequences on how the US behaves internationally. However, it is important to notice that Presidents do have limitations, President Obama's failure regarding the Israeli- Palestinian conflict has been in part due to domestic constraints (Strategic Comments, 2016,2). Equally, President Trump's foreign policy approach has been deeply influenced by domestic actors, and in particular by its party, the necessity to appeal to his base, and the role of pressure groups. It is definitely difficult to assess Trump's Middle-East stance, before his election President

Trump bolstered the slogan “America First”, in which he expressed his intention to focus on American domestic issues. President Trump’s rhetoric suggested that his approach would bring the US out of the multilateral political forums going back to an Isolationist stance (Krieg 2017, 145). Initially, from a foreign policy perspective, the Trump administration's main focus was ISIS and the containment of Iran. Thus, keeping in line with the Conservative Christian faction of the Republican Party, it followed the belief that Islamic extremism was the main US’ concerned in the region (Krieg 2017, 2016). In particular, with regards to Iran, President Trump’s positions have been clear since his presidential campaign. During his rallies, he spoke negatively of President Obama's foreign policy achievements and particularly on the JCPOA and the relations with Israel (Strategic Comments, 2017, 2). There are two aspects of considerable importance in the foreign policy strategy of the Trump administration, firstly the need to respect his campaign promises to appease his base, and secondly, the rollback of President Obama’s approach to the Middle-East. President Trump was considered the most unlikely candidate to win the elections in 2016 and was the predicted loser in the confrontation with Hilary Clinton. However, he was able to attract key sections of the American electorate and was able to exploit the Republic Party's strength in capitalizing on its voters’ loyalty and guaranteed to turn out on election day. From the outset President Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan touched upon the discontent of those white traditional Americans until it reached two of the most important electorate groups, the evangelicals and the white Catholics (Mara et al, 2019, 86). Evangelical and white Catholics make up respectively 26% and 23% of the electorate, they defined themselves as “values voters”, looking for candidates that will promote low taxation, strong support for Israel, and strong defense. (Mara et al, 2019, 94-95). Trump runs on all the deeply important issues for evangelicals and Catholics including limiting LGBT rights, reproductive rights, and education, making his strategy effective and ultimately successful. In November, 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump, a percentage higher than that obtained by Bush in his elections, and obtained 60% of white Catholics’ votes. President Trump was also was able to secure the votes of the so-called Alt-Right (Alternative-Right), a far-right group, which finds its origin in fascism. In recent years, the group, composed of white nationalists, was responsible for the “Birther movement” against President Obama and is a key section of the Tea Party (Mara et al, 2019, 86- 90).

Looking at the electorate that has made Trump President it comes to no surprise that one of his Middle-East principal interests was that of showing strong support for Israel. During his campaign, he runs on highly sensitive issues such as moving the embassy to Jerusalem and the intention of vetoing any initiative, declaration, or agreement at the United Nations against Israel. This also included the withdrawal from the JCPOA (Strategic Comments, 2017, 2) (Mara et al, 2019, 96). What seemed like pure rhetoric during the campaign trail became real policies, by 2018 the US embassy was moved to Jerusalem and the US withdrew from the JCPOA (Mara et al, 2019, 105). The success of President Trump's policies was also ensured by the appointment to his cabinet of key figures who favored the alliance with Israel. Particularly relevant were the appointment as the Ambassador to Israel of David Friedman, a well-known supporter and contributor of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, as well as, a stern objector to the two-state solution (Strategic Comments, 2017, 2-3). Worth mentioning is also the role of Trump son in law, an adviser to the President and an observant Jew, Jared Kushner, who was also responsible for key foreign policy decisions regarding the Middle-East (Strategic Comments, 2017, 2-3). Arguably, maintaining campaign promises and secure the interests of his electorate, have greatly influenced the foreign policy agenda of the Trump administration. The JCPOA is a clear example of such constrictions. Adding to that, pro-Israel lobbyist groups and the ability of countries like Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to exploit President Trump's ambitions, through the injection of a copious amount of money into advocacy groups, has ensured the slandering of the JCPOA, effectively influencing the Congress, as well as, the general public perception of the deal (Simon, 2018, 13-14). What has emerged is a new approach towards Iran. Furthermore, the Trump administration has advocated for a rollback of President Obama's policies. President Trump approach involved going back to the containment strategy, to effectively relegate Iran back within its borders (Strategic Comments, 2017,3). President Trump's trip to Saudi-Arabia and the \$110 billion arms deal with them, seems to point to an alignment of the US towards its allies, and it suggests possible preparations for an open conflict with Iran. (Strategic Comments, 2018,2). In 2018 President Trump rhetoric on the Middle-East, suggested his readiness to assist US allies in a conflict with Iran, even though Iran had been in full compliance with the JCPOA. The administration insisted on the destabilizing role of the Islamic Regime in the region while considering

the Iran deal as insufficient and useless to reach stability. (Morgana, 2018, 1-3). To this end, a 2018 State Department testimony reveals President Trump's intention to ensure a US military presence in north-east Syria with the objective of lessening Iran's influence over the country (Simon, 2018, 18). Additionally, in 2018 Trump demanded a rise in the US military budget, the requested increase surpassed even that of the Carter and Regan administrations (Simon, 2018, 19). This coupled with the unilateral approach favored by Trump, disparaging remarks made on the NATO alliance and on traditional European allies (Yarhi-Milo, 2018, 68), likely signified the administration stepping away from its previous non-interventionist policy and instead readying for possible military conflicts. More recently, in 2020, the Trump administration intensified its policies towards the Middle-East through significant proposals such as, the "Peace for Prosperity" project, which aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As expected, the accord disproportionately favored the Israelis' requests, seemingly ignoring all Palestinians requirements. According to this proposal, Israel would obtain the majority of the city of Jerusalem, the redistribution of territories in the West Bank, the majority of which would be under Israel control while the latter would recognize the Palestinians a small demilitarized state. The proposal never came to fruition. Lastly, in August of 2020, the Trump administration revealed the signing of diplomatic agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain - the so-called "Abraham Accord" - described by the administration as a historic accord and a step towards peace in the Middle-East. (Dentice, 2020, 1-3). The normalization of the relation between the parties represented a further step towards the centralization of the role of Israel in the Middle-East and the strengthening of the containment strategy towards Iran. It is important to notice that the agreement failed to include Saudi-Arabia and Oman. The absence of both countries is noteworthy, without them the agreement seems to be lacking an important component to its effectiveness. Moreover, the loss of the 2020 presidential elections and the democratic majority in both the Senate and the house of representatives makes it unlikely the completion of President Trump's plan. If President Trump had won the 2020 elections the US position towards the JCPOA would have remained unchanged. President Trump's stance on Iran was unlikely to change in fact, to appeal again to the evangelical and the Christian voters keeping with his 2016 position was essential. Thus, the possible re-signing of nuclear accord by the US was unlikely to happen, at the same time, a new

agreement without the USA would have been difficult to reach considering the position taken by the US and the effect on its close allies, namely the European Union. However, the victory of Joe Biden has opened new venues for a possible future agreement.

The Biden - Harris Administration

After the 2020 elections, President elect Joe Biden has yet to comment on his stances on Iran and whether he will make the USA re-enter the deal. However, some considerations can already be made based his campaign propositions and in light of the Democratic control of the Senate and the House of Representatives which, has made possible to sign international treaties with the approval of Congress thus, making the withdrawal from them more difficult for other administrations. The 2015 deal with Iran was never approved by Congress and instead the US, under President Obama, joined the JCPOA through an executive agreement which, can was easily rectified by President Trump thus, control over Congress gives President Biden an incredible advantage compared to President Obama's mandate, he will be able to joint treaties counting on the approval on Congress, giving treaties stability. According to an essay written by Joe Biden his plans towards Iran are as follows:

“As president, I will renew our commitment to arms control for a new era. The historic Iran nuclear deal that the Obama-Biden administration negotiated blocked Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Yet Trump rashly cast the deal aside, prompting Iran to restart its nuclear program and become more provocative, raising the risk of another disastrous war in the region. I’m under no illusions about the Iranian regime, which has engaged in destabilizing behavior across the Middle East, brutally cracked down on protesters at home, and unjustly detained Americans. But there is a smart way to counter the threat that Iran poses to our interests and a self-defeating way [...]. Tehran must return to strict compliance with the deal. If it does so, I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it, while more effectively pushing back against Iran’s other destabilizing activities.” (Biden,2020, 15)

There are a few elements that need to be taken into consideration with regards to challenges the Biden-Harris administration will have to face with regards to the Islamic Regime and the JCPOA. Firstly, Iran's willingness to adhere to the deal's provisions seems to have considerably lessened. After President Trump's four years in office, the relationship between the USA and Iran has been left strained, and new developments suggest that a great diplomatic effort will be required, from the new administration, to reinstate to the JCPOA. In fact, as of January 2021 Iran, has declared its intention to restart the enrichment of uranium up to the 20% required for medical purposes (Dell'Aguzzo, 2021, 1). Previously, in September 2020, the Trump administration had already expressed its intentions to reinstate UN sanctions as where before the 2015 deal. Although it is unlikely that the US have any legal ground on which to impose their will on the rest of the Security Council, the statement has surely played a part in Iran's decision to restart the enrichment of uranium, furthering eroding the relationship between Iran, the USA and the western world in general (Dell'Aguzzo, 2020, 1). However, perhaps the most harmful action undertaken by the Trump administration, with regards to the survival of the JCPOA, has been the US killing of Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020, leader of the powerful Revolutionary Corps (Dell'Aguzzo, 2020, 1). As previously mentioned, the Revolutionary Corps has gained a great amount of political power within the country and no foreign policy decision can be expected to be taken without their consent. The killing of their leader, not only has made Soleimani a martyr-like figure in the country but has reinforced the belief that western powers, particularly the US, are an evil entity whose goal is to control and exploit Iran (Arango at all., 2020, 1). Since the death of Soleimani, and indeed since the US withdrawal from the agreement, the tension between the two countries has been raising, incidents such as, in March 2020 with the launch of their first military satellite, have led to the expectation of a military conflict in the near future. However, an open military conflict is still an unlikely choice as the US interests in the region would be better served by a diplomatic resolution to the tensions. To this end, the Biden administration has a unique opportunity to roll back President Trump's policies. Realistically, Iran should favor a diplomatic resolution, considering the economic reforms that are still needed and the difficult situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the Biden campaign has been very clear on the conditions necessary for the US to open dialogue again. The full compliance with the JCPOA is an important

pre-condition to the US re-entering the agreement. Thus, the dilemma does not reside in whether the JCPOA would be favorable for both countries but, lies in their political will and the domestic constraints. In the case of Iran, the question of whether or not Rouhani will be able to once again convince the country's leadership, the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards, that the agreement is indeed the regime's best option and that ideology should be once again sidelined in favor of a pragmatic approach. Iran's announcement in January 2021, seems to suggest its unwillingness to remain in the deal as it is. Since Soleimani's death, the Regime has cleverly exploited his persona to gain the public's support on the leadership's ideological based policies, impeding any future diplomatic efforts and the survival of the agreement. Furthermore, as of January 2021, both Iran and Iraq have requested the arrest of President Trump, accused of violating international laws after the killing of Soleimani. Both countries and the UN Special Rapporteur for extrajudicial executions, have found President Trump in violation of international laws. In addition, following the arrest warrant, the new leader of the Revolutionary Corps, Esmail Ghaani, has requested the US to forgo its involvement in the Middle-East (Meloni, 2021, 1). Both the arrest warrant and Ghaani's request suggest the lack of willingness from Iran to take part in new negotiations regarding the JCPOA. Most likely, the country will try to fully resume its nuclear ambitions counting on the unwillingness of the Biden administration to engage in a military conflict. Furthermore, the idealistic faction of Iran's government, represented by exponents from the Revolutionary Corps, will likely continue to oppose any cooperation with the US, and probably with western powers. Iran's isolation during the Covid Pandemic will also play a part in their perception of the western world. Certainly, President Trump's conduct during his four years in office has deeply weakened the already fragile cooperation between the two countries while he also failed to build a meaningful coalition between other Middle-Eastern countries. A second important aspect, regarding the foreign policy strategy of the Biden administration, resides in domestic constraints it is likely to face. Firstly, the current health crisis will force the Biden administration to focus more on domestic issues rather than on foreign policy, the questionable approach adopted by the Trump administration has made the pandemic fertile soil for political debate, leaving the next administration to deal with the consequences of months of unclear directions, public discontent and a great deal of general skepticism. Furthermore, the rising social tensions

within the country will likely require President Biden's attention, which could lead the US either, to temporarily sidelines foreign policy issues such as the Iran deal or, could push the administration to find a diplomatic solution sooner rather than later. Arguably, considering Biden's rhetoric during the presidential campaign, his foreign policy primary interests will likely be the strengthening of the US' traditional alliances, re-joining the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization. The appointment of former Secretary of State John Kerry is a sign of the Biden administration's commitment towards the climate issue and the importance that will be placed on it during his first term (Peter Beaumont, 2020,1) (Milman, 2020, 1). In addition, the Biden administration is expected to face a great deal of backlash both from the Republican Party and powerful pro-Israel groups that will, in all probability, launch campaigns to oppose the signing of the deal. Lastly, President Biden is set to face a very divided country, as demonstrated by the attack on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2001. The newly elected President will likely try to avoid embarking on foreign policy decisions that could be exploited by the opposition to foment the ongoing civil unrest, worsening the current divide in the country (Diletti, 2020, 1). Therefore, a diplomatic solution to the ongoing tension between the United States and Iran, as well as, Biden's declared intention, will bring the administration to re-evaluate the JCPOA with the intention of rejoining. However, the new administration will likely consider it a secondary objective and will focus its attention on the ongoing pandemic and on less controversial foreign policy decisions.

CHAPTER 3

THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union differs greatly from the United States with regards to the JCPOA. Because of its nature and possibilities, the European Union approach towards Iran and the Middle-East is characterized by a soft power approach, diplomacy and multilateralism. At the same time, the long-standing alliance with the US and the EU reliance on the former for security purposes has greatly influenced the current European Strategy towards the Middle-East. Although, officially the party's signatories of the JCPOA are the permanent member of the Security Council plus Germany, the European has been the *de facto* chief negotiator, representing its member states. In fact, the EU High Representative, first Javier Solana and then by Federica Mogherini, have represented the EU during the negotiation process, which has remained as the main actor responsible for the survival of deal. Therefore, the following analysis will take into consideration the European Union foreign policy approach, considering its strength and limitation with regards to the Middle-East and Iran. Subsequently, the chapter will focus on the European Union role in the making of the agreement, the consequence of the United States withdrawal and the recent developments.

The European Union foreign policy

The institutional structure

One of the main differences between the European Union and all the other parties to the JCPOA is the uniqueness of its foreign policy approach, which has to rely on a complex system of coordination between the member states and requires the EU to rely almost solely on its soft power and on diplomacy. Despite the autonomy EU's institutions have gained since the Lisbon Treaty in 2007, all foreign policy decisions must be taken with the approval of the member states, relying on an intergovernmental approach. Thus,

cooperation and coordination between member states is the most distinctive characteristic of the European Union (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 13). Furthermore, the EU is also limited by the standards and principles to which it aspires. Resulting in further restrictions and has undermined the EU's foreign policy capability. In its own words, the EU defines its foreign policy approach as:

“The EU's joint foreign and security policy, designed to resolve conflicts and foster international understanding, is based on diplomacy and respect for international rules. Trade, humanitarian aid, and development cooperation also play an important role in the EU's international role. [...] The EU has no standing army, so relies on ad hoc forces contributed by EU countries” (Europa.eu)

Therefore, in developing its foreign policy strategy, the EU must abide by the instruments and the system imposed by its treaties. While negotiating as a single entity has been a great advantage for the member states, it also implies a certain amount of limitations in the scope its actions can take. In particular, the EU foreign policy approach is comprised of a complex system of institutions responsible for specific foreign policy issues. Particularly relevant are: The Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP), the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the External Action, and the External Dimensions of International Policies (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 11-12). The CFSP is responsible for the development and implementation of EU diplomatic issues. This is done under the supervision of the High Representative and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Firstly, introduced by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, this “agency” has become more important in the last two decades, decisions are taken within an intergovernmental system thus, requiring approval and cooperation of all member states. (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 12). Similarly, the CSDP is responsible for all matters regarding civil or military interventions. Operational since the beginning of the 2000s, it fully depends on the approval and interests of the member states (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 12). On the other hand, the EU External Action and External Dimensions of Internal Policies abide by the community method thus, concerning all institutional bodies of the EU (Commission, Council, Parliament, and the European Court of Justice). The External Dimensions is concerned mainly with issues related to trade, development, economic and financial cooperation, sanctions, humanitarian aid, and international agreements.

Whereas the External Dimension of Internal Policies deals with issues such as energy, the environment, migration, and asylum policies (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 12-16). Concerning, the EU's foreign policy principles, the approach is mostly based on promoting multilateralism, considered to be an effective method for achieving its foreign policy objectives. As an internationally recognized actor, the EU is a strong supporter of international organizations, as well as, believes in the full adherence to international norms. To this end, multilateralism has been declared, in 2003, as a key European Security strategy (Cronberg 2017;2018, 244). Arguably, the EU favors multilateralism because of its structural inability to pursue unilateral agreement of fundamental security issues. Thus, making the pursuit of foreign policy objectives, through multilateral forums, both a choice and an obligation. This has limited the EU scope of action resulting in the EU's deprivation of fundamental foreign policy tools, which could make the EU more than an actor relying on its soft power (Cronberg 2017;2018, 244). As per its statement, the EU does not have military capabilities, and it has to rely on the member states armies in order to undertake any military operation. It is arguably the most prominent structural limitation the EU has to face. To put things into perspective, the EU is currently engaged in 6 military operations, while Italy is engaged in 39 operations, the implications of not been able to promptly respond with military means, or to straighten its position because of the lack of it, has arguably become an impediment in the foreign policy-making of the EU. Since the Cold War, European countries and the EU have been dependent on the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for their security. Failure by France, in 1950-1960, to make security one of the EU's primary interests, as well as, the recognition of the European Community as a civilian actor in the 1970s, have deeply shaped the European Union of today (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 20). Noticeably, the EU's dependency on NATO also implies a considerable US' direct, and indirect, influence over the decision-making process of the EU, especially during multilateral negotiation in which both take part in. The JCPOA is no exception to such influence, decision taken in Washington have a great impact on the decision or capabilities of the EU regarding the deal. Therefore, the EU's lack of military capabilities and the US' influence, have been two of the most relevant factors in the making the EU's foreign policy agenda particularly, with regards to the Middle-East and Iran. Thus, for instance, in cases in which the US has been the proponent of regime changes and of direct military

interventions, such as in Iraq, the EU has both been more cautious in confronting Saddam while, also not opposing the US' approach as member states became actively involved in the conflicts (Kagan, 2002, 10). Certainly, the lack of military capabilities has influenced all aspects of the EU's foreign policy, from its approach to its main objectives.

Foreign policy strategies

The current foreign policy approach, namely the European Global Strategy (EUGS) was adopted by the European Union in 2016, following the failure of the previous strategy, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), employed from 2004. The ENP was the main framework for all EU's foreign policies regarding its eastern and southern neighbors. The ENP's main purpose was to coax non-member neighbors to undergo economic, political, and social reforms with the aim to build, or strengthen, their democratic systems and to promote the rule of law and the respect of human rights (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 250-251). Coaxing neighbors was done under the prospect of economic partnerships and access to the European market through several levels of cooperation (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 250-253) (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 22). The EU believed that economic cooperation would eventually bring to political and social integration (Kagan, 2002, 18). Ultimately, the EU's main goal was to Europeanize its eastern and southern neighbors, ensuring Europe's stability and fostering economic growth (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 21). However, the ENP was partially a failure, as it was not able to produce meaningful structural reforms in the targeted countries. The main criticism made to the ENP was centered around its inability to effectively respond to conflicts, not giving countries adequate access to the EU market, and failure to improve mobility from partner countries to the UE (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014, 252). Most noticeably, the ENP failed to respond to the issues arising from the Arab Spring. In particular, Contrary to the US, whose main interests during the Arab Spring was the maintenance of stability and energy resources, the EU involvement in the Middle-East was more ambitious. In fact, the EU's Middle-Eastern agenda included security and political relations in addition to, economic interests such as trade and development (Perthes, 2011, 74). The EU posed itself as a defender and active supporter of democratic movements, often overlooking stability

concerns in name of democratization and the promotion of the EU's principle in the region. Thus, the EU had a high stake during the Arab Spring, both in terms of implementing its ambitions, as well as, securing its interests in the region. Failure in dealing with the Arab Spring, and the poor performances of the ENP, pushed the EU to reformulate its foreign policy strategy, towards a more realist stance. Therefore, since 2016 the EU has implemented the EUGS (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 23). The EUGS greatly differs from the ENP. Instead of, focusing on its normative and transformative powers, aiming to Europeanize its neighbors, the EUGS main aim is to address country-specific weaknesses (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 23). The catalyst of the EU's foreign policy shift has been the recent conflict in Crimea, the growing influence of non-state actors in the Middle-East, as well as, the rising of new global concerns such as terrorism, climate change, energy, and migration. To face these challenges, the EUGS is based on less ideological values, like democratization, and is instead focused on security, by supporting different actors, and takes into consideration the specificity of each case (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 27). Ultimately, the EU gave up on the idea that by democratizing neighboring countries, stability could be reached in the region. Thus, instead of democratizing other countries, today's approach is based on the idea of achieving resilience through what the EU defines as principle pragmatism. For the EU, resilience involves the ability to absorb shocks and adapt to them. In particular, to achieve these objectives the EU has emphasized the use of a bottom-up approach, which aims at supporting the cooperation between people and institutions. The main objectives are the fight against poverty, inequality, supporting locals in the reform of their justice systems, and strengthening the security and defense sector (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 31). To do this, the EU adopts the idea of principle pragmatism, meaning finding the balance between trying to export the EU's system and not actively engaged in other countries' domestic issues. The belief is that the EU should not seek to reach unlikely goals, no matter how desirable they might be, but instead, it aims at reaching realistic objectives. Thus, the EU supports non-member states only if asked to do so, without imposing the full subscription to the EU's model or in exchange for economic gains and market access (Giusti and Mirkina, 2019, 33-36). Ultimately, the EU's foreign policy is dependent on several constrictions and it has to take into consideration the foreign policy interests of its member state. At the same time, it has to work within a framework which, has recently

shifted from full structural changes within non-member countries to dealing with country-specific fragilities. In doing so, the EU has to abide by its values through the promotion of multilateral formats, diplomacy, the protection of human rights, and the rule of law. The difficulty is in the implementation of its foreign policy approach in problematic areas, such as the Middle-East, and on country-specific actions, as in the case of Iran.

The European Union approach to the Middle-East

There is some resemblance between the EU and the United States' interests in the Middle-East, specifically, keeping the stability of the region and safe access to energy resources. However, because of the EU's institutional structure, the foreign policy tools at its disposal, and the general principles it subscribes to, there are many differences in the European Union approach if compared to the US. Firstly, the geographical vicinity of the EU to the Middle-East has made the formers highly sensitive to any disruption and instability happening in Middle Eastern countries, making security one of the main EU's interests. Secondly, the EU enjoys a substantial trading partnership with Middle-Eastern countries that goes beyond energy goods (Perthes, 2011, 74). Despite its interests, since 1993 the EU has never adopted a comprehensive and long-term strategy to deal with the challenges arising from the region, only including the Middle-East in their general Global Strategy (Osiewicz, 2019, 1). It has failed to exert its influence over the region, at the cost of its own interest. Particularly, problematic has been the EU's weak response to the Arab Spring and the related civil tensions it has fostered in the last few years. The conflict in Syria, the civil wars in Libya, Yemen, the civil unrest in Algeria and Iraq, as well as, the strengthening of extremist groups in the whole region, have already negatively impacted the EU's interests, both from a security and economic standpoint (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 102) (Zarhloule, 2019, 1). Negative implications such as the immigrant inflow, as well as, the terrorist attack on EU soil, the growth of ISIS, and the negative economic impact due to the oil embargo, are all consequences of the lack of response of the EU to the most relevant issues in the region (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 102).

Ultimately, the EU wants to avoid any situation that would have a destabilizing effect in the region, which should force the EU to take up a more active role to deal with the

negative consequences of an unstable Middle-East (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 102) (Geranmayeh, 2015, 2). Arguably, the EU stance with regards to the Middle-East is a passive approach, responding to issues when they become apparent without proactively trying to solve the underlying problems within the region (Osiewicz, 2019, 1). While the approach seems consistent with the EU's intention of not imposing its own belief on other partner countries, this strategy is the result of the limits the EU has to deal with in foreign policy matters. Firstly, the EU approach to the Middle-East is mostly made off bilateral agreements, without taking into consideration the region as a whole (Osiewicz, 2019, 1). Secondly, the EU has engaged in short-term policies addressing singular issues without taking into consideration the roots of the problems, such as in the case of the migration crisis, terrorism, and also the JCPOA (Zarhloule, 2019, 1). To this end, the EU approach seems similar to that of the US, they are addressing specific issues within the region, but without applying a pragmatic realistic approach that should address the underline problems in the Middle-East. Moreover, the EU is in a much different position than the US. Because of its wider interests and overall lack of conventional power, it has seemingly aligned its position to that of the US, leaving to the American ally the responsibility to guard the region's stability and only dealing with issues that have directly impacted the EU, passively waiting for a new issue to arise (Zarhloule, 2019, 1). This poses two problems for the EU. Firstly, with the US progressive withdrawal from the region, the EU will not be able to rely on its ally to exert a controlling influence over unstable countries, instead of having to rely on US allies in the region. Secondly, the US has always perused its own interests, following a realist approach, and has shown no sign of taking into consideration the interests of any other actor in the region, thus potentially enacting policies that would go against the EU's interests. The war in Iraq is one of those cases. On the other hand, Economic tools are currently the single most effective means at the EU disposal in the Middle-East and also one of the biggest interests. To put it into perspective, compared to the US the EU had three times the volume of the export to the region (Tilovska-Kechedji , 2018, 102). In fact, the EU is the primary trade partner of the whole MENA region, with trade between the two regions valued at roughly \$637 billion per year from 2014 to 2017, while the trade with the US is worth around \$137 billion. Furthermore, the European Commission has invested around \$8.2 billion every year from 2014 to 2017 in the region, towards development projects and humanitarian

aid. Additionally, the European Investment Bank has loaded more than \$2 billion in the same period of time and has made direct investments valued at around \$292 billion, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (\$31 billion) and in Egypt (\$46 billion) (Zarhloule, 2019, 1). Thus, the economic stakes for both regions are incredibly high and the economic leverage is the best tool at the EU disposal. Despite, the EU's economic prowess, it has not been able to gain meaningful political benefits from its endeavors (Zarhloule, 2019, 1). Arguably, the EU's approach does not represent the over-all importance the Middle-East has for the security and prosperity of the EU. Instead, the EU still heavily relies on the US to maintain stability in the region, while it deals with specific issues. Its structural limitation, mainly the lack of military power, has led the EU to adopt a passive stance without capitalizing even on its strongest tools. This has had negative consequences also on its dealing with Iran and the survival of the JCPOA.

The European Union and Iran

Despite its interests and the tools at its disposal, the EU strategy towards the Middle-East has brought few results. The EU's approach to the Islamic Republic is no different, the country's strategic importance is not adequately reflected in the EU's agenda. The failure in ensuring the effectiveness of the JCPOA is perhaps the most notable mistake made by the European Union. The lack of proactive policies, as well as, its deferential approach to the US in the region has made the survival of the agreement extremely difficult. The main problem is that the EU's approach towards Iran does not reflect the strategic role the latter has for the European Union. While sharing similar goals with the US, the EU relations with Iran are much more complex than the ones enjoyed by the American ally. Similarly to the US, the EU has considered Iran as one of the great destabilizing powers in the region, endangering several of its regional interests for decades. In particular, the invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, the crisis in Syria, as well as, its close relationship with a non-governmental organization like Hamas and Hezbollah has made Iran a potential threat (Geranmayeh, 2015, 2). Nevertheless, the EU has been open to

cooperation with the Islamic Regime on security issues relating to Syria and the rise of ISIS (Seeberg, 2016, 6). The EU's foreign policy limitations have curtailed its influence in the Middle-East, with the EU relying almost solely on economic tools. As a result, regional partners are fundamental from the European perspective. Thus, since Iran appears to be one of the only stable actors in the region, it has always retained the potential to become a strategic ally, a possibility the EU had never excluded in its dealings with the country. To this end, the JCPOA has been able to provide new avenues of cooperation between the two actors, ranging from common political issues in the region to security concerns. Considering Iran's role as a transit country and the EU is the largest market for opioids, drugs-trafficking related issues are just one of the potential common interests between the two countries (Constantin-Bercean, 2018, 192). As previously mentioned, the EU is one of the biggest trading partners for many Middle-Eastern countries. After the signing of the JCPOA, many European companies, such as Siemens, Daimler-Benz, and Bayer, have become interested in forming a trading partnership with Iran and gain access to its market. Reportedly, those companies, and many more with them, have also lobbied for the signing of the agreement (Shirvani and Vuković, 2015, 81). Conversely, from Iran's perspective, the EU is an important trading partner. Only in the last decade, Iran has exported one-third of its total production to the EU. Already, in 2008 the value of Iran's export to the EU was €11,3 billion. With the signing of the JCPOA, and subsequent lifting of the nuclear sanctions, the Iranian economy and its trade partnership with the EU, have shown clear signs of positive growth. Data from 2017 valued trades with Iran at €21 billion, with a rise in the average annual growth rate of 31.3%(2016-2017). In comparison, the average annual growth rate in 2013, before the signing of the deal, was 18.7%. Imports have doubled with an 83.9% increase in 2016-2017 making Iran the EU's 30th trading partner (Fiedler, 2018, 298). Thus, the economic relationship between the EU and Iran is beneficial to both countries and will serve as an important leverage for possible future negotiations regarding a new agreement.

The European Union, Iran and the energy issue

However, from the EU's perspective, its single most important interest in Iran is energy and more specifically the export of natural gasses and oil. The European Union is highly dependent on foreign export to meet its internal demand for energy. Although, each country within the EU has a different energy mix, the main country of import, for most, has consistently been Russia. This has made the EU susceptible to changes in provisions coming from the eastern neighbor. Thus, access to Iran's energy market would partly be a solution to its dependency on Russia (Bahgat, 2017,101).

The European Union energy mix is quite peculiar if compared to other countries. In 2013 it was able to produce 5.8% of the total world's energy production and consumed 12% (Bahgat, 2017,101). Only 45,8% of the EU's electricity demands derive from fossil fuels, roughly 41% less than the average of the rest of the world. Nuclear energy and renewable energy make up respectively 12,5% and 21.7%. The goal by 2030 is to produce 39% of electricity from fossil fuels, 22% from nuclear energy, and 26% from renewable energy (Bluszcz, 2016, 1354). The EU imports around 33.5% of its total demand of oil from Russia, 8.6% from Saudi-Arabia, 11.7% from Norway, 8.1% from Nigeria, 3.1% from Iraq. Natural gas was imported primarily from Russia (39%), 29,5% from Norway, 12.8% from Algeria, 6.7% from Qatar. (Bluszcz, 2016,1539). However, the tensions between Russia and Ukraine in 2009, and the crisis between the two in 2014, have demonstrated the fragility of the EU's reliance on its eastern neighbors. For instance, Germany depends on Russia for 40% of its natural gas imports, while 50% of Russia's natural gas passes through Ukraine, proving 16% of the EU total gas consumption. A possible embargo on Russia has been estimated, would make Germany rely completely on its domestic reserves within nine months (Shirvani and Vuković, 2015, 82). Therefore, diversifying its sources of energy has become of primary interest to the EU. Considering the EU's current situation, it comes as no surprise that the EU has been trying to form a partnership with Iran. Following, the signing of the JCPOA Iran and the EU have restarted their energy trade, only in 2018, 40% of Iran's oil exports were to EU's member states (Fiedler, 2018, 299). Importing energy from Iran is both economically and strategically advantageous for both Iran and the EU. Strategically Iran needs European investment and

technological assistance for its economic growth while, the EU needs Iranian reserves to reduce its dependency on Russia (Bahgat, 2017, 103). Clearly, economic tools can be very effective and they arguably hold the strongest effect on Iran, since the country needs European investments and heavily relies on the revenues from its exports to the EU's market. Thus, in possible future negotiations, the EU is expected to leverage them to ensure the survival of the deal or the signing of a new one. Concerning, Iran this would also serve as a deterrent for the country from engaging in destabilizing behaviors with respect to European partners in the region thus, acting as a stabilizing factor and ensuring the EU's economic endeavors (Geranmayeh, 2015, 6).

The JCPOA process and Nuclear Proliferation

The JCPOA has brought about several side effects on the relationship between the EU and Iran. Most notably, it has resolved one of the oldest EU's interests with regards to Iran, namely the nuclear proliferation issue. From the EU perspective, the signing of the deal put an end to almost 20 years of negotiating attempts on issues such as Human Rights, non-proliferation, terrorism, and the Middle-East peace process (Fiedler, 2018, 295). The Iran issue, within the EU, has undergone several changes in terms of its objectives, mostly to appease the interests of the other signatories. However, looking at the role of the EU in the making of the deal reveals Iran's centrality in the EU's foreign policy strategy and is perfectly exemplifies the changes in the European approach. Contrary to the US, since the rising to power of the Islamic Regime the EU has never completely cut ties with Iran. Europeans have always recognized the potential of maintaining positive relations with Iran, with the first diplomatic effort dating back to the 1990s. (Fiedler, 2018, 292). Initial talks between the two countries took place in 1992 and lasted till 1997. This first phase is commonly defined as the "Structural Dialogue" phase, with a focus on human rights (Fiedler, 2018, 295). Following a brief period of tension, talks continued in 1998 through the "Comprehensive Dialogue" approach, which included discussions on human rights, non-proliferation, terrorism, and the Middle-East peace process. However, the main focus was the signing of a trade and cooperation agreement. Up to this point, the EU's strategy was quite simple, offering the agreement

as a means to bring Iran closer to the EU and therefore being able to influence the country's decisions (Fiedler, 2018, 295). Nevertheless, the 2003 nuclear revelations halted any negotiations and the US response to the crisis forced the EU to change its strategy. As previously mentioned, the EU reliance on the US for security purposes has historically influenced the EU's foreign policy decisions. In the case of Iran, US influence was ensured by the adoption of sanctions towards the country which, also had a negative effect on the relations between the Regime and the EU (Fiedler, 2018, 294). The 2003 talks showed a shift in the EU's agenda, the main focus was now nuclear proliferation, rather than economic cooperation or human rights issues. At the time, the EU decided to offer technical assistance and trade cooperation with Iran in exchange for the halting of the enrichment of uranium; Iran accepted (Cronberg, 2017, 246). However, the presidential election of 2005 and the victory of the conservative, Ahmadinejad, resulted in Iran's refusal of the tabled proposal. Therefore, 2006 saw the first major shift in the EU approach towards Iran, with Iran's restarting of its nuclear program and the EU declaring their two yearlong engagement to be at an impasse, stating that any future talks needed to happen in the Security Council. Resolution 1696 of the Security Council (2006) called on Iran to halt the enrichment of uranium, failure to do so would have meant the implementation of economic sanctions. (Cronberg, 2017, 248). During this period the EU took on the role of coordinator, leading repeated rounds of negotiations with the P5+1 group which, disappointingly did not bring to any agreement (Cronberg, 2017, 248). It is worth remembering that, during this phase of negotiations the US had invaded Afghanistan and had initiated a war with Iraq thus, the EU efforts at this point were geared towards trying to avoid other conflicts in the region, as it would have furtherly undermine its security and interests. 2010-2013 brought another significant change in the EU's position towards the Iranian problem. This period was characterized by a rising of tensions between Iran and the P5+1 group. Failure in the previous decade to reach an agreement, as well as, the Iranian unwillingness to give up its nuclear program, brought the EU closer to the US' position, shifting the discourse more towards the latter's approach rather than the European's diplomatic one (Fiedler, 2018, 296).). From 2010 to 2012, several UN resolutions have imposed sanctions on Iran. Particularly, relevant during this rounds of sanctions has been the EU's decision to impose even stricter terms on Iran by halting the latter oil imports to the EU, resulting in the lowering of the total

value of trade between the two countries from EUR 27 billion (2011) to EUR 6 billion (2013). The European sanctions, adopted under the pressure of the US, and to avoid possible Israeli air-strikes, were incredibly effective. Despite the US had been imposing sanctions since the beginning of the Islamic regime in 1979, the ones imposed by them between 2011 and 2013 did not have the expected impact on Iran. On the other hand, the EU's sanctions brought the desired results, negatively impacting Iran's economy, worsening the ongoing crisis, and de facto isolating Iran both politically and economically (Fiedler, 2018,297) (Cronberg, 2017, 250). Therefore, in 2013, following the election of Rouhani, the poor economic condition of the country forced Iran to restart negotiations. In 2014, the parties signed an interim agreement, the Joint Plan of Action, which required Iran to reduce enrichment under the level required for medical research (20%) while, the final deal was reached in July 2015 (Cronberg, 2017, 250-251). The JCPOA requires Iran to dispose of all the uranium enriched from the level of 20% and up, to keep only 2% of the one enriched up to 3.5%, to limit LEU stockpiling (to 300kg), for the next 15 years, and to dismantle 70% of the centrifuges installed (Fitzpatrick, 2017, 23). The JCPOA also ensures the monitoring of Iran's nuclear program under the IAEA. In addition, the parties have added an Additional Protocol which, allows for even further monitoring, requiring open access to any nuclear site. (Fitzpatrick, 2017, 24). In return, all nuclear-related sanctions were lifted, including getting access to \$100 billion of proceeds from oil sales that were previously frozen (Fitzpatrick, 2017, 25).

During the last phase of negotiations, the EU's role became less prominent, becoming more of a mediator between Iran and the US in what is largely considered more a bilateral agreement between these two opposing powers than a multilateral deal (Cronberg, 2017, 253). Although the EU's role has been highly praised by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, it poses the question of whether the EU would be able to achieve an agreement in the absence of the US. Since the withdrawal of the US in 2018 this question has become more prominent. Following the withdrawal, the US has reinstated all previous sanctions against Iran which also affects EU companies. To counter the US, move the European Union could add the US sanction in the 1996 Blocking Statue which, would make it possible for EU companies to continue to engage with Iran. At the same time, if the Biden administration does not re-enter the agreement, the EU might face an ultimatum, given by the US, of either choosing access to the US market or to the Iranian

one. Since the US is the world's largest economy, the choice would, without doubts, giving up on the partnership with Iran (Cronberg, 2017, 257). Therefore, once again the European choice is dependent on the US' position. Without the US involvement, the decision to stay within the agreement would be reliant on the EU's willingness to change its current approach, by distancing itself from the US position and becoming a more proactive actor in the region. Moreover, as the ties to the country are mainly economic ones, the EU would have to ensure equal, or close to equal, economic gains for Iran if they stay in an agreement without the US. Since the withdrawal of the US in 2018 this question has become more prominent.

European Union's position after the signing of the deal and the recent events

Following its withdrawal, the US has reinstated all of the previous sanctions against Iran which also affects EU companies. To counter the US, move the European Union could add the US sanction in the 1996 Blocking Statue which, would make it possible for EU companies to continue to engage with Iran. At the same time, if the Biden administration does not re-enter the agreement, the EU might face an ultimatum, given by the US, of either choosing access to the US market or to the Iranian one. Since the US is the world's largest economy, the choice would, without doubts, giving up on the partnership with Iran (Cronberg, 2017, 257).

After the signing of the deal, in 2016, the High Representative, Mogherini, established an ad hoc task force, the Iran Task Force (EEAS), with the aim of “ coordinate the different strands of action of all Iran related issues, in particular the implementation of the JCPOA, the development of bilateral relations, including the establishment of an EU representation and exploring ways for a more cooperative regional framework” (Council of the EU, 2020, 2). The JCPOA had the desired effect of halting Iran's nuclear ambitions thus, neutralizing one destabilizing factor in the Middle-East and has been, perhaps, one of the most successful foreign policy endeavors in which the EU had taken part in. It also kept in line with the EU's overall approach of dealing with specific issues without engaging with the whole region. Moreover, as previously mentioned, the relations

between the two actors brought considerable economic benefit for both parties, proving that the deal was favorable for both. The EU also saw the JCPOA as a starting point for future negotiation on more controversial topics, such as the promotion of human rights and Iran's backing of non-state groups in other Middle Eastern countries (Council of the EU, 2020, 4). It is debatable whether the other parties to the agreement had the same intention. In particular, Iran did not appear to be interested in any other issues related to its country. The main EU's problem remains the US' position, most notably after the Trump administration withdrawal. In particular, considering the reinstated sanctions on Iran, which also negatively impacted the EU. For instance, the US' sanctions directly affected bilateral agreements between Iran and the EU, particularly with regards to the newly signed partnership on safe civil nuclear proliferation packages, worth around €10 billion. More recently, the EU supported Iran's request for a loan from the International Monetary Fund valued at \$5 billion that was later vetoed by the US (European Council, 2020, 4). Therefore, once again the European choices are once again influenced by the US' position. Without the US involvement, the decision to stay within the agreement would be reliant on the EU's willingness to change its current approach, by distancing itself from the US and becoming a more proactive actor in the region. Moreover, as the ties to the country are mainly economic ones, the EU would have to ensure equal, or close to equal, economic gains for Iran if they stay in an agreement without the US. However, despite committing itself to the fulfillment of the agreement, the EU was unable to procure the necessary economic resources to meet the terms of the deal (Zarhloule, 2019, 1).

What has never changed, is the EU's open support for the agreement, and the continuous diplomatic efforts to preserve it. To this end, in December 2020, all the parties to the agreement, with the exception of the US, met virtually to discuss the future of the deal. The meeting, which was seen as a "do or die" moment for the agreement and was staunchly sponsored by the EU. It ultimately achieved the desired result of buying time for the parties until President Biden's inauguration (Meloni, 2020, 1). However, Iran's latest decision to restart the enrichment of uranium up to 20% suggests the country's unwillingness to reopen negotiations on the deal. Despite the EU's intention, and the effort of the last few years, its inability to meet the terms of the agreement, after the US withdrawal, might have reinforced Iran's idea that a deal, without the US, is not in their

best interests. Moreover, while the Biden administration has expressed its keenness in engaging in multilateral agreements, specifically to re-enter the JCAPOA, as well as, reinforcing the US commitment to its European allies, the impact of Covid-19 on the world's economy, and the rising social tension within the US, will likely leave the EU alone in dealing with Iran for the foreseeable future. Notably, the US sanctions imposed on Iran have also affected the Regime's ability to acquire the needed medical necessities to combat the virus (Meloni, 2020, 1). Thus, worsening the US perception within Iran and strengthening the conservative faction's resolve to oppose any relations with the Americans. Most likely, this will affect the EU's ability to preserve the agreement. In the event of, the US opposition to rejoining the agreement, the EU will likely have to choose between its partnership with the US or Iran. It is unlikely that in the event of the US' refusal, they will be willing to lift their sanctions. In that case, the EU will probably decide to carry on with their current approach thus, trying to maintain the agreement without taking measures to evade the effects of the US' sanctions, effectively halting several economic partnerships between EU companies and Iran. Once again, the decision seems to be in the hand of the Iranian governments. Considering, that the EU's efforts since the withdrawal of the US did not bring the expected results, it is reasonable to believe that Iran will not remain in the agreement, since the EU has already proven its inability to meet all the requirements without the US. Additionally, it is unlikely that the EU will change its approach, especially after President Biden's election and the promise of more constructive relations with the American superpower and also considering the constant lack of a European strategy targeting specifically the Middle-East. On the other hand, the economic gains and the stability achieved through the agreement will likely affect the decision-making process of the EU in the foreseeable future. What is certain is its inability to deal with the issue without its strongest ally thus, failure to convince President Biden to rejoin the deal, or to negotiate a new one, will leave the EU in a worse position than it was before the signing of the agreement in 2015. In such a scenario, Iran would most likely behave even more erratically within the region, looking to strengthen its position. Subsequently, tension would rise between the US and Iran, leading to an even more unstable Middle-East and even worse circumstances for the EU. Its ability to safely acquire energy resources and continue its trade partnership with countries in the region would be negatively impacted. Currently, the optimal solution for the European Union

would be to engage the US in talk regarding Iran, once again becoming a mediator between the two countries in negotiating a new agreement or going back to the provision agreed in the JCPOA. Certainly, the EU's foreign policy limitations, and recent failures suggest that the survival of the deal resides in the decisions of the US and Iran, with the EU continuing to play a supporting role.

CHAPTER 4

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The rise of China as one of the world's powers, has increased its influence and participation within the international community, as proven by its participation to several multilateral agreements like the JCPOA. However, the country's foreign policy approach differs greatly from that of the other parties to the agreement thus, making prediction on his future behaviour difficult. As an emerging power on the international stage China's approach and strategies regarding the Middle-East differs greatly from the European approach and the US. Security concerns, stability and any other issue arising from the region have been subordinated to its economic interests, which have also shaped the country's approach. The following chapter will examine China's foreign policy approach with regards to the Middle-East and the recent evolution dictated by new Chinese concerns in the region. Subsequently, the chapter will present China's "Belt and Road" initiative, that has shaped the country's foreign policy strategy in the last few years. Lastly, the chapter will look over the bilateral relations between China and Iran to understand the former involvement in the JCPOA, what his stance has been since the US withdrawal.

China's foreign policy strategy and the Middle-East

China's foreign policy approach with regards to the Middle-East diverges greatly from its American and European counterparts. After Mao Tse-Tung's communist revolution, in the late 1940s, the country's foreign policy became secondary to its domestic needs, mainly focusing on economic development and raising the living standard of its population (Shichor,1992, 87). While China was already involved in foreign policy matters, the period between the 1950s till the 1970s was mainly dependent on the Chairman's wishes and ambitions. In particular, concerning the Middle-East, China's

involvement in those years was neglectable, only becoming worthy of notice from the 1970s. Since the 1970s China's strategy towards the Middle-East has been incredibly consistent, with only a few slight changes to its approach. The only real shift in the country's dealings with the region registered in 2011, following the Arab Spring. Till 2011, China's foreign policy strategy was rooted in the principle of non-interference within the domestic policy realm of other countries. China's ideology was mainly based on the idea of creating economic-based relations rooted in economic partnerships thus, distancing itself from the more western-based approach reliant on direct involvement, including regime change attempts or, ideologically based positions. Instead, China believes in a foreign policy approach based on political dialogue, on cooperation within a win-win framework and mostly engaging in economic partnerships (Dorsey, 2019, 24-25). Therefore, it is a foreign policy approach reliant on the use of economic incentives, with the aim of creating tighter relationships, that best serves China's domestic interests (Dorsey, 2019, 198). In comparison with the European approach, China has never required its partners to adhere to its ideology or values. Cooperation and trade with China and Chinese companies were not based on the expectation that their partners would sign off on Chinese values and beliefs, it was mainly a sterile transaction rooted in the mutual respect for their respective values, which meant overlooking the partner country's domestic and foreign conduct. To this day, this is of the main components of China's foreign policy approach. Thus, China has prioritized a soft power approach, while developing its economic power. Compared to the "geopolitical" strategy adopted by the United States, China's approach has been often defined as a "gloeconomic" strategy, with the initial goal of satisfying its economic interests and only recently shifting towards more security-related objectives (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 644). China's main interests within the Middle-East have consistently been accessing to energy resources and developing fruitful economic partnerships with the region's countries. Only since 2011, with its growing economic power and political influence, China has broadened its objectives to include geostrategic ambitions (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 7). Thus, aside from its traditional interests, China's objectives in the Middle-East have started to include forming strategic political partnerships with Middle Eastern countries, to avoid the spread of Islamic terrorism inside its own borders, and actively maintaining stability, thus involving itself in one of the most contentious regions in the world, pressuring the hegemonic role

of the US (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 646). The Middle-East has increasingly become more important in China's foreign policy agenda, failure to exert its influence in the region could undermine the country's future aspirations and domestic stability. Traditionally, China's main objectives within the region included exports, the attraction of foreign investment and loans, as well as, the selling of Chinese arms and technology to foreign countries (Shichor,1992, 87).

Despite having little to no economic partnerships within the Middle-East in the early 1970s, by the 1980s China's economic footprint in the region had become evident. Its economic relations with the region had become a fundamental part of China's growth strategy. In fact, exports to the Middle-East and low levels of imports - with a steady difference between exports and imports of around \$2 billion a year between 1983 and 1989 - helped China reduce its balance-of-payments deficit (Shichor,1992, 96). With the government setting up more than seventy companies and corporations to carry out economic activities in the Middle-East, in ten years China signed contracts for a total value of \$10 billion, and by the 1990s, several countries in the Middle-East had become major trading partners for the People's Republic (Shichor,1992, 96). Especially, after the negative repercussions China had to face because of its brutal repression of the Tiananmen Square protests, in 1989, which resulted in the imposition of sanctions by western powers, the Middle-East became central for China's economic survival. Middle-eastern countries continued to provide China with the economic benefits it had fostered in the previous decades. In addition, the influential role China gained from those economic partnerships raised the country's international profile, forcing Western countries to open up again to the Chinese. The negative consequences of China's refusal to adopt Western positions on regional issues, such as in the war between Iraq and Iran, and the country refusal to impose an embargo on arms, showed the strategic role China had come to play in the region (Shichor,1992, 88).

From the 1990s, China's relevance for Middle-Eastern countries furtherly grew. In fact, in 1993, China became a net importer of oil, making the economic dependence between middle-eastern countries and China a strategic interest for both parties' foreign policy agenda. From China's perspective, ensuring the free flow of oil from the region became its main interest (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 647). Despite, the free-flow of oil being one of its primary interests, as in the case of the US and the EU, China's approach to the Middle-

East did not change the country's principle of non-intervention. Instead, the Chinese approach continued to adhere to its long-standing principles while also leaving to the US most of the region's security concerns. In addition, it has never expressed any intention of challenging the US' guardianship role. What has characterized China's approach till the 2000s has been its pragmatism, aimed at forging positive relations with as many countries as possible in the region. This required China to not weigh in on regional issues between its partners, and not getting directly involved in countries' disputes or political matters (Ponižilová, 2018;2019, 650). It has limited itself to call for dialogues between Israel and Palestinians and has remained neutral in most instances, such as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. By virtue of this strategy, China has been able to maintain diplomatic ties with all the countries in the region (Dorsey, 2019, 9). China has adopted the role of a mediator, never taking a side and condemning western interventions in regional conflicts. Instead, it has promoted dialogue and diplomacy always with the purpose of securing its economic interests (Dorsey, 2019, 8). Proofs of the effectiveness of this strategy have been China's historically close relationship with both Saudi-Arabia and Iran as well as, its capacity to continue to sell arms to both Iraq and Iran during the war and maintaining positive relations with both Israel and Palestine (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 8). Particularly, relevant are China's relations with Saudi Arabia. Despite the former's close relationship with the US, the country has built a strong economic partnership with China, data from 2013 reveals that contracts between Chinese companies and Saudi-Arabia were worth \$18 billion (Dorsey, 2019, 56). More recently, the US is set to become one of the major energy exporters thus, reducing its dependency on Saudi oil. On account of this prospect, Saudi-Arabia is becoming even closer to the Chinese (Dorsey, 2019, 60). China building of its first defense production facility in Saudi-Arabia is significant of their closer relationship (Dorsey, 2019, 50). Moreover, since 2002 Saudi-Arabia has been China's biggest seller of energy goods, making the country extremely relevant for the Chinese (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 34).

Regarding, the Middle-East in general, in 2016 the value of bilateral trades with the Middle-East was \$230 billion, twelve times higher than in 2000. Moreover, 7% of all China's exports went to the Middle-East while foreign direct investments (5% of China's total) are mostly directed towards the energy sectors among the region's countries (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 4). In addition, China enjoys close ties with countries in the

Gulf Cooperation Council. From 2005 to 2014, projects between Chinese companies and GCC countries were worth \$30 billion (Dorsey, 2019, 198).

Particularly, relevant is China's dependency on the Middle-East for energy goods. Middle-Eastern countries have been China's main source of energy since 1995. Since the 1990s China's oil consumption has tripled, reaching 12 million barrels in 2017, and Middle-Eastern countries have provided 44% of its total. In comparison, in the same year, the US has imported 15% of their total from the region (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 4). To ensure access to the region's resources, China has invested heavily in infrastructure. For instance, it has invested in the building of the pipeline that connects the Arab Emirates with the Indian port in Fujairah thus, making it possible for countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to avoid passing through the Hormuz Strait. Another relevant example is the Chinese investments in oil concessions in Abu Dhabi (Dorsey, 2019, 56-60). China's oil dependency keeps on growing, while in 2007 China imported 1.46 million barrels a day from the Middle-East, 46% of its total (3.2 million barrel a day), by 2014 import had risen to 3.2 million barrels a day, making up for 52% of its a total estimated at 6.1 million barrels a day (Dorsey, 2019, 78). Despite, the fundamental importance of being able to access the region's energy resources, China's strategy has consistently not relied on security provisions. On the other hand, China's economic partnership has become increasingly important for many countries in the region, making it a potential US rival in the Middle-East. However, the Chinese have yet to express any interest in taking on the role of stabilizer in the region and have instead, historically exploited the US' security efforts. Leaving the US to deal with security issues, has allowed China to invest all its resources in its economic objectives. Although China has heavily criticized western direct interventions within the Middle-East, it has rarely vetoed any resolutions concerning the Middle-East, in the Security Council. Instead, the country has mostly abstained. Therefore, contrary to its western counterpart, China, by keeping a neutral stand, has been able to quickly adapt to leadership changes ensuring the stability of interests (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 655) (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 11).

China's new foreign policy strategy

The Arab Spring

The Chinese strategy of avoiding direct involvement within Middle-Eastern countries came to an end following the Arab Spring. As for many other foreign powers in the region, the insurgencies of 2011 forced China to review its own approach towards the region, its growing influence compiled with the danger of continuing to rely on the US for the region's stability, brought the country at an impasse, either continuing to behave as a secondary power or engaging in foreign policy according to its growing capabilities. However, the Arab Spring, not only were the catalyst for a shift in China's approach to the Middle-East but they also coincided with the country's already raising global aspiration. In fact, President Obama's focus on the South-East China Sea had led China to explore new option towards the west and to consolidate its position in East-Asia (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 9) (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 10). Concerning, China's strategy in the Middle-East, the Arab spring signaled the country's realization that it had to get more directly involved in security issues, as failure to do so would prove to be extremely costly (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 652). China's failure in dealing with the crisis emerging in Libya and Syria, cemented the need for a more realist approach. In particular, during uprisings in Libya and Syria, China lost millions of dollars and, considering that in Libya alone lived 36.000 Chinese citizens, it also put thousands of its people at great risk (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 652). Both crises, and the danger they represented for Chinese interests, forced China to change its stance from non-intervention to actively seeking to ensure their main objectives. Particularly, in the case of the Libyan crisis, in addition to its citizens, China's projects in the country were worth around \$18 billion (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 10). After realizing that waiting for a new leadership to emerge would have endanger its citizens and its economic interests, China's opted to deploy 4 military aircraft to retrieve its citizens from the country. Moreover, in the Security Council, it decided to support the Resolution 1970, which imposed an embargo on arms. At the same time, it abstained on Resolution 1973 which, made Libya a no-flight zone and called for a cease-fire (Fraihat and Leber, 2019, 10). Considering previous instances of non-intervention, and the usual practice of abstaining from voting on Security Council's resolution in

matters regarding the Middle-East, China's dealing with the Libyan crisis was a major shift in the country's traditional position. The evacuation of its citizens from Libya was a clear indication of the realization by China's leadership that, in addition to its economic objectives, it now had to include political and security concerns to its strategy, which would require a new type of engagement (Dorsey, 2019, 199). Arguably, China's strategy during the Libyan crisis, characterized by its keeping communication channels open with regime while, also reaching out to rebels and the its costly consequences, was one of the country's worst failure. By trying to keep contacts with all the parties to the conflict, China ended up putting its own interests at risks. In fact, when Libya's new regime took power, the Chinese were threatened with being excluded from the reconstruction of the country, the reason being their undeceive position during the uprisings. When, China was allowed to return to the Libya, the country had already lost an estimate of \$18.8 billion, a costly price to pay for keeping with its traditional approach (Dorsey, 2019, 204). Therefore, the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamic terrorism, kick started a period of changes within China's foreign policy intentions and particularly its involvement in the region. While still mostly relying on its non-interventionist approach, China has gradually become more involved in the resolution of regional conflicts. To this end, in 2013 it proposed a 4 points plan to the Israel-Palestine peace process, actively involving itself in one of the most contentious and long-standing issue in the Middle-East. Moreover, in 2015 China sought to promote a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict by offering to act as mediator between the Syrian government and the opposition groups (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 655). China's participation in the JCPOA is another example of the country's changing approach to foreign policy.

China's foreign ambitions and the Middle-East

China's growing power as an international actor, and the proclaimed interest in exerting more its influence on other countries, has led others to adopt policies aimed at containing China, forcing the country to find new avenues. In particular, President Obama's foreign policy approach in the South-East China Sea has led China to concentrate its efforts on its western borders. From 1978 China's main focus has been the growth of its economy. To this end, China's leadership has chosen to focus eastward, towards a region populated

by emerging economies like the four Asian tigers, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 9). However, focusing on its eastern borders led to an internal imbalance. While cities in the East grew, the western part of the country remained poor. By 1999 China had launch a development program to aid the growth of this part of the country. However, serious efforts only started searching for new possibilities in west after 2010, with the main catalyst being the US growing presence in South-East Asia, which impeded many Chinese objectives (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 10). China came to the realization that pivoting its attention towards its western neighbors would prove to be more beneficial than trying to face off with the US. To this end, in 2013 President Xi Jinping presented China's new monumental project the "Belt and Road" initiative (Kobojević et al, 2018, 113).

Concerning, the Middle-East China's growing desire to become a more prominent international actor ran parallel to the changes brought by the negative effects of the Arab Spring. In 2015, the Chinese government published a new defense paper, "the White Paper", which envisioned a new role for China on the international stage (Dorsey, 2019, 211). Until 2011 China's took part in very few military interventions limiting itself to UN led operations, to the evacuation of Chinese citizens during unrests and to anti-piracy operations (Dorsey, 2019, 213) (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 19). However, since 2011 China's position on military intervention has greatly changed and the country has started the process of becoming more involved in security issues. To this end, in 2014, according to Djibouti's President, China had started the process of negotiation for the establishing a new naval base in the port of Obock. The Djibouti's port is a key shipping hub overseeing around 30% of all the shipping goods in the world. In addition, 15% of the world's oil and petroleum products are shipped from this port, needless to say, considering China reliance on oil from the region, the establishment of such base marks the beginning of a new approach for the Chinese (Dorsey, 2019, 213). After years of positioning themselves in opposition to the US approach, based on military expansion abroad, the Chinese had started behaving in the same way. At the same time, China's changes were also due to internal issues regarding the Uighurs, as the country feared a possible spread of Sunni Jihadist movements inside its borders. Consequently, China sought a more direct involvement in Afghanistan and in Syria to curb Islamic extremism. Its involvement focused on training military forces in Afghanistan and becoming one of

the Syrian government's main supplier of military weapons (Dorsey, 2019, 2017) (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 14). Additionally, after the publication of the defense paper, China's had sought out other regional powers, like turkey, to forge military partnerships (Dorsey, 2019, 2018). However, arguably the most consequential foreign policy strategy adopted by China, affecting its relations with the Middle-East has been the "Belt and Road" initiative, a new project that would prove China's foreign policy skills and ensure its place among the most powerful countries on the international stage.

The One Belt and One Road initiatives

The success of the "One Belt and One Road" initiative would make China incredibly influential thus, undermining the centrality of the US in the international economic system. (Huang, 2016, 317). The project was first presented by President Xi Jinping in September 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan. The initiative is composed of two main components the "Belt and Road" project and the "New Maritime Silk Road" (OBOR) (Koboević et al, 2018, 113). Born from the idea of reviving the ancient Silk Road, the new Chinese project clearly shows the country's global intentions. While some would think of the Belt Road as an exertion of China's soft power, this initiative is much more complex. It relies both on China's traditional soft power approach while also adopting a geopolitical strategy based on China's growing economic power. It is a "coordinated campaign of commercial and cultural outreach that magnifies political influence without relying on military strengths" (Bianchi, 2019, 6). The ultimate objective is to build strong economic ties with the majority of the world. Moreover, the OBOR is meant to facilitate China's challenge to the current US centric economic system, which is still mostly based on Bretton-Woods principles, that has given the dollar and the US economic dominance (Bianchi, 2019, 6). Aiming at building the broadest economic cooperation partnership in the world, the OBOR plans to create three major commercial routes: a Central-Asian route, connecting China and Europe, a second through West-Asia towards the Persia Gulf, and a third going from the Mediterranean and a South Asia to the Indian Ocean (Koboević et al, 2018, 114). If completed the OBOR will reach 60 countries, 4.4 billion people (60% of the world's total) and would account for 40% of the total world's trade (Koboević

et al, 2018, 114). To achieve this, China's has identified five key cooperation areas among participating countries, consisting of: policy coordination, improving connectivity, free trade, financial integration and people-to-people relations. As per China's traditional foreign policy approach the basic idea is to promote regional development through win-win economic partnerships. The projects are set to be based on the principles of openness, cooperation, harmony, inclusiveness and market-based regulations. While the main route connects specific countries, the initiative is open any State who wish to join. Finally, the project is strictly based commercial ties between participating countries and market principles, excluding the possibility of foreign aid coming from China (Huang, 2016, 318).

There are two main reasons as to why China is investing a vast amount of resources on this project. Firstly, as already mentioned, the initiative is thought to aid China's in becoming more influential on the international stage. Secondly, the OBOR initiative should address one key economic issue that has become worrisome for the Chinese. In fact, economically wise, China is trying to find a solution to its slowing economic growth rate. China's real GDP has been growing at an average of 9.6% annually, from 1980 and 2015, reaching a GDP per capita of \$8000 from the initial \$2000. However, China's growth has faced several slowing down periods, for instance, in 2012, China's growth rate was 7.7% compared to 2014 in which the country grew by 9.3% (Huang, 2016, 315). China's slowing growth rate has partially to do with outside factors. In particular, the weaker global economy has had a negative impact on the country. At the same time, China's reliance on cheap exports seems to have become outdated and a shift towards high-tech and high-value-added sectors is needed to ensure its continuous growth (Huang, 2016, 315). This is where the OBOR comes into play, since many of the countries included in project are low-income countries, they have a great growth potential, if the right conditions are nurtured, which would allow them to develop faster and thus, becoming potential new markets for Chinese exports and also new engines for the growth of the world's economy (Huang, 2016, 317). The second main objective is to grow China influence in the international system. As China is now the world second largest economy it cannot shy away from its potential. The OBOR initiative is the first step in trying to influence the international economic system that, has consistently only served the interests of developed countries. In particular, the 2009 crisis has highlighted the

weaknesses within the current system, putting into question whether a dollar-centered economic order is still efficient. Here lies the motivation behind the OBOR, to reshape the system to its liking China is called to play a more central role in international relations (Huang, 2016, 317- 318).

With regards to the Middle-East, the region is especially important for the success of the project. Geographically, two out of the three routes meet in the Middle-East. At the same time, the region keeps providing investment opportunities for Chinese companies, as well as, being a major trading area both for good goods coming from China and the necessary energy imports (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 649). Thus, the OBOR initiative in the Middle-East is set to further expand Chinese influence and strengthen its role within the region (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 649).). Considering China's plans in the context of the OBOR, its reasons behind becoming more directly involved in regional issues becomes apparent. The above-mentioned effort by the Chinese to become a more prominent actor in the region's stability, outside its traditional economic role, is a factor in China's new global ambitions. The success of the OBOR is dependent on China's ability to guarantee stability in the region, especially considering a potential diminishing of the role of the US. Observing China relative limited involvements in the last decades and its focus on a diplomatic approach, is expected to gradually change, failure to do so would run the risk of remaining too reliant on the US' security efforts (Ponížilová, 2018;2019, 656). Therefore, similarly to the EU involvement in the Middle-East, China has been at an impasse in its dealing with the region, either ensuring its interest by play a more active role or remain a passive actor. Considering China efforts in the OBOR, as well as, the recent its recent involvement in regional issues, including the JCPOA, the country will increase its involvement. Regarding the future of the JCPOA, China's stance will be highly dependent on the country interests in Iran, as well as, the role the country plays in the Chinese overall foreign policy strategy and the building of the One Belt One Road initiative. Certainty, Chinese interests in the Middle-East remain high in the country's agenda, the existing economic ties, as well as, China's depended on energy imports for the region, and its global ambition are making the Middle-East a strategic area of the world for the Eastern giant.

China's relations with Iran

Emblematic of the Chinese foreign policy approach is its long-standing relations with the Islamic Regime. Since 1979, China has been able to enjoy a positive relationship with Iran while also strengthening its partnerships with major regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. China's role within the JCPOA and its future can only be understood in line with the relations the two countries have enjoyed since 1979, taking into consideration the other main regional alliances and the role of the US in the Chinese overall strategy.

As previously mentioned, China's approach in the Middle East, until the Arab Springs, was characterized by a non-interventionist approach, combined with a mostly neutral stand and strong economic ties with most countries in the region.

Concerning Iran, there are several aspects to take into consideration, which involve both the bilateral relations between the two countries, its relevance for China, as well as, the role Iran plays in China's overall foreign policy strategy, particularly concerning China's growing global ambitions (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 49-51). Both, levels of understanding are necessary to explain China's stance towards the JCPOA and its survival. Firstly, from a bilateral standpoint, the relations between the two regimes have always been characterized by their economic and political partnerships. Iran has been a considerable source of oil and natural gas since the rise of China's demand for such goods. Since 2011 China has been the biggest oil importer from the Middle-East, but close ties with the regime had already been in place since it became a net importer in the 1990s (Djallil, 2011, 244-245) (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 59). Iran is China's second-biggest exporter of oil after Saudi Arabia and has remained a consistent source of energy. Before the signing of the JCPOA, in 2014, Iran contributed 10% of the total Chinese oil imports (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 60-64). Since the signing of the JCPOA, China has remained Iran's largest trade partner and its main oil customer, accounting for 26% of Iran's total exports (Holmquist and Englund, 2020, 16). Besides, particularly significant have been Chinese investments in Iran's energy infrastructure. In 2004, the Chinese company, Sinopec, committed itself to invest \$100 billion in Iran to modernize the outdated Iranian infrastructure and to develop the Yadavarian oil field. Similar investments have been made by other major Chinese companies, like China National Petroleum Corporation

(CNPC), the aim was to update Iran's infrastructure to increase the exports to China. To this end, by 2009, China had become Iran's most valuable partner with regards to the development of its energy sector (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 60). Despite, several other projects were undertaken between 2009 and 2012, such as the 2009 deal between CNPC and Iran, for an investment in the South Pars Phase 11 gas field, worth \$ 4,7 billion and 2011 \$2.5 billion Chinese deal to develop the South Azadegan oil field (Scobell and Nader, 2016), the sanctions imposed by the Security Council in 2012 restrained China from furthering its investment projects. However, it remained able to purchase oil and gas from Iran. In addition, because of the difficulties posed by the sanctions and the unwillingness to raise tension with the Americans, China had to halt many of the above-mentioned projects while, continuing to import oil (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 60-64). Moreover, to energy-related interests, China has also been Iran's main trade partner. To this end, until serious talks started to take place in the Security Council, on Iran's nuclear program, China has been Iran's main supplier of military weapons, as well as, aiding the country in developing its military capabilities and its nuclear ambitions. Notably, military-related trades were already key components of the economic relationship between the two countries in the 1980s during the war with Iraq. Despite, pressure from the United States to halt the selling of specific military weapons, such as cruise missiles and long-range arms, China has remained Iran's biggest export of conventional military weapons well into the 2000s (Djallil, 2011, 235). In addition, between 1985 and 1996, China invested in the development of Iran's civil nuclear program. Thus, making it possible for Iran to further its plans without access to western technologies (Holmquist and Englund, 2020, 24). For all intent and purposes, China's technical assistance has aided Iran to develop its program to the level it reached in the early 2000s. However, in 1997, following pressure by the US, China halted any nuclear technical assistance and has remained compliant with the 2006 and 2010 UN arms embargo (Holmquist and Englund, 2020,44-45). However, despite the Chinese government halting its non-conventional arms sales to Iran, following US pressure, there have been reports of Chinese companies continued to trade with Iran for the development of their military capabilities (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 58). Besides, energy and weapons-related trade, since 2016 and with the Launch of the Silk and Road initiative, Iran has become a pivotal part of China's new global strategy. Proves can be found in the Chinese President's visit to the country in

2016, and the focus China has posed on reviving the bilateral relations with the Islamic regime following the signing of the JCPOA (Bianchi, 2019, 82-84). As a matter of fact, within the Silk and Road project, Iran would likely be the meeting point between land roads and the maritime branch, positive relations with the regime and the stability of the country is therefore of utmost importance for the Chinese. Similarly, following his election in 2013, President Rouhani has expressed his intention to rekindle Iran's relations with the eastern giant, following a few years of limited cooperation due to the sanction regime imposed by the Security Council (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 65). Moreover, since the signing of the JCPOA China has been actively involved in the reconstruction of Iran's economy, investing in several different sectors, aside from the traditional energy-related infrastructures. While half of the Chinese investment has gone to the energy industry, the other half has been directed towards other key sectors, such as transportation, telecommunication, and housing (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 65-66).

Besides the bilateral relations between the two countries, Iran plays an important role in China's global strategy. As the country is trying to exert more influence abroad, as reflected by the Belt and Road initiative, the Middle-East has become fertile ground for the Chinese to broaden their foreign policy influence. However, the close relations the two countries enjoy have also been a source of tension with other allies in the region. Firstly, in terms of the role Iran plays within china's foreign policy strategy, it is noticeable that both countries enjoy a certain level of understanding when it comes to their positions in the world. Especially, Iran has been led to perceived China as a unique actor in the international scene, independent from the west and, as a non-democratic regime, which has strongly opposed the western approach to foreign policy. These perceptions have fostered a positive outlook by the Iranians towards the Chinese. From the Chinese perspective, things are a little different. While Iran represents the only country in the Middle-East considered to be a foe of the United States, thus highly independent from the direction imposed by Washington, that does not mean that the country sees Iran as their only allies, or even the most important, in the region. Despite China's highly valued economic relations with Iran, its dependence on the partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the western world, particularly with the US, far outweighs any relations it enjoys with the Islamic Regime (Holmquist and Englund, 2020, 10) (Scita, 2019, 1) (Calabrese, 2020, 1). On the contrary, it would be more appropriate to understand

Iran as a component of China's overall interests. China's relatively passive role during the negotiation of the JCPOA and its acceptance of the sanctions regime, wanted by the US, before the signing of the agreement, point secondary role Iran plays in China's overall strategy (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 66). Arguably, China's interests towards Iran, from Belt and Road initiative to energy imports, are just a piece of China's global strategy, mostly based on the maintenance of the stability of the whole region. While Iran plays an important strategic role, it would be wrong to overestimate its importance and thus trying to understand China's position in the JCPOA as a country in line with the Islamic regime's objectives. China's relations with Iran are characterized by a balanced approach, maintaining positive relations with the Islamic regime, without involving itself with its domestic issues, while also recognizing its current subordinating role to the US when it comes to ensuring the stability of the region. To this end, China has broadly adhered to the sanctions imposed on Iran (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 51). Therefore, Iran is not an exception within China's overall strategy in the Middle-East, it is an important piece of the puzzle but not the central one, even more so, considering China's relations with Iranian enemies like Saudi-Arabia (Calabrese, 2020, 1). Thus, the relations between Iran and China need to be understood in light of its Middle-Eastern approach, mostly based on the principle of neutrality, and the belief that a positive relationship with all countries will best serve China's interests.

China and the JCPOA

The withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA has had noticeable effects on the bilateral relations between China and Iran. Bilateral trade between the two fell by 34.5% in 2019, and with the exception of energy-related exports, humanitarian aid, and consumer goods most bilateral trades have been frozen (Holmquist and Englund, 2020, 21). In addition, Iran's oil exports have also suffered, compared to 2019, China's oil import from the Islamic republic fell from 650,000 barrels per day to 300,000 bdp, and has reached its all-time limit in 2020 (Holmquist and Englund, 2020, 21) (Cancarini, 2021, 1). Nonetheless, China and Iran are expected to sign a bilateral trade agreement worth around \$400 billion, leaving many shocked, considering the trend of their bilateral relations in the last few

years (Cancarini, 2021, 1). The agreement will greatly impact the geopolitics of the region, rekindling China and Iran's long-standing partnership and signaling the Chinese intention of playing a more direct role in the Middle-East. The accord is likely a consequence of President Trump's confrontational policies towards the Islamic Republic, leading to insecurities in the region, and endangering Chinese interest (Cancarini, 2021, 1). Thus, begs the question of the future of China in the JCPOA. As previously mentioned, China's role during the negotiation of the agreement, was little more than a passive observer, accepting the leading role of the US. China's participation in the signing was in itself quite difficult to comprehend, since the country benefited greatly from the political isolation of Iran, as it was able to enjoy lower oil prices being Iran's only customer (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 62). However, despite China's privileged relationship with the Islamic Regime, its participation in the JCPOA has been beneficial to the global aspiration of the country. An unstable Middle-East would put pressure on the country's main interests and run the risk of becoming a negative factor in China's economic growth. Thus, possible tensions between the US and Iran, arising from the regime continuing to develop its nuclear program, were less desirable than the possible downfall in the bilateral relations between China and Iran. Furthermore, considering China's role as Iran's main trading partner before the signing of the agreement, and its passive role during the negotiation phase, have greatly reduced the political backlash it received from Iran (Bianchi, 2019, 83). Additionally, China's participation in the JCPOA, gave the country considerable bargaining power with the US, making it possible for the Chinese to continue their imports of oil from Iran (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 66). Ultimately, for China the JCPOA had great potential, it ensured stability, it avoided direct actions from the US in the region thus, undermining China's growing presence, as well as, allowing China to further its economic ties with the Islamic Regime. The future of the JCPOA is highly reliant on the Chinese position, as the country is Iran's main trading partner. Failure to ensure China's participation would endanger Iran's commitment to the deal (Calabrese, 2020, 1). While the Chinese have recently expressed their commitment to the deal, and have asked Iran to respect the terms of the deal, following President Trump's confrontational approach, China's involvement in the deal remains entirely dependent on their interests in the region. Ensuring stability is China's top priority and considering their ambitions with regard to the Belt and Road initiative, it is likely that it

will continue to support the JCPOA, also in view of the US' seemingly willingness to re-enter the deal. Contrary to the EU, China's role is much more pivotal, the political pressure the country can exert on Iran is perhaps more valuable than many other foreign policy tools. Considering China's relations with other Middle-Eastern powers, and in particular with Saudi-Arabia, it is likely that given the option the country will favor a non-nuclear Iran. At the same time, if the US will further withdraw from the region, Iran could play a stabilizing role for the Chinese by becoming a nuclear power (Scobell and Nader, 2016, 51). It is unlikely that such a scenario will become reality in the near future. Moreover, as the Chinese are becoming more and more directly involved in foreign policy, and as their ambitions keep growing, including China's development of its own nuclear arsenal, it is unlikely that it will favorably look at the rise of another nuclear power in the world. Ultimately, China's involvement in the JCPOA seems to be in line with the countries interests and reflects its global ambitions and its approach. What remains uncertain is the level of involvement the Chinese are willing to engage in to maintain the agreement, in light of the difficulties that have recently emerged. Without a doubt, considering Iran's recent actions, the Chinese political power will be needed for the survival of the agreement, especially if the US will not get involved in the near future.

CHAPTER 5

THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Russia is the last party to the JCPOA and it also a unique actor in the Middle-East. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Russia's new governments had to reconstruct the country's domestically, as well as, giving it a new foreign policy direction. The newly built federation and the subsequent rise to power of Vladimir Putin influenced the foreign policy strategy of the country. Putin's own ambitions have played a role in the country's foreign standing and have led to an uncertain and at times unclear approach, especially in the Middle-East. Russia's unique domestic situation coupled with the country's ambitions, as well as, its current capabilities have made it a peculiar actor in the Middle-East. To understand Russia's position in the JCPOA this chapter will examine the country's overall approach in the Middle-East, particularly with regards to Russia's role during two of the most recent regional crises, such as Libya and Syria. Afterward, the chapter will continue with an overview of Russia's bilateral relation with Iran, concluding recent development and future prospects.

The Middle-East in Russia's global ambitions

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly elected federation had to build a new foreign policy strategy, taking into consideration the new world order it had to engage with, as well as, the countries domestic needs. Thus, not surprisingly, Russia's foreign policy strategy in the 1990s was almost the polar opposite to its communist past. Firstly, Russia's new borders were not as stable as those it enjoyed when part of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the newly independent states it was surrounded by required Russia's utmost attention and became the primary focus of the country's post-communist period (Dannreuther, 2012, 544). The main interest of the newly formed government was that of ensuring a modicum of control over former members of the Soviet Union thus, regional stability and domestic reconstruction characterized the early 1990s (Dannreuther, 2012, 544). The maintenance of its territorial integrity led the country to

engage in two wars in Chechnya, which also had negative consequences in the country's future dealing with the Middle-East. Secondly, post-Soviet Russia distanced itself from its previous ideologically-based approach to foreign policy. To this end, Russia halted economically disastrous efforts to support countries adhering to the communist principles, which had depleted the Soviet Union (Dannreuther, 2012, 545). By the end of 1991, Russia's GDP had lowered by almost 16%, leading the country to try to build a market-based economy while also facing an economic crisis (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9). Therefore, Russia's 1990s were mostly characterized by its focus on domestic issues with foreign policy becoming a secondary interest. For the most part, Russia became active only within its immediate neighbors, leaving the world in the hands of the US, consolidating the unipolar system it was currently living in (Trenin, 2018, 7). Subsequently, the first half of the 1990s saw Russia's efforts in realigning itself with the western world and particularly with the US. Scholars have defined 1990-1996 as the era of the "Atlanticist" thinkers, to underline the foreign policy approach adopted by the Russian government. During this period Russia's relations with Middle-Eastern countries were almost non-existent. After decades of meddling within the region, the Russian Federation of the 1990s could not consider the Middle-East as part of their interests. Firstly, as already mentioned the country needed to focus on its domestic issues, rather than continuing to finance foreign regimes in which it had no longer had any interests (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9) Secondly, after decades of opposing the US in the Middle-East, Russian disengagement in the region might have also been a way to appease its new western allies. Thus, by not involving itself in the Middle-East the country was able to focus on its immediate neighbor and, at the same time, it could reassure its allies that it had no intention of behaving like the previous communist regime. Therefore, President Yeltsin did not visit any country in the region apart from Jordan on the occasion of the funeral of King Hussein in 1999 (Lovotti et al, 2020,9).

Contrary to the 1990s, the early 2000s saw a rekindle of relations between the Russian Federation and several countries in the Middle-East. There are few reasons why Russia decided to return to one of the most contentious regions in the world, certainly, the main drive of this changed was the election of Vladimir Putin and its new global agenda. Certainly, even without the election of Putin Russia would have eventually become active in foreign policy matters and would have played a role in the Middle-East. However, it is

indisputable that the direction Russia took since the 2000s was mainly due to Putin's agenda and his vision for Russia. While the country had already started to engage with countries in the Middle-East, the election of Putin signaled the definitive return of Russia in the MENA region. Noticeably, between 1997 and 1998, President Primakov, had already started to engage with key actors in the region, relying on diplomatic tools he engaged Russia with Israel, Palestine, and Syria. At the same time, the President started the process of repositioning Russia in opposition to the US, criticizing the latter direct intromission in the region, and particularly with regards to Iraq (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9). Nonetheless, during this period, Russia did not reach any meaningful achievement, particularly concerning its opposition to the US' actions. However, it set the stage for Russia's return under President Putin. If the previous President had led Russia's foreign policy through less ideological and more realist lenses, Putin's approach consolidates Russia's foreign policy strategy on a realist and statist basis (Talbot et al, 2019, 14). To this end, the Kremlin approach to foreign policy was based on the belief that Russia needed to take back its position as one of the great powers of the world. Ultimately, Russia's main objective was that of creating a new world order, shifting away from the unipolar system the world had found itself in since the fall of the Soviet Union, and bring fort a multipolar system in which Russia could become one of its main actors. To do so, Putin's' first mandate focused on reshaping Russia foreign policy by involving it in strategic regions, like the Middle-East, while at the same time exploiting is renewed alliances with the western world to further the country's economic growth (Talbot et al, 2019, 14). Specifically, Russia does not have a strategy towards the Middle-East, instead, the region plays a role in the country overall global scheme thus, leading Russia to exploit emerging opportunities in the region to advance its global agenda, without considering specific interests it might have (Sladden et al, 2017, 2). Between 2001-2008 Putin's main concern was that of changing the perception Middle-Eastern countries had of Russia, failure to do so would have impeded the country from positively engaging with the region. In fact, since the start of the war in Chechenia many Arab countries had regarded Russia as an enemy of Islam. For his part, Putin's focus on resolving the conflict in Chechenia steamed from the fear that Islamic extremism would spread inside Russia's border. Additionally, the conflict in Chechenia was an instability factor in the North Caucasus region thus, resolving the issue was of primary importance for Russia's global

aspirations (Dannreuther, 2012, 546). However, the war in Chechnya and Putin's renewed efforts damaged the country's perception in the Middle-East. For instance in 2000, Saudi Arabia, publicly criticized Putin's actions at the Organisation of Islamic Conference (Dannreuther, 2012, 2). In this condition, Russia's ambitions seemed to be more utopic than realistic. If the goal was to become a valuable alternative to the US for Middle-Eastern countries, Putin's efforts in Chechnya made it an impossibility, as almost all Middle-Eastern countries were sympathetic to the Chechens' cause. However, Russia was able to cleverly exploit the event that soon followed, proving to itself that an opportunist approach best served its interests. In fact, following the 9/11 terrorist attack, President Putin was able to exploit the "war on terror" to define the Chechens as Islamic terrorists, and Russia's actions as a counter-terrorism operation, in the hope of legitimizing the second war in Chechnya (1999-2009). Additionally, 9/11 gave Russia the opportunity to reengage with the US and to find common grounds with MENA countries dealing with a surge of Islamic extremism (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9). Despite, immediately supporting President Bush's "War on Terror", the US's refusal to reengage with Russia and to recognize the war in Chechnya as a counter-terrorist operation, halted Russia's ambition towards the US. At the same time, Russia's declared efforts in countering Islamic extremism were successful in starting the process of rapprochement with Middle-Eastern countries. The real turning point for Russia was the US-led Iraq war in 2003. On the surface, Russia's approach before the US's invasion seems to be a failure, leading to a diminishing of its role within the region, making the country neither a western alliance nor an opposing alternative. Despite, supporting previous UN resolutions towards Iraq, and supporting the "War on Terror", Russia strongly opposed direct military operations in the country, siding with France and China. To this end, Russia tried mediating between Saddam's regime and the western world, resulting in an overall failure (Trenin, 2018, 7) (Magen, 2013, 31). However, the "War on Terror" had positive repercussions, particularly with regards to Russia's approach and the perception of the country in the region. Firstly, the US invasion of Iraq proved to the Russians that a strong alliance with the US was impossible, pushing Russia to adopt even more pronounced anti-western policies. It also pushed Russia to pursue a new approach in the Middle-East, reminiscent of the Chinese one. In fact, after 2003 Russia opted to establish positive relations with all Middle-Eastern countries but, contrary to the Chinese approach, while

it also re-established significant economic ties, its main objective was to be able to have a say in any issue arising from the region without taking a side in advance. In this sense, to this day Russia's approach has been very successful as the country enjoys positive relations with countries at odds with each other like Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinians (Magen, 2013, 31). At the same time, the invasion of Iraq shifted the Muslim world's attention from the war in Chechnia and led many to view Russia as a possible alternative to the US. President Putin was particularly clever in exploiting the forming of this new positive perception, on one side, he started to promote the involvement of the Muslim community in Russia's public affairs, and on the other, he emphasized Russia's multi-ethnic population (Dannreuther, 2012, 548). The new approach proved to be fruitful, in 2004 Russia became an observer member in the OIC, when only a few years prior members of the organization were actively criticizing it (Dannreuther, 2012, 549). While, in general, trade relations were few and limited to mainly state-led partnerships, their growths remain relevant, especially considering the lack of interests on Russia's part to form economic partnerships. Thus, while in 1995, trade was valued at \$4.1 billion, by 2004 it had risen to \$10.2 billion (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9). More significant are both, Russia's arms trades with MENA countries, as trade rose from \$1.5 (2000) to \$9 billion (2009), and Russia's gas companies' possible investments in the region, which would impact EU companies and the EU access to natural resources. The significance of these actions is once again political rather than economical, providing arms, makes MENA countries more dependent on the Russians while investing in the energy sector would furtherly strengthen European countries reliance on Russia.

Between 2005 and 2010, Russia actively pursued the reestablishment of positive relations with almost all players in the region. Putin and Russian officials made several visits to Middle-eastern countries during this period, starting from Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Iran (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9). Thus, the early 2000s marked the consolidation of Russia's global ambition in which the Middle-East only played a part in. While strengthening its economic relations this period was mainly characterized by the building of political relations between Russia and several Middle-Easter countries, while it failed to become an effective opposition to the US, who maintained its primacy in the region.

Russia in the 2010s

Russia's approach to the Middle-East until the Arab Springs was quite similar to the approach adopted by China but, on very different terms. Whereas China, aimed at establishing win-win economic relations with as many countries as it could, Russia relations were based on political and diplomatic ties, incentivized by some trade relations and the selling of arms. Because of its intentions, the nature of Russia's ties with the Middle-East is quite different from all the other actors. Russia's interests in the region follow two main purposes. Firstly, as demonstrated by Putin's agenda, Russia's main objective is that of transforming the current unipolar world, into one where Russia can play a protagonist role once again. To this end, it had to position itself in opposition to the US thus, making the current tensions more on realists' terms than on ideological ones. Secondly, Russia is still very much dedicated to its domestic reconstruction, its effort in curbing Islamic extremism is related more to its fear that it might spread inside Russia, or its immediate neighbors, rather than aiming at the stability of the Middle-East which, remains a secondary concern. This approach, based on opportunistic behavior and a short-term strategy, still characterizes Russia today, but the event that took place during the Arab Springs and immediately after, causes the country to recalibrate its approach, as well as, brought to the development of strategies with a specific focus on the Middle-East. While Russia still very much relies on a global strategy, in which the Middle-East is but one of its elements, the events of the Arab Spring made it so that the country is developing a more effective approach towards this contentious region (Talbot et al, 2019, 31). The lack of grand strategy and instead Russia's focus on short-term gains seem to be a strategy in itself, giving the country great flexibility and perpetuating its position of a great power respecting the sovereignty of other countries (Sladden et al, 2017, 9-10). As for all the other parties to the JCPOA, the Arab Spring forced a change in the way the country interacts in the region. In Russia's case, the Arab Spring gave rise to two main concerns. Firstly, Russia was concerned with the possible repercussions the rise of revolutionary movements might bring inside its borders. Secondly, Russia firmly believed that the Arab Spring was a direct consequence of the decades of the US and western countries' disastrous involvement in the region, as well as, a by-product of globalization and the spread of western ideology (Trenin, 2018, 7). Above all, Russia

believed the Arab Spring to be a continuation of the “color revolutions”. Thus, the Arab Spring for Russia was a clear demonstration of the value It would gain from maintaining stability in the region. Noticeably, Russia’s idea of stability resided on the very realist belief of not promoting its ideology but instead valuing stability through stable regimes (Lovotti et all, 2020, 9). Secondly, it reinforced the idea that external interferences would lead to the rise of extremism. In particular, Putin believed that the Arab Spring was only successful in the rise of the power of Islamic extremists (Lovotti et all, 2020, 9). It is important to notice, that the Arab Spring also coincided with the economic crisis of 2009, which halted the economic growth Russia had been experiencing in the previous decade. Between 2000 and 2008, due to the high price of oil and natural gas, the country experiences an average annual growth of 7%. The impact of the economic crisis was disastrous on the country, as its GDP fell by 9% in 2009 (Talbot et all, 2019, 34). However, it also created new opportunities, as Russia's economic ties with Middle-Eastern countries consistently grew between 2008 and 2010. However, the Arab Spring negatively impacted trade relations between the region and Russia. Political instability in several countries undermined Russia’s economic interests, among all the Libyan crisis had the most disastrous consequences for the Russians and directly impacted the country’s approach to the Middle-East.

The Libyan crisis

The Libyan crisis was arguably the single most influential factor in the shift of Russia’s Middle-Eastern approach, demonstrating the failings and weakness it had at the time. Not only the crisis had a negative impact on the economic relations between the two countries but, was also Russia’s last attempt at trying to resolve foreign policy issues looking for allies in the west (Trenin, 2018 7). Economically wise, the country losses were great, only a few years prior to the crisis Russia had pardoned a Libyan debt valued at \$4.5 billion. In exchange, Russian companies would be able to participate in a joint project relating to the energy sector. In particular, companies like Gazprom, Lukoil Overseas, and Tatneft were interested in investing in Libya’s energy sector (Lovotti et all, 2020, 9) (Talbot et all, 2019, 35). The global consequence of such deals would have had a great impact in terms of Russia’s relations with European countries. In addition, several Russian

companies experienced severe losses as a consequence of the crisis, impacting also the stable arm sector. Noticeably, arms exporter, Rosoboron, reported a loss of at least \$4 billion, and the railway corporation, RZD, lost around \$2 billion. However, while the economic losses showed Russia the direct consequences that instability could bring, perhaps the most important consequence of the crisis was the definitive shifting away from cooperation with western powers. Considering the marginal importance Libya played in Russia's global strategy, the country used the crisis as a way to test the trustworthiness of western countries. Russia's ideal approach to the crisis, and the one it advocated for in the Security Council, was of non-intervention, focusing the foreign efforts in safeguarding civilians and support internal forces in the writing of a new institutional system. To achieve those objectives, Russia expected western power to collaborate on equal terms in the Security Council, it was disappointed rather quickly. As western powers took direct actions in Libya, the intervention made easier by Russia abstention in the Security Council, the country concluded that the west could not be trusted. The general Russian belief was that the West interventions in the Libyan crisis, coupled with the War in Iraq and their general approach, would lead the region to further crisis, the rise of extremism and instability (Lovotti et al, 2020, 9).

The Libyan crisis would be the last time Russia would try to deal with Middle-Eastern issues relying on western countries. Instead, today's approach, as clearly demonstrated by Russia's stance in the Syrian crisis, is much tougher. Russia is now a strong opposer to western intervention, presenting itself as a strong alternative. It is also much more interested in continuing to build positive relations with all actors in the region aiming at being able to play the mediator role in case of a future crisis.

Syria

Russia's dealing with the Syrian crisis signaled the beginning of a more comprehensive approach to the Middle-East. After more than a decade of trying to emerge as an effective alternative to the US, as well as, trying to cooperate with western countries on regional issues, Russia's approach shifted towards a more confrontational stance, relying on its own forces and almost reminiscent of the Soviet period. While it would be incorrect to assume that today's Russia is trying to emulate its past, it is true that by seeking to get on

equal footing with the US, the country is opting for a more confrontational approach, opposing the US ways, and generally criticizing actions taken by western powers since the end of the Second World War. The Syrian crisis is the first case in which Russia took direct actions to solve a problem arising from the Middle-East thus, well represent the country's current approach. It must be noted, that until the Syrian crisis Russia had been reluctant to engage in direct operation within the Middle-East, and most likely will be reluctant to continue to do so in the future, considering the economic and political cost for the country (Sladden, 2017, 4). Most notably, the Syrian crisis was arguably the first time in which Russia seemed to be more willing to act than the US, seemingly giving the country a great amount of positive notoriety and consolidating the perception of it being one of the great powers of the world, ready to take actions to defend the regional stability and global security. In fact, at the beginning of the crisis (2011-2012), Russia was one of the most fervent supporters of finding a common solution within the Security Council, believing that a peace agreement could be reached between the Syrian government and the revolutionaries (Trenin, 2018, 7). To this end, Russia vetoed any resolution that could lead to military intervention and instead continued to support the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, who the US intelligence did not believe had any chance of surviving the crisis (Trenin, 2018, 7). In 2012, after failing to reach a political agreement between the parties, as well as, between the US and Russia, the real turning point of the crisis came about with the notorious 2013 attack on Damascus, which involved the use of chemical weapons. While the US blamed the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons, President Obama, despite considering the use of such weapons as the US' "red line", showed his unwillingness to involve the country in yet another conflict in the Middle-East, and indecisiveness Putin was able to exploit (Trenin, 2018, 7). The US and Russia came to the agreement that the latter would bear the responsibility for eliminating Syria's chemical weapons in exchange for the former non-intervention. The success in getting rid of Syria's chemical weapons put Russia, for the first time since the Cold War, on the same level as the US thus, consolidating Russia's global standing (Trenin, 2018, 7). 2013 was quite significant, not only Russia was successful in dealing with one of the many issues in Syria, but it also was able to exploit the situation in a way that made Russia seems like a great power willing to deal with a tragic issue while the US appeared to backtrack from their previous statement of considering the use of such weapons. Russia

comes out of 2013 stronger while the US, seemed unreliable and to be losing its footing in the region. The following military campaign launched in 2015, furtherly strengthen Russia's position in Syria. While the humanitarian crisis is yet to end, the military conflict itself was concluded and the Syrian government was reinstated.

By the end of the military conflict, Russia had made several gains both in terms of its global strategy and regional interests. Globally, the country had successfully conducted its first military operation outside of the former Soviet Union borders. It had proven to be able to stand at the same level as the US, making it an effective actor in the region. Regionally, the success of its military campaign was also an incredibly effective means to promote its new military technologies leading to the signing of several contracts with other Middle-Eastern countries. In 2017, Russia signed a military-technical cooperation agreement with Qatar including the purchase of its advanced S-400 system. Similarly, it signed a commercial deal with Turkey for the selling of the same system and opened discussions on its new system with Saudi-Arabia and Iraq (Lovotti et al, 2020, 10) (Trenin, 2018, 10). Therefore, regionally Russia became a valuable ally, and, contrary to western powers, it was able to strengthen its diplomatic ties with all countries in the region, maintain its realistic, non-ideological, stance of being open to work with anyone.

The Syrian crisis was cleverly exploited by Russia, to be able to strengthen its position both globally and regionally. Russia's approach shifted further away from the US and western powers, aiming at solidifying its global position. Realistically, the country's approach to the Middle-East remains opportunity-based and transactional. Russia will engage in the region on a short-term basis, taking advantage of any opportunity it might get (Sladden, 2017, 4). While the US remains the region's primary actor, Russia became a valuable addition to Middle-Eastern countries. In fact, despite no country is likely to forego its relations with the US, being able to diversify its diplomatic, political, and economic ties with other world's powers is desirable. To this end, Russia is a perfect option, since its policies towards the Middle-East are generally not directly influenced by the US, contrary to European countries. Furthermore, following the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, and the sanctions imposed on Russia, the Middle-East have become a considerable source of economic gains, particularly concerning the energy sector. (Sladden, 2017, 4) (Trenin, 2018, 10). Additionally, as mentioned before, Russia's short-term strategy seems

to satisfy the country's needs, by not engaging in long-term policies the country is able to quickly redirect its actions, taking advantage of any issue arising from the region without constraints (Sladden, 2017, 4). Despite, not being able to substitute the US in the Middle-East, the Syrian crisis rose Russia's profile through the Middle-East, giving the country noticeable political leverage. Avoiding the spread of religious extremism remains Russia's biggest concern, as well as, its economic interests concerning the energy sector and the selling of military weapons. Thus, security and stability are a relatively new interest for the country in the Middle-East, which seems to direct its actions on the possibility of short-term gains. Following this approach, it is difficult to identify Russia's position on the JCPOA, stability, and avoiding US direct involvement in the region suggest that the deal is in line with its interests and global ambitions. Thus, consider relevant are the bilateral relations between Russia and Iran.

Russia's bilateral relations with Iran

A look at the bilateral relations between Russia and Iran allows a remarkable insight into the former's position towards the JCPOA. As of December 2020, Russia is still committed to the survival of the agreement as it was signed in 2015 (Meloni, 2020, 1). Despite, many have considered Russia's past and present technical assistance to Iran's nuclear program as its de facto acceptance of the latter's nuclear aspiration, the reality of the relation between the two countries reveals a much more nuanced approach by the Russian Federation. There are two levels of understanding of Russia's approach to Iran, one involving the country's interests in Iran itself and a second related mainly to the role the Islamic Republic plays in the Russian geopolitical analysis. Firstly, from a bilateral standpoint, the two countries' relations have historically been being quite difficult. During the Russian empire, Iran was considered to be a country of interest for Russia's colonial ambitions and fertile ground in the former's confrontations with the Ottoman empire. During Soviet time, and before the 1979 revolution, Iran was a close American ally and a strong opposition to the communist influence in the region. Following the Islamic Revolution, the country's antagonist stance against any foreign owners made Russia an enemy of the new regime (Katz, 2012, 54-55). Thus, when the Russian Federation

replaced the communist regime, the long-standing grievances between the two countries seemed hard to surpass. However, considering the regional conditions Russia found itself in aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, especially in light of the new powers emerging around the Caspian Sea, establishing positive relations with Iran. Furthermore, in the first years of the 1990s, Iran was the only Muslim country that did not condemn Russia's war in Chechnya and instead cooperated with the Russians to solve the Tajik civilian conflict (1992-1997). (Katz, 2012, 55). Additionally, already in the 1990s, the sanction regime imposed by the USA had pushed Iran to look for better partnership within countries outside the US 'sphere of influence, leading the country to review its past relations with Russia. While the relations between the two countries have steadily grown since the 1990s, it has yet to reach the level of an effective partnership with long-term goals (Therme, 2018, 549). Instead, in line with Russia's overall approach, the relationship is characterized by short-term gains, mainly relating to Syria, arms trades, and the energy sector. Noticeably, Russia and Iran share some commonalities, particularly regarding their view of the world order. In fact, both countries believe that the current unipolar world, dominated by the US should become a multipolar order. From Russia's perspective, the country would be one of the most influential actors in this new world, whereas, for the Islamic Regime the main focus is to become the most prominent actor in the region and to replace the US as the guardian of the Middle-East (Geranmayeh, and Kadri, 2016, 2). However, by only looking at the bilateral relations between the two countries one would assume that the relationship is of little consequence, especially from the Russian perspective. According to data from UNCTAD, in 2018 Iran was ranked only as the 51st Russian trade partner as well as, the 48th exporter and the 55th importers (Lovotti et al, 2020, 12). Russia's main interests in Iran lie in the export of arms, and nuclear technology. To this end, in 2016 confirmed its commitment to provide Iran with sufficient loans to run a gas thermal power plant in Sirik, as well as, continue its efforts to develop Iran's civilian nuclear program. In addition, the economic relations between the two are further strengthening in fact, in 2019 Iran became part of the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (Franiok, 2020, 1). Notably, nuclear development has been the main area of cooperation between the two countries since the 1990s. In 1992 Russia's first project in the region since the fall of the Soviet Union was assisting Iran in the building of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plan (NPP), which involved

the signing of two agreements related to the building of the plants and the assurance of its peaceful use. By 1995, the Russian company, Zarubezhatomenergostroi and Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, signed a deal worth \$800 million that in the seven years grew to \$2.7 billion. The project has undergone several stepbacks, mainly due to the rise in tensions between Iran's and western powers in the 2000s, and the final commissioning of the plant was reached only in 2011 (Paulraj, 2016, 97-98). Nevertheless, nuclear trade remains the most significant sector within the bilateral relations between the two countries which also serves Russia's global aspirations.

Despite the rather weak bilateral relations between the two, Iran plays an important role in Russia's global aspirations. Firstly, Iran's cooperation is of utmost importance with matters concerning the Caspian Sea. Secondly, Iran has played a central role in Russia becoming a key player in the Middle-East and has been a fundamental partner in the Syrian Crisis. Thirdly, Russia's nuclear historical nuclear partnership with Iran has also been instrumental both as leverage against the US and as a way to prove the effectiveness of the Russians' approach to the Middle-East.

Historically, Iran's role in the Caspian Sea is arguably the oldest Russian interest regarding the Islamic Regime. Superficially, one could assume that the relation between the two countries finds its commonality in their opposition to the US, following the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" but, this is a rather over-simplistic way of explaining the above-mentioned shared ideology on the current world's order. As previously mentioned the 1990s, rather than being characterized by Russia's opposition to the US, were instead a period of realignment for Russians with the western world thus, making the above-mentioned analysis rather useless. In fact, the relations between Iran and Russia were born from very real geopolitical interests, based on a pragmatic evaluation by both parties of their situations (Therme, 2018, 550-551). In particular, the Caspian Sea is an area of interest for both parties, as Iran is situated Russia's southern borders, thus making the country a primary actor in the events that took place between the Caspian Sea and the Gulf region (Lovotti et al, 2020, 12). Tensions between the two countries could diminish Russia's role in the export of Iran's oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea, thus reducing the former's influential role in the Islamic Republic and would imply the loss of an important ally in the contention for the Caspian's reserves (Katz, 2012, 62). Secondly, Iran has been the gateway for Russia to become a major actor in the

Middle-East especially concerning the cooperation between the two countries in the Syrian Crisis. The role the Syrian conflict has played in the making of Russia's role in the Middle-East has been already discussed. Among the factor that has led to the success of Russia's approach, the collaboration with Iran has been largely influential. Iran has been on the frontline in the fight against Isis, with a death toll of reaching between 10 to 15 death per day by October 2016. Arguably the Assad regime without Iranian's troupes would not have been able to survive (Therme, 2018, 555) (Vannucci, 2015, 1).

Russia and Iran's nuclear program

Iran's nuclear program and Russia's partnership have been cleverly exploited by the latter to reach different global objectives. As previously mentioned Russia's assistance dates back to the 1990s with the agreements reached on the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plan. Paralleled to the development of the project Russia has been involved in the negotiations and raising concerns over Iran's nuclear program. In 1995, following its policy of rapprochement with the US, Russia signed the Gore- Chernomydin agreement whereby reducing the amount of nuclear assistance and weapon sales to the Islamic Republic. Putin withdrew from the agreement in 2000, according to its new policy of distancing itself from the sphere of influence of the US (Katz, 2012, 56). Up until 2006, Russia had been the most fervent supporter of Iran's nuclear program, not sharing the western concerns. To this end, Putin has repeated Russia's belief that Iran's enrichment did not prove the latter ambition to build a nuclear arsenal and that the country was still in compliance with IAEA's provisions (Paulraj, 2016, 101). Accordingly, in 2005, Russia proposed an agreement to Iran for the creation of a multinational enrichment center, which would enrich uranium up to the level permitted. The idea was to sell to Iran this enriched uranium, whereby dissipating any concerns over the Regime's nuclear program while providing economic gains for Russia (Paulraj, 2016, 101). Besides, the economic gains, Russia would have arguably become the main power responsible for Iran's nuclear program, consolidating its position in the Middle-East as a key player capable of solving one of the region's most pressing issues thus, appeasing its Sunni allies in the region while also remaining a fundamental partner for Iran. This has remained Russia's main

objective within Iran, meaning using the Gulf actor to consolidate its own position as a defender of the non-interventionist approach and as a conservative power respectful of the sovereignty of countries in the region. However, Iran declined the offer which had led to Russia deferring to the Security Council and the eventual imposition of three rounds of sanctions in 2007 and 2008. By this point, Moscow needed to be seen as a dependable great power and could not afford to continue to refuse to impose sanctions on Iran. Instead, Russia joined the Security Council strategy while also advocating for softer sanctions thus, keeping its appearance of being Iran's ally (Katz, 2012, 56-57). Consequently, by 2008 Russia had adopted UNSC resolutions 1737, 1747, and 1803 while also ensuring the possibility of continuing to provide Iran with materials to build light water reactors in Bushehr (Paulraj, 2016, 102). In 2009 Russia was part of the negotiation that took place in the Security Council, the initial agreement included Russia's previous proposal of becoming a Bank for low enriched uranium. Failure by the Security Council to secure Iran's approval once again thwarted Russia's ambitions. However, Russia was able to leverage its participation in later rounds of sanctions (2010). In exchange for Russia's participation in the 2010' sanctions, the IAEA and MinAtom (a Russian company), created the first low nuclear fuel bank of low enriched uranium, whereby giving Russian a considerable amount of geopolitical power by dominating a specific energy sector (Paulraj, 2016, 102).

The agreement cemented Russia's participation in the P5+1 negotiation.

Russia's reasoning for joining the deal is multiple. Firstly, the deal is in line with the country's advocacy for multilateral solutions of Middle-Eastern conflicts avoiding direct intervention. The agreement has been praised by Russia, who arguably believe that it proves Russia's role in global politics and confirms the US retraction from the region. Secondly, Russia is likely to gain from a non-nuclear Iran. Security concerns remain important, a nuclear Iran would undermine the scope of actions and influence of Russia in the Middle-East, something the country is unwilling to let go of (Katz, 2012, 57) (Paulraj, 2016, 103). Lastly, as Iran is the only power currently outside the sphere of influence of the US, ensuring Russia's influence over the country is particularly important for Russia's ambition to change the world's order. Being allied with Iran has the potential to diminish the role of the US in the region, it is a point of access for Russia and proof of their ongoing conservative approach. Additionally, Iran is a good lavage against western

countries and the US, ensuring Russia's approval in dealings with Iran is necessary to reach any meaningful result with regards to the Islamic regime.

Therefore, Iran's importance for Russia lies in the opportunities it has given the country to raise its international profile, while the bilateral relations between the two remain almost inconsequential. Russia's approach remains rooted in the idea of maintaining positive relations with all actors in the Middle-East. To this end, most recently Russia has reinforced its collaboration with one of Iran's main enemies, Saudi Arabia, on issues relating to Libya, Palestine, the Gulf region, and on the development of the Russian Covid-19 vaccines in the Arab country (Meloni, 2020, 1). Furthermore, in 2019, Putin has met with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, reiterating Russia's alliance with the Jewish Country and involving the latter in talks about Syria and the latter reconstruction after the conflict (Duclos, 2019, 2). All in all, Russia's participation in the JCPOA is opportunistic and based on a realist approach. Iran is but one of Russia's interests and allies in the region thus, examining the relationship between the two powers only on ideological terms will lead to a simplistic conclusion. The relations are much more nuanced and directly related to Russia's stance on the JCPOA.

Furthermore, by only looking at Russia's gains in terms of its bilateral relations with Iran, one would assume that Russia would not favor the deal. Firstly, Iran is a potential Russian competitor in energy resources. Secondly, since the signing of the agreement in 2015, Russia has not gained much. Russian export to the Regime between 2015 and 2018, was valued at only around \$5 billion, only 2.5% of all exports to Iran. In addition, the JCPOA opened competition between Russia and western countries in Iran (Mahmoudian and Cafiero, 2021, 1). However, Iran's role in Russia's global ambitions is much broader than being a simple bilateral partner, it is essential for Russia to maintain its influence over the latter. Considering the most recent Iranian stance on the agreement, and its restarting of the enrichment process, suggest that the country will not look favorably to the US in the foreseeable future. Thus, giving an opportunity to Russia to consolidate its current position. As in the case of China, Russia can play a fundamental role in bringing Iran back to the negotiating table. Covid-19 has definitely changed the world's priority, especially the US' agenda. Russia's political influence in Iran is likely to become even more important to slow the regime's withdrawal from the agreement and the potential of the signing of a new deal.

CONCLUSION

In January 2021, the Islamic Republic of Iran has declared its intention to resume the enrichment of Uranium, potentially endangering the survival of the JCPOA signed in 2015. Following the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, the deal had already entered a crisis with its survival dependent on the will of the remaining parties to the agreement. By examining the interests that lied behind the signing of the agreement of all parties, different reasonings have emerged, which highlight the peculiarities of each actor. Iran has definitely gained from the agreement as the GDP of the country grew by 15% in 2017, and several trade agreements have been signed. Politically, the deal ended the isolationism Iran had found itself in following the imposition of sanctions by the Security Council. It was able to restart its economic partnership with western countries, particularly with the European Union, and was set to consolidate its position in the Middle-East. On the other hand, Iran is a country highly influenced by revolutionary sentiments that have never disappeared. They are an intrinsic part of the Iranian regimes thus, play a part in the foreign policy decision-making process of the Regime. What has emerged by examining the recent conduct of all the parties is that the US withdrawal from the agreement has seemingly irreparably affected the success of the Agreement. The US who has almost entirely relied on a realist approach since the end of the Cold War is the current guardian of the Middle-East making its actions enormously influential. President Obama's focus on domestic policy and the subsequent non-interventionist approach has been instrumental to the success of the negotiations. Similarly, President Trump thought approach on Iran, favoring the US-Israel alliance and influenced by the Republic Party's perception of the JCPOA, led to the current crisis. Furthermore, the assassination in January 2020 of Qassem Soleimani, has given the most conservative faction in Iran a great amount of political leverage. Considering the Supreme Leader's tendency to favor a conservative position, the county seems set to revert back to its confrontational position towards western countries, raising the domestic profile of the Revolutionary Guard and legitimizing the decision to seek nuclear weapons. As tensions rose between the US and Iran, the EU seems to be powerless. Considering, that the EU's inability meets all the requirements without the US, and the limits of its own foreign policy, the EU seems to

be most suited to revert to its role as moderator. Despite, the importance the EU can play within the Iranian economy, the renewed US sanctions have restricted the possibilities of EU companies to sign deals with the Iranians. Additionally, while the EU would gain greatly from cooperating with Iran, particularly in terms of the energy resources it could provide, in the event of a choice between Iran and the US, it would undoubtedly prefer its current partnerships with the latter. Incredibly different is China's approach. The country benefited greatly from the isolation of Iran since it was the country's most valuable trading partner. However, China's approach is quite different from all the other parties. The country has developed a security-based approach only recently, following the Libyan crisis and the negative effect the instability brought by the Arab Springs had on the region. Currently, China's approach is focused on developing win-win partnerships with all actors in the region, while also building on their global aspirations through the "Belt and Road" initiative. Thus, while China might have had gained more from an isolated Iran, the security concerns related to the potential instability that the escalation of tensions between the latter and the US would have brought to China's long-term ambitions, led the Chinese to favor a peaceful resolution of the problem. Furthermore, China has become an essential party to the deal, its economic ties with Iran have made the country instrumental in trying to convince the Islamic Regime to remain in the deal. If the EU is likely to play the mediator role, China has the most economic leverage of all parties. Lastly, Russia has emerged as a key supporter of the JCPOA. The country's global ambitions depend heavily on the role it plays in Iran. The Iran deal is considered a success by the Russians, proving that their conservation approach is the most suited. In looking to change the current unipolar world's order, the opportunity-based relations Russia has built with Iran are both fundamental for the country and considered valuable by the Iranians. Russia has become a valid alternative to the US, and its political leverage is strengthening. Thus, it is likely that Russia will continue to support the JCPOA and it might also look at the possibility of playing a more central role in the survival of the agreement. Especially, in the event of the US's refusal to timely restart negotiation, Russia has the strongest political leverage.

Currently, the most influential factor in the future of the JCPOA is the stance President Biden will take. President Biden has expressed the US interest in resuming negotiation.

To do so, the US expects Iran to adhere to the agreement's provisions, a precondition the Islamic regime is intentioned to abide by. However, a few issues run the risk of halting any possible future negotiations. Firstly, on January 5th, 2021, Iran has announced that it will no longer adhere to the operational limitations imposed by the JCPOA but, will maintain its compliance with the safeguards obligation envisioned in 2015. Additionally, Iran wants the US to lift the sanctions imposed since its withdrawal and expects the country to unfreeze Iran's foreign financial assets. Both requests seem unlikely to be accepted by President Biden as a precondition to the negotiations. Most likely, the US will comply with Iran's request in the event of the signing of a new agreement. Furthermore, President Biden is likely to face opposition within the US Congress. The Iran deal was already unpopular at the time of its signing, in particular, the Republican party put great efforts in trying to discredit the validity and efficacy of the agreement. Since, 2015 both sides of the aisle have negatively regarded the JCPOA thus, making any future negotiations even more difficult for a president whose main priority is to reunify the country. Most likely, President Biden's additional requests, are meant to appease Congress members who have regarded the JCPOA as insufficient. Certainly, the deal will need Congress' approval. In fact, the signing of a new deal within the scope of a presidential executive order will result in the same weakness the JCPOA had within the US system thus, running the risks of another withdrawal by future administrations. Furthermore, the Iranian issue is not among President Biden's current priorities. Following its campaign promises, the President has been focusing his attention on domestic issues relating to the pandemic and the deep social divisions the country has been experiencing in the last few years. Similarly, his foreign policy focus has been on rejoining the Paris Climate Accord, reinforcing the US support for its traditional allies, rather than on more controversial issues. Most likely, the new administration will not set its sign-on on Iran's issue in a timely measure. Arguably, a joint effort by the EU, China, and Russia could for the time appease the Iranians while the US focuses on their priority but, considering the possibility of the rise to power of the conservative faction in Iran's next election, this path seems difficult. In light of, the disastrous effect Covid-19 had in Iran, worsened by the political isolation the country was forced in, the election of members of the revolutionary guards to key institutional positions, will make negotiations almost impossible. Thus, time has become a fundamental variable. Ultimately, the future

of the JCPOA or a possible new deal relies on the actions Iran and the US will take. The EU will likely keep pressuring the US for their return. Russian and China will be instrumental to buy some time and influence Iran, leveraging their political and economic relations with the regime. Without a doubt, the deal is in crisis and its survival uncertain. All the parties to the agreement have unique opportunities to save it, but ultimately the decision will rely on the political will of each government to make this issue a priority in their foreign policy agenda.

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SUMMARY

The JCPOA, commonly known as the Iran Deal, was signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015, by the members of the Security Council plus Germany, Iran, and the European Union (P5+1). The main aim of the agreement was to scale back Iran's nuclear program steering it away from nuclear armaments. The JCPOA mainly revolves around Iran's stockpile and enrichment of uranium. In particular, Iran was required to renounce 97% of its enriched uranium and was allowed enrichment only up to 3.67%, which is less than it would be needed for medical research purposes (20%) or for weapons production (90%). Moreover, Iran is required to reduce the number of centrifuges it owns and to comply with UN inspections of its facilities. Lastly, the US, EU, Russia, and China were required to relieve Iran from the economic sanctions previously imposed. However, the United States' President Donald J. Trump withdrew from the agreement on May 8, 2018, creating a crisis and endangering its survival.

Before becoming the JCPOA, the Iran Deal had to pass through different stages of negotiations which reflecting the difficult dynamic between the parties. Between 2003 and 2005 the EU led by Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (E3) was the main negotiator trying to convince Iran to comply with IAEA's provisions. This proved to be a failure as the Iranian elections of 2005, with the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and not the expected Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. By 2006 Iran, guided by the conservative faction, started enrichment again. A new agreement sponsored by the US, UK, Russia, and France was proposed in 2009/2010 which would enable Iran to enrich uranium up to the level necessary for medical research. However, oppositions inside Iran and against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made the signing of the agreement impossible. By 2012 US and the EU had imposed unilateral sanctions. The sanctions greatly impacted Iran's economy and politically isolated the country. The election of President Rouhani in 2013, coming from the green party, as well as, the economic crisis Iran was facing brought the country back to the negotiating table, resulting in the signing of the 2015 JCPOA. The deal was set to be a medium-term solution to the problem, giving the parties 15 years to review the issue and find a permanent solution. However, the 2018 US withdrawal from the agreement effectively led the JCPOA to a crisis, questioning its survival. Between 2018 and 2020 the EU, China, and Russia have continued to express their commitment to the agreement but failed to meet its requirements. As of January 2021, Iran has resumed its

enrichment program, furtherly weakening the already critical condition of the deal. The following works try to examine the interests that lie behind each country's decision to join the deal.

Concerning Iran, the chapter examined briefly the history of the current regime and the rising to power of the Islamic regime. In February 1979, the revolutionaries took control of the country and gave rise to the current regime. Their ideology was rooted in Shiite ideas as demonstrated by the newly written constitution, backed by the traditional ulama and bazaar factions. Khomeini, from the main protagonist of the revolution, became the Supreme Leader of the country, acquiring for all intent and purposes almost unlimited power to “determine the interests of Islam, set general guidelines for the Islamic Republic, supervise policy implementation and mediated between the executive and the judiciary”. The revolutionaries were able to exploit the growing negative sentiments within the citizens to further their agenda. There are three main elements on which the revolutionaries focused on to gain public support, elements that remain of utmost relevance in today’s Iran: they opposed the Shah’s policies and anti-Islamic based propaganda, which had the effect of alienating a key section of society, including the powerful ulama, lastly, the Islamic revolution was born under the premises of being a counteract to western powers’ meddling and exploitation of Iran, effectively making foreign powers the enemy of the revolution.

The new Regime institutional structure deeply influenced the foreign policymaking of the country, especially with regards to the power given to the supreme leader and the limitation faced by the President. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran reflects the revolutionist ideas, primarily based on Shia Islam. It also incorporates some secular democratic institutions and allows for elections of such institutional bodies. Most notably, the constitution set out the creation of a parliament, made of the majlis, and the presidency, allowing the regime to gain legitimacy both from God and from its citizens. Contrary to expectations the Iranian institutional structure does not afford the Supreme Leader the total and unquestionable control of the country. Far from resembling a system of checks and balances typical of democracy, the Iranian Constitution has nonetheless created a power structure where no person, not even the Supreme Leader, has total control over the state. Furthermore, the Institutional structure of the country relies heavily on the exploitation of religion for its survival and legitimacy. Despite that, the Supreme Leader

has total control over all branches of government: legislative, executive, and judiciary, and has full authority and ultimate decision-making power with regards to foreign policy, defense, and national security. To date, there have been only two Supreme Leader in the country, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. Khamenei has been responsible for the shaping of the Iranian Regime as we know it today. His governance of the country has been characterized by his conservative views while also adopting a realistic approach, in particular with regards to foreign policy. Whereas, the President is elected by the citizens of Iran, he represents the executive power in the country and the agenda setter whether it concerns domestic policy or foreign policy. In reality, from a hierarchical perspective, the presidency is under the Supreme Leader's rule, which has historically affected the decision-making power of the President, undermining its domestic and foreign policy decisions. Since its conception in 1979, the country has undergone periods in which both figures perused the same goals and administration where the Supreme Leader undermined the President's decisions. For instance between 1989 and 1992 almost all foreign policy decisions were taken by the President, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, (1989 -1997), instead of from 1992 to 1996 the Supreme Leader retracted his support for the President, ostracizing his agenda in favor of the more conservative faction. In addition, the President and the Supreme Leader key actor in Iran have become the Revolutionary Guards, which adopt an ultra-conservative stance and have ostracized any attempt at realignment with foreign powers. Geographically, Iran is situated in one of the most relevant and contentious regions in the world. The Middle-East is one of the most oil and natural gas-rich region in the world, a characteristic which has ensured the attention of foreign actors. The country sits in an area between the Middle-East, Central and South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea. The country is ranked fourth for its crude oil reserves, preceded only by Venezuela, Saudi-Arabia, and Canada. It was also ranked second in terms of its natural gas reserves, controlling 17% of the world's reserves of natural gas. The centrality Iran plays for Central Asia and Caucasus countries have allowed the regime to sign several bilateral agreements concerning multi-lateral gas lines that reach European countries. Iran's main powers in the region are non-state allies, specifically Islamist groups such as Hezbollah, who were meant to be Iran's tool used to influence other countries in the region. Thus, one of the Iran's biggest weakness is its, de facto, isolation within the region and lack of support in the international community, this seems to have

been both the result of the country own approach to foreign policy, based on the opposition to the US and the western world, as well, as being perceived as destabilizer in the region. A decisive factor in Iran's foreign policy has been its nuclear program which has led to tension within the region and with the most relevant actors in the international community. Considering, the geographical and geopolitical positioning of Iran, as well as his foreign policy agenda, the decision to build nuclear plants and weapons is in line with the objective to ensure the regime's survival and to reach total independence from foreign countries. Iran's potential development of nuclear weapons would change the balance of power in the Region. Taking into account that the only bordering or nearby countries with nuclear warheads are India, Pakistan, and Israel, a nuclear Iran has could rival Israel and, more importantly, threaten the US' control in the region. A key factor in Iran's decision to join the deal has been the economic crisis born from its economic and political isolation after the sanction imposed in 2012. sanctions imposed by the international community have negatively impacted the economy of the country. In particular, sanctions imposed by the Security Council and the EU since the early 2000s have had the most impact on Iran's economy and especially on the energy sector. Since the introduction of the sanctions, in 2012 and loss of access to the international market, Iran's GDP has shrunk by 9% (2012 -2014), the country has lost around 160 billion dollars in oil revenues, the Rial has devalued by over 60% and inflations reached 45% in 2013. Additionally, 4 million people were living under the poverty line. President Rouhani's long-term economic policies depend on the possibility of Iran accessing the international market and attract foreign investors. Thus, Iran's willingness to reach an agreement in 2015 is consistent with the President's realistic approach and the protection of national interests. Data from the lifting of the nuclear sanctions in 2015 is definite proof of the opportunities derived from the signing of the JCPOA. The GDP grew by 15% in 2017, with the IMF estimating a growth rate of 4%, exports rose to 50 billion dollars in 2017 compared to 20 billion in 2012, dependency on oil revenue lowered to 23% of the GDP, inflation lowered to 9.8% (2017) and several trade agreements have been signed since the 2015 deal.

The second chapter is reserved for the United States from its interests in the middle east to its strategy and recent development. The US's foreign policy strategy towards the Middle-East is comprised of four main objectives: ensuring the and free flow of oil and

energy resources, preventing nuclear proliferation, the fight against terrorism, and democratization. To achieve them, the USA has sought to maintain the stability of the region through a realistic approach. The US's foreign policy strategy in the Middle-East had been characterized by a realist approach, while there were efforts put towards projects involving democratization, the main objective has always remained the access to natural resources and the stability of the oil market. In addition, the US has been active opposers to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, with the only exception of Israel. Nuclear proliferation has become an especially important issue for the USA since the rise to power of the Islamic Regime in Iran. The US' reasonings for opposing nuclear proliferation are straightforward. Firstly, countries in possession of nuclear warheads are able to engage in coercive diplomacy with states that do not have them thus, the US opposition to nuclear proliferation in the Middle-East is due to their interests in maintaining their ability to influence the decision-making process within the region's governments to ensure the adoption of policies that would favor them. Additionally, the mere possibility of one country acquiring nuclear weapons could lead to a chain reaction of other states trying to develop their own nuclear warheads. Lastly, the US opposition to nuclear proliferation within the region finds further reasoning in the "stability-instability paradox" meaning the belief that the acquisition by an enemy country of nuclear weapons would bring the destabilization of the whole region. To this end, the centrality of the Iranian problem in US politics is not without merit, owning nuclear weapons might give Iran the confidence to engage in even more detrimental actions around the Middle-East thus, leading to instability, the possibility of war, and the weakening of US's control in the region. 9/11 meant a shift in US interests. The "War on Terror" meant a shift in the United States' approach in the Middle-East, going from a pure realist strategy towards a more ideological one, based on military intervention and unilateral operations. During this period the fight against terrorism became the key US interests. The last US interest is democratization. The issue of democratization was not present during Bush's administration but, the chosen ideological approach required the President to exploit the US traditional role as the exporter and defender of democracy to legitimize his agenda. After the relative failure in democratizing Iraq and the Bush Presidency's endeavors in the region, Obama's administration side-lined the issue of democratization favoring the US' traditional goal. Interest in supporting democratic movements resurfaced with Arab

Springs in 2011. The 2009 financial crisis and the general discontent of the American public towards the protracted war in Iraq, led President Obama to focus more on domestic issues. Concerning the Middle-East, this translated into a shift in strategies going from direct military intervention and presence to focus more on soft power, multilateralism, and support for regional allies. The issue of democratization became more prominent during the Arab Spring but was always overshadowed by Obamas central-realistic approach and the focus on the free flow of oil and market stability. Arguably, democratization became an instrument of the Obama administration to ensure stability in the region rather than an ideological objective as the US conduct in Egypt and in Bahrain has clearly demonstrated. It involved protecting its main interest in the free-flow of oil thought maintaining stability. US' efforts in opposing nuclear proliferation in the region have also been instrumental to the protection of their primary interests, as was the case with their objectives in combatting terrorism and aiding democratic movements. Thus, the United States position regarding the JCPOA must be understood in light of these interests and as a policy adopted to achieve them. Another important factor in understanding the United States' position with regards to the JCPOA is its historical alliance with Israel. In fact, the alliance between the US and Israel serves two main purposes, one based on ideological reasoning and the other on the well-known US' realist approach. From an ideological stand-point, the alliance with Israel is rooted in the shared values between the two countries. Secondly, based on a more realist view, both countries have historically found commonality in the recognition of enemies in the region. The strong popular and political support for the alliance has played a considerable part in the rejection and in the unpopularity of the deal, especially within republicans. The belief in the commitment of the US towards Israel is so deep-rooted in American politics that, any attempt, being it direct or indirect, to undermine or weaken such alliance is seen as contrary to the US' values and has given rise to strong opposition from both parties. The signing of the deal was made to be a political tool exploited by directly linking the US' involvement in the deal with anti-Israel stances. The countless negative articles written by media platforms, especially those associated with the Republican Party, played a part in the instability of the agreement and ultimately led to the US withdrawal. For the United States, the JCPOA is the result of several years of negotiations, setbacks, and strong opposition from Congress. The realist approach of several US administrations has made

cooperation possible despite the ideological disagreements. Since neither the US nor Iran can afford a war with each other, cooperation and finding a diplomatic solution has been the US chief option. Therefore, the US' interests in the Middle-East remained unchanged, with stability the stability of the oil market being the most important one. Additionally, after the US' military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan during Bush's administration, direct military intervention in the region became an undesirable option for President Obama, while maintaining stability in the region remained of primary importance. Thus, the JCPOA became a valuable option for the Obama administration in the absence of other solutions. However, after the election of President Trump, the US position towards the JCPOA completely shifted. President Trump's foreign policy approach has been deeply influenced by domestic actors, and in particular by its party, the necessity to appeal to his base, and the role of pressure groups. It is definitely difficult to assess Trump's Middle-East stance, before his election President Trump bolstered the slogan "America First", in which he expressed his intention to focus on American domestic issues. President Trump's rhetoric suggested that his approach would bring the US out of the multilateral political forums going back to an isolationist stance. From the outset, President Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan touched upon the discontent of those white traditional Americans until it reached two of the most important electorate groups, the evangelicals and the white Catholics both fervent supporters of Israel. There are two aspects of considerable importance in the foreign policy strategy of the Trump administration, firstly the need to respect his campaign promises to appease his base, and secondly, the rollback of President Obama's approach to the Middle-East. During his campaign, he runs on highly sensitive issues such as moving the embassy to Jerusalem and the intention of vetoing any initiative, declaration, or agreement at the United Nations against Israel. Adding to that, pro-Israel lobbyist groups and the ability of countries like Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to exploit President Trump's ambitions, through the injection of the copious amount of money into advocacy groups, has ensured the slandering of the JCAPOA, effectively influencing the Congress, as well as, the general public perception of the deal. The administration insisted on the destabilizing role of the Islamic Regime in the region while considering the Iran deal as insufficient and useless to reach stability. To this end, a 2018 State Department testimony reveals President Trump's intention to ensure a US military presence in north-east Syria with the

objective of lessening Iran's influence over the country. More recently, in 2020, the Trump administration intensified its policies towards the Middle-East through significant proposals such as, the "Peace for Prosperity" project, which aimed at resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lastly, in August of 2020, the Trump administration revealed the signing of diplomatic agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, the so-called "Abraham Accord", described by the administration as a historic accord and a step towards peace in the Middle-East. The normalization of the relation between the parties represented a further step towards the centralization of the role of Israel in the Middle-East and the strengthening of the containment strategy towards Iran. It is important to notice that the agreement failed to include Saudi-Arabia and Oman. The absence of both countries is noteworthy, without them the agreement seems to lack an important component to its effectiveness. Moreover, the loss of the 2020 presidential elections and the democratic majority in both the Senate and the house of representatives makes it unlikely the compete with President Trump's plan. After the 2020 elections, President-elect Joe Biden has yet to comment on his stances on Iran and whether he will make the USA re-enter the deal. However, some considerations can already be made based on his campaign propositions. There are a few elements that need to be taken into consideration with regards to challenges the Biden-Harris administration will have to face with regards to the Islamic Regime and the JCPOA. Firstly, Iran's willingness to adhere to the deal's provisions seems to have considerably lessened. In fact, as of January 2021 Iran, has declared its intention to re-start the enrichment of uranium up to the 20%. In addition, the most harmful action undertaken by the Trump administration, with regards to the survival of JCPOA, has been the US killing of Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020, leader of the powerful Revolutionary Corps. Realistically, Iran should favor a diplomatic resolution, considering the economic reforms that are still needed and the difficult situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the Biden campaign has been very clear on the conditions necessary for the US to open dialogue again. The full compliance with the JCPOA is an important pre-condition to the US re-entering the agreement. A second important aspect, regarding the foreign policy strategy of the Biden administration, resides in domestic constraints it is likely to face. Firstly, the current health crisis will force the Biden administration to focus more on domestic issues rather than on foreign policy. The newly elected President will likely try to avoid

embarking on foreign policy decisions that could be exploited by the opposition to foment the ongoing civil unrest, worsening the current divide in the country.

The third chapter focuses on the European Union. The European Union differs greatly from the United States with regards to the JCPOA. Because of its nature and possibilities, the European Union approach towards Iran and the Middle-East is characterized by a soft power approach, diplomacy, and multilateralism. Arguably, the EU favors multilateralism because of its structural inability to pursue unilateral agreement of fundamental security issues. Thus, making the pursuit of foreign policy objectives, through multilateral forums, both a choice and an obligation. This has limited the EU scope of action resulting in the EU's deprivation of fundamental foreign policy tools, which could make the EU more than an actor relying on its soft power. To put things into perspective, the EU is currently engaged in 6 military operations, while Italy is engaged in 39 operations, the implications of not been able to promptly respond with military means, or to straighten its position because of the lack of it, has arguably become an impediment in the foreign policy-making of the EU. Noticeably, the EU's dependency on NATO also implies a considerable US' direct, and indirect, influence over the decision-making process of the EU, especially during multilateral negotiation in which both take part in. The JCPOA is no exception to such influence, decision taken in Washington have a great impact on the decision or capabilities of the EU regarding the deal. Therefore, the EU's lack of military capabilities and the US' influence, have been two of the most relevant factors in the making the EU's foreign policy agenda particularly, with regards to the Middle-East and Iran.

The current foreign policy approach, namely the European Global Strategy (EUGS) was adopted by the European Union in 2016, following the failure of the previous strategy, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), employed from 2004. Most noticeably, the ENP failed to respond to the issues arising from the Arab Spring. The EU posed itself as a defender and active supporter of democratic movements, often overlooking stability concerns in name of democratization and the promotion of the EU's principle in the region. Failure in dealing with the Arab Spring, and the poor performances of the ENP, pushed the EU to reformulate its foreign policy strategy, towards a more realist stance. Therefore, since 2016 the EU has implemented the EUGS. The EUGS greatly differs from the ENP. Instead of, focusing on its normative and transformative powers, aiming

to Europeanize its neighbors, the EUGS main aim is to address country-specific weaknesses. The EUGS is based on less ideological values, like democratization, and is instead focused on security, by supporting different actors, and takes into consideration the specificity of each case. The difficulty is in the implementation of its foreign policy approach in problematic areas, such as the Middle-East, and on country-specific actions, as in the case of Iran. Concerning the Middle-East the EU enjoys a substantial trading partnership with Middle-Eastern countries that goes beyond energy goods. Despite its interests, since 1993 the EU has never adopted a comprehensive and long-term strategy to deal with the challenges arising from the region, only including the Middle-East in their general Global Strategy. Arguably, the EU stance with regards to the Middle-East is a passive approach, responding to issues when they become apparent without proactively trying to solve the underlying problems within the region. Arguably, the EU's approach does not represent the over-all importance the Middle-East has for the security and prosperity of the EU. Instead, the EU still heavily relies on the US to maintain stability in the region, while it deals with specific issues. Its structural limitation, mainly the lack of military power, has led the EU to adopt a passive stance without capitalizing even on its strongest tools. This has had negative consequences also on its dealing with Iran and the survival of the JCPOA. The EU's approach to the Islamic Republic is no different, the country's strategic importance is not adequately reflected in the EU's agenda. As previously mentioned, the EU is one of the biggest trading partners for many Middle-Eastern countries. Data from 2017 valued trades with Iran at €21 billion, with a rise in the average annual growth rate of 31.3%(2016-2017). However, from the EU's perspective, its single most important interest in Iran is energy and more specifically the export of natural gasses and oil. Importing energy from Iran is both economically and strategically advantageous for both Iran and the EU. Strategically Iran needs European investment and technological assistance for its economic growth while the EU needs Iranian reserves to reduce its dependency on Russia. The JCPOA allows for such an important partnership. Although the EU's role has been highly praised by EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, it poses the question of whether the EU would be able to achieve an agreement in the absence of the US. Following the withdrawal, the US has reinstated all previous sanctions against Iran which also affects EU companies. To counter the US, the European Union could add the US sanction in the 1996

Blocking Statue which, would make it possible for EU companies to continue to engage with Iran. At the same time, if the Biden administration does not re-enter the agreement, the EU might face an ultimatum, given by the US, of either choosing access to the US market or to the Iranian one. Since the US is the world's largest economy, the choice would, without doubts, giving up on the partnership with Iran. Despite its commitment to the deal after the US 'withdrawal, the EU was unable to procure the necessary economic resources to meet the terms of the deal. Currently, the optimal solution for the European Union would be to engage with the US in talks regarding Iran. Certainty, the EU's foreign policy limitations, and recent failures suggest that the survival of the deal resides in the decisions of the US and Iran, with the EU continuing to play a supporting role.

The fourth chapter is reserved for China. the country's foreign policy approach differs greatly from that of the other parties to the agreement thus, making a prediction on his future behavior difficult. China believes in a foreign policy approach based on political dialogue, on cooperation within a win-win framework and mostly engaging in economic partnerships. Compared to the "geopolitical" strategy adopted by the United States, China's approach has been often defined as a "geoeconomic" strategy, with the initial goal of satisfying its economic interests and only recently shifting towards more security-related objectives. What has characterized China's approach till the 2000s has been its pragmatism, aimed at forging positive relations with as many countries as possible in the region. By virtue of this strategy, China has been able to maintain diplomatic ties with all the countries in the region. Regarding, the Middle-East in general, in 2016 the value of bilateral trades with the Middle-East was \$230 billion, twelve times higher than in 2000. Moreover, 7% of all China's exports went to the Middle-East while foreign direct investments (5% of China's total) are mostly directed towards the energy sectors among the region's countries. Particularly, relevant is China's dependency on the Middle-East for energy goods. Middle-Eastern countries have been China's first source of energy since 1995. The Chinese strategy of avoiding direct involvement within Middle-Eastern countries came to an end following the Arab Spring. China's failure in dealing with the crisis emerging in Libya and Syria cemented the need for a more realist approach. While still mostly relying on its non-interventionist approach, China has gradually become more involved in the resolution of regional conflicts. China's participation in the JCPOA is another example of the country's changing approach to foreign policy. For instance, since

2011 China's position on military intervention has greatly changed and the country has started the process of becoming more involved in security issues. To this end, in 2014 China had started the process of negotiation for establishing a new naval base in the port of Obock. However, arguably the most consequential foreign policy strategy adopted by China, affecting its relations with the Middle-East has been the "Belt and Road" initiative, a new project that would prove China's foreign policy skills and ensure its place among the most powerful countries on the international stage. The ultimate objective is to build strong economic ties with the majority of the world. Moreover, the OBOR is meant to facilitate China's challenge to the current US-centric economic system. With regards to the Middle-East, the region is especially important for the success of the project since two out of the three routes meet in the Middle-East. Fundamental in OBOR initiative is Iran. Iran is China's second-biggest exporter of oil after Saudi Arabia and has remained a consistent source of energy. China has also been Iran's main trade partner. To this end, until serious talks started to take place in the Security Council, on Iran's nuclear program, China has been Iran's main supplier of military weapons, as well as, aiding the country in developing its military capabilities and its nuclear ambitions. Arguably, China's interests towards Iran, from Belt and Road initiative to energy imports, are just a piece of China's global strategy, mostly based on the maintenance of the stability of the whole region. While Iran plays an important strategic role, it would be wrong to overestimate its importance and thus trying to understand China's position in the JCPOA as a country in line with the Islamic regime's objectives. China's relations with Iran are characterized by a balanced approach, maintaining positive relations with the Islamic regime, without involving itself with its domestic issues, while also recognizing its own current subordinating role to the US when it comes to ensuring the stability of the region. Ensuring stability is China's top priority and considering their ambitions with regard to the Belt and Road initiative, it is likely that it will continue to support the JCPOA, also in view of the US' seemingly willingness to re-enter the deal. Contrary to the EU, China's role is much more pivotal, the political pressure the country can exert on Iran is perhaps more valuable than many other foreign policy tools.

Lastly, the fifth chapter focuses on Russia. Russia does not have a strategy towards the Middle-East, instead, the region plays a role in the country's overall global strategy thus, leading Russia to exploit emerging opportunities in the region to advance its global

agenda, without considering specific interests it might have. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly elected democratic government had to build a new foreign policy strategy, taking into consideration the country's new unipolar world it had to engage, as well as, the country's domestic needs. The main interests of the newly formed government was that of ensuring a modicum of control over ex-members of the Soviet Union thus, regional stability and domestic reconstruction characterized the early 1990s. Subsequently, the first half of the 1990s saw Russia's efforts in realigning itself with the western world. The early 2000s saw a rekindle of relations between the Russian Federation and several countries in the Middle-East, mainly due to Putin's agenda and his vision for Russia. If the previous President had led Russia's foreign policy through less ideological and more realist lenses, Putin's approach consolidates Russia's foreign policy strategy on a realist and statist basis. To this end, the Kremlin approach to foreign policy was based on the belief that Russia needed to take back its position as one of the great powers in the world. Between 2001-2008 Putin's main concern was that of changing the perception Middle-Eastern countries, failure to do so would have impeded Russia in positively engaging with the region. During this period Russia was able to exploit the War in Iraq to present itself as a non-interventionist ally and regained the trust of most countries in the region. Russia opted to establish positive relations with all Middle-Eastern. This approach was very successful as to this day the country enjoys positive relations with countries at odds with each other like Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinians. As for all the other parties to the JCPOA, the Arab Spring forced a change in the way the country interacts in the region. In Russia's case, the Arab Spring gave rise to two main concerns. Firstly, Russia was concerned with the possible repercussion the rise of revolutionary movements might bring inside its borders. Secondly, Russia firmly believed that the Arab Spring was a direct consequence of the decades of the US and western countries' disastrous involvement in the region. Above all, Russia believed the Arab Spring to be a continuation of the "color revolutions", and that those movements would eventually spread inside its own borders. The Arab Spring negatively impacted trade relations between the region and Russia. Political instability in several countries undermined Russia's economic interests, among all the Libyan crisis had the most disastrous consequences for the Russians. The Libyan crisis would be the last time Russia would try to deal with Middle-Eastern issues relying on western countries. Russia

expected western power to collaborate on equal terms in the Security Council, it was disappointed rather quickly as western powers took direct actions in Libya. Russia's dealing with the Syrian crisis signalled the beginning of a more comprehensive approach to the Middle-East. After more than a decade of trying to emerge as an effective alternative to the US, as well as, trying to cooperate with western countries on regional issues, Russia's approach shifted towards a more confrontational stance, relying on its own forces and almost reminiscent of the Soviet period. The Syrian crisis is the first case in which Russia took direct actions to solve a problem arising from the Middle-East. The real turning point of the crisis came about with the notorious 2013 attack on Damascus, which involved the use of chemical weapons. While the US blamed the Syrian government for the use of chemical weapons, President Obama, despite considering the use of such weapons as the US' "red line", showed his unwillingness to involve the US in yet another conflict in the Middle-East, an indecisiveness Putin was able to exploit. The US and Russia came to the agreement that the latter would bear the responsibility for eliminating Syria's chemical weapons in exchange for the former non-intervention. The success in getting rid of Syria's chemical weapons put Russia, for the first time since the cold war, on the same level as the US thus, consolidating Russia's global standing. Regionally, the success of its military campaign was also an incredibly effective means to promote its new military technologies that led to the signing of several contracts with other Middle-eastern countries thus, Russia became a valuable addition for Middle-Eastern countries. It is difficult to identify Russia's position on the JCPOA, stability, and avoiding US direct involvement in the region suggest that the deal is in line with its interests and global ambitions. Thus, consider relevant are the bilateral relations between Russia and Iran. As of December 2020, Russia is still committed to the survival of the agreement as it was signed in 2015. There two levels of understanding of Russia's approach to Iran, one involving the country's interests in Iran itself and a second related mainly to the role the Islamic Republic plays in the Russian geopolitical analysis. By only looking at the bilateral relations between the two countries one would assume that the relationship is of little consequence, especially from the Russian perspective. According to data from UNCTAD, in 2018 Iran was ranked only 51st Russian trade partner.). Russia's main interests in Iran lie in the export of arms, and of nuclear technology. Notably, nuclear development has been the main area of cooperation between the two

countries since the 1990s. Despite the rather weak bilateral relations between the two, Iran plays an important role in Russia's global aspirations. Firstly, Iran's cooperation is of utmost importance with matters concerning the Caspian Sea. Secondly, Iran has played a central role in Russia becoming a key player in the Middle-East and has been a fundamental partner in the Syrian Crisis. Thirdly, Russia's nuclear historical nuclear partnership with Iran has also been instrumental both as leverage against the US and as a way to prove the effectiveness of the Russians' approach to the Middle-East. Despite the assumption that Russia benefits from an isolated Iran, Russia's reasoning for joining the deal is multiple. Firstly, the deal is in line with the country's advocacy for a multilateral solution of Middle-Eastern conflict without direct intervention. Secondly, Russia is likely to gain from a non-nuclear Iran. Security concerns remain important, a nuclear Iran would undermine the scope of actions and influence of Russia in the Middle-East, Lastly, it is essential for Russia to maintain its influence over the latter. Considering the most recent Iranian stance on the agreement, and its restarting of the enrichment process, suggest that the country will not look favorably to the US in the foreseeable future. Thus, giving an opportunity to Russia to consolidate its current position. As in the case of China, Russia can play a fundamental role in bringing Iran back to the negotiating table. To conclude, currently the most influential factor in the future of the JCPOA is the stance President Biden will take. President Biden has expressed the US interest in resuming negotiation. To do so, the US expects Iran to adhere to the agreement's provisions, a precondition the Islamic regime is intentioned to abide by. However, a few issues run the risk of halting any possible future negotiations. Firstly, on January 5th, 2021, Iran has announced that it will no longer adhere to the operational limitations imposed by the JCPOA but, will maintain its compliance with the safeguards obligation envisioned in 2015. Additionally, Iran wants the US to lift the sanctions imposed since its withdrawal and expects the country to unfreeze Iran's foreign financial assets. Both requests seem unlikely to be accepted by President Biden as a precondition to the negotiations. Most likely, the US will comply with Iran's request in the event of the signing of a new agreement. Furthermore, President Biden is likely to face opposition within the US Congress. The Iran deal was already unpopular at the time of its signing, in particular, the Republican party put great efforts in trying to discredit the validity and efficacy of the agreement. Since, 2015 both sides of the aisle have negatively regarded the JCPOA thus, making any

future negotiations even more difficult for a president whose main priority is to reunify the country. Most likely, President Biden's additional requests, are meant to appease Congress members who have regarded the JCPOA as insufficient. Certainly, the deal will need Congress' approval. In fact, the signing of a new deal within the scope of a presidential executive order will result in the same weakness the JCPOA had within the US system thus, running the risks of another withdrawal by future administrations. Furthermore, the Iranian issue is not among President Biden's current priorities. Following its campaign promises, the President has been focusing his attention on domestic issues relating to the pandemic and the deep social divisions the country has been experiencing in the last few years. Similarly, his foreign policy focus has been on rejoining the Paris Climate Accord, reinforcing the US support for its traditional allies, rather than on more controversial issues. Most likely, the new administration will not set its sign-on on Iran's issue in a timely measure. Arguably, a joint effort by the EU, China, and Russia could for the time appease the Iranians while the US focuses on their priority but, considering the possibility of the rise to power of the conservative faction in Iran's next election, this path seems difficult. In light of, the disastrous effect Covid-19 had in Iran, worsened by the political isolation the country was forced in, the election of members of the revolutionary guards to key institutional positions, will make negotiations almost impossible. Thus, time has become a fundamental variable. Ultimately, the future of the JCPOA or a possible new deal relies on the actions Iran and the US will take. The EU will likely keep pressuring the US for their return. Russian and China will be instrumental to buy some time and influence Iran, leveraging their political and economic relations with the regime. Without a doubt, the deal is in crisis and its survival uncertain. All the parties to the agreement have unique opportunities to save it, but ultimately the decision will rely on the political will of each government to make this issue a priority in their foreign policy agenda.