
The United States and Nuclear Iran
**An Analysis of the Effects of United States Foreign Policy on Nuclear Non-
Proliferation**

MA International Relations in Historical Perspective

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Dina Marges

Supervisor: Dr. Paschalis Pechlivanis

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Utrecht University

Abstract

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is an agreement reached in 2015 between Iran, the United States (US), the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and Germany in cooperation with the European Union. The JCPOA marked a significant change in the tense relation between Iran and the US. With the JCPOA, the US allowed Iran to have a limited nuclear program, which it had previously strongly opposed by imposing an intensive sanctions regime. The US nuclear policies from 2003 to 2021 have mainly focused on limiting Iran's nuclear capacities with coercive diplomatic means. The US's influence is visible in its ability to mobilize support for an international sanctions regime on Iran. From 2009, US policies concentrated on negotiating with Iran, and the impact of the US can be seen in the resolution of the impasse in negotiations with Iran and the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. However, since 2017, and particularly after the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA in 2018, a downward trend is visible in the US influence on the nuclear non-proliferation regime, as the other JCPOA signatories actively criticized the US decision and supported the deal's provisions. The findings of this research argue that US nuclear policies only recognize the stabilizing potential of nuclear weapons in the hands of the US and its allies and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nations such as Iran remains unthinkable. The US nuclear policies from 2003 to 2021 reflect this inherently contradictory and hypocritical line of thought.

Keywords: nuclear non-proliferation, US foreign policy, Iran nuclear deal, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

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Abbreviations

DOD: Department of Defense

E3: the United Kingdom, Germany, and France

EU: European Union

IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency

JPA: Joint Plan of Action

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

NSC: National Security Council

NSS: National Security Strategy

NPR: Nuclear Posture Review

NPT: Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

P5 + 1: the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Russia, China, and Germany

QDR: Quadrennial Defense Review

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

US: United States

WMD: Weapon of mass destruction

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran signed and ratified the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1970 and as a non-nuclear weapon state, Iran has the right to establish nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes, the duty to recognize full protections for the nuclear installations and to guarantee that nuclear power is not diverted from peaceful to military use.¹ The pursuit of nuclear energy in Iran was effectively suspended after the revolution of 1979.² Following the revolution and the 1979 to 1981 hostage crisis between Iran and the US, the relation between the United States (US) and Iran became characterized by reciprocal scorn and enmity. The ties worsened in early 2002 after US President George W. Bush proclaimed Iran, along with Iraq and North Korea, to be part of an ‘axis of evil’.³ Concerns over Iran backing terrorist groups prompted the US to implement a broad sanctions regime in the 1990s and actively sought to discourage nations from aiding Iran’s nuclear operations.⁴

In recent years, Iran and the size and progress of its nuclear program have been the cause of concerns internationally and have been subjected to unconfirmed rumors.⁵ In 2015 a multilateral nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was reached between Iran, the Permanent Five of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and Germany in cooperation with the European Union (EU), also referred to as the P5+1. In return for easing international sanctions relating to Iran’s nuclear program, the JCPOA ensures that Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful.⁶ In 2018 the US, under President Donald J. Trump’s administration announced its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. This has put the agreement and the parties involved under pressure to uphold it, with the EU expressing ‘deep regret at the US decision to withdraw from the agreement and re-imposition of sanctions.’⁷

The idea of non-proliferation treaties such as the JCPOA fits within the broader academic debate about the effects of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and deterrence on

¹ Namira Negm, *Transfer of Nuclear Technology under International Law: Case Study of Iraq, Iran and Israel* (Leiden, The Netherlands: BRILL, 2009), 193,

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=489458>.

² *Ibid.*, 189.

³ ‘State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002)’, accessed 3 June 2021,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

⁴ Riccardo Alcaro, ‘The History: The 2003–16 Iran Nuclear Crisis’, in *Europe and Iran’s Nuclear Crisis*, by Riccardo Alcaro (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 62, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74298-4_3.

⁵ Negm, *Transfer of Nuclear Technology under International Law*, 190.

⁶ ‘Iran and the EU’, Text, EEAS - European External Action Service - European Commission, accessed 1 December 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2281/iran-and-eu_en.

⁷ *Ibid.*

international politics. Therefore this research will investigate the effects of US policy toward Iran on the nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2021.

Societal and academic relevance

Since 1945, the non-use of nuclear weapons has emerged as a ‘major puzzle in international politics’, according to T.V. Paul.⁸ Research into the nuclear non-proliferation regime will aid in gaining insights into the nuclear policymaking process as well as theoretical insights that might have shaped these notions and ideas that led to nuclear non-use. According to International Relations-scholar and former US Department of Defense adviser Jeffrey R. Fields, there is a rich and underexplored aspect of security studies on state thinking on nuclear nonproliferation, the regime, and its many components. Fields states that there are a variety of regime instruments, which are suitable for rigorous, individual study since too frequently, research on the regime fails to define what the regime is or reduces it to the NPT.⁹ This research aims to contribute to the debate surrounding nuclear non-proliferation by concentrating on one of the nuclear non-proliferation regime’s most influential aspects: US nuclear policy.

The influence of the US on nuclear policies internationally is generally regarded as significant. According to Jon Wolfsthal, an American nuclear security advisor, the US has influenced its allies to refrain from their pursuit of a nuclear arsenal. Wolfsthal claims that each case study of US influence is shaped by various circumstances.¹⁰ The case study of US policy toward Iran and the JCPOA will assess the influence of the US on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Academic debate and historiography

In the debate surrounding nuclear weapons and the consequences and implications of their existence, so-called ‘nuclear optimists’ have argued that nuclear weapons are a stabilizing force in international politics. Nuclear optimistic scholars have argued that nuclear weapons and the proliferation of these weapons do not necessarily lead to warfare, but can promote international security. American political scientist Kenneth Waltz argued that nuclear weapons are a major force for peace and provide nations that possess them with the possibility of security at a

⁸ T.V. Paul, ‘Taboo or Tradition? The Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons in World Politics’, *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 4 (2010): 853.

⁹ Jeffrey R. Fields, *State Behavior and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime* (Athens, United States: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 238, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=1813396>.

¹⁰ Jon B. Wolfsthal, ‘The Next Nuclear Wave - Nonproliferation in a New World Reviews & Responses: Review Essay’, *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 1 (2005): 160.

reasonable cost.¹¹ The presence of nuclear weapons forces nations to figure out how to deescalate, not how to escalate. According to Waltz, the probability of major war among states having nuclear weapons approaches zero.¹² Political scientist John Mearsheimer likewise believes that nuclear proliferation can promote peace and stability. According to Mearsheimer, states with great power should have secure nuclear deterrents, whilst minor powers should not possess nuclear weapons, to sustain international stability.¹³ Mearsheimer argues that the widespread belief that nuclear weapons are a major cause of conflict between nations and that their deterrent effect is fairly limited, is incorrect. Instead Mearsheimer, in line with nuclear optimistic reasoning, nuclear weapons diminish the probability of international violence. Mearsheimer points to the history of the Cold War to sustain his argument.¹⁴

The reasoning of these ‘nuclear optimists’ is challenged by nuclear pessimists like Nicholas J. Wheeler. There is sufficient historical precedence according to Wheeler that threats will only widen if nuclear weapons continue to expand. Wheeler argues that it requires fundamental rethinking and associated policy interventions to replace the fear-led defense of nuclear weapons if governments and global civil society are to rid the world of nuclear weapons and make a non-nuclear world more stable.¹⁵ Nuclear pessimist Joel Marks also contradicts the arguments of nuclear optimists and states that their analyses have theoretical and empirical weaknesses that significantly challenge their optimistic scenarios regarding nuclear proliferation.¹⁶

Nuclear pessimistic and optimistic viewpoints focus on explaining the effects of nuclear weapons and why states should contribute to either the proliferation or the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Normative or constructivist approaches to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, focus on norms and traditions sustaining a certain international community and its ideas. The notion of the ‘nuclear taboo’ reflects the idea that states and actors have internalized the belief that nuclear weapons are different from conventional weapons because of their extreme destructive force. The assumption that parties have internalized this belief, constituting a nuclear taboo, could lead to nuclear non-use and non-proliferation, according to constructivist

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, ‘Nuclear Myths and Political Realities’, *The American Political Science Review* 84, no. 3 (1990): 731–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962764>.

¹² *Ibid.*, 740.

¹³ John J. Mearsheimer, ‘The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent Debate’, *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993 1992): 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵ Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Beyond Waltz’s Nuclear World: More Trust May Be Better’, *International Relations* 23, no. 3 (1 September 2009): 441–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809340489>.

¹⁶ Joel Marks, ‘Nuclear Prudence or Nuclear Psychosis? Structural Realism and the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons’, *Global Change, Peace & Security* 21, no. 3 (1 October 2009): 325, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781150903169018>.

scholars.¹⁷ Other constructivists have focused on a less stringent or rigid approach to non-use and non-proliferation, stating that a ‘nuclear tradition’ exists.¹⁸

Research question

By reviewing the US’ nuclear policies and doctrine based on different theoretical perspectives, the impact of the US on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime will be assessed. The developments in US foreign policy will be placed in a historical context to explain the formation of its policies and the foundations of US actions. The following question is central to examining the foreign policy of the US on nuclear non-proliferation:

How has the foreign policy of the United States toward Iran’s nuclear program affected the development of the nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2021?

This study’s framework will be separated into two distinct phases. First, the period between 2003 and 2015 will be analyzed. This period begins with the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 and concludes with the official signing of the JCPOA. The conclusion of the JCPOA will serve as a turning point, as it marks a shift away from the US policy before, which did not allow Iran to have any sort of nuclear program. Second, the period following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, ending with the inauguration of US President Joseph Biden in 2021, will be researched. The change in government in 2021 will most likely result in a political shift in the policy of the US administration and thus signals a concluding point for this research. The following supplementary questions will assist in answering the research’s core question:

1. How has the nuclear non-proliferation regime developed?

2. How has United States’ foreign policy toward Iran affected the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2015?

3. How has United States’ foreign policy toward Iran affected the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2015 to 2021?

¹⁷ Nina Tannenwald, ‘How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?’, *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 89–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520553>.

¹⁸ Paul, ‘Taboo or Tradition?’

Methodology and sources

This research seeks to answer the central research question based on a content analysis of documents and sources produced by various bodies of the US government. Included in this analysis are documents from the Department of Defense (DOD), the White House, and the Presidential archives. These sources are official statements, publications, and policies as carried out by the US concerning Iran, the JCPOA, and nuclear strategy. The documents are selected from 2003 to 2021. Together these documents provide a comprehensive image of the policy incentives and strategies by the US government.

The selected sources include the National Security Strategy (NSS), published by the President or the executive branch of the US government, which is intended to transmit the national security vision of the executive branch to the legislative branch. It is meant as a comprehensive declaration that articulates the global security interests, ambitions, and aims of the US.¹⁹ The NSS is required to describe the US' foreign interests, commitments, objectives, and policies, as well as the military capabilities required to prevent threats and carry out US security goals.²⁰ Furthermore, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) will be evaluated, which is conducted by the US DOD and examines the country's nuclear capabilities, and lays out the US' security strategy for the next five to ten years.²¹ The NPR does not execute or determine nuclear policy, but it may provide direction and a sense of what should be prioritized.²² Additionally, the Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR), carried out by the DOD every four years and which examines strategic objectives and potential military threats, will be analyzed.

Chapter 1 will provide an outline of the debate surrounding nuclear non-proliferation, based on writings of various scholars in International Relations and nuclear weapon experts. These perspectives will demonstrate how the nuclear non-proliferation regime evolved. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will discuss how the US foreign policy toward Iran affected the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime, respectively from 2003 to 2015 and from 2015 to 2021. These analyses of Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will be based on several US policies, including the NSS, NPR, and QDR.

¹⁹ 'National Security Strategy Archive', National Security Strategy Archive, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://nssarchive.us/>.

²⁰ 'National Security Strategy', Historical Office: Office of the Secretary of Defence, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://history.defense.gov/Historical-Sources/National-Security-Strategy/>.

²¹ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review 2002 [Excerpts]', 8 January 2002, 1, <https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/media/Excerpts-of-Classified-Nuclear-Posture-Review.pdf>.

²² Stephen Young and Lisbeth Gronlund, 'A Review of the 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review', 14 May 2002, 1.

Chapter 1: analytical framework and historiography

Chapter 1 will outline the development of the global movement advocating nuclear non-proliferation, with the following question at the center of this chapter: *How has the nuclear non-proliferation regime developed?* The historical context of nuclear non-use and non-proliferation will be provided to understand how the movement originated. Furthermore, various understandings and explanations of nuclear non-proliferation will be discussed, including nuclear optimism, nuclear pessimism, and constructivist perspectives. These visions of nuclear non-proliferation will function as the analytical framework for evaluating the case study of the United States' foreign policy toward Iran and its nuclear program.

The historical context of nuclear non-use and non-proliferation

Following the deployment of the first nuclear weapons by the United States (US) to end the Second World War, the world was dominated by a nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation by these superpowers would not be achieved until both sides were confident that the other would follow suit. A supranational entity capable of verifying and implementing continual disarmament was proposed as a strategy to preserve international stability during the Cold War. According to this viewpoint, such a 'world state' was the only entity capable of providing such assurance.²³

As the Cold War progressed, these grand schemes involving the establishment of an effective world government capable of bringing nuclear weapons under control faded, according to political scientist John Mueller. This was because it became generally recognized that the US and Soviet Union would be unable to compromise on the political and economic orientation of a world state, making nuclear disarmament unlikely to occur during the Cold War. Consequently, less ambitious plans to control and counter the proliferation of nuclear weapons were formulated and debated.²⁴

However, international attempts to reverse the trend of nuclear proliferation continued. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), primarily driven by the United Nations (UN), and signed and ratified by the majority of the world's sovereign states in 1970, was an important development in the process of global nuclear non-proliferation. According to political scientists Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka, this ensured that non-proliferation formally

²³ Campbell Craig and Jan Ruzicka, 'The Nonproliferation Complex', *Ethics and International Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1 October 2013): 331, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679413000257>.

²⁴ John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima* (Cary, United States: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=472331>.

became an objective of the international community. By signing the treaty, states not possessing nuclear weapons agreed to refrain from pursuing nuclear weapons in return for possible international assistance in developing peaceful atomic energy. The states that had manufactured and detonated nuclear weapons prior to the treaty, the five recognized nuclear-weapon states, committed to pursuing nuclear disarmament in good faith.²⁵ Since the signing of the NPT, several legal and diplomatic institutions, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), have been established to control the implementation of the principles and articles of the NPT. According to the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, ‘the Treaty is regarded as the cornerstone of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime and an essential foundation for the pursuit of nuclear disarmament.’²⁶

The debate concerning the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons

Despite international attempts to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons, several countries have obtained or threatened to use nuclear weapons. The debate surrounding the impact of nuclear weapons and how nuclear non-use can be explained, despite the existence of nuclear weapon states, such as the US, and countries possibly attempting to acquire them, such as Iran, has persisted. The differing views on nuclear non-proliferation, which will be outlined in this paragraph, will assist in comprehending the development and effect of the nuclear foreign policy of the US toward Iran.

Nuclear optimism

In the debate surrounding nuclear weapons, ‘nuclear optimists’ have argued that nuclear weapons and the proliferation of these weapons do not necessarily lead to warfare, but can promote international security.²⁷ Proliferation optimism is based on the assumption that states when faced with nuclear risk, exercise extreme caution.²⁸ Nuclear optimists argue that nuclear weapons eliminate the option of escalation, consequently reducing the likelihood of conflict.²⁹ Therefore, optimists have claimed that the weapons’ historical effect may potentially be highly advantageous and increase stability among states, believing that nuclear weapons were

²⁵ Craig and Ruzicka, ‘The Nonproliferation Complex’, 330.

²⁶ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, ‘Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – UNODA’, Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), accessed 19 April 2021, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/>.

²⁷ Waltz, ‘Nuclear Myths and Political Realities’, 731–32.

²⁸ David J. Karl, ‘Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers’, *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1997): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.21.3.87>.

²⁹ Michael Horowitz, ‘The Spread of Nuclear Weapons and International Conflict: Does Experience Matter?’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 2 (2009): 237.

important to preserving international stability throughout the Cold War as means of deterrence.³⁰ Nuclear arms offer states the ability to protect their sovereignty and independence not by direct defense, but through deterrence. States deter enemy attacks by threatening an aggressor with unacceptable damage, whereby potential costs outweigh the benefits.³¹ It is assumed by optimists that the presence of nuclear weapons in any deterrent situation is key because the fear of its devastating effects overshadows all the other factors.³²

Influential neo-realist Kenneth Waltz, in accordance with nuclear optimistic viewpoints, argues in *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better* that nuclear weapons are a major force for peace and provide nations that possess them with the possibility of security at a reasonable cost. According to Waltz, deterrence depends on what one can do, not on what one will do. The problem of the credibility of deterrence, as Waltz argues, is a big worry in a conventional world, however, this fear disappears in a nuclear one.³³ The presence of nuclear weapons forces nations to figure out how to deescalate, not how to escalate.³⁴

Realist political scientist John Mearsheimer also claims that nuclear proliferation can foster peace and explain the non-use of nuclear weapons. According to Mearsheimer, the best formula for maintaining stability is for great powers to have secure nuclear deterrents and for minor powers to be nonnuclear.³⁵ Mearsheimer opposes the belief that nuclear weapons are a major source of tension between states and that their deterrent value is quite limited, arguing that this view of nuclear weapons is simplistic and flies in the face of the inherent logic of nuclear deterrence, as well as the history of the Cold War.³⁶

Nuclear pessimism

‘Nuclear pessimists’, contrary to nuclear optimists, believe that the continuing presence of nuclear arms and proliferation implies imminent catastrophe and annihilation as well as international conflicts.³⁷ The pessimistic view emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in nuclear relationships and is skeptical about taking the history of the Cold War and the US-Soviet nuclear relationship as a prototype to argue for a promising nuclear future. It argues that the stability of nuclear deterrence in the Cold War was based on a variety of military and

³⁰ Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 29.

³¹ Stephen M. Walt, ‘Rethinking the “Nuclear Revolution”’, *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/08/03/rethinking-the-nuclear-revolution/>.

³² Karl, ‘Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers’, 91.

³³ Waltz, ‘Nuclear Myths and Political Realities’, 731–34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 740.

³⁵ Mearsheimer, ‘The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent Debate’, 51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁷ Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 29.

political factors, that are either completely absent or only partly present in other regions. Because of these contextual differences, pessimists question nuclear weapons' near-absolute deterrence capability, which optimists attribute to them. According to the nuclear pessimistic view, nuclear proliferation will most likely emerge in areas where political-military conditions are particularly susceptible to conflict. Since proliferation in the context of these conditions would occur within current chronic dynamics of conflict, leaders might be willing to threaten nuclear war, or a relatively high degree of nuclear destruction, to achieve their goal.³⁸

Pessimists disagree with the optimistic notion that many nations are capable of solving the challenges involved in establishing conditions of mutual deterrence and question the optimistic belief that nuclear-armed states would not pre-emptively attack an adversary's nuclear potential. Additionally, pessimistic thought also challenges the optimistic assumption that new nuclear states will eventually develop stable retaliatory arsenals, as pessimists claim that new nuclear forces are vulnerable to illegal or unintended use.³⁹

According to pessimistic political scientist Nicholas J. Wheeler, there is ample historical precedent to indicate that if the quantity of nuclear weapons expands further, threats will only grow. Wheeler suggests that, if governments and global civil society want to rid the world of nuclear weapons and ensure that a non-nuclear world becomes more stable, fundamental rethinking and associated policy interventions are needed to replace fear-driven defense with robust security communities embedded in relations of trust.⁴⁰ Joel Mark also goes against the 'optimistic' claims of Mearsheimer and Waltz, stating these analyses contain theoretical and empirical deficiencies that make their optimistic scenarios regarding nuclear proliferation highly questionable, highlighting the risks of nuclear proliferation.⁴¹

Constructivist and normative approaches

Besides nuclear optimism and pessimism, which assess the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons by focusing on deterrence and physical or material capabilities, other perspectives emphasize more constructivist and normative understandings of international relations and politics. Constructivism, as explained by influential constructivist Alexander Wendt, views international relations and world politics as social constructions and sees the fundamental structures of international politics as social rather than strictly material. The notion

³⁸ Karl, 'Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers', 91–92.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁰ Wheeler, 'Beyond Waltz's Nuclear World', 441–42.

⁴¹ Marks, 'Nuclear Prudence or Nuclear Psychosis?', 325.

that these structures shape actors' identities and interests is fundamental to this constructivist belief. Constructivist thinking emphasizes the importance of norms, rules, and language in the social dimension of international relations.⁴² Constructivist understandings of nuclear non-use and non-proliferation focus on international conventions and social interaction of shared ideas, which become embedded in norms and practices and could invalidate the use of nuclear weapons.⁴³

Nuclear taboo

According to political scientist Nina Tannenwald, the tradition of the non-use of nuclear weapons after the Second World War can be explained by a specific norm in international society known as the 'nuclear taboo'. Tannenwald defines this taboo as a normative inhibition against the first use of nuclear weapons, which stems from a strong aversion associated with such destructive weapons. In the post-war period, nuclear weapons were distinguished from conventional weapons, leading to nuclear weapons being actively stigmatized as unusable weapons of mass destruction. This normative branding of weapons as 'unacceptable' and 'inhumane' was thereupon actively reinforced internationally, according to Tannenwald.⁴⁴

Tannenwald argues that since its rise during the Cold War, the nuclear taboo has been embraced by the United Nations and by leaders and societies around the world as a norm of international politics.⁴⁵ The 'taboo' has been established by embedding and stabilizing the practice of non-use, rather than 'use', in a set of regulative and constitutive norms, such as various arms control agreements. According to Tannenwald, the nuclear non-proliferation system involves not just force, intimidation, or physical denial, but also an internalized view among participants that the prohibited weapons are illegitimate and abhorrent. In other words, the non-proliferation norm helps sustain the taboo.⁴⁶

Historians William Burr and David Alan Rosenberg also claim that a deep-rooted predisposition or 'nuclear taboo' against the military use of nuclear weapons, except in retaliatory circumstances, emerged in the US. They argue that this taboo was based on concerns such as the adverse international reaction and the disproportionate effects of the weapons. Burr and Rosenberg state that although the civilian leaders of the nuclear superpowers believed that

⁴² Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 71–72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539217>.

⁴³ Paul, 'Taboo or Tradition?', 853.

⁴⁴ Tannenwald, 'How Strong Is the Nuclear Taboo Today?', 92.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

nuclear weapons were valuable politically and diplomatically, they found them virtually unusable militarily.⁴⁷ Political scientist Matthew Bolton likewise claims that international society has developed a ‘nuclear taboo’, making the use of nuclear weapons essentially forbidden by custom. As a result, states have negotiated a series of instruments limiting nuclear weapons testing and proliferation, according to Bolton.⁴⁸

Nuclear tradition

While scholars such as Tannenwald, Burr, Rosenberg, and Bolton argue that a nuclear taboo exists, others, like political scientists John Mueller and T.V. Paul argue that the non-use of nuclear weapons should be interpreted as a ‘nuclear tradition’. Mueller, contrary to Tannenwald, claims that it is unclear if the nuclear taboo has had a practical effect. While nuclear-armed countries have been at odds or war with one another regularly, Mueller argues that their nuclear conservatism or non-use appears to stem at least as much from expectations of the weapons’ military ineffectiveness as from fears of breaking some prohibitory practice or taboo. Nuclear non-use and non-proliferation, according to Mueller, originate more from a tradition of ‘non-usefulness’ than from a strong nuclear taboo.⁴⁹

Paul, like Mueller, acknowledges that Tannenwald’s empirical case studies have validity, but also claims it is a stretch to relate non-use to a taboo-like prohibition. Paul argues that taboos should prohibit talk of their breaching by their existence, but points to the contradictory fact that nuclear states have national military policies that allow for nuclear use under specific circumstances, and that nuclear-armed states have considered using nuclear weapons in a variety of crises.⁵⁰ According to Paul, the absence of nuclear assaults is partly due to a more modest tradition, rather than a taboo, that arose as a result of the understanding of the dreadful repercussions of a nuclear assault as well as the negative consequences for a potential user’s reputation. Unlike Tannenwald, Paul believes that the tradition is not a strict taboo and that it can be broken if material and political conditions force nuclear states to do so.⁵¹ Nuclear

⁴⁷ William Burr and David Alan Rosenberg, ‘Nuclear Competition in an Era of Stalemate, 1963–1975’, in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 2: Crises and Détente*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, vol. 2, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105–6, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-the-cold-war/B71B9D33438BE62E5BEC1D1FA85EC236>.

⁴⁸ Matthew Bolton, ‘The Nuclear Taboo and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons’, *Revista de Direito Brasileira* 22 (1 January 2019): 320.

⁴⁹ Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 62.

⁵⁰ Paul, ‘Taboo or Tradition?’, 853.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 853.

non-use, according to Paul, is a ‘more limited tradition which has an informal norm inherent in it.’⁵²

The nuclear non-proliferation regime or complex

Normative or constructivist understandings of the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, emphasize the norms and rules of international societies. The arguments in favor of a normative explanation for the non-use of nuclear weapons are based on certain premises, according to Paul, such as that nuclear weapons are regarded as instruments that bring infamy to those who use them and that a norm-like prohibition against nuclear use seems to have evolved. This prohibition would have been due to the efforts of norm entrepreneurs such as scientists, peace movements, and developing countries.⁵³

Craig and Ruzicka argue that a powerful institutional regime can be established when an international initiative has been widely accepted as an apparent universal good, and it commands the support of the most powerful states and funders globally. They claim that a ‘nonproliferation complex’ exists, with the ‘international community’ having set itself the goals of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament for decades, which includes dozens of governmental agencies, international nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and academic programs and institutes. According to Craig and Ruzicka, this complex has dominated the debate about nuclear weapons for years and contributes to shaping leading powers’ foreign policies.⁵⁴

Craig and Ruzicka argue that when a universalistic ideology that purports to achieve a universally positive objective, namely the prevention of nuclear apocalypse, is bound to the strategic interests of the world’s most influential state and its main partners, the outcome is a dominant discourse. Those who pursue this discourse benefit from financing, government patronage, and ‘policy relevance’. Craig and Ruzicka, like the scholars arguing in favor of a nuclear tradition or taboo, emphasize that the concept behind non-proliferation is that nuclear weapons ought to be stigmatized. In other words, they also contest that an antinuclear norm has been at the forefront of non-proliferation politics.⁵⁵ This ‘antinuclear norm’ reflects the views of nuclear pessimists, emphasizing the negative effects of nuclear proliferation.

⁵² Ibid., 863.

⁵³ Ibid., 855.

⁵⁴ Craig and Ruzicka, ‘The Nonproliferation Complex’, 329.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 341.

Nuclear theory and United States' foreign policy

During the Cold War, US nuclear policy was primarily concerned with deterrence and sustaining mutually assured destruction, while the focus of the post-Cold War strategy shifted away from nuclear warfare. Nuclear weapons remained a deterrent against the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) by others, but the US no longer had a monopoly on them, and the attention of US policy switched to governments and actors who could potentially obtain nuclear weapons. The US also focused on the possible acquirement of nuclear weapons by one of its adversaries, Iran. In 2002 president George W. Bush referred to Iran as being a part of the 'axis of evil', emphasizing the 'dangers' of Iran and the risks of countries that sponsor terrorism acquiring nuclear weapons.⁵⁶

This research on nuclear non-proliferation and non-use will utilize the US and its policies toward Iran from 2003 to 2021 as a case study. By reviewing the US' nuclear policies and doctrine based on the different theoretical perspectives the impact of the US on the global nuclear non-proliferation regime will be assessed. The US will serve as a case study because the impact of the US on nuclear policies internationally is generally regarded as influential. Jon Wolfsthal argues that the US has greatly influenced its allies to refrain from their pursuit of a nuclear arsenal.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the US is an appropriate case study in nuclear weapons research because, according to Nathan Edward Busch, the US has been willing to provide more information on its nuclear systems than other countries, allowing for a better understanding of the nuclear decision-making process and the types of actions that nuclear-weapon states are likely to take.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ 'State of the Union Address (January 29, 2002)'.

⁵⁷ Wolfsthal, 'The Next Nuclear Wave - Nonproliferation in a New World Reviews & Responses', 160.

⁵⁸ Nathan Edward Busch, 'Assessing the Optimism-Pessimism Debate, Nuclear Proliferation, Nuclear Risks, and Theories of State Action' (Dissertation, 2001), 33–34, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/15974>.

Chapter 2: United States' foreign policy toward Iran 2003-2015

Chapter 2 will outline the actions of the US toward Iran in reaction to the developments of Iran's nuclear program in the period of 2003 to 2015. Furthermore, the effects of the US foreign policy on the nuclear non-proliferation regime will be assessed by using the analytical approaches to nuclear non-proliferation and non-use provided in Chapter 1. The analysis of Chapter 2 will commence with the negotiations to constrain Iran's nuclear program, which began in 2003 with discussions between various nations, including the United States and Iran. The negotiations concluded in 2015 with the signature of a substantial agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which marks the end of the research period of Chapter 2. In Chapter 2 the following question will be addressed: *How has the United States' foreign policy toward Iran affected the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2015?*

2003-2006: Negotiations, Bush and Iran

In 2002, a report by an Iranian opposition group, revealed the discovery of covert Iranian nuclear facilities, raising international concerns. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the organization committed to supporting the peaceful use of nuclear technology and prohibiting its use for military purposes, confirmed that Iran had failed to disclose aspects of its nuclear program, which constituted an infringement of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) obligations.⁵⁹ Although IAEA-inspectors found no proof of military deviation, the fact that Iran had kept its nuclear operations secret, allegedly in breach of international disclosure commitments, raised concerns internationally.⁶⁰ To avoid sanctions and other forms of coercion, Iran pursued diplomatic cooperation with the European Union (EU), particularly the E3, which consists of the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, and the IAEA.⁶¹

In the period leading up to the discovery of Iran's nuclear facilities in 2003 and the subsequent negotiations, the administration of US President George W. Bush had already expressed its concerns about the new challenges of 'rogue states' seeking to acquire nuclear weapons in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS).⁶² The NSS describes how these 'rogue regimes' threaten the US and its values and the administration announced strengthened

⁵⁹ Negm, *Transfer of Nuclear Technology under International Law*, 194–95.

⁶⁰ Alcaro, 'The History', 61.

⁶¹ Alireza Nader, 'Influencing Iran's Decisions on the Nuclear Program', in *Sanctions, Statecraft, and Nuclear Proliferation: Sanctions, Inducements, and Collective Action*, by Etel Solingen (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 220, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=866902>.

⁶² President of the United States, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2002' (The White House, 17 September 2002), 13, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2002/>.

counterproliferation and nonproliferation efforts to prevent rogue states and terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).⁶³ According to the NSS, rogue nations do not view WMDs as a last resort that will culminate in mutually assured destruction, but rather as a weapon of choice and a tool of intimidation and military aggressiveness, as well as their most effective means of overcoming the US's conventional dominance.⁶⁴

The line of reasoning by the US in the 2002 NSS implies that these 'rogue nations' have not internalized the international norm of nuclear weapons as inhumane and unusable forms of weapons. By juxtaposing these rogue nations to the US, the US administration creates the impression that the US would not deploy nuclear weapons as easily or carelessly. However, the NSS states that, if required, the US will act preemptively to prevent or deter any offensive actions by adversaries.⁶⁵ This contradicts the nuclear taboo or tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons as the administration explicitly asserts that the US would use nuclear weapons if the situation demanded it.

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2002 states that the US intends to reduce its dependence on nuclear weapons. This new strategy would strive to provide a credible deterrent with the lowest level of nuclear weapons possible while ensuring secure stability for the US and its allies.⁶⁶ The NPR does emphasize that nuclear weapons would continue to play a critical role in the defense capabilities of the US and its allies.⁶⁷ According to the NPR, US nuclear forces provide assurance to security partners, reducing the incentives for allied countries to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.⁶⁸ Iran is listed as being among the countries that could be involved in immediate, potential, or unexpected contingencies, because of the longstanding hostility toward the US and its security partners.⁶⁹

With the 2002 NPR, the Bush administration produced new roles for nuclear weapons, by calling for new types of weapons and increasing the US capability to manufacture new weapons, rather than reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US military strategy.⁷⁰ These new tasks, according to nuclear disarmament experts Stephen Young and Lisbeth Gronlund, would jeopardize the overarching task of avoiding nuclear weapons proliferation and usage by leading weaker states to believe that they would need nuclear weapons for their safety.⁷¹ Political

⁶³ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review 2002 [Excerpts]', 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁰ Young and Gronlund, 'A Review of the 2002 US Nuclear Posture Review', 1.

⁷¹ Ibid., 2.

scientist Amy Woolf, a specialist in nuclear weapons policy, agrees with the notion put forward by Young and Gronlund. In this view, the US should prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons by reducing the perceived utility of nuclear weapons and refrain from acquiring new capabilities.⁷² Political scientist Richard Sokolsky attests that the 2002 NPR provoked an outcry among advocates of nuclear disarmament both in the US and abroad, arguing that the Bush administration would make nuclear war more possible and foster further nuclear proliferation by promoting the production of new nuclear weapons and a strengthened position for old ones.⁷³

The Bush administration sought to counter those concerns of the international community that the US could develop new nuclear weapons and lower the threshold of deployments of nuclear weapons.⁷⁴ However, the administration demonstrated the contrary in its policy activities. According to Brad Roberts, the decision in March 2003 to discard the long-standing Single Integrated Operational Plan, the US' general strategy for nuclear war, in favor of a more flexible strategy mirrored changes in deterrent planning. These changes are assumed to be intended to provide more flexibility for the US President to use both nuclear and nonnuclear weapons.⁷⁵

The negotiations between Iran and the E3 made progress at first, with two settlements being reached in 2003 and 2004. However, from the outset, disagreements existed between Iran and the E3 about the content of the agreements, and both accused each other of failing to keep their promises. The US persuaded the EU to also take a less friendly stance against Iran at the end of 2004. The Iranian government declared at the end of 2005 that it would proceed with its nuclear enrichment program, which the E3 and the US had hoped to avert by diplomatic efforts. Consequently, negotiations came to a halt.⁷⁶ This process coincided with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran, a supporter of the development of the country's nuclear program. In reaction to Iran's restart of uranium enrichment in 2005, the Bush

⁷² Amy F. Woolf, 'The Nuclear Posture Review: Overview and Emerging Issues' (Library of Congress Washington DC Congressional Research Service, 31 January 2002), 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA477933>.

⁷³ Richard Sokolsky, 'Demystifying the US Nuclear Posture Review', *Survival* 44, no. 3 (1 September 2002): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1093/survival/44.3.133>.

⁷⁴ Jean du Preez, 'The Impact of the Nuclear Posture Review on the International Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime', *The Nonproliferation Review* 9, no. 3 (1 September 2002): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700208436904>.

⁷⁵ Brad Roberts, *The Case for U. S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, United States: Stanford University Press, 2015), 23, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=4414763>.

⁷⁶ Tom Sauer, 'The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 57, no. 5 (2019): 946–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12861>.

administration enhanced and tightened the sanctions system it had previously placed on the country.⁷⁷

From 2003 to 2006, the nuclear policies of the US toward nuclear nonproliferation and Iran, reflect nuclear pessimism in the claims that nuclear proliferation, particularly by nations like Iran, would result in regional and international instability. The US policies oppose nuclear proliferation but do not promote total nuclear abolition, stating that by retaining its nuclear arsenal, the US provides assurance and stability to its national security and those of its allies. This is a nuclear optimistic viewpoint and goes against the earlier nuclear pessimistic line of thought. The US government highlights the importance and value of nuclear weapons and the possibility of deploying them, as well as the US right to preemptive action, in its 2002 NPR and various policy documents from 2003 to 2006. With these policies, the US undermines agreements and treaties of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. This regime can only be sustained by parties adhering to its values and internalize the norm of nuclear non-use. With these explicit mentions of nuclear use and pre-emptive nuclear action in its policy statements and actions in this period, the US does not appear to have internalized the norm of non-use and is thereby destabilizing the nuclear taboo.

2006-2009: Changing relationship and global nuclear non-proliferation efforts

With the historic rivalry between the US and Iran, the discovery of Iranian nuclear facilities in 2003 strengthened the US view that rapid intervention was necessary. The US urged the IAEA to declare Iran in non-compliance with the NPT and refer the matter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).⁷⁸ The E3, joining forces with Russia, China, and the US, commonly labeled the P5+1 (the UNSC five permanent members and Germany), referred the Iranian situation to the UNSC in 2006, leading to a period of increasing confrontation between the parties. Iran continued to move forward with its nuclear program and vowed to not be bullied by foreign powers into giving up its 'nuclear rights'. The E3 continued to emphasize their willingness to re-engage with Iran in substantive talks aimed at resolving the conflict in a mutually agreeable way.⁷⁹ Despite attempts to re-engage with Iran, the US and EU primarily

⁷⁷ Nader, 'Influencing Iran's Decisions on the Nuclear Program', 213–14.

⁷⁸ Alcaro, 'The History', 62.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 67.

used coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions to force Iran back to negotiations from 2006, with the US leading this effort.⁸⁰

In policy documents from 2006 to 2009, the US government highlights the dangers presented by the spread of WMDs to terrorist organizations and state-sponsored terrorism, with a particular focus on Iran. The 2006 NSS, published by the Bush administration, prioritizes preventing and countering the proliferation of WMDs to rogue states and terrorist allies, that will use them without hesitation.⁸¹ According to the NSS, this process necessitates concerted international action. The 2006 NSS emphasizes the role of the US in this process, stating that ‘the international community is most engaged in such action when the United States leads.’⁸² It claims that the US prefers to address proliferation concerns through international diplomacy; however, like in the 2002 NSS, it does indicate that if necessary, the US does not rule out the use of pre-emptive force under the long-standing principles of self-defense.⁸³

The 2006 NSS places a particular focus on Iran, claiming that no nation represents a greater threat to the US than Iran. It notes how the Iranian government withheld many of its significant nuclear activities from the international community for over two decades. Furthermore, the document mentions the US’s collaboration with European allies and international organizations to put pressure on Iran to follow its non-proliferation commitments.⁸⁴

In the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) by the US Department of Defense (DOD), Iran is also mentioned as one of the potentially hostile states that possess or seek weapons of mass destruction. It explains that to states such as Iran, nuclear weapons provide the means to assert regional hegemony and the intimidation of others.⁸⁵ The US National Strategy for Combatting Terrorism 2006 points to Iran as an active state sponsor of terrorism and it underscores the US’ commitment to oppose these regimes and expresses concerns over the capacity of these countries to develop WMDs that may fall into the hands of terrorists. It reaffirms the US’ determination to sustain sanctions against Iran and to encourage international

⁸⁰ Sauer, ‘The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)’, 947–48.

⁸¹ President of the United States, ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006’ (The White House, 16 March 2006), 12, <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2006.pdf>.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁵ United States Department of Defense, ‘Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2006’, 2006, 23, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/QDR/Report20060203.pdf>.

isolation.⁸⁶ The DOD Agency Financial Report of 2007 again emphasized that ‘The government of Iran continues to cause concern as its members promote violence and instability throughout the Mideast region.’⁸⁷

With these documents, the US reaffirms its commitment to the international community in pursuit of nuclear non-proliferation and actively supports other parties and nations adhering to the nuclear nonproliferation regime’s commitments, by actively seeking to combat the forces that counter the regime. The anti-proliferation measures by the US uphold or sustain the nuclear taboo inherent in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. However, the documents, such as the 2006 NSS and QDR, continue to focus on the US’ need for nuclear deterrence and armament, rather than working toward nuclear abolition. The documents also specifically address the threat posed by Iran and its potential acquisition of nuclear weapons. The US developed a strategy of using coercive diplomatic means to pressure Iran into abandoning its nuclear weapon program. The documents reflect a nuclear pessimistic viewpoint, meaning the notion that Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will lead to greater proliferation, resulting in global and regional instability provoked by Iran.

In 2007, former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, and former US Senator Sam Nunn presented a forceful public argument for the US to resume its commitment to the eventual eradication of nuclear weapons. This was remarkable as they all had advocated for maintaining US nuclear capabilities during their services in the US government. They published their opinion pieces in reaction to the perception that US policy had strayed too far from nonproliferation and disarmament and that it would therefore fail to address new challenges.⁸⁸ Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, and Nunn proposed the elimination of short-range nuclear weapons as this would be a concrete move toward a future free of nuclear weapons. The removal would be a symbolically significant gesture to non-nuclear armed states.⁸⁹ This would present a historic opportunity for the US to

⁸⁶ The White House, ‘National Strategy for Combating Terrorism’, 2006, 15, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235161948_National_Strategy_for_Combating_Terrorism_Background_and_Issues_for_Congress.

⁸⁷ United States Department of Defense, ‘United States Department of Defense Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2007’, 15 November 2007, vii, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/afr/fy2007/Entire_Document_\(5.1_KB\).pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/afr/fy2007/Entire_Document_(5.1_KB).pdf).

⁸⁸ Roberts, *The Case for U. S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, 26.

⁸⁹ Tom Sauer, ‘U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons: A European Perspective’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 66, no. 5 (September 2010): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340210381338>.

lead the process of taking critical steps toward reversing reliance on nuclear weapons globally, according to Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, and Nunn.⁹⁰

With this nuclear pessimistic reasoning, the effects of norms and the influence of the US on the international community are acknowledged as Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, and Nunn underline the need for the US to abolish its nuclear program. The initiative by these four statesmen had far-reaching consequences, both in the US and internationally, according to Brad Roberts, since think tanks and movements in the US and Europe strengthened their efforts to accelerate arms control and disarmament processes. In the US, Presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain both advocated the goal of a nuclear-free world while campaigning.⁹¹

2009-2015: Leading up to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

With the administration of US President Barack Obama taking office in 2009, a window of opportunity seemed to have appeared in the negotiations process between Iran and the other parties, as the US sought rapprochement with Iran. However, following the 2009 Iranian election, pragmatic voices on the nuclear program increasingly lost their ability to influence the country's national security strategy. This left Iran less open to sanctions and constructive inducements, and more likely to seek a nuclear arms program regardless of the costs.⁹² In 2009 it was also revealed that Iran had been constructing a new enrichment facility in secret, which further damaged Iran's credibility.⁹³ After the US unilaterally imposed harsher economic sanctions in 2010 and threatened to terminate relations with European firms based in the US that were involved with Iran, the E3 committed to posing severe economic sanctions on Iran as well.⁹⁴ The P5+1 established a financial blockade of ongoing economic sanctions against Iran, believing that this would ultimately crack Iran's resistance.⁹⁵

The 2010 NPR was highly anticipated after President Obama's 2009 speech in Prague in which he declared that the US would pursue a world free of nuclear weapons and the subsequent peace and security. The NPR was also much anticipated, as the report was issued in the context of the influential appeal by Kissinger, Shultz, Perry, and Nunn, for a bold initiative to take practical steps toward the long-term objective of nuclear disarmament to revitalize the

⁹⁰ George P. Shultz et al., 'Toward a World without Nuclear Weapons', 2007, 1, https://media.nti.org/pdfs/NSP_op-eds_final_.pdf.

⁹¹ Roberts, *The Case for U. S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, 27.

⁹² Nader, 'Influencing Iran's Decisions on the Nuclear Program', 213.

⁹³ Alcaro, 'The History', 69.

⁹⁴ Sauer, 'The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)', 950.

⁹⁵ Alcaro, 'The History', 71.

nonproliferation effort. Moreover, the US Congress had explicitly instructed the Obama administration to reassess its nuclear strategy and posture.⁹⁶

With the 2010 NPR, it became clear that the Obama administration was willing to take tangible measures toward the goal of nuclear disarmament, by reducing the number of nuclear weapons owned by the US and their role in the country's security strategy. However, in line with previous US foreign policy, the NPR also pledged that the US would retain a stable, secure, and reliable arsenal as long as nuclear weapons would exist. This is to deter potential adversaries and to assure US allies and other security partners that they can count on America's security commitments, according to the 2010 NPR.⁹⁷

With the NPR, Obama's administration made it known that it considered nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation the most immediate and extreme dangers to the security of the US. The NPR specifically refers to Iran, arguing that the country has breached non-proliferation commitments in pursuit of nuclear ambitions and resisted international efforts to address crises through diplomatic means. Iran's disruptive activity, according to the NPR, has raised regional instability and could pressure neighboring countries into exploring their nuclear deterrent options.⁹⁸

The 2010 NPR recognizes the existence of a nuclear non-proliferation regime, stating that: 'Our efforts to contain these dangers are centered in a global nonproliferation regime that has frayed as more people and nations break the rules. That is why reversing the spread of nuclear weapons is a top priority. Success depends upon broad consensus and concerted action.'⁹⁹ The NPR notes that continuing noncompliance with nonproliferation norms by states has the potential to undermine the NPT, with negative security ramifications for the US and the international community.¹⁰⁰ It makes clear that the US intends to lead extended diplomatic efforts to restore and reinforce the global nuclear nonproliferation regime as a vital component of the commitment to work toward a world free of nuclear weapons.¹⁰¹

In the bureaucratic formation process of the NPR, Obama was opposed by officials of the National Security Council (NSC) and DOD, who did not share Obama's view that a world without nuclear weapons is a feasible objective. This is a highly peculiar circumstance because

⁹⁶ Roberts, *The Case for U. S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, 29.

⁹⁷ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review Report 2010', April 2010, iii, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, iv.

⁹⁹ President of the United States, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2010' (The White House, 27 May 2010), 23, <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2010.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review Report 2010', iv.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, vi.

the NSC is usually perceived as advocating for the President's priorities and agenda over those of other bureaucratic players.¹⁰² The NPR was also not fully endorsed by advocates of more immediate and extensive changes to US policy and posture, which had hoped for further unilateral actions to decrease the US' nuclear posture and the adoption of a declaratory policy stating that the sole objective of US nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack.¹⁰³

The significance of the threat of Iran and its nuclear program in the internal security environment is underlined in multiple policy documents of the US. The 2010 NSS states that if Iran refuses to comply with its international commitments, the US is prepared to use a variety of methods to further isolate Iran and bring the country into line with international nonproliferation norms. The NSS considers the nuclear crises to be about 'the responsibilities of all nations and the success of the nonproliferation regime'.¹⁰⁴ The 2010 QDR emphasizes the US' concerns surrounding the nuclear ambitions and confrontational postures of Iran and contends that Iran defies international norms with its active testing and fielding of new ballistic missile systems.¹⁰⁵

The nuclear policies around 2010 stress the presence of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the significance of maintaining states' adherence to the rules that support this regime. The US government underlines its influential position and leadership role in ensuring that Iran complies with the norms of the international community. In this nuclear doctrine, nuclear pessimistic thought is again visible, even though the US is still not able to commit to full nuclear abolition.

From 2010 to 2013 the number and pace of meetings between Iran and the P5+1 increased. Even though this process was without many results, a better negotiation environment was established and Iran-US relations were improving. When the Obama administration resumed international negotiation with Iran, national and international diversion on the subject became apparent as Obama was subjected to unrelenting criticism from the US Congress, as well as Middle Eastern allies.¹⁰⁶ Despite the diversion, during this last stage of negotiations leading up to the JCPOA, the US was the most important diplomatic interlocutor for Iran, with covert

¹⁰² Joanna Spear, 'More Business as Usual? The Obama Administration and the Nuclear Posture Review', *Contemporary Security Policy* 32, no. 1 (1 April 2011): 259, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2011.556865>.

¹⁰³ Roberts, *The Case for U. S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, 33.

¹⁰⁴ President of the United States, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2010', 23–24.

¹⁰⁵ United States Department of Defense, 'Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2010', 2010, 31, <https://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Alcaro, 'The History', 72–75.

bilateral negotiations between Iran and the US doing much of ‘the heavy lifting of the negotiations’.¹⁰⁷

The breakthrough in the negotiations occurred in 2013, as Iranians elected Hassan Rouhani as president; a pragmatic regime insider, who had been instrumental in initiating and overseeing the negotiations from 2003 to 2005. Rouhani had vowed to end Iran’s isolation and revive the economy by having sanctions lifted, evidently presupposing a nuclear compromise.¹⁰⁸ In 2013, the P5+1 and Iran reached a preliminary agreement, the Joint Plan of Action (JPA).

The nuclear policies of the US in the period, such as the 2013 DOD Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy, reaffirm that the US seeks the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons as a long-term objective while preserving the safety, security, and effectiveness of the US nuclear deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist.¹⁰⁹ The DOD report stresses that the US will continue to hold Iran responsible for the continued breaches of their international obligations, through diplomacy, tightened international sanctions, and other measures. With this approach, the objective is to bring Iran into compliance with its international obligations.¹¹⁰ The QDR of 2014 mentions that as diplomacy on nuclear issues continues, with the 2013 JPA only representing a first step toward a longer-term comprehensive solution, the DOD will maintain all options on the table and counter other threats that Iran poses in the region.¹¹¹ The 2014 QDR mentions the objective of stabilizing the nuclear non-proliferation regime and states that the US’ sustained attention and engagement will be important in shaping emerging global trends. It argues that an unprecedented degree of global connectivity provides common incentives for international cooperation and shared norms of behavior.¹¹²

The 2015 NSS of Obama’s administration addresses the ongoing efforts to reach a comprehensive resolution to ensure the international community that Iran’s nuclear program is

¹⁰⁷ Sauer, ‘The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)’, 951.

¹⁰⁸ Alcaro, ‘The History’, 73–74.

¹⁰⁹ United States Department of Defense, ‘Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.’, 12 June 2013, 2, https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/NukeEmploymentGuidance_DODbrief061213.pdf.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

¹¹¹ United States Department of Defense, ‘Quadrennial Defense Review 2014’, 2014, 21, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2014.pdf?ver=tXH94SVvSQLVw-ENZ-a2pQ%3d%3d>.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, III.

peaceful, while the JPA halted the progress of Iran's program.¹¹³ It mentions the US-led international attempts to avoid the proliferation of nuclear weapons, including the implementation of an unprecedented international sanctions mechanism that holds Iran liable for failing to meet its international obligations, while still pursuing diplomatic efforts.¹¹⁴ The 2015 NSS emphasizes that the US sanctions regime has demonstrated that the international community can, and will, hold those nations accountable that do not meet their international obligations, while also opening up space for a diplomatic resolution. It claims that the US prefers to reach a substantive and verifiable agreement that guarantees Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes since this is the best way to advance US interests, reinforce the global nonproliferation regime, and allow Iran access to peaceful nuclear energy.¹¹⁵ This argument allowing Iran to have some type of nuclear program is distinct from previous policies that prohibited Iran from any form of nuclear development capacity.

In 2015 the final deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was achieved. The JCPOA attempted to block all potential paths to develop a nuclear weapons capability while keeping Iran's nuclear industry intact.¹¹⁶ Iran had to restrict its nuclear program as part of the JCPOA, and the IAEA had to verify it. In return, all sanctions by the P5+1 would be eliminated. In the event of Iran's non-compliance, a snapback system was also enabled.¹¹⁷

Comprehensive analysis of the United States' foreign policy toward Iran 2003-2015

The preceding analysis in Chapter 2 concentrated on distinct, chronological timeframes up until the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. To comprehend and contextualize the period, the following paragraph will analyze the US nuclear policy in the complete period of 2003 to 2015.

Nuclear pessimism, according to David J. Karl, has generally advised traditional opinion on proliferation issues and served as a touchstone for US nonproliferation policies.¹¹⁸ This can be seen in US foreign policy toward a 'nuclear Iran' from 2003 to 2015. The US feared the nuclear proliferation of a country such as Iran and thought it would spread to other countries in the region, decreasing regional and international stability. The notion that has been prevalent in the rhetoric of US foreign policy since the 1960s, entails that if a new country entered the

¹¹³ President of the United States, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2015' (The White House, 6 February 2015), <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2015.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁶ Alcaro, 'The History', 77.

¹¹⁷ Sauer, 'The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003-15)', 951.

¹¹⁸ Karl, 'Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers', 92.

nuclear community nuclear proliferation would be accelerated and certain points of no return would be crossed.¹¹⁹ Therefore, John Mueller argues, the US has made a big effort to defend armed powers from nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction and improve its ability to defeat nuclear weapons against the prospects of the rogue nations possessing nuclear weapons.¹²⁰ From 2003 to 2015, this nuclear pessimistic thought has had a major influence on US nuclear policy toward Iran.

Nuclear optimists argue, contrary to nuclear pessimists, that a nuclear-armed Iran would most likely restore stability to the Middle East, by reducing imbalances in military power, and therefore producing more regional and international stability. Kenneth Waltz argues that the danger of a nuclear Iran has been exaggerated and that Israel's regional nuclear monopoly has long fueled insecurity in the Middle East, suggesting that power must be balanced.¹²¹ Historian Martin van Creveld also contends that with Iranian possession of nuclear the region would become more secure rather than less stable.¹²² The US foreign policy, in this regard, does not follow nuclear optimist understandings of nuclear proliferation, as it consistently has taken a hard stance against a nuclear Iran. However, after 2013, when the US embraced the notion that a modest nuclear Iran program may bring about an end to the deadlock, a certain degree of nuclear optimism is evident in US external policies.

Even though nuclear policies of the US, especially since 2009, have stressed the US' commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons, the policies have remained cautious and have restricted further reduction of US nuclear posture and maintained many of previous administrations' core nuclear weapons force structure and policy elements.¹²³ This also reflects a nuclear optimistic thought, as it sees nuclear weapons as providing stability to the US and its allies.

The US has influenced the nuclear non-proliferation regime extensively in the period 2003-2015. The US has emphasized its readiness to cooperate with the international community and main allies to pursue shared objectives in its stance toward the spread of WMDs to Iran,

¹¹⁹ Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 91.

¹²⁰ Karl, 'Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers', 88.

¹²¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, 'Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability Comment', *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2012): 2-4.

¹²² Martin Van Creveld, 'Technology and War II: From Nuclear Stalemate to Terrorism', in *The Oxford History of Modern War*, ed. Charles Townshend (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2005), 350, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=437166&site=ehost-live>.

¹²³ Hans Kristensen, 'The Nuclear Posture Review', Federation Of American Scientists, 8 April 2010, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2010/04/npr2010/>.

hereby stressing its leadership role in this process.¹²⁴ The ‘international community’, according to political scientist Tom Sauer, has developed the widely shared goal of preventing Iran from developing and acquiring nuclear weapons.¹²⁵ Under the influence of the US, the international alliance opposing Iran’s nuclear ambitions grew, with more countries cutting economic and political links with Iran.¹²⁶ When negotiations between the P5+1 reached a stalemate, the influence and actions of the US paved the way for the JCPOA’s establishment. With these policy actions, mostly influenced by nuclear pessimistic notions, the US has influenced the nuclear non-proliferation regime and stabilized the norm of nuclear non-use in the international community.

¹²⁴ President of the United States, ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006’, 18–19.

¹²⁵ Sauer, ‘The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)’, 943.

¹²⁶ Alcaro, ‘The History’, 71.

Chapter 3: United States' foreign policy toward Iran 2015-2021

Chapter 3 will outline the actions of the US toward Iran in reaction to the developments of Iran's nuclear program in the period of 2015 to 2021. Furthermore, the effects of the foreign policy on the nuclear non-proliferation regime will be assessed by using the analytical approaches to nuclear non-proliferation and non-use provided in Chapter 1. The analysis in Chapter 3 will depart from the establishment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, as this is a turning point in the US-Iran relations and a significant moment in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The inauguration of the administration of United States (US) President Joseph Biden in 2021, which will presumably constitute a significant policy change in the US government, marks the conclusion of the research period of Chapter 3. In Chapter 3 the following question will be addressed: *How has the United States' foreign policy toward Iran affected the broader nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2015 to 2021?*

2015-2018: Changing United States' foreign policy

With the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, Iran accepted far-reaching limitations on its nuclear program that prevent it from producing nuclear weapons.¹²⁷ In the period following the ratification of the deal, it was widely assumed that Iran complied with the restrictions that had been placed under the JCPOA.¹²⁸ At the beginning of 2016, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that the JCPOA's provisional commitments had been satisfied by Iran. The US, European Union (EU), and United Nations (UN) consequently revoked or suspended their sanctions. The decision of the Obama administration to lift supplementary sanctions on Iran's oil sector, which fell outside the agreements of the JCPOA, was an especially significant event in the US-Iran relations.¹²⁹

In 2017 a change took place in US leadership with the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the US. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the first NSS issued by Trump's administration, reflects this change, particularly concerning Iran and the JCPOA. In the 2017 NSS, the US government states that it aims to confront the danger posed by the dictatorship in Iran, 'which those determined to pursue a flawed nuclear deal had neglected.'¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Sauer, 'The Role of Informal International Organizations in Resolving the Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2003–15)', 939.

¹²⁸ Mirko Sossai, "'The Dynamic of Action and Reaction' and the Implementation of the Iran Nuclear Deal', *Questions of International Law* 66 (29 February 2020): 7.

¹²⁹ Kali Robinson, 'What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?', Council on Foreign Relations, 25 February 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

¹³⁰ President of the United States, 'The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2017' (The White House, 18 December 2017), I, <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2017.pdf>.

The NSS emphasizes the US administration's view that the 'dictatorship of Iran' is determined to destabilize its region, threaten the US and its allies, and brutalize its citizens.¹³¹ The report, which refers to Iran as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, claims that Iran has continued to develop nuclear capabilities, despite the JCPOA. The NSS makes it clear that the US aims to collaborate with its allies to deny Iran's regime all pathways to nuclear weapons and to neutralize Iranian malign activity and activities.¹³²

In the 2017 NSS, the Trump administration stresses the dangers of hostile states and non-state actors who attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. The NSS claims that these regimes threaten to undermine international norms against 'these heinous weapons, which may encourage more actors to pursue and use them.'¹³³ The report emphasizes the objective of enhancing counterproliferation measures, to reduce the chance that they might fall into the hands of hostile actors and hold state and non-state actors accountable for the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).¹³⁴ Nuclear weapons are seen as the foundation of the US strategy to preserve peace and stability by deterring aggression against the US, its allies, and partners. According to the 2017 NSS, the expansion of the US nuclear arsenal to allies and partners serves to ensure their stability while reducing their need for nuclear weapons.¹³⁵ The NSS reflects the US' readiness to strengthen cooperation with its European allies and partners to combat powers that challenge its mutual ideals, security interests, and vision.¹³⁶ The US states that it will consider new arms control arrangements if they contribute to strategic stability and are verifiable. The NSS does stress that the US will not allow adversaries to use threats of nuclear escalation or other irresponsible nuclear behaviors to coerce the US and its allies and partners.¹³⁷

The 2017 NSS the US administration reflects the norm of nuclear weapons as 'heinous' forms of weapons, sustaining the nuclear taboo or tradition of non-use. However, it also regards nuclear weapons as providing a form of security that is essential to US nuclear policy, thereby weakening the nuclear taboo of the international community with this nuclear optimistic view.

The 2017 annual report by the US Department of Defense (DOD) reflects the US government's belief that Iran continues to constitute a substantial global security threat to the US, because of its regional power ambitions and potential development of nuclear weapons. It

¹³¹ Ibid., 2.

¹³² Ibid., 49.

¹³³ Ibid., 8.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 31.

claims that the US Congress enacted legislation imposing further economic sanctions against Iran in 2017, as a result of Iran's continuous ballistic missile testing and hostile actions.¹³⁸ The DOD describes how, in response to the new economic sanctions, Iran's President Rouhani warned that it could start its nuclear program 'within hours' and Iran's parliament voted in favor of legislation to increase the budget for the country's ballistic missile program and external operations arms. In response, the US government states its commitment to cooperating with its Middle East allies to curb Iranian aggression and influence.¹³⁹ The DOD identifies Iran as one of the five entities that present the greatest challenges to the department and argues that the Iranian threat requires active monitoring.¹⁴⁰

The DOD also asserts that the global security environment has changed and that US adversaries are developing advanced nuclear and conventional weapons that rival the US' capability. The DOD emphasizes that, in this security environment, maintaining a secure and effective nuclear deterrent is a key priority. Nuclear weapons, according to the DOD, are a deterrent to strikes by enemies with WMDs, with a credible US nuclear force providing security for allies and lessening pressure on them to develop their own nuclear weapons.¹⁴¹

With the 2018 National Defense Strategy the US DOD emphasizes the belief that Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability with its pursuit of nuclear weapons and sponsorship of terrorism.¹⁴² According to the 2018 National Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism Iran remains the most prominent state sponsor of terrorism, supporting militant and terrorist groups across the Middle East and cultivating a network of operatives that pose a threat in the US and globally.¹⁴³

The documents from 2017 of 2018 reflect the deterioration of the US-Iran relationship. They also express the US' dissatisfaction with Iran and the JCPOA and stress the US' commitment to supporting the worldwide nuclear non-proliferation regime or community. However, the US administration and the DOD continue to place focus on the need for the US to maintain and strengthen its nuclear defense and deterrence capabilities.

¹³⁸ United States Department of Defense, 'United States Department of Defense Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2017', 2017, 6, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/afr/fy2017/5-Appendices.pdf>.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² United States Department of Defense, 'Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America', 2018, 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹⁴³ The White House, 'National Strategy for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism', 1 December 2018, 9, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=>.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) states that Iran has committed to the constraints on its nuclear program in the JCPOA, but that it retains the technological capability and much of the capacity necessary to develop a nuclear weapon within a year.¹⁴⁴ Iran, according to the NPR, poses proliferation threats. It emphasizes that, while Iran has agreed to constraints on its nuclear program, many of the agreement's restrictions on Iran's nuclear program will end by 2031. Iran's construction of increasingly long-range ballistic missile technologies, as well as its provocative policy and activities to destabilize neighboring countries, poses doubts about the country's long-term pledge to a nuclear-free future, according to the NPR. If Iran pursues nuclear weapons after the JCPOA restrictions expire, pressure on other countries in the region to develop nuclear weapons will rise.¹⁴⁵ According to the NPR, Iran is determined to expand its presence in neighboring countries while combating US influence.¹⁴⁶ The US deterrent policy is intended to guarantee that the Iranian leadership knows that any non-nuclear military attack on the US, its allies, and partners must be thwarted and that the costs would outweigh any advantages.¹⁴⁷

The Trump administration's NPR blurs the line between non-nuclear and nuclear war, reversing the Obama administration's 2010 pledge to limit nuclear weapons' position in the US grand strategy. The US thereby also weakens the norm of nuclear non-use or nuclear taboo. The 2018 NPR, according to Seyom Brown, fails to demonstrate that modernized nuclear weapons are more capable of deterring and defending against external enemy threats than technologically advanced non-nuclear capabilities. Brown argues that the NPRs assumption of controllable nuclear transfers will limit risk assessments and raise the chances of disputes leading to nuclear war.¹⁴⁸ The 2018 NPR demonstrates that the US government follows the line of thinking of US strategists who have been advocating that strategic nuclear war can be contained and regulated.¹⁴⁹ The 2018 NPR explicitly opposes the possibility of nuclear elimination, reflecting a nuclear optimistic outlook.¹⁵⁰ The foreign policy is shifting away from the predominantly nuclear pessimistic views of the 2003 to 2015 period.

¹⁴⁴ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review 2018', February 2018, V, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁸ Seyom Brown, 'The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): In Historical Perspective', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 2 (3 July 2018): 268, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2018.1494092>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 276.

¹⁵⁰ David J. Lonsdale, 'The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review: A Return to Nuclear Warfighting?', *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 2 (4 March 2019): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2019.1573074>.

Furthermore, while the 2018 NPR reiterates previous statements that the US will only use nuclear weapons under exceptional situations, the report as a whole suggests a rather flexible definition of ‘extreme’.¹⁵¹ The 2018 NPR is weakening the nuclear taboo or tradition of the nuclear non-proliferation regime by going against certain international norms and standards of nuclear non-use.

Throughout his election campaign, Trump repeatedly stated that he was willing to undo the ‘catastrophic’ Iran deal and that it would be his top priority. However, once elected, Trump learned that keeping to this promise, was more complex than he had anticipated. The IAEA quarterly reports on Iran’s compliance with the deal, worldwide support for the JCPOA, and conflicts with some of Trump’s former senior colleagues were major impediments to the Trump administration’s departure from the deal in the early months of his presidency. In 2017, the Trump administration did reinstate certain sanction waivers under the JCPOA’s terms, but several US Republican Senators worked hard to resurrect sanctions through new legislation, and eventually found support in the US Senate and House of Representatives, as they passed their resolution as a show of support for Trump’s anti-Iran stance.¹⁵² However, the other international parties that negotiated the agreement with Iran, namely Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, consistently stated that the JCPOA was meeting its core objectives and that its implementation should not be compromised by the US.¹⁵³

2018-2021: The United States’ withdrawal from the JCPOA

The US government under the administration of Trump made its discontent with the JCPOA clear and eventually unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in May 2018. Trump announced that his administration would cease to implement US commitments to the JCPOA and reimpose all US sanctions that were in place before the 2015 accord.¹⁵⁴ According to the statement by the US government, ‘The Iran Deal was one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into’.¹⁵⁵ The statement mentions that the Trump administration terminated the US’ participation in the JCPOA because it failed to protect its national security

¹⁵¹ Brown, ‘The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): In Historical Perspective’, 277.

¹⁵² Hossein Nourani et al., ‘Discursive (De)Legitimization of the Iran Nuclear Deal in Donald Trump’s Tweets’, *Strategic Analysis* 44, no. 4 (3 July 2020): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2020.1809205>.

¹⁵³ Kenneth Katzman, Paul K. Kerr, and Valerie Heitshusen, ‘U.S. Decision to Cease Implementing the Iran Nuclear Agreement’ (Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, 9 May 2018).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ The White House, ‘President Donald J. Trump Is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal – The White House’, The White House, 8 May 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>.

interests. It states that the JCPOA enriched the Iranian regime and enabled its malign behavior, while at best delaying its ability to pursue nuclear weapons and allowing it to preserve nuclear research and development. The administration indicates that by withdrawing from the JCPOA, the US would pressure the Iranian regime to alter its course of ‘malign activities’, and optionally renegotiate the JCPOA, and ensure that Iran’s misconduct is not rewarded.¹⁵⁶

According to the Trump administration, Iran negotiated the JCPOA in bad faith, as the Iranian regime did not come clean about its nuclear activities. Furthermore, the statement mentions that it views the JCPOA as not including strong enough mechanisms for inspections and verification. President Trump’s administration reassures its commitment to ensuring Iran has no possible path to a nuclear weapon. The US government aims to assemble a broad coalition of nations to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and to counter the totality of the regime’s malign activities: ‘Nations must work together to halt the Iranian regime’s destabilizing drive for regional hegemony.’¹⁵⁷

Following the withdrawal, Trump signed a presidential memorandum to institute the highest level of economic sanctions on Iran, thereby re-imposing previous sanctions. Trump did state his willingness to resume negotiations if Iran wished.¹⁵⁸ The unilateral withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA complicated the deal. The leaders of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, and the EU, expressed regret at the US decision and committed to continue working with Iran to implement the JCPOA. Iranian President Rouhani reacted to the withdrawal of the US by promising to continue enforcing the deal, on the condition that Iran would continue to receive the economic advantages of the JCPOA.¹⁵⁹ While many arms control experts and European allies opposed the withdrawal of the US, it was supported and praised by various Republican lawmakers, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁶⁰

The departure signaled the start of the Trump administration’s rhetorical and military escalation with Iran.¹⁶¹ The US unilaterally withdrew from international agreements, inherently also affecting the other parties involved. Even though Trump never shied away from expressing his disdain for the JCPOA, the majority of the JCPOA signatory states did not expect that Trump would remove his country from the agreement that essentially stifles Iran’s nuclear program

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Nourani et al., ‘Discursive (De)Legitimization of the Iran Nuclear Deal in Donald Trump’s Tweets’, 332.

¹⁵⁹ Katzman, Kerr, and Heitshusen, ‘U.S. Decision to Cease Implementing the Iran Nuclear Agreement’.

¹⁶⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, ‘U.S. Relations With Iran, 1953–2021’, accessed 28 May 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-iran-1953-2021>.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

and encourages IAEA inspections. By withdrawing from the JCPOA President Trump disobeyed a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution, jeopardized the defense and economic interests of the US's Western allies, and jeopardized the IAEA non-proliferation process.¹⁶²

The E3/EU parties have made many attempts to maintain the nuclear agreement and prevent the US withdrawal. This is because of the belief that the US exit caused the resulting action-reaction dynamic, but also because they feel that punishing Iran would only encourage the country to escalate further.¹⁶³ European parties have attempted to maintain trade with Iran, even establishing a special financial structure to allow for limited business with Iran. However, European power has been limited since few European individuals and businesses are willing to risk losing access to the US market and financial system to conduct business with Iran, no matter how publicly committed European politicians are to the agreement.¹⁶⁴

The reaction of the international community to the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA reflects that the US policy has changed significantly. The opposition reflects the absence of support from the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the US' disengagement from the nuclear taboo or tradition by departing from an important international non-proliferation agreement.

In 2019, the IAEA confirmed that Iran had not fully complied with the obligations and restrictions under the JCPOA.¹⁶⁵ Following the killing of top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani by the US in January 2020, Iran announced that it would no longer abide by the limitations of the JCPOA. The US administration stated that 'This strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans. The United States will continue to take all necessary action to protect our people and our interests wherever they are around the world.'¹⁶⁶ In reaction to these developments, the leaders of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom released a joint statement urging Iran to comply with the nuclear deal's conditions and desist from committing or supporting any other

¹⁶² Nourani et al., 'Discursive (De)Legitimization of the Iran Nuclear Deal in Donald Trump's Tweets', 332.

¹⁶³ Sossai, "'The Dynamic of Action and Reaction' and the Implementation of the Iran Nuclear Deal', 21.

¹⁶⁴ Philip H. Gordon, 'The Coming Nuclear Crisis With Iran', Council on Foreign Relations, 6 January 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/coming-nuclear-crisis-iran>.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Beaumont, 'Iran Has Enriched Uranium Past Key Limit, IAEA Confirms', the Guardian, 8 July 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/08/iran-has-enriched-uranium-past-key-limit-iaea-confirms>.

¹⁶⁶ United States Department of Defense, 'Statement by the Department of Defense', United States Department of Defense, 1 February 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/>.

violent actions. Iran emphasized that it remained open to negotiations with European partners over its nuclear program and reaffirmed that it would not seek to acquire nuclear weapons.¹⁶⁷

In this period, Trump increased the severity and quantify of sanctions against Iran. The US DOD reaffirmed in 2020 the US assessment of Iran as a leading source of instability in the Middle East.¹⁶⁸ Following the assassination of Iranian key nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizdeh in November 2020, Iran further boosted its uranium enrichment above the permitted concentrations by the JCPOA and vowed to expel IAEA inspectors if sanctions on the banking and oil sectors were not lifted. Uncertainty remains surrounding the instigator of the attack.¹⁶⁹

In 2020, the absence of international support for the Trump administration's US strategy became apparent. The Trump administration sought to extend a UN arms embargo on Iran, claiming that Iran breached the agreement. However, at the UNSC, the US-backed resolution to extend the embargo failed, highlighting a lack of international support for US' Iran policy and the diminishing influence of the US.¹⁷⁰ In April 2020 the US attempt to reimpose snapback sanctions on Iran also failed, with the other P5 countries objecting to the move, claiming that the US could not unilaterally implement the snapback mechanism because it had withdrawn from the nuclear deal in 2018.¹⁷¹

Comprehensive analysis of the United States' foreign policy toward Iran 2015-2021

The preceding analysis in Chapter 3 has concentrated on distinct, chronological timeframes from 2015 to 2021. To comprehend and contextualize the period, the following paragraph will analyze the US nuclear policy in the complete period of 2015 to 2021.

All JCPOA parties have publicly criticized the US choice to withdraw from the deal in 2018 and have tried to uphold the deal by continuing to providing Iran with its economic advantages under the original deal.¹⁷² With the disengagement of the deal, the Trump administration embarked on a program of maximum pressure on Iran, combining sanctions with various diplomatic and military measures. This plan aimed to put Iran under unprecedented

¹⁶⁷ Karimi Nasser, Jon Gambrell, and Zeina Karam, 'Blowback: Iran Abandons Nuclear Limits after US Killing', AP NEWS, 6 January 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-ap-top-news-tehran-international-news-united-nations-e043255bd33ab318f71d1947716a5b94>.

¹⁶⁸ United States Department of Defense, 'United States Department of Defense Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2020', 2020, 41, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/afr/fy2020/DoD_FY20_Agency_Financial_Report.pdf.

¹⁶⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, 'U.S. Relations With Iran, 1953–2021'.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Robinson, 'What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?'

¹⁷² Kenneth Katzman, 'Iran Sanctions [Updated April 6, 2021]' (Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service, 6 April 2021), 42, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>.

pressure to reach a new comprehensive agreement.¹⁷³ The EU countries did not reimpose sanctions on Iran following the US departure from the JCPOA, however, many European companies did discontinue Iran-related business. While striving to maintain civilian economic interaction with Iran, European governments have attempted to help US efforts to fight Iran's terrorist and proliferation operations.¹⁷⁴

These international developments reflect the US' declining influence on the nuclear non-proliferation regime, with the European parties steering their own course and criticizing the US withdrawal and extensive sanctions regime. On the other hand, the developments also show that the US remains a large influence, as the European parties do not completely distance themselves from the US and its policies. The preservation of the JCPOA reflects the conviction of the international community of the significance of the deal for maintaining the stability of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Upholding international nuclear non-proliferation treaties reflects the dominance of nuclear pessimistic views internationally and commitment to the norm of nuclear non-use.

Fundamental to the US thinking and nuclear policies, as articulated in the 2018 NPR, is the notion that US nuclear capabilities offer critical contributions to the deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. Nuclear capabilities and deterrence tactics are viewed as essential for the security of the US and its allies. The US claims that the deterrence effects that nuclear weapons provide are unique and necessary for averting opponent nuclear attacks.¹⁷⁵ According to NPR, conventional forces alone are insufficient to reassure allies who place a high value on US extended nuclear deterrence for their security.¹⁷⁶ This line of reasoning mirrors nuclear optimism.

According to T.V. Paul, nuclear powers, including the US, have strategic doctrines that advocate nuclear deployment under certain conditions. Paul attests that those conditions are enlarging and now include the prevention and pre-emption of use of WMDs by non-nuclear states. Such policy changes would not have been conceived or adopted by nuclear weapon nations with minimal public debate if nuclear non-use had been a well-entrenched taboo-like prohibition. Instead, nuclear use is constantly debated, and as a result, the prohibition against use is not a powerful taboo.¹⁷⁷ This is also visible in the nuclear policies of the US from 2015

¹⁷³ Sossai, "'The Dynamic of Action and Reaction' and the Implementation of the Iran Nuclear Deal", 20.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

¹⁷⁵ United States Department of Defense, 'Nuclear Posture Review 2018', VI.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, VII.

¹⁷⁷ Paul, 'Taboo or Tradition?', 857.

to 2021, which demonstrate considerations of nuclear deployment and breaking the nuclear taboo of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The US withdrawal of the JCPOA and the policies under President Trump's administration, reflect the US's noncompliance with the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the norm of non-use of the nuclear taboo.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to contribute to the debate surrounding nuclear non-proliferation by focusing on the foreign policy of the United States (US) toward Iran and its nuclear program, using an analysis that included various theoretical approaches to nuclear non-proliferation. The following question was central to this research: *How has the foreign policy of the United States toward Iran's nuclear program affected the development of the nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2021?* To address this issue, this study examined several US policy papers from various branches of government focused on nuclear policy and Iran's nuclear program.

This study has provided a historical context to the debate around nuclear non-proliferation the assumptions and explanations to nuclear non-use and non-proliferation of several theoretical approaches. Nuclear optimists claim that nuclear weapons have contributed to international stability and the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. Nuclear pessimists, on the other hand, believe that nuclear weapons cause international instability and further proliferation. These interpretations of international relations have focused primarily on aspects such as deterrence to explain the non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, whereas more constructivist or normative approaches explain it as a result of a taboo or tradition of nuclear non-use. Constructivist and normative approaches have argued that either a nuclear taboo or tradition, which claims that the active stigmatization of nuclear weapons has led to the continued non-use of nuclear weapons, forms a major aspect of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The case study of US foreign policy regarding nuclear non-proliferation and Iran's nuclear program has been analyzed with the analytical and theoretical approaches provided.

The focus of US nuclear policy from 2003 to 2015 has remained on maintaining a stable nuclear deterrence capacity while proclaiming to decrease its reliance on nuclear weapons. The policy documents in this period have emphasized the need to actively prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons to 'rogue regimes' and adversaries. Various US administrations have admitted to considering the possibility of using nuclear weapons pre-emptively under certain conditions. Due to its historic rivalry with Iran, the US has been suspicious of Iran and its nuclear program from the outset. The nuclear pessimistic notion that Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would lead to a chain of regional proliferation and instability in the international security environment is prevalent in US nuclear policy. Therefore, US policy has actively sought to deter any nuclear proliferation efforts by Iran. While nuclear pessimistic thought has dominated the US foreign policy from 2003 to 2015, the US has allowed Iran to develop a

limited form of its nuclear program with the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a multilateral agreement reached in 2015.

The JCPOA, reached under US President Barack Obama's administration in 2015, was hailed as an important advance in the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, as well as a long-awaited rapprochement between the US and Iran. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, marked a significant occurrence in the international community between 2015 to 2021. With US President Donald J. Trump's administration, a change in nuclear strategic policies took place. The policies implemented during Trump's presidency reflected the administration's dissatisfaction with the JCPOA. The policies shifted away from the long-term objective of the abolition of nuclear weapons and reasserted the significance of nuclear weapons in US security strategies. The nuclear policies of the US from 2015 to 2021, particularly those during the Trump administration, reflect the nuclear optimistic notion of nuclear weapons as tools of stability and peace. The modernization and maintenance of the US nuclear arsenal reflect this line of reasoning and contradicts the notion of seeing value in the nuclear taboo. However, US nuclear policies only recognize the stabilizing potential of nuclear weapons in the hands of the US and its allies and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nations such as Iran remains unthinkable, reflecting a more nuclear pessimistic view. The US nuclear policies reflect this inherently contradictory and hypocritical line of thought.

The nuclear policies of the US from 2003 to 2021 have emphasized the nuclear optimistic notion that the US needs to maintain nuclear weapons to ensure deterrence and stability. By adhering to this notion, the US undermined the state of the nuclear non-proliferation norm internationally. Contradictory, the US strongly opposed the nuclear proliferation of other states, reflecting a nuclear pessimistic viewpoint, and thereby also reinforcing the idea of non-use and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons globally. The findings of this research argue that US nuclear policies only recognize the stabilizing potential of nuclear weapons in the hands of the US and its allies and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to nations such as Iran remains unthinkable. The US nuclear policies from 2003 to 2021 reflect this inherently contradictory and hypocritical line of thought.

The US nuclear policies have mainly focused on limiting Iran's nuclear capacities with coercive diplomatic means. The US's influence is visible in its ability to mobilize support for an international sanctions regime on Iran. From 2009, US policies concentrated on negotiating with Iran, and the impact of the US can be seen in the resolution of the impasse in negotiations with Iran and the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. However, since 2017, and particularly after

the withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA in 2018, a downward trend is visible in the US influence on the nuclear non-proliferation regime, as the other JCPOA signatories actively criticized the US decision and supported the deal's provisions. This concludes this research and answers the main research question: *How has the foreign policy of the United States toward Iran's nuclear program affected the development of the nuclear non-proliferation regime from 2003 to 2021?*

The focus of this research on nuclear non-proliferation has remained on US policy and has only briefly addressed the governmental internal developments of Iran's political structure and its policies. Further research might shift the emphasis toward Iran and outline changes and developments of Iran's nuclear policies and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the nuclear non-proliferation regime by placing it in the context of international developments. The scope of this research was limited to US policy developments until the changing of the US administration in 2021. The subsequent developments could not be examined as these developments are too recent to be placed in a historical context or perspective. Future research could implement the analytical framework of this research onto the developments that occurred after the inauguration of the Biden administration in 2021.

As of June 2021, the US relationship with Iran remains contentious. The US administration under President Biden has declared its willingness to resurrect the JCPOA if Iran abides by the deal's terms, and discussions to restore the deal have resumed. Iranian presidential elections are scheduled for June 18, 2021, which could influence the prospects of the negotiations for a new comprehensive agreement. The future of the Iran nuclear deal and the global nuclear non-proliferation regime remain undetermined.

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Faculty of Humanities

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PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;

- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or text materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.

The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



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entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.	
Name: Dina Marges	
Student number: 6209858	
Date and signature: 15-6-2021,	

Submit this form to your supervisor when you begin writing your Bachelor's final paper or your Master's thesis.

Failure to submit or sign this form does not mean that no sanctions can be imposed if it appears that plagiarism has been committed in the paper.