

Kumuda Simpson, *U.S. Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran: From the War on Terror to the Obama Administration* (Lanham: Rowman & Little Field, 2016), 203.

This book covers events related to US-Iran Nuclear Diplomacy from the commencement of War on Terror to the end of Obama's Presidential tenure via a comparative study of notions which Kumuda Simpson significantly found diverging. For instance, Bush's alarmist rhetoric of public diplomacy was often a mismatch with his administration's actual non-proliferation policy towards Iran. Besides, American efforts to prompt regime change in Iran undermined nuclear diplomacy to the extent that neither their nuclear programme came to a halt nor did democratic reforms become a reality in the Islamic Republic.

The book is patterned chronologically. The first half provides a brief overview of history and detailed analysis of the Bush administration's policy towards Iran, whereas the latter half focuses on Obama administration's policies and its future prospects.

Ab initio, the nuclear policy of the United States (US) during the Cold War is covered compendiously. It elucidates the role of the US helping Iran in developing its nuclear infrastructure concentrating upon its Cold War considerations and strategic importance of Iran in balancing Soviet expansion into the Middle East.

Subsequently, key historical events that have shaped each state's contrasting conception of the other are expatiated, including Central Intelligence Agency's involvement in the 1953 coup that overthrew Iranian PM Mohammad Mosaddegh, Iran Contra affair, the Iranian Revolution, and the 1979 hostage crisis.

Switching from past to present, Dr Kumuda rivets to US-Iranian nuclear diplomacy. In 2012, revelations about Iran's nuclear programme radically altered America's public rhetoric. US response was subject to its four geostrategic considerations i.e. security of Israel and the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia; energy security; counterterrorism; and the broader prevention of regional nuclear proliferation.

The book, then, addresses how every President since Woodrow Wilson has adopted the notion of 'democracy promotion' as his prime foreign policy objective. With regard to the Bush administration's

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approach towards Iran, this age-old notion clashed with the short-term desire of regime change. Due to this, the US ignored options of engagement with Iran.

In contrast to strong statements designating Iran as part of an ‘Axis of Evil’, calling its leadership irrational and untrustworthy, pronouncing Iran’s nuclear weapons as insecure, and signalling the possibility of military action, the Bush administration actually followed a pragmatic course of action. The practice of bad-labelling, however, undermined Iran’s trust in the US.

When President Obama was sworn into office, his administration showed willingness to negotiate directly with the Iranian regime without preconditions. However, the strength of anti-Iranian narrative within the US and outside i.e. in Saudi Arabia and Israel made it a problematic task. The chances of diplomatic advance subdued further in August 2012 as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report criticising Iran for its continued refusal to allow inspection of its suspicious Parchin site. Consequently, the US and European Union expanded the ambit of sanctions against Iran targeting its financial and energy sectors. Hence, during his first term, President Obama achieved little in terms of any immediate halt to Iran’s nuclear programme. Election of President Rouhani during Obama’s second term, however, saw manifestation of US-Iran’s mutual intent:

On September 27, President Obama spoke on the phone to President Rouhani, the first direct communication between the leaders of two states since the 1979 hostage crisis (p. 120).

The Geneva Process 2013-14 between P5+1 nations (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the US, plus Germany) and Iran culminated in the historic signing of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. Iran, in concurrence, agreed to the most intrusive inspections and stringent monitoring by the IAEA. After prolonged episodes of sanctions and negotiations, the US and international community have found themselves in a dilemma of having to accept that one day the Iranian regime will probably be added to the list of states that could opt for breakout capacity.

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By limiting the scope of research to one aspect of US-Iran relations i.e. nuclear diplomacy, Dr Kumuda has furnished an in-depth analysis of strengths and weaknesses of American non-proliferation policies. She opines that forthcoming US administrations will find it more complicated to deal with proliferation challenges, and such policies are likely to impact prospects for future nuclear diplomatic talks.

She has inimitably identified US administration's attempts of giving dire warnings and extreme predictions of nuclear disaster and war in the Middle East based on its fear assumptions grounded in security dilemma and the stability/instability paradox, volatile regional balance of power, the inherent weaknesses of nuclear non-proliferation regime and finally, concerns emanating from the US description of Iran as a rogue state. These misleading elocutions have done little to educate the public about the real concerns pertaining to nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Moreover, the discourse of American exceptionalism provides a framework for understanding how America positions itself in the world in opposition to the 'Other'.

The pattern of policy confusion that this book has highlighted in many ways is a common problem for US policy in the Middle East. The author has proficiently assessed the extent to which policy options were shaped and constrained due to ideological driven narrative of Iran's intent to become a nuclear power, and US necessity to take the lead and prevent this from happening.

In its earnestness to inflict regime change in Iran, the US targeted three key sectors inside Iran: non-government organisations, exchange programmes and print and radio broadcasts. In the *New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh claimed that President Bush sought up to USD 400 million from Congress for covert activities against Iran (p. 72). US classified the details of the recipients of this funding. This gave Iran an excuse to harass and arrest Iranian political activists, accusing them of being foreign agents and traitors (p. 69).

The author has, furthermore, enumerated that commonly disseminated narratives about Iran as a despotic theocratic state have often missed the intricacies and nuance of Iran's political *status quo*, including the testy and shifting balance of power that exists between different factions.

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Additionally, future research areas have been recommended by the author as she indicates that the mere existence of the nuclear programme in the absence of a nuclear weapons component is sufficient to encourage proliferation in other/regional states, and how far that has already been done is something worth examining in detail.

What the author has missed citing as part of history is the fact that US-Iran relations were not always adverse. Before the Iranian coup d'état, Russians and British were thought of being behind everything that went wrong, whereas the Americans were the good guys as they came with their missionaries, brought their schools, hospitals, and a whole generation of Iranians used to go to the US for education. 1953 blew that apart to a degree that it never became the same again.

The author has efficiently furnished both the theoretical and conceptual points of view and the chronology of events helps the reader understand how the US and Iran have viewed each other over the years, and which events have positively or adversely shaped the trajectory of their relationship.

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Bledar Prifti, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case for Continuity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 232.

The prospects of gradual American retreat from the Middle East, in the context of its relative decline and increasing engagements in the Indo-Pacific, has been articulated by many scholars. Contrary to the dominant perspective, however, Dr Bledar Prifti in his book titled *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Case for Continuity* argues that foreign policy behaviour of America towards the Middle East has not seen any abrupt transformations, rather has remained consistent throughout its history and is more likely to continue as such in the future. As the United States (US) is considered well-suited to be ‘the poster child for offensive realism’ because of its consistent aggressive behaviour during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, offensive realism partially delivers a promise to explain and predict its foreign policy. In this scenario, its unique geographic location in the western hemisphere, and its status in the international political sphere as a sole regional hegemon has prescribed that the country’s foreign policy relied on the Grand Strategy of Offshore Balancing to avert the emergence of another regional hegemon (p.21).

During the post-World War period, when the US was expanding to ensure its survival, the substance of all the presidential doctrines, irrespective of domestic preferences, was markedly similar. Even the doctrines formulated during the post-Cold War era were influenced by the same factors, pursued the same objectives, and implemented the same strategies that the US had dealt with, pursued, or implemented during the Cold War.

In the author’s opinion, the factors that contributed in shaping American foreign policy in the Middle East during the Cold war are: 1) anarchy in the international system; 2) possession of significant military capabilities by the Soviet Union and regional great powers that can hurt or even destroy the US interests in the region; 3) suspicion about the intentions of regional (Middle East) and extra-regional powers toward the USA; 4) the need to survive in anarchic international environment; and 5) the need to act rationally against the threats coming from within or outside the Middle Eastern region (p.50).

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According to one perspective, ideological predispositions of leaders hold primary importance in shaping US foreign policy. But the writer states that ideology and history, like other components of a state's culture, are important factors, but states rarely practice them at the expense of their national security interests (p.153). This phenomenon can be understood through the case study of previous American Presidents, Jimmy Carter and Obama. During their early days, both leaders, in the context of Vietnam and Iraq war, respectively, continued to emphasise the need for fundamental transformation in foreign policy outlook, but having identified the doctrines of both presidents through different case studies, Dr Bledar Prifti asserts that their doctrines represent a continuation of American foreign policy.

To understand the future trajectory of US foreign policy in the Middle East, it is very important to investigate the nature of US-Iran relations. During the post Iranian revolution era, ideological incompatibility and rhetorical confrontation dominated relations. Contrary to dominant perception, in practice, both countries did cooperate on issues of geostrategic interests. Iran-Contra affairs, American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and Iran-US nuclear deal are cases in point. Unaltered character of system level determinants and constant nature of geographical location and military capabilities kept their relations moderately unchanged despite radical changes in their domestic politics (p.156).

Suffice to say that given the dynamics of contemporary political and strategic realities at regional and global levels, it is reasonable to expect that the US foreign policy towards the Middle East will likely remain unaltered as long as there is no change in its geography and its status as the only regional hegemon in the world. Emergence of ISIL does not pose a direct challenge to geostrategic interests of the US. Besides, given the power configuration in the region, it is possible that the US-Iran strategic relationship (based on mutual geostrategic interests) will continue even in the future. Prifti appears to believe that Russia and China are currently the only two great powers that challenge the US influence directly in the region or across the globe (p.196). In this context, reinstatement of the containment policy, through the strategy of Offshore Balancing, along with economic attacks on both could help America in maintaining its status as a sole regional hegemon in the world.

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Despite the fact that the writer provides deep insight of the system level variables influencing America's foreign policy in the Middle East, he appears to be oblivious of the shift in the global power structure. All the doctrines mentioned by Prifti were formulated under the dynamics of bipolar and unipolar power settings at the global level. But now, in the second decade of the Twenty-First Century, as quoted by Richard Hass in his article titled *The Age of Non-Polarity*, the international system is shifting from a unipolar system into a system of non-polarity in which dozens of state actors possess and exercise various types of power. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the strategy of Offshore Balancing is going to face certain challenges in the near future.

Policymakers, scholars, students of foreign policy, and those who are particularly interested in US foreign policy should read this book to improve their understanding of its dynamics and future in the Middle East.

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