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THE WESTPHALIAN LEGACY AND THE MODERN CROSSROADS: A PLEA FOR DIPLOMATIC RENEWAL

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Abstract

The evolution of global governance began with a departure from imperial dominance toward a system of mutual respect between defined borders. In a general sense, the international order relies on the tension between the power of individual states and the collective rules that govern them. When this tension is managed through diplomacy and law the system remains stable. When it is managed through unilateral force or economic exclusion the system begins to fracture. The conflict represents a fundamental clash of political philosophies. Washington has increasingly moved toward a post Westphalia model where sovereignty is treated as a conditional status dependent on a state's behavior and alignment with global norms. On the contrary, Tehran operates from a hard sovereignties position viewing any external pressure as a violation of the foundational rights established in 1648. This narrowing gap between intervention and autonomy is most visible in the failure of the maximum pressure narrative. Broad economic sanctions, however, outside the framework of traditional diplomatic channels, have helped change the international system, leading Iran and other world players to seek new economic and political alternatives. It is in the context of a gradual shift in global governance, in which States are interacting with regional groups and financial diversification, in addition to existing international institutions. The shift can be seen in a wider historical context of general adaptation or reinterpretation of the principles of the Westphalian system in the light of new multipolar constellation of the international scene. This paper explores the cornerstones of the westphalian system, its development and changes in today's 21st century, especially in relation to geopolitical relations between the United States and Iran. The principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention have been central to the structuring of interstate relations since 1648, and are a central feature of the international order. In particular, this research examines the role that economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool have played in driving change of state behaviour and international alignment. The results indicate that changing perceptions of Westphalian principles continue to play an

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important role in the study of conflict management in a multipolar global system.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern international system did not evolve naturally from the development of civilizations or from the gradual evolution of international law; rather, it was built on the ruins of catastrophe, exhaustion and political compromise. The modern state system of sovereignty on which international politics are based is deeply entrenched in the 1648 peace settlement of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, the Peace of Westphalia. In popular usage, the treaty is often reduced to a symbolic "birth certificate" of state sovereignty, but in reality it was a declaration of a principle that had been hidden from view by a continuing stream of ideas and notions of unlimited ideological absolutism: boundless ideology leads to perpetual violence (Ikenberry, 2018).

Today, however, in the twenty first century, this is a historic crossroads. The U.S.-Iranian relationship is a key part of the international order discussions. It represents a geopolitical dynamic that involves notions of sovereignty, legitimacy, intervention, and global governance in the post–Cold War era, with regional consequences. The dynamics of this relationship point to the continuing nature of the interpretation and use of the current 'rules-based' international order, which has various interpretations among the international actors.

Discussions over the development and adaptation of diplomatic practice in the modern international system also highlight the importance of those methods which are based on restraint, on mutual recognition, on negotiated engagement and on respect for political diversity.

2. The Westphalian Foundations: Sovereignty, Order, and the Birth of Political Modernity

The Peace of Westphalia occupies a foundational place in the history of international relations because it institutionalized the principle that political authority should be territorially bounded rather than universally imposed. Before Westphalia, Europe was dominated by overlapping claims of authority. The Holy Roman Empire, the Papacy, dynastic monarchies, and religious institutions competed for legitimacy within a fragmented political landscape where sovereignty was diffuse and unstable. Political identity was inseparable from religious allegiance, and rulers often justified expansionist wars through divine or universal claims.

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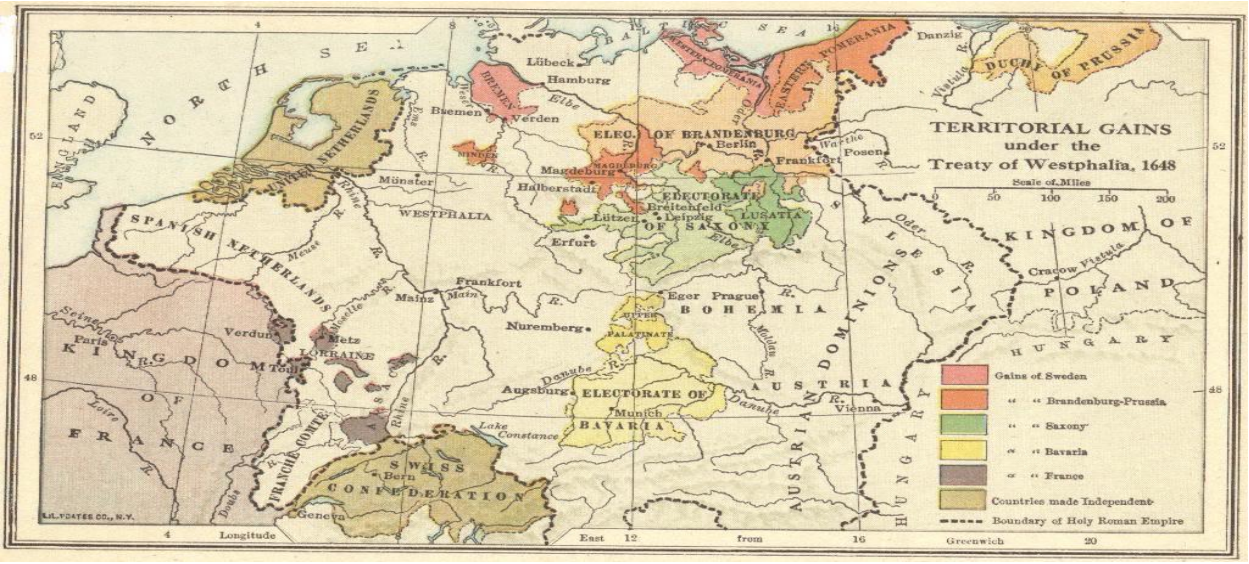


Figure 1: The Peace of Westphalia and the Birth of the Sovereign State

Source: Clemente Collado, L. (2025)

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) exposed the catastrophic consequences of this system. Initially beginning as a conflict between Protestant and Catholic states within the Holy Roman Empire, the war evolved into a broader continental struggle involving most major European powers. The devastation was unprecedented. Entire regions of Central Europe experienced economic collapse, famine, depopulation, and social disintegration. Historians estimate that some German territories lost between twenty and forty percent of their populations (Gause, 2019). The war demonstrated the destructive potential of ideological absolutism combined with unrestrained military competition. The significance of Westphalia, therefore, was not merely diplomatic but philosophical. It represented the transition from universalist politics to pluralist coexistence. The treaties institutionalized several principles that later became central to modern international law: territorial sovereignty, juridical equality among states, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Although these principles evolved gradually and were often inconsistently applied, they established a conceptual framework that transformed interstate relations.

Most importantly, Westphalia replaced the notion of a singular political truth with the acceptance of political plurality. States no longer needed to share identical religious or ideological systems in order to coexist. Stability emerged not from uniformity but from mutual restraint (Drezner, 2021). This was revolutionary because it recognized diversity as a permanent feature of international politics rather than a temporary deviation to be eliminated.

Political theorists such as Hedley Bull and Martin Wight later described this arrangement as the foundation of "international society," where states, despite competing interests, recognize common rules and institutions necessary for coexistence. Sovereignty functioned not simply as a legal doctrine but as a mechanism for limiting violence. By establishing boundaries around political authority, Westphalia attempted to prevent endless wars of ideological conversion. This perception is particularly significant in the Global South, where historical memories of colonialism shape contemporary attitudes toward Western interventionism. Many states increasingly interpret sanctions and unilateral pressure campaigns as modern forms of coercive hierarchy incompatible with sovereign equality (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). With the passage of time, the erosion of trust in Western-led institutions has accelerated the emergence of

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alternative geopolitical and economic arrangements, including BRICS, regional currency initiatives, and new strategic partnerships outside traditional Atlantic frameworks.

The Westphalian model therefore remains relevant not because it offers perfect solutions, but because it provides a cautionary lesson about the dangers of unlimited political universalism. The historical trauma of the Thirty Years' War demonstrated that durable peace depends less on ideological victory than on negotiated coexistence. In this sense, Westphalia was fundamentally an exercise in political humility: a recognition that no power, however strong, can permanently impose uniformity upon a plural world.

3. The American Stewardship: From Architect of Order to Practitioner of Exception

The emergence of the United States as the dominant global power after the Second World War fundamentally transformed the international system. Unlike previous empires that openly pursued territorial conquest as the basis of international hierarchy, the United States presented itself as the architect of a rules-based order grounded in institutions, collective security, economic cooperation, and international law. This distinction became central to the legitimacy of American global leadership. Washington did not merely accumulate power; it embedded that power within an institutional framework that appeared universal, procedural, and cooperative.

The current U.S.–Iranian relationship is an outcome of differing perceptions about U.S. role in international system and U.S. interactions with international norms. This has fed into the scholarly debate about the role and boundaries of the United States' foreign policy within the framework of Westphalian sovereignty and, potentially, the Soviet Union's genesis of new interpretations of international law and rules in line with strategic interests (European External Action Service, 2023). To grasp these changes requires an appreciation of the roots of the United States' international involvement as well as of the evolution of its foreign policy approaches in the post–Cold War era.

3.1 The Post-1945 Liberal International Order

The devastation of World War II created conditions remarkably similar to those that produced the Peace of Westphalia centuries earlier. Europe lay economically shattered, millions had perished, and the legitimacy of aggressive nationalism had collapsed. American policymakers concluded that sustainable peace required not merely military victory but the construction of durable international institutions capable of regulating interstate competition.

The United States became the principal architect of institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and later the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which evolved into the World Trade Organization (WTO). These institutions reflected a strategic calculation: American power would be more sustainable if exercised through rules and multilateral structures rather than direct imperial domination.

The United Nations Charter, signed in 1945, explicitly reinforced Westphalian principles. Article 2 emphasized sovereign equality among states and prohibited the use of force except in self-defense or with Security Council authorization. The Charter sought to institutionalize restraint by limiting unilateral military action and encouraging diplomatic resolution of disputes (Biersteker, 2019). For many newly decolonized states emerging in Asia and Africa during the mid-twentieth century, these principles represented protection against external domination.

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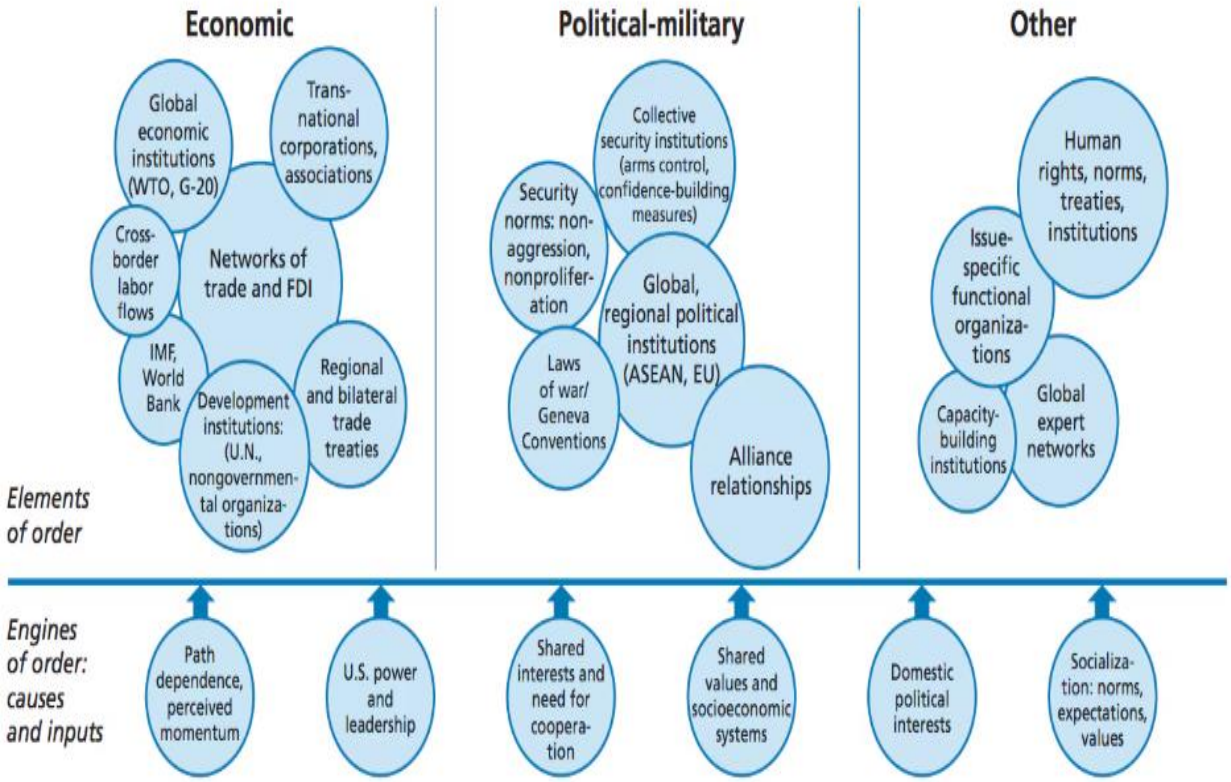


Figure 2: Snapshot of the Elements of the Liberal International Order

Source: RAND Corporation (2016)

In this era the United States participated in the international system through its military power and through its advocacy of ideology. In fact, the United States' foreign policy frequently became proponents of self-determination, constitutional government, and international legal order. It has also been pointed out that institutions dominated by Americans were important to developing elements of global stability during the Cold War period. The 1953 intervention with the Central Intelligence Agency and Mohammad Mossadegh as Iran's prime minister is often mentioned when talking about the history of U.S.-Iran relations. Mossadegh's nationalization of the Iranian oil industry incurred the wrath of economic interests of the British and the western countries and later the political change in Iran and the return of the Shah's monarchy. In Iranian political memory and scholarship, this period is commonly linked to the understanding of the involvement of external actors in internal politics of Iran (Alcaro and Siddi, 2020).

3.2 The Collapse of Bipolarity and the Rise of Unipolar Exceptionalism

The end of the Cold War marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of American foreign policy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower. This unprecedented concentration of military, economic, and technological dominance generated what political scientist Charles Krauthammer famously termed the "unipolar moment."

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During this era, many American policymakers and intellectuals concluded that liberal democracy represented the inevitable endpoint of political development. Francis Fukuyama's influential "End of History" thesis argued that ideological conflict had largely been resolved in favor of liberal capitalism. This atmosphere of triumphalism significantly altered the strategic culture of American foreign policy.

Without a rival superpower to impose constraints, Washington increasingly adopted interventionist policies justified through humanitarianism, democracy promotion, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation. The interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya reflected an emerging belief that sovereignty could be overridden when governments were perceived as threats to international norms or human rights (Parsi, 2018). This marked a subtle but important departure from classical Westphalian logic. Sovereignty was no longer treated as an inviolable principle but as a conditional privilege dependent on state behavior. In theory, this evolution appeared morally progressive because it sought to prevent genocide, terrorism, and authoritarian abuses. However, in practice, the selective application of intervention undermined the legitimacy of the broader system.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq became one of the most relevant examples of this contradiction. The United States justified the invasion primarily on claims regarding weapons of mass destruction and the alleged threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime. When these weapons were never found, global confidence in American strategic credibility suffered immense damage. More importantly, the invasion bypassed broad international consensus and was perceived by many states as evidence that the United States could unilaterally reinterpret international law according to strategic preference. For many countries in the Global South, Iraq symbolized the collapse of the distinction between rule-based leadership and coercive exceptionalism. If sovereignty could be suspended on disputed intelligence and unilateral claims, then the foundational guarantees of the international order appeared increasingly fragile (UNCTAD, 2023).

The consequences extended beyond Iraq itself. The destabilization of Iraqi state institutions contributed to sectarian conflict, regional instability, and the eventual rise of extremist organizations such as ISIS. Thus, the intervention not only weakened trust in American leadership but also demonstrated the unintended repercussions of attempting to engineer political transformation through military force.

3.3 Iran and the Crisis of Strategic Consistency

The U.S.-Iran dynamic is one among a set of dynamics in international relations that include contrasting views on liberal internationalism and state-centered foreign policy. Ideological differences, security concerns, and differences in regional priorities have shaped relations between the two nations since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The nuclear issue increasingly became a major concern in diplomatic relations between Iran and various other international actors over time.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is generally referred to as a multilateral diplomatic deal to manage concerns about Iran's nuclear program, reached in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 nations. As part of the deal, Iran agreed to reduce some of its nuclear programs in return for being eased from some of the international sanctions and improved economic engagement. In the early stage of implementation, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitored and reported on Iran's adherence to the measures agreed upon.

The JCPOA carried significance beyond nuclear policy itself. It demonstrated that sustained diplomacy, multilateral coordination, and negotiated compromise could manage even deeply entrenched geopolitical conflicts. For European powers especially, the agreement symbolized the continuing viability of diplomatic engagement within the framework of international law.

However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in 2018 fundamentally

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altered global perceptions of American reliability. The decision was justified by the Trump administration on grounds that the agreement inadequately addressed Iran's missile program and regional influence (Parsi, 2018). Yet critics argued that abandoning a functioning multilateral agreement without evidence of material violation undermined the credibility of American commitments more broadly.

The implications were profound. International agreements rely heavily on trust, predictability, and continuity across political administrations. If treaties can be reversed solely because of domestic political change, then long-term diplomatic negotiations become significantly more difficult. Adversarial states may reasonably question whether future agreements with Washington will survive electoral transitions.

European allies openly expressed frustration with the American withdrawal, revealing a widening transatlantic divide regarding the management of international diplomacy. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom continued supporting the agreement because they viewed diplomatic continuity as essential to global stability. Their response reflected a more traditionally Westphalian perspective emphasizing negotiated coexistence over coercive escalation.

Following the exit from the agreement came modifications in the internal political debate in Iran, some of which attentively cited that the withdrawal was linked to the dominance of various political positions on the U.S-Iran relations. Some scholars have come to the conclusion that the voice of the skeptics of long-term negotiation with the United States grew louder after this time in policy discussions (Mearsheimer, 2018). However, other perspectives that favored a continuation in diplomatic dialogue were also represented in the political sphere in Iran. In general, the JCPOA's conclusion was a factor in regional diplomacy and continued discussions in Iran about the strategy for international relations and negotiations.

3.4 The Crisis of Hegemonic Leadership

The contemporary international system is entering a transitional period characterized by rising multipolarity, economic competition, technological rivalry, and ideological fragmentation. In such an environment, hegemonic leadership requires not merely military superiority but the capacity to maintain broad international legitimacy.

Historically, stable hegemonic orders have depended on a combination of power and restraint. The British-led order of the nineteenth century and the American-led order after 1945 both derived legitimacy partly because they provided public goods: trade stability, security guarantees, and institutional predictability. However, when hegemonic powers appear increasingly unilateral or inconsistent, subordinate states begin seeking alternative alignments.

The rise of organizations such as BRICS reflects this dynamic. While these groupings remain internally diverse and often fragmented, they collectively signal dissatisfaction with Western dominance over global governance structures (Ikenberry, 2018). Many states no longer wish to operate within an international system perceived as disproportionately shaped by American strategic preferences.

The lesson of the Westphalian tradition is that durable order cannot rest solely upon dominance. Stability emerges when power is constrained by mutually recognized rules and when adversaries are treated not as existential anomalies but as enduring participants within a shared international system. The United States now faces a historic choice: to continue expanding exceptionalist practices or to renew the diplomatic principles that once made its leadership broadly legitimate.

The outcome of this choice will significantly shape the future of global order in an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world.

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4. The Narrative Gap: Power, Legitimacy, and the Crisis of Strategic Communication

In contemporary international relations, military and economic power alone are insufficient to sustain global leadership. The modern geopolitical environment is increasingly shaped by narratives: the stories states tell about themselves, their adversaries, and the moral legitimacy of their actions. In the twenty-first century, global influence depends not merely upon coercive capability but upon the ability to persuade international audiences that one's exercise of power is justified, proportional, and consistent with shared norms (Leverett & Leverett, 2019). This is where the United States faces one of its greatest strategic challenges in relation to Iran and the broader Middle East—a widening "narrative gap" between how Washington understands its policies and how much of the world perceives them.

This narrative gap is not a superficial public relations problem. Rather, it represents a structural crisis of legitimacy within the contemporary international order. The United States continues to frame its actions as necessary for maintaining global security, combating extremism, preventing nuclear proliferation, and preserving regional stability. Yet many states, particularly within the Global South, increasingly interpret American actions through a different lens: one shaped by selective interventionism, coercive sanctions, inconsistent applications of international law, and perceived geopolitical double standards. The divergence between these competing narratives weakens diplomatic credibility and complicates America's ability to mobilize broad international consensus.

The conflict with Iran demonstrates how narrative legitimacy has become central to modern geopolitics. Washington often portrays Iran as a destabilizing regional actor engaged in proxy warfare, ideological militancy, and nuclear brinkmanship. From this perspective, sanctions and strategic pressure are presented as defensive mechanisms intended to deter aggression and preserve international security (Katzman, 2024). However, Iran and many external observers frame the same policies as examples of hegemonic coercion designed to subordinate a sovereign state unwilling to align with American strategic preferences.

The significance of this disagreement extends beyond bilateral hostility. It reflects a broader transformation in global political consciousness where populations increasingly evaluate international behavior through historical memory, post-colonial experience, and perceptions of fairness rather than purely through formal legal arguments. In such an environment, credibility becomes one of the most important forms of strategic capital.

4.1 The Evolution of Strategic Narratives in International Politics

Historically, dominant powers have always relied upon narratives to legitimize their authority. Empires justified expansion through concepts such as civilizing missions, divine mandate, or ideological liberation. During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union framed their geopolitical competition as a struggle for humanity's future. Narratives simplified complex power struggles into morally intelligible frameworks capable of mobilizing domestic and international support.

However, globalization and digital communication have fundamentally altered the nature of narrative competition. Information is no longer monopolized by states or traditional media institutions. Populations across the world now consume geopolitical events through diverse and often competing informational ecosystems (ICG, 2022). Besides, governments can no longer rely solely on official declarations to shape international opinion.

It is pertinent here to quote Joseph Nye's notion of 'soft power'. For Nye, soft power is influenced by attraction not coercion and involves cultural appeal, institutional credibility and perceived legitimacy in addition to material power. It works via persuasion and normative influence. A lack of alignment between the stated principles and

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external perceptions of state actions can impact soft power. In the field of international relation, these perceptions are sometimes referred to as credibility and trust, especially in the context of Middle East where historical experiences of foreign involvement tend to be discussed in politics analysis (Gause, 2019). Often, historical context is used in conjunction with contemporary events to understand policy and diplomatic communication in U.S.-Iran relations.

4.2 Maximum Pressure and the Limits of Economic Coercion

The "Maximum Pressure" campaign initiated after the American withdrawal from the JCPOA represents a crucial case study in the limitations of coercive narratives. The policy sought to compel Iran into renegotiating broader security arrangements by imposing severe economic sanctions designed to isolate Tehran from global financial systems. Supporters argued that economic pressure would weaken Iran's regional influence and force political concessions without direct military confrontation.

From a tactical perspective, the sanctions inflicted significant economic hardship on Iran. Oil exports declined dramatically, inflation intensified, currency values deteriorated, and foreign investment contracted (ECFR, 2022). Yet the broader strategic effectiveness of the campaign remains deeply contested.

One major reason for this contestation lies in the humanitarian implications of sanctions. Although sanctions are formally directed at governments, their practical effects are often experienced most intensely by ordinary citizens. Restrictions on banking systems, trade access, and financial transactions can disrupt access to medicine, food imports, healthcare infrastructure, and employment opportunities (World Bank, 2021). Resultantly, sanctions frequently produce widespread social suffering without necessarily achieving intended political transformations.

This creates a profound narrative dilemma. The United States frames sanctions as targeted instruments of accountability, yet populations affected by these measures often perceive them as collective punishment. The distinction between government pressure and civilian suffering becomes blurred in everyday experience (Zakaria, 2021). As economic conditions deteriorate, anti-American sentiment may intensify rather than diminish.

Political scientist David Baldwin has long argued that economic statecraft is most effective when integrated into broader diplomatic frameworks offering credible pathways toward normalization. Coercion without realistic diplomatic off-ramps often produces resistance rather than accommodation. The "Maximum Pressure" campaign struggled precisely because it emphasized punishment more than achievable political reintegration (Drezner, 2021).

4.3 Moral Authority and the Politics of Consistency

The effectiveness of international narratives depends heavily on consistency. States gain moral authority when their actions align predictably with their declared principles. Conversely, selective applications of international law weaken normative legitimacy.

One of the central criticisms directed toward American Middle East policy concerns perceived inconsistency regarding sovereignty, human rights, and intervention. Critics argue that Washington often condemns violations committed by adversaries while minimizing or strategically overlooking similar behavior by allies. Whether fully accurate or not, these perceptions significantly shape international opinion.

For example, debates surrounding military interventions, civilian casualties, and regional alliances often generate accusations of double standards. When international norms appear selectively enforced, they risk being interpreted not as universal principles but as instruments of geopolitical convenience. This undermines the broader legitimacy of the rules-based order.

Iran strategically exploits these inconsistencies within its own narrative framework. Iranian officials frequently present their country as

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resisting hegemonic domination rather than merely pursuing regional influence (Brookings Institution, 2020). By emphasizing themes of sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and national dignity, Tehran seeks to position itself symbolically within broader Global South critiques of Western power structures.

Importantly, narrative competition does not require universal persuasion. Iran does not need global audiences to fully endorse its policies; it only needs to generate sufficient skepticism regarding American credibility to complicate international consensus. In many respects, the persistence of geopolitical ambiguity benefits weaker states confronting stronger adversaries because it prevents overwhelming diplomatic isolation (Posen, 2020)

This dynamic reflects a broader transformation in international politics where legitimacy increasingly operates through contested informational environments rather than universally accepted narratives. Great powers can no longer assume that material dominance automatically translates into ideological authority.

4.4 Diplomacy as Narrative Reconstruction

The central weakness of coercive foreign policy is that it often narrows political imagination. Once relationships become framed entirely through punishment, deterrence, and strategic hostility, opportunities for diplomatic creativity diminish. Adversaries cease to be viewed as political actors capable of negotiation and instead become permanent embodiments of threat.

This is precisely where diplomatic renewal becomes essential. Effective diplomacy is not merely negotiation over technical issues; it is the reconstruction of political narratives capable of transforming adversarial relationships (Katzman, 2024). The JCPOA succeeded temporarily because it created a framework in which both sides could claim strategic dignity while reducing immediate tensions.

Diplomacy works best when it acknowledges complexity rather than simplifying conflicts into moral absolutes. Iran is simultaneously a regional competitor, a sovereign state, a historical civilization, and a society containing diverse political currents. Reducing such a complex actor solely to a security threat limits policy flexibility and reinforces cycles of escalation.

Similarly, the United States remains more than a military superpower. It retains enormous capacities for innovation, institution-building, humanitarian leadership, and diplomatic influence. However, these strengths become undermined when coercive policies overshadow broader commitments to international cooperation.

The future of American leadership will depend significantly upon whether Washington can narrow the growing narrative gap between its proclaimed values and its strategic practices. Restoring credibility requires more than rhetorical adjustment; it demands consistent adherence to diplomatic norms, multilateral engagement, and legal predictability.

The lesson of the Westphalian tradition remains highly relevant here. Stable international systems are sustained not through perpetual unanimity but through mutual recognition among competing political communities. Diplomatic legitimacy emerges when states demonstrate restraint, consistency, and respect for negotiated frameworks even amidst profound disagreement (ICG, 2022).

Without such legitimacy, power increasingly generates resistance rather than cooperation. In an interconnected and multipolar world, this distinction may ultimately determine whether global order evolves toward stability or fragmentation.

5. The European Bridge: Strategic Autonomy and the Preservation of Diplomatic Order

Europe has a significant influence in the U.S.-Iran relations in terms of its views on international stability. European countries have focused on multilateral diplomacy, institutional continuity, and negotiated engagement (Vaez, 2020), whereas the United States have used a spectrum of policies as part of its foreign policy, such as diplomacy and

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coercion. It is not surprising that these disparities are connected to Europe's past history of significant wars and political division on scholarship.

When the United States withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018, European leaders openly expressed concern that Washington's decision undermined the credibility of international agreements. From the European perspective, the issue extended beyond Iran itself. If multilateral treaties could be abandoned unilaterally despite verified compliance, then the broader architecture of diplomatic trust would weaken significantly (IAEA, 2018). Such unpredictability threatens the very foundations upon which international cooperation depends.

Europe's reaction also reflected growing concerns regarding American unilateralism. Over time, many European policymakers began questioning whether excessive dependence on U.S. strategic decisions exposed Europe to geopolitical instability. This contributed to increasing discussions surrounding "strategic autonomy," a concept emphasizing Europe's ability to pursue independent diplomatic and economic policies when necessary.

The Iran issue accelerated these debates because European states found themselves caught between maintaining transatlantic unity and preserving diplomatic engagement with Tehran. The creation of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), although limited in effectiveness, symbolized Europe's attempt to sustain economic channels with Iran outside direct American financial control. More importantly, it revealed a broader anxiety regarding the weaponization of global financial systems. Thus, the U.S.-Iran conflict has implications extending well beyond the Middle East. It has become part of a larger global debate about the future structure of international order. Europe largely fears that excessive coercion and declining diplomatic consistency may accelerate fragmentation within the global system (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). If states lose confidence in treaty reliability and institutional neutrality, international politics may increasingly return to competitive blocs and transactional alliances.

The future of the international system may depend significantly upon whether such diplomatic principles survive the pressures of rising multipolar competition. If coercion increasingly replaces negotiation as the dominant mode of international interaction, global fragmentation will likely intensify. Conversely, if major powers recommit themselves to treaty reliability and multilateral engagement, the possibility of a more stable and cooperative order may still remain achievable.

6. The Human Element: Sovereignty, Society, and the Cost of Geopolitical Confrontation

At the center of geopolitical conflicts are not abstract states alone but human societies whose lives are shaped by the consequences of international decisions. One of the major limitations of contemporary strategic discourse is that it often reduces nations to security calculations, overlooking the social and humanitarian dimensions of foreign policy. In the case of U.S.-Iran tensions, the prolonged cycle of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and regional confrontation has significantly affected ordinary civilians far more than political elites.

Economic sanctions are frequently justified as alternatives to military conflict because they are perceived as nonviolent instruments of pressure (Biersteker, 2019). Inflation, unemployment, shortages of medicine, declining purchasing power, and weakened healthcare systems disproportionately affect students, workers, and middle-class families rather than state leadership structures. In Iran, sanctions have contributed to rising economic insecurity and social frustration, particularly among younger generations seeking economic opportunity and international engagement.

This creates an important ethical contradiction within modern international politics. Policies intended to pressure governments frequently weaken civil society instead. When populations experience external economic hardship over

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prolonged periods, nationalism and distrust of foreign powers may intensify rather than decline. Consequently, sanctions can unintentionally strengthen hardline political narratives by allowing governments to portray themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against external coercion.

A sustainable diplomatic approach requires moving from a framework of permanent confrontation toward one of conditional engagement. This does not mean ignoring disagreements regarding regional activities or security concerns (Brookings Institution, 2019). Rather, it means recognizing that durable peace is more likely to emerge through inclusion within negotiated frameworks than through indefinite isolation.

7. Recommendations for a Diplomatic Renaissance

The growing instability within the international system demonstrates the urgent need for diplomatic renewal grounded in credibility, restraint, and multilateral cooperation. The United States retains enormous political, military, and economic influence, but sustainable leadership in the twenty-first century will depend increasingly upon legitimacy rather than coercive dominance alone. A more balanced and constructive approach toward Iran could therefore serve not only regional stability but also the restoration of confidence in the broader international order.

7.1 Restoring Treaty Credibility

International agreements function effectively only when states believe commitments will survive domestic political transitions. The withdrawal from the JCPOA weakened confidence in American reliability because it suggested that multilateral agreements could be reversed despite verified compliance. Rebuilding diplomatic trust requires demonstrating continuity and predictability in foreign policy commitments.

For the United States, restoring treaty sanctity is strategically important because credibility itself is a form of power. When allies and adversaries trust diplomatic commitments, negotiations become more effective and less dependent on coercive enforcement.

7.2 Replacing Broad Sanctions with Targeted Engagement

While sanctions may remain necessary in limited circumstances, broad economic restrictions often produce humanitarian suffering without achieving long-term political transformation. Future policy should prioritize targeted measures focused on specific military or political actors rather than entire populations.

At the same time, diplomacy should incorporate incentive-based engagement. Economic cooperation, scientific exchange, and regional development initiatives can create conditions where political moderation becomes more attractive than confrontation. Constructive engagement is often more sustainable than permanent isolation.

7.3 Strengthening Multilateral Diplomacy

The complexity of Middle Eastern politics cannot be managed effectively through unilateral action alone. Regional tensions involve multiple actors, historical grievances, sectarian divisions, and security concerns that require collective frameworks for resolution.

The United States should therefore work more closely with European allies, regional mediators, and international institutions to develop inclusive diplomatic mechanisms. Multilateral negotiations provide greater legitimacy and reduce perceptions of hegemonic domination.

7.4 Shifting Strategic Narratives

American foreign policy rhetoric has frequently emphasized pressure, containment, and deterrence. While security concerns remain valid, excessive reliance on confrontational language narrows diplomatic possibilities and reinforces adversarial identities.

A more effective narrative would focus on shared regional interests such as maritime security,

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climate challenges, energy stability, counter-narcotics cooperation, and economic development. Diplomatic language grounded in mutual interests rather than permanent hostility can gradually reduce tensions and open space for negotiation.

7.5 Reaffirming Sovereign Equality

Perhaps most importantly, the United States must demonstrate a more consistent commitment to sovereign equality within international politics. The legitimacy of the rules-based order depends upon the perception that international norms apply universally rather than selectively.

This does not require abandoning strategic interests or security concerns. Rather, it requires balancing power with restraint and ensuring that international law remains more than an instrument of geopolitical convenience. When rules are applied consistently, states are more willing to cooperate within institutional frameworks rather than seeking alternative power blocs.

8. Conclusion

The U.S.–Iran relationship reflects more than a regional rivalry; it exposes deeper tensions within the modern international order itself. The Westphalian principles of sovereignty and non-intervention were designed to prevent perpetual conflict by respecting political difference within defined borders. Yet contemporary global politics increasingly tests these foundations through selective intervention, economic coercion, and contested interpretations of legitimacy. The United States, as a central architect of the post-1945 order, now faces a credibility challenge: its leadership depends not only on power, but on consistency in applying the rules it helped establish. Iran, meanwhile, represents both a geopolitical actor and a symbol of resistance to perceived structural inequalities in global governance. Between these positions lies a narrowing space for diplomacy. Rebuilding that space requires restraint, multilateral engagement, and renewed respect for treaty-based cooperation. Without such recalibration, global order risks further fragmentation rather than stability.

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