

Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age

إعادة النظر في الانخراط الانتقائي: الإستراتيجية الكبرى لأوباما والعلاقة

الأمريكية الإيرانية في عصر متعدد الأقطاب

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Abstract:

This article analyses President Barack Obama’s Iran policy through the lens of selective engagement to gain a deeper insight of how a realist-informed grand strategy functions in an increasingly multipolar international order. Using an analytical descriptive approach, the study aims to demonstrate how Obama employed a form of selective engagement strategy combining calibrated coercion, targeted diplomatic outreach, and reliance on multilateral institutions to address the Iran nuclear issue. The research finds that the strategy culminating in the Iran nuclear deal is an important non-proliferation achievement, yet the undermining of the agreement since the withdrawal by the Trump administration reveals its limitations. The study argues that the grand strategy of selective engagement is still viable in a multipolar world but that it has to be adapted to the structural constraints of the current international system.

Keywords: Selective Engagement, U.S. Grand Strategy, Iran Nuclear Policy, Obama Administration, Multipolarity.

Introduction:

While international relations scholars have long focused on theorizing grand strategy and explaining its relationship with foreign policy, yet a notable gap remains. They have, by far, examined empirically less how these abstract grand strategic visions unfold through specific time periods. The present article attempts to fill this lacuna by shedding light on the US approach to Iran during the Obama presidency, specifically, through a systematic examination of the Obama administration’s handling of Iran’s nuclear program between 2009 and 2016. The case under study illuminates selective engagement grand strategy in practice. But what exactly is selective engagement? It is a framework that emphasizes strategic restraint, which entails avoiding overextension while remaining committed only in regions of vital interests. Additionally, the strategy prizes multilateral coalitions for cost and burden sharing and requires a constant calibration between coercive and diplomatic instruments to advance American security objectives.

Among other competing visions during the 1990’s, selective engagement emerged as a grand strategy that would theoretically help the United States navigate the world in a post- Cold War unipolar context. It proposed that the United States should maintain a forward military

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“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

presence in vital regions, specifically Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf, while avoiding hegemonic domination that would lead to balancing by other rising powers. It outlined U.S. interest, threats to those interests and policy tools that best serve them. However, the theoretical framework established in a time of alleged US primacy; its applicability to contemporary multipolar conditions remains to be examined. The Iran nuclear case proves invaluable for examining how the selective engagement strategy adapts to an evolving multipolar system characterized by a relative decline in American power, the diffusion of military, technological, and economic capabilities among multiple great powers, and divergence between the strategic interests of nations ostensibly part of the same multilateral coalitions.

In fact, shedding light on the Obama administration's Iran nuclear diplomacy lay bare the strengths and weaknesses of selective engagement. President Obama perceived the Iranian nuclear program as a “paramount threat”, synonymous with nuclear proliferation by a regional power hostile to American interests and allies. To neutralize the threat posed by Iran, he decided to engage Tehran diplomatically. Indeed, the Obama administration was successful in negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), whereby significant non-proliferation goals were accomplished and unprecedented verification mechanisms were established through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These non-proliferations goals were achieved through multilateral coordination and without resorting to military confrontation. However, when the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the agreement, and Iran subsequently violated the JCPOA, the case revealed the structural fragility of multilateral agreements dependent on political continuity in democratic states and consequently highlighted the flaws of selective engagement.

Most importantly, this article aims to examine how the Obama administration applied the logic of selective engagement in its approach to Iran and also evaluate the extent to which structural changes in the international system impact its viability as a grand strategy. With this aim, it seeks to address the following questions: How did the Obama administration apply selective engagement in its approach to Iran, and how does the transition from a predominantly unipolar to a more multipolar world order impact its viability? In order to answer these questions, the article uses a qualitative descriptive approach, relying on official documents and secondary literature. Furthermore, it utilizes a process tracing methodology to illuminate the sequence of decisions and diplomatic interactions that produced the Obama administration’s approach to Iran, thereby evaluating whether or not the engagement with Iran was a strategic use of selective engagement to advance US interests without risking costly military intervention.

In order to relate theory to substance, this article is divided into three sections. The first lays the theoretical and intellectual foundation of selective engagement as a grand strategy and places it within the context of international relations. The second section sifts through the Obama administration strategy toward Iran, providing a broad empirical analysis of Obama’s Iran policy throughout its main phases and demonstrating how selective engagement principles were operationalized across specific policy domains. The third part analyses the strengths and weaknesses of selective engagement in a rising multipolar context, arguing that although the strategy offers coherent, useful theoretical guidance for the United States, its practical success depends on structural conditions.

1- Selective Engagement as Grand Strategy Theory:

Researchers have attempted to outline different treatments of the concept of grand strategy. Yet, in terms of its definition, most scholars have defined it as the overarching vision that states employ to allocate resources and utilize instruments of power to advance their national interests in the international system. According to Barry Posen, grand strategy can be defined as

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

“a state’s theory about how it can best secure its security,”¹ which recommends an intellectual framework linking national interests to policy instruments. In the context of the post-Cold War era in the United States, different grand strategies have been proposed, ranging from the maximalist/hegemonic to the minimalist/isolationist². In this regard, selective engagement takes a mid-range position that asserts the need for the United States to sustain its military capabilities and active engagement in international politics in critical regions that are considered vital to its national interests. At the same time, it rejects the idea of overextension to attain hegemony in international politics, as this would come at a high cost to the state and prompt counterbalancing efforts from other actors³.

1.1- Theoretical Foundations and Evolution:

As a grand strategy in international relations, selective engagement owes its theoretical origins to defensive realism which claims that states seek security rather than expansion and that sensible restraint often best preserves national interests. Defensive realists, such as Stephen Walt and Charles Glaser, argue that because “anarchy” creates “uncertainty” but does not constantly lead to expansion, major powers should focus on countering clear and important threats rather than seeking worldwide dominance^{4,5}. Within this logic, selective engagement asserts that the United States should differentiate among operational regions and threats, accepting that not all instability is equally consequential and that unnecessary interventions can erode legitimacy, exhaust resources, and provoke balancing. Thus, the strategy aims to manage the international balance of power and prevent the rise of regional hegemon in areas critical to US interests, specifically, Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf, while minimising the cost⁶.

Robert Art, one of the intellectual architects of selective engagement, frames the strategy as a pragmatic one, rejecting both the maximalist assumption that the United States has unlimited power for international military dominance and the minimalist claim that American military power should be largely withdrawn from international commitments. In his canonical work, “*A Grand Strategy for America*”, where he presents selective engagement as the best grand strategy for the United States, Art recognizes the constraints on American power and resources. Subsequently, he preconizes strategic selectivity and a hierarchy of interests. He outlines six vital US interests (preventing great power war, containing nuclear proliferation and terrorism, securing energy access, maintaining economic openness, preserving Western Hemisphere prevalence, and preventing hostile regional hegemonies in main strategic regions) that merit sustained military engagement and deployment of US resources⁷.

Barry Posen, along with Robert Art, set the theoretical framework of selective engagement in the 1990s and early 2000s, in a post-Cold War unipolar context, when American military and economic capabilities were preponderant and unchallenged. They started from the premise that the United States possessed sufficient power to sustain multilateral leadership while maintaining the capacity to engage in multiple contingencies in different areas. However, they recognised also the fact that US resources are finite. Thus, to distribute burden-sharing and to enhance the legitimacy of American-led policies through consensual rather than hegemonic mechanisms, they emphasized building multilateral coalitions and stressed the role of international institutions^{8,9}.

1.2 - Selective Engagement and Multipolarity:

In an ever-changing international system, the theoretical preconditions assumed by selective engagement have been eroding as the world order has transitioned from unipolarity towards multipolarity. Significant structural shifts have occurred, China has accelerated its economic growth and military modernization, Russia has reasserted its role as a regional power actor, Brazil, India, and other emerging economies continue to grow, and military and technological capabilities among secondary powers are spreading¹⁰. All these developments attest to the important changes in the international system. As a consequence of this rising

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

multipolar context, the theoretical assumptions underpinning selective engagement may require recalibration.

To begin with, selective engagement emphasis on building strong relationships with regional allies to share the burdens of security and its selective reliance on international institutions and multilateral agreements for more legitimacy can be easily undermined in the current world order. To understand how this is possible, it is worth noting that in a multipolar system, major powers with true strategic independence tend to be less receptive to multilateral coordination frameworks that they believe mostly benefit their competitors¹¹. Moreover, as international power becomes more widely distributed among multiple actors rather than being concentrated in one or two hegemonies, major powers increasingly perceive that they can achieve greater advantage by withdrawing from or reducing their commitment to multilateral coordination institutions and instead pursuing independent strategic action, taking unilateral action without coordinating through institutional channels¹². Thus, the coordination mechanisms that selective engagement emphasizes, namely, international institutions, multilateral agreements, and burden-sharing arrangements, depend for their success on member states sharing sufficient interest in maintaining coordination, which requires them to prioritize the stability of the alliance itself over short-term individual gains.

Another aspect that gets undermined in a multipolar international system would be the allocation of resources made necessary by selective engagement. The theory suggests that if countries can effectively cope with the threat of crises arising in the second tier of regions diplomatically, they would be able to divert enough resources for allocation to regions that they consider more vital. However, it has been noted that multipolar contexts are consequential. Instability in secondary regions may complicate the situation, mainly if neglected, making it difficult to implement strategies in central regions. Indeed, in a multipolar international system, spillover effects are common, as instability experienced in the Middle East, for instance, has a direct impact on the implementation of strategies in regions deemed of high importance, such as the Asia-Pacific¹³.

1.3- Selective Engagement and Democratic Governance:

A further level that must be considered from a theoretical standpoint is the relationship between selective engagement and democratic political processes in a state. This is due to the fact that selective engagement implies that a state’s determination of its vital regions or strategies would remain more or less constant. However, a democratic state that goes through the electoral cycle and can be confronted with contested domestic politics may well see its view of orientation in grand strategies change over periods of time¹⁴. Conspicuously, the manner in which the Trump administration chose not to use the same strategy of his predecessor but rather adopted a more confrontational great power competition strategy in terms of its Iran policy through the JCPOA withdrawal and imposition of sanctions¹⁵, clearly highlights how electoral change can alter grand strategy orientation.

Such a scenario thus poses a kind of structural tension regarding the use of selective engagement as a policy instrument in democratic states. Indeed, the strategy long-term success relies upon continued political will over several administrations, and yet, the nature of democratic governance, like in the case of the United States of America, sets up a system where a future administration has the capacity to reverse decisions made by past administrations. Indeed, multilateral agreements, even as they provide legitimacy and structural embedding, cannot fully protect against a democratic reversal. The latter has been proven by the course of action pursued by the Trump administration in its handling of U.S. relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, mainly in regard to the nuclear agreement. The Iran Nuclear Deal, with its all-encompassing verification systems and approval by the UN Security Council, lacked sufficient procedural safeguards against unilateral withdrawal by the United States. Sifting through Obama’s Iran

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

strategy provides a window into how the strategy of selective engagement was operationalized in US foreign policy and how it might be affected by the structural conditions.

2- The Main Phases of Obama's Iran Strategy:

The Obama administration entered the Oval Office in January 2009, a critical moment in the international order. The financial crisis in 2008-2009, while being mainly an economic event, brought about the relative decline in American power due to the flight of capital from American markets and the simultaneous enhancement of China’s economic position in the global arena ¹⁶. Within this new world realities and structural transformation, the administration launched the readjustment of the American grand strategy in line with the policy guidelines of selective engagement, recognizing in the process the imperatives of strategic prioritisation and multilateral agreement in order to maintain American primacy and protect US interests. Specifically, as far as Obama’s strategy toward Iran is concerned, selective engagement unfolds through three distinct phases.

2.1- Phase One: Calibrated Coercion and Multilateral Alignment (2009-2012):

In regard to the Iranian case, the Obama administration found itself dealing with a legacy in which Iran was being sanctioned by a total of six UN Security Council resolutions, which resulted in the imposition of multilateral sanctions and did nothing to alter Iranian practices on the issue of nuclear enrichment. The maximalist approach adopted by the George Bush administration, consisting of exerting pressure on Iran through the use of unilateral sanctions, the threat of military force, and the articulation of a desire for Iranian regime change¹⁷, resulted only in a balance-of-power reaction by Russia and China, which assisted Iran in part due to their concern over US hegemony in the Middle East¹⁸. However, the Obama administration realized that the US had reached the strategic limit in this maximalist policy and attaining more pressure on Iran required adjustment of approach rather than escalation.

From the outset of his presidency, President Obama made it clear that he wanted to change the strategic context of the US Iran relations by emphasizing diplomatic channels and reducing rhetorical hostility. Obama’s 2009 Inaugural Address, in which he offered to "extend a hand" to US adversaries, his March 2009 Nowruz message reaching out to Iranians for “a new beginning” and his June 2009 Cairo university speech where he explicitly recognized Iran’s right to access peaceful nuclear power exemplified this change in style and language and demonstrated Obama’s intent for diplomatic venues. Public manifestations of diplomatic intent included invitations for dialogue within multilateral institutional settings and indirect communications, also. For instance, the Obama administration made full commitment to participate in the negotiations led by the P5+1(China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States + Germany), culminating in the October 2009 Geneva talks and the "fuel-swap" agreement ¹⁹.

Beyond the public sphere, the administration used underground correspondence and backchannels to engage with Iran. Obama sent secret letters to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and his administration used Omani indirect channels to convince Iran to sit and negotiate a nuclear agreement. In parallel with these diplomatic efforts were increased multilateral sanctions through UN Security Council Resolution 1929, specifically after the failure of the “fuel-swap” agreement, which further restricted Iran’s financial and energy sectors and its maritime transport sector ²⁰. Notably, by late 2012, overall sanction pressure had: increased Iran inflation threefold; depreciated the value of the Iranian rial by some thirty-eight percent; and reduced Iranian government revenue flows ²¹.

The early Iran strategy developed by the Obama administration expressed the principles of selective engagement in a number of ways. For instance, the strategy abandoned the rhetoric of Iran regime change and concentrated solely on the Iran nuclear issue, making nuclear non-

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

proliferation its first objective. This removed the incentive for Russian and Chinese strategic hedging since the US had clear and limited concerns. In addition, the strategy emphasized the role of international cooperation with the P5+1 coalition. By involving Russia, China and European Union members in a common negotiating framework as opposed to being left out and subjected to US unilateral pressure, the Obama administration stressed the role of multilateral institutions and coalition building for security burden sharing. Furthermore, the strategy combined coercive pressure by continued international sanctions with the use of diplomatic communication via backchannel and presidential correspondence. Through this “dual track strategy” the Obama administration opted for a middle ground strategy, avoiding military escalation and selectively opting for economic tools whenever diplomatic means failed ²².

Indeed, the administration had a two-pronged strategy of its own, it simultaneously applied multilateral pressure and maintained diplomatic channels in order to strategically position itself for transition into negotiations in the event that Iranian political conditions changed. President Obama highlighted this dual policy when accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, acknowledging that “engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation... sanctions without outreach, and condemnation without discussion, can carry forward a crippling status quo” ²³. Nevertheless, it was only in 2013 that his administration was able to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table and change the “status quo”.

2.2- Phase Two: Diplomatic Opening and Interim Agreements (2013-2014):

The driving force behind the start of phase two came with Hassan Rouhani's presidential win in Iran in June 2013. Three days after his inauguration, President Rouhani expressed his willingness for serious negotiations with the West on the Iranian nuclear issue. In fact, the new ruling authority considered a negotiated agreement as potentially beneficial compared to the existing state of confrontation, that resulted only in paralyzing Iran's economy. However, President Rouhani's initiative was preceded by the Obama administration's signalling through the Omani backchannels, in March 2013, that the United States may tolerate limited uranium enrichment on Iranian soil. Consequently, in September 2013, Obama and Rouhani had a telephone conversation, the first direct interaction between an American and Iranian president since 1979. The call was followed by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meeting with Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, leading to a series of bargaining arrangements ²⁴.

In November 24, 2013, the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), also known as the “Geneva interim deal” was issued. It formalized a transition into the diplomatic framework of phase two. The joint plan marked a paradigm shift in approach compared with the focus of phase one: it invoked direct mutual commitments, with Iran agreeing to particular nuclear limits in return for limited and staged sanctions relief. Iran's side of the deal included a recognition of the legitimacy of their nuclear program (subject to peaceful usage), limited sanctions relief, and a plan for a broad nuclear deal. As far as the United States and the other members of the P5+1 coalition are concerned, the Joint Plan of Action prolonged the time it would take for Iran to produce enough material for a nuclear weapon, pushing it from just a few months to about six months, and established verification procedures that can successfully detect Iranian violations ²⁵.

The way the Obama administration proceeded in phase two mirrored how the strategy of selective engagement stressed developing mechanisms that would allow both parties to check each other's compliance and modify their behaviour in response to mutual performance. The Joint Commission, consisting of representatives from Iran and P5+1, offered the means to resolve disputes and monitor the implementation of the agreement. The new controlling powers granted to the IAEA enabled more access to Iranian facilities, including its centrifuge assembly workshops and daily video monitoring of its enrichment sites. These new procedures resulted in technical transparency, reducing uncertainty and providing early warning of any attempt by Iran to violate the new guidelines ²⁶. Most importantly, through this strategy, the Obama

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

administration showed to both allies and adversaries that the United States is committed to solve the Iran nuclear issue without resorting to military escalation and meantime without totally ceding to Iran’s demands.

Phase two also showed the complicated balance between using pressure and trying to engage diplomatically. The Obama administration kept applying international sanctions, particularly those related to oil, banking, and finance, even as they strengthened diplomatic efforts. They used the phrase "limited, temporary, targeted, and reversible" to describe easing sanctions as a way to keep the threat of reimposing them if Iran did not comply with the agreement²⁷. This selective approach acknowledged that sanctions provided leverage. If the United States lifted all the sanctions, Iran might have less reason to comply. Specifically, the Obama administration calibrated sanctions, issued during this phase were used as a bargaining tool which operated as strategic hedging, a main feature of selective engagement.

In fact, the strategy adopted by the Obama administration during phase two was met with domestic political challenges, and congressional criticism. Republican Senators uttered their concerns about the inadequacies of the agreement in constraining Iran. US allies, notably, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, publicly opposed US negotiations with Iran, claiming that engagement with Tehran would not eliminate the nuclear threat posed by Iran and it may only result in delaying it. These oppositions and pressures limited the Obama administration’s flexibility in phase three negotiations, leading it to prove that any final agreement reached should satisfy American concerns and its allies regarding verification and sanctions enforcement^{28,29}.

2.3- Phase Three: Final Negotiations and Institutional Consolidation (2015-2016):

Phase three, the last stage in Obama’s approach to Iran, was marked by extensive negotiations spanning from January to July 2015. The negotiations resulted in the announcement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, on July 14, 2015. To highlight the strategic importance of the reached agreement, it is worthy to note that U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry devoted more than fifteen consecutive days in Vienna to finalise the JCPOA. The negotiating process culminated in landmark compromises on issues that had previously been highly disputed, including uranium enrichment levels, the number of operating centrifuges, the duration of imposed restrictions, the plan for sanctions relief, and verification procedures³⁰.

On April 2, 2015, the P5+1 and Iran announced the Lausanne framework agreement, which established the foundation for the JCPOA. It stipulated that Iran would maintain enrichment at 3.67 percent for ten years, limit centrifuges to 5,060 IR-1 type machines, maintain an enriched uranium stockpile below 300 kilograms, and halt its operations of advanced centrifuges. Notably, the agreement incorporated sunset provisions explicitly laying down when various restrictions on Iran nuclear program would expire. For instance, it disclosed that centrifuge limitations would be removed after ten years, and uranium enrichment restrictions would expire after fifteen years³¹. Genuinely, these provisions reflected negotiated compromises between the United States and Iran.

Indeed, the final JCPOA aimed not only at restricting Iran's nuclear program but it also sought to promote a framework for diplomacy and international cooperation, using international institutions as substitutes for force and sharing the security burden. Consequently, it operationalised selective engagement through significant policy instruments. Particularly, it developed genuine verification procedures by giving the IAEA full access to Iran's declared facilities and its entire nuclear supply chain. The latter facilitated engagement with Iran while ensuring that Iran's nuclear activities were carefully scrutinized, encouraging a controlled environment for diplomacy. Besides, mechanisms for conflict resolution were put in place, such as the review process of the Joint Commission and the technical evaluation of the IAEA, where any suspected breach of the JCPOA terms could be addressed without leading to conflict.

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

Additionally, sanctions relief measures were established based on verified Iranian compliance, creating a procedure through which both the United States and Iran could adjust their behaviour in response to the other's actions ³². From a selective engagement perspective, these policies embodied prudence and allowed risk management at the lowest cost.

On January 16, 2016, the IAEA released a report certifying that Iran complied with its initial commitments. This led to coordinated sanctions relief. The UN Security Council resolution lifted nuclear-related sanctions, the European Union eliminated its oil embargo and asset freezes, and American executive waivers enabled sanctions cessation ³³. For the Obama administration, the approximately \$100 billion in recovered assets and sanctions relief represented both recognition of Iran's compliance and implicit acknowledgment that Iran's economic reconstruction would enable expanded regional influence, a trade-off that the administration accepted as a price of nuclear constraint ³⁴. As per the principles of selective engagement, the concessions made by the Obama administration are worth doing since preventing nuclear proliferation is a core U.S. interest. However, whether the administration met this vital interest through its reliance on the strategy of selective engagement requires assessment.

3- Selective Engagement, Multipolarity, and Strategic Effectiveness:

To evaluate the efficacy of selective engagement strategy with regard to the Obama nuclear deal, we need to consider different aspects of success, ranging from nuclear non-proliferation, reliance on multilateral coordination and coercive diplomacy to strategic prioritisation, the durability of the agreement, and the extent to which these were affected by a multipolar context.

3.1- Effectiveness in Limiting Nuclear Proliferation:

From a strict non-proliferation standpoint, the JCPOA made a remarkable accomplishment. Indeed, the International Atomic Energy Agency has reported that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium decreased to under 300 kilograms, marking an incredible 98 percent reduction, and the number of its operational centrifuges dropped to 5,000 units ³⁵. The most notable aspect of the agreement was Iran's extension of its breakout period to a complete year, as opposed to the previous projection of only two to three months ³⁶. The above-mentioned developments mark a notable achievement in non-proliferation, especially if one were to compare it with what could have been achieved in the absence of the agreement.

The verification regime established through the JCPOA represented institutional innovation in arms control. The IAEA's expanded authorities exceeded those previously negotiated with any non-nuclear weapons state, reflecting both American insistence on intrusive inspection and Iranian willingness to accept unprecedented transparency as price for sanctions relief and diplomatic recognition. The agreement's 24-hour presence requirements, environmental sampling provisions, and access to military sites suspected of undeclared activities created a technical capability for detecting Iranian circumvention. This would theoretically enable an international response before Iran could develop any nuclear weapon ³⁷.

However, a critical assessment of the Obama administration's Iran strategy involves acknowledging the limitations embedded within the nuclear deal. The JCPOA did not require Iran to dismantle its nuclear enrichment infrastructure or activities; it only forced it to freeze them at definite levels. Besides, the nuclear deal comprised sunset provisions, which created automatic expiration of certain restrictions after ten to fifteen years, meaning that indefinitely constraining Iran nuclear capabilities proved impossible through the agreement structure. From a maximalist perspective, stressing the complete elimination of Iranian enrichment capacity, the agreement represented inadequate constraint ³⁸. Yet, if the United States had asked Iran to fully abandon its nuclear program, this would have rendered negotiation itself impossible. Iran would never have

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

accepted permanent subordination of its nuclear rights to international control ³⁹. Thus, based on the mutual interests of both Iran and the United States, we can say that the agreement was the best case scenario that was to be reached through negotiations.

3.2- Great Power Coordination in a Multipolar Context:

A review of the negotiations of the third phase of Obama’s strategy illustrates both the advantages and limitations of multilateral coordination within a multipolar environment. The arrangement that engrained the JCPOA negotiations within the P5+1 brought Russia and China into a common channel, preventing a situation that could be most harmful to U.S. interests, namely an open Sino-Russian opposition that could allow Iran to use the rivalry among the great powers against each other. This particular arrangement, on the other hand, left the U.S. forced to make concessions regarding the nature of the agreement, due to the different priorities of each major power. Notably, European states stressed non-proliferation and regional stability, Russia required economic assurances to maintain and expand its privileged position within the Iranian market, and China, while seeking stability, sought the maintenance of an internationally unchecked Iran to protect its security and energy sectors, and favoured maintaining close ties with Tehran to counterbalance western regional hegemony ⁴⁰.

The fact that both Russia and China are part of the same coordinating framework added to the importance and legitimacy of the negotiations, but also produced a weakness by default. Since all the members of the P5+1 are supposed to work by consensus, Washington could not dictate terms to the rest ⁴¹. It required the lowest common denominator to reach an agreement, and that served well the nuclear deal all through the negotiation, but posed problems if any of the major powers changed its stance. The decision by the Trump administration to withdraw unilaterally from the JCPOA, in May 2018, highlighted that shortcoming. Indeed, though the JCPOA was endorsed by UN Security Council, Trump unilaterally exited, and his decision affected all the members ⁴².

The response of Russia and China to the American withdrawal revealed the challenges of multipolar cooperation. The two great powers joined the EU signatories and voiced their continued formal commitment to the original provisions of the nuclear deal. They criticized the American withdrawal as a violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 and a disruption of the regional stability ⁴³. Rather than being at the forefront of a new round of negotiations to contain Iran or convince Trump to adhere to the reached agreement, both Russia and China provided implicit diplomacy for an Iranian response to the deal’s collapse and reinforced their economic and military ties to Iran in the following years. The multilateral cooperation, which began as P5+1, turned to P4+1, minus the United States. This demonstrated that though multilateral cooperation can be an effective tool for legitimisation when united, it becomes weaker when one of the major participants leaves the group: the remaining members line up against the one that left ⁴⁴.

3.3- The Challenge of Policy Continuity in Democratic Systems:

One of the main problems that has been identified in Obama’s strategy towards Iran relates to the durability of multilateral agreements based on political sustainability in democratic states. Even though a complex set of institution-building arrangements existed in the nuclear deal, it lacked proper procedural mechanisms that would prevent unilateral withdrawal by the United States. Indeed, though the JCOPA was highly institutionalised by being embedded in the P5+1, endorsed by the UN Security Council and monitored by the IAEA, Trump withdrew from this international agreement without difficulty. To understand how this was possible, it is worthy to note that the Iran nuclear deal had been implemented through an executive memorandum rather than ratification by a Senate treaty, thereby allowing future U.S. administrations to withdraw from it in an identical manner, which had been accomplished by President Trump ⁴⁵.

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

Such a situation reveals the inherent tension between the theoretical focus on multilateral coalitions and institutions within selective engagement and the reality of the process of democratic governance. The theoretical framework of selective engagement assumes that once certain agreements are reached, governments will comply with the agreements due to commitment costs and institutionalisation ⁴⁶. Nonetheless, the nature of democratic electoral cycles in the United States immediately nullifies the aforementioned assumption, as long as strategic differences over definitions of national interests and interpretation of certain agreements continue between competing political coalitions within different administrations.

It is worth mentioning, that the Trump administration’s withdrawal was not only about policy differences concerning the JCPOA, but it was rather about disagreement over Iran strategy. Whereas the Obama administration believed that constraining Iran nuclear proliferation was a vital national interest that could be realised via a deal involving sanctions relief and assistance with the reconstruction of the Iranian economy, the Trump Administration was more concerned with putting an end to Iran regional expansion and viewed the implementation of the JCPOA agreement as a result of Obama’s ineffective engagement. In summary, this reflects not only the two administrations’ different policy choices but different grand strategies: Obama’s selective engagement versus Trump’s great power Competition. The latter puts America’s relative position against rising powers ahead of regional security and non-proliferation ⁴⁷.

From a nuclear proliferation stand point, the Trump administration withdrawal from the JCPOA had serious consequences. It was reported that around July 2019, Tehran began to announce gradual JCPOA violations by exceeding the level of uranium enrichment beyond the set level of 3.67 percent. Specifically, Iran escalated its uranium enrichment to around 5 percent by January 2020 and then to an average of 84 to 90 percent by 2024. This indicated a significant step in the direction of producing materials usable in making weapons and reached a point that hadn’t been reached since the beginning of the JCPOA agreement. Moreover, in 2023 the IAEA revealed that Iran’s enrichment levels couldn’t be verified or Iran’s stockpile accounted for ⁴⁸, this meant a critical failure in the verification process that was identified as the greatest success in Obama’s strategy.

3.4- Coercive Diplomacy in a Multipolar World:

In fact, closer examination also reveals the structural limitations imposed on multilateral coercion in multipolarity. The presumptions of selective engagement that multilateral coercion can effectively limit the behaviour of the target state implicitly depend on one prerequisite: that the great powers will cooperate with one another in this context of multilateral coercion in such a way that they do not think the multilateral agenda serves the interests of their competitors. This is less likely to happen in a multipolar order.

In the case of Russia, for instance, Iran’s sanctions were partly viewed as tools by which the United States and the west sought to substantiate their influence in the Middle East and meantime constrain Russia and other powers. Thus, by preventing Iran to develop as a regional power, they challenged Russian interests. Indeed, it has been reported that though the Russians were nominally committed to collective sanctions as the Iran nuclear agreement was being negotiated and implemented, they were at the same time engaging Iran in military partnerships as well as energy links and implicitly supporting Iran’s violation of the agreement after the US withdrawal in 2018. This Russian behaviour stemmed from a calculated view that U.S. unilateral control over the Middle East undermined Moscow’s interests more than Iran’s autonomy from American dominance would ⁴⁹.

The Chinese government also used ambiguous tactics in that they cooperated in multilateral sanctions while at the same time facilitating Iranian sanctions circumvention through technology transfer and energy relations that protected Chinese companies from sanctions. Chinese leaders believed that if successful in materially limiting Iranian nuclear programs,

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

widespread multilateral sanctions against Iran could strengthen the American position because Iranian ambitions to challenge the American-led order in the region would be eliminated, which goes against Chinese support for alternative poles of power ⁵⁰.

Indeed, the Chinese and Russian behaviour demonstrates a basic limitation within the use of multilateral coercive pressure. Notably, where unipolarity declines and several great powers develop their own powerful capabilities, the tools relied on to maintain pressure appear to become less stable ⁵¹. Coordination relies on all members agreeing to impose pressure on the target state; however, in a multipolar context, they will have incentives for strategic hedging. Each power will perceive opportunities to gain an advantage over the coordinators by defecting: offering enough compliance to maintain the appearance of coordination while implicitly undermining it ⁵².

3.5- Strategic Priorities and the Allocation of Resources:

In terms of American strategic positioning within a multipolar order, the most significant implication of selective engagement relates to the resource allocation rationale. The administration’s attempt at resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis through a negotiated settlement was, in fact, an attempt at enabling less engagement in the Middle East and shifting attention towards the Asia-Pacific region, which is more critical for American long-term competitive positioning vis-à-vis China. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly uttered this strategic vision in 2011, declaring: “One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will therefore be to lock in a substantially increased investment -diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise - in the Asia-Pacific region” ⁵³. Notably, the Obama administration’s intentions of stationing sixty percent of American naval forces in the Indo-Pacific, negotiating military access agreements with allies like Australia and Singapore, and concluding the Trans-Pacific Partnership were all aligned with this ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy ⁵⁴.

Whether or not this strategic shift was ultimately optimal is up for debate, but at least it appears to have had an internal logic given the structural constraints of a multipolar world. In light of the relative weakening of American power, strategic prioritisation by region is called for, as attempting to sustain equal commitment levels to all regions risks overextension and resource dissipation. Negotiating and passing a nuclear deal with Iran provided a way through which constraint could be managed, freeing up resources to be allocated to other regions deemed vital to American competitive position, such as the Asia-Pacific region against China ⁵⁵.

Nevertheless, the process of implementing “selective engagement” brought discrepancies and challenges arising from a disparity between this rational resource allocation strategy and the complexity of regional dynamics. The events of the “Arab Spring,” the civil war in Syria, and the “ISIS” rise assuredly consumed much more time and attention than the administration had initially planned. The “Pivot to Asia” policy, though an immense shift when compared to the force allocation strategy under the Bush administration, was constrained by the events in the Middle East, where a recurring call for American military and diplomatic presence hindered this significant policy shift ⁵⁶. Indeed, the “spillover effect” demonstrates an inherent constraint of selective engagement strategy within a multipolar world, as this strategy’s premise relies upon a degree of regional autonomy, which does not exist within the current international system. Specifically, the assumption that managing one regional problem through negotiation can free resources for deployment elsewhere assumes greater regional autonomy and lower interdependence than the contemporary international system actually permits.

Conclusion:

The Obama administration's Iran nuclear policy from 2009 to 2016 exemplifies selective engagement grand strategy operating within multipolar structural realities characterized by declining American relative power and competing great power interests. The strategy achieved significant non-proliferation objectives through negotiated settlement, extended Iran's nuclear

“Selective Engagement Revisited: Obama’s Grand Strategy and the US-Iran Relationship in a Multipolar Age”

breakout timeline, established unprecedented verification procedures, and maintained great power coordination that might otherwise have fragmented. The JCPOA represented genuine achievement in multilateral diplomacy and arms control institutionalisation. However, the subsequent erosion of the agreement following the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal revealed fundamental vulnerabilities rooted within selective engagement when applied to democratic states subject to cyclical electoral change and contested domestic political debate regarding grand strategy orientation.

Selective engagement, while facing significant challenges, remains theoretically a plausible approach to managing American role in a multipolar order. Nevertheless, the Iran case suggests that the strategy requires adaptation to account for multipolarity's specific structural constraints and for durability. Thus, future application should emphasize the following measures:

- Creating a more durable institutional mechanism that can survive great power political fluctuations by involving domestic and international stakeholders with interests in agreement preservation.
- Forming flexible alliances and partnerships on specific issues that show greater resilience in the face of changing great power relationships.
- Encouraging more collaboration on international issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, universal health, climate change and maritime security.
- Considering serious reforms and strategic use of institutions such as the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the world Trade Organisation.
- Building bipartisan consensus in relation to U.S. vital strategic commitments and designing international agreements with stronger institutional durability, through Congress ratification for instance, to endure electoral outcomes.

What remains evident is that the Obama’s Iran nuclear deal represented a pragmatic strategic alternative to both military confrontation and ineffective isolation—an alternative that, despite its flaws, characterised the operational feasibility of selective engagement in addressing the proliferation challenges of the 21st century. Whether such approach can be sustained or reconstructed in the future remains an open question for the grand strategy debates to come, notably in regard to U.S. foreign policy towards Iran or to any other state representing a threat to American interests, in an international system shaped by unprecedented great power competition and multipolar structural complexity.

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