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Noemi M. Rocca

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Correspondence:

Noemi M. Rocca: UC2014108534@student.uc.pt

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Iran's geopolitics in Eurasia after the nuclear deal

Noemi M. Rocca

International Politics and Conflict Resolution, Center for Social Studies and School of Economics of the University of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Abstract

Since the positive conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, Iran is enhancing economic, military, energy and security ties with many countries, particularly with its Caucasus and Central Asian neighbours. Relations with Russia and China – which never stopped – are experiencing a new boom. Access to international financial markets – allowed by the progressive lifting of sanctions – coupled with the expected revenues from oil exports will modernise the Iranian industrial structure and make resources available for new infrastructure projects. This article approaches Iran's geopolitics from a peculiar angle, that is through analysis of the offers Iran made in 2003 and 2005 to the United States and the European Union for solving the nuclear dispute. This article argues, firstly, that these proposals – focused not just on nuclear issues, but also on geopolitical matters – can shed light on how Iran shapes and conveys its geopolitical role in the Middle East and Central Asia; secondly, that such a role has been “legitimised” by global players like the United States, China, Russia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the European Union (i.e., the 5 + 1 countries which participated at the last round of the nuclear deal) through the positive conclusion of the deal; and, finally, that Iran's geopolitical role within the greater Eurasian space will increasingly assume more important dimensions.

Introduction

The term “Iran nuclear deal” refers to a process of negotiation which lasted from 2002 to 2015 and involved a variable number of countries in addition to the main contenders, Iran and the United States. The target of the protracted negotiations was the Iranian nuclear infrastructure already existing or planned during that period of time.¹ Because of such existing and potential capabilities, Iran suffered repeated economic sanctions² and diplomatic isolation. This article uses that negotiation process as a prism to interpret the potential geopolitical role of Iran. It argues that what was at stake through the whole process was not just nuclear deterrence, but the geopolitical role of Iran. As former Italian Ambassador to Teheran Roberto Toscano wrote in December 2014 “what is at stake today goes much beyond the nuclear issue – an issue, incidentally, that has always been instrumentalised for both sides. We are talking about the regional role of Iran, the balance in the Gulf, the future of Iraq, the possibility of checking the onslaught of Sunni jihadists.”³ In other words,

1 For an updated and comprehensive account of the deal, see Daniel H. Joyner, *Iran's Nuclear Program and International Law: From Confrontation to Accord* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

2 A 2015 US Congress Research Report defined such a regime of sanctions “arguably the most complex the United States and the International Community have ever imposed on a rogue state.” See Dianne E. Rennack, *Iran: U.S. Economic Sanctions and the Authority to Lift Restrictions*, Congressional Research Service, 22 January 2016, 1. Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43311.pdf>. Accessed 27 September 2016.

3 Roberto Toscano, “The Iranian nuclear issue: what next?” in *Opinion. Seguridad y Política Mundial*, CIDOB, Barcelona Center for International Affairs, December 2014. Available at: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/opinion/seguridad_y_politica_mundial/the_iranian_nuclear_issue_what_next.

as Parsi states in his various works,⁴ the US–Iran conflict has been a strategic and not an ideological one, as it has indeed been opportunistically framed by both of the players.⁵ During the whole negotiation process, the US administrations' objective has been that of preventing Iran from getting an internationally recognised regional role and in order to pursue such a target it has refused any bargain with Iran.

The instrumentalisation of the “Iran nuclear impasse”⁶ by the Bush Administration implies that misunderstanding and misperceptions could have played a role in the long confrontation between the United States and Iran.⁷ However, they were neither the only nor the main reason for the failure of the protracted negotiations. Stalemates appear indeed to have been a precise goal for allowing the United States and the international community to use coercion against Iran. At the same time, political narratives — which labelled Iran as “rogue country”⁸ and part of the so-called “axis of evil”⁹ — as well as diplomatic ones — which imposed the responsibility for the negotiations' stalemate onto Iran — were opportunistically constructed for enhancing Iran's international isolation. Such narratives about Iran — portrayed as a regime which repudiates diplomacy — and the nuclear deal — defined as the most intractable conflict for the United States — did not rise spontaneously, but were fuelled by intentional behaviour as a precise instrument of foreign policy. Faizullaev and Cornut¹⁰ call this kind of opportunistic behaviour as the “narrative management by politicians and diplomats.”¹¹ They state that a “[n]arrative is instrumental for presenting a state's case, achieving political goals, building coalitions and developing and maintaining relationships. Most importantly, narratives are used as instruments of political reasoning and persuasion.”¹² In short, Iran's ostracism was intentionally pursued by the Bush Administration through the denial of negotiations and the construction of narratives with the final aim of internationally isolating and weakening the Islamic Republic. In fact, because of the complex regime of sanctions, Iran's participation in multilateral initiatives — in particular those regarding regional issues (for example, peace talks for the Syrian conflict and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's full membership) — have been forbidden.

This article adopts a geopolitical perspective which sees the processes unfolding in the greater Eurasian space as a geographical and resources-driven one. Moreover, states are considered as the main actors at play. This article doesn't support the interpretation of Iran's stance in global affairs — in particular those regarding the wider Eurasian area — as ideologically driven. Religion is only one of the Iran's many foreign policy drivers and it is not considered as the most important one. Geopolitical factors — proximity to the European continent on one side and to the Indian subcon-

4 See, among others, Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama's Diplomacy with Iran* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2012); Trita Parsi, *Treachorous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007); Trita Parsi, “The price of not talking to Iran,” *World Policy Journal*, 2006, 23 (4): 11–17, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wopj.2007.23.4.11>.

5 For a description of contemporary Iran–US relationship which underlines its geopolitical determinants as well as the possibility of future fundamental changes, see Reza Sanati, “Beyond the domestic picture: the geopolitical factors that have formed contemporary Iran-US relations,” *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 2014, 26 (2): 125–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2014.905525>. For an analysis of the balance of power in the Persian Gulf focused on Iran–US security strategies, see Kayan Barzegar, “Balance of power in the Persian Gulf: an Iranian view,” *Middle East Policy*, 2010, 17 (3): 74–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2010.00452.x>.

6 The stalemate in negotiations has been defined in Tim Guldemann, “The Iranian nuclear impasse,” *Survival*, 2007, 49 (3): 169–178, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396330701564778>.

7 Robert Jervis's concepts of misperceptions and misbeliefs have indeed been those most commonly used by academic literature devoted to the Iran nuclear deal. See for example: Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012); Abbas Maleki and John Tirman, editors. *US-Iran Misperceptions: A Dialogue*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014; Robert Jervis, “Getting to Yes With Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2013, 92 (1): 105–115.

8 The first time Iran was labelled as “rogue state” was during the Clinton Administration by National Security Advisor Anthony Lake in a 1994 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

9 Expressed during the 2002 President George W. Bush's “State of the Union address.” Available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

10 Alisher Faizullaev and Jérémie Cornut, “Narrative practice in international politics and diplomacy: the case of the Crimean crisis,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2016: 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2016.6>.

11 Ibidem, 3.

12 Ibidem, 2.

continent and the Russian territory on the other; accessibility to seas; the possession of consistent reserves of gas and oil; the fact of being the Central Asian corridor's terminal in the Eurasian continent¹³ — represent the main determinants of Iran's foreign policy.¹⁴ In addition, this article argues that Iran doesn't aim to build a counter-hegemonic strategy but seeks full acknowledgement of its status within the international community.

The article is organised as follows. The second section that follows investigates the offers Iran made in 2003 and 2005 for solving the nuclear dispute. The third one compares Iran's geopolitical potential before and after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's (JCPOA's) signature. Finally, the fourth section frames the end of the nuclear deal as the turning point of Iran's presence in international relations.

The Iran nuclear deal as a prism

On 14 July 2015, Iran and the group of 5 + 1 countries (Russia, the United States, China, France and Germany, plus the European Union) signed the JCPOA,¹⁵ a programmatic document which positively concluded the Iran nuclear deal. Ratified by the United States Congress in the second part of 2015, it got full implementation in January 2016.¹⁶ However, well before the 2013 talks which led to the JCPOA's signature, Iran made various attempts to diplomatically solve the dispute. In March 2003, Iran had offered the United States a very comprehensive deal — later known as the “Great Bargain” — in attempting to get rid of the diplomatic and economic sanctions which were increasingly isolating it and putting under stress its economy. In the absence of direct diplomatic relations, the offer was handled by the then Swiss Ambassador to Teheran.¹⁷ That proposal for a diplomatic solution to the negotiations' stalemate was rejected by the United States after a decision-making process whose actors and steps had not yet been fully clarified.¹⁸ Two years later, in 2005, Iran tried again to end the sanctions' regime and the political marginalisation it was experiencing. This time, the Iranian chief negotiators approached the representatives of the European countries which, at that time, had joined the United States in the negotiation process: Germany, Great Britain and France. However, even this offer was rejected. According to some of the then European negotiators this was because of United States' pressure.¹⁹

- 13 Iran is situated in that part of the continent which Nicholas Spykmen defined as “Rimland” whose control, according to him, would have assured Eurasia's control. For a recent approach to Iran's geopolitics focused on its geographical location, see Farhang Morhadi, “Iran ambitious for regional supremacy: the great powers, geopolitics and energy resources,” *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 2011, 7 (1): 75–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2011.587332>.
- 14 For a comprehensive analysis of the Iranian foreign policy until Ahmadinejad's years, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri, editors. *Iran's Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*. Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 2008. For an explanation of the geopolitical factors' growing importance in Iran's foreign policy vis-à-vis the ideological ones, see Kayhan Barzegar, “The Geopolitical Factor in Iran's Foreign Policy,” in *The Iranian Revolution at 30, The Middle East Institute Viewpoints* (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2009). Available at: <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2009.01.The%20Iranian%20Revolution%20at%2030.pdf>.
- 15 “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action”, European External Action Service. The full text of the Plan is available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf. Accessed 26 September 2016.
- 16 However, since then, Iranian authorities increasingly criticised the partial fulfilment of the JCPOA's requirements by the United States' side: see, for example, President Rouhani's statement at the United Nations General Assembly on 22 September 2016. Available at: <http://www.iranwatch.org/library/governments/iran/president/iranian-president-hassan-rouhani-addresses-71st-un-general-assembly>. Accessed 23 February 2017. It has to be noted that the procedure to lift the regime of sanctions developed along the years by the United States is as complex as the regime itself. In fact, while sanctions imposed by the President can be removed unilaterally by the President, those voted by Congress can only be temporarily suspended by the President and require a Congress vote in order to be permanently removed.
- 17 At that time, the Swiss Embassy was representing the United States' diplomatic interests in Iran since Washington closed its embassy in Teheran following the 1979 hostage crisis.
- 18 See, for example, Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, *Going to Tehran: Why America must accept the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013), 122–124.
- 19 Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p.384) states clearly the US Administration's direct involvement in making the three European negotiators (Germany, France and Britain) refuse that proposal. Former British Minister of Foreign Affairs Jack Straw, who took part in those negotiations, during an interview on 3 August 2016, confirmed that “had it not been for major problems within the US Administration under President Bush, we could have actually settled the whole Iran nuclear dossier back in 2005.” (As reported in David Morrison and Peter Osborne, “US scuppered deal with Iran in 2005 says then British Foreign Minister”, in *OpenDemocracy*, 23 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/david-morrison-peter-osborne/us-scuppered-deal-with-iran-in-2005-says-then-british-foreign-minister>. Accessed 26 September 2016.) See also Ali Parchami, “American culpability: the Bush Administration and the Iranian nuclear impasse,” *Contemporary Politics*, 2014, 20 (3): 315–330.

The 2003 and 2005 Iranian proposals are worthy of analysis for at least two reasons: firstly, because they represent some of the very few documents developed by the highest Iranian political authorities currently in the public domain which explicitly state Iran's geopolitical stances in relation to Central Asia and the Middle East and, secondly, because the end of the nuclear deal represents an important shift in the United States' foreign policy towards Iran — and, therefore, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia regions — since the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution. The question of whether the United States is currently opting for a (not-so)²⁰ new strategic partner and a new balance of power in those regions can be contextualised, if not answered, by an analysis of the rejected 2003 and 2005 Iranian offers. In a nutshell, what those proposals asked for in return for offering the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) full access to Iranian nuclear facilities and the fulfilment of all its requests was the international community's — and, primarily, the United States' — acknowledgement of Iran's regional role. In other words, an analysis of the 2003 and 2005 Iranian deal offers gives insights into the role Iran was ready to play in Central Asia and the Middle East. This, in turn, can shed light on the role Iran is prepared to play in those regions after the JCPOA's signature.

The concessions the Islamic Republic of Iran was offering in 2003 were as detailed as unprecedented and involved its nuclear capabilities as well as its foreign policy. Regarding the latter, Iran was ready to make “decisive action against any terrorists (above all Al Qaida) on Iranian territory, full cooperation and exchange of all relevant information.”²¹ Regarding Iraq: “coordination of Iranian influence for actively supporting political stabilization and the establishment of democratic institutions and a democratic government representing all ethnic and religious groups in Iraq.” About the Middle East in particular: “1. Stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad, etc.) from Iranian territory, pressure on these organizations to stop violent action against civilians within borders of 1967. 2. Action on Hisbollah to become an exclusively political and social organization within Lebanon. 3. Acceptance of the two-states approach.” Finally, in the sections devoted to the steps to be undertaken, Iran envisages “active Iranian support for Iraqi stabilization (...) Iranian commitment for decisive action against Al Qaida members in Iran, agreement on cooperation and information exchange” and an “Iranian statement that it supports a peaceful solution in the **Middle East**, that it accepts a solution which is accepted by the Palestinians and that it follows with interest the discussion on the Roadmap, presented by the Quartet.” On its side, Iran — among other requirements — asked the United States for “a dialogue with **mutual respect**,” “**refrains from supporting change of the political system by direct interference from outside**,” with “recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests in the region with according defense capacity” and “acceptance of Iranian access to **WTO** full membership negotiations.”²²

On March 2005, in an attempt to avoid the US veto on the deal's solution, the Iranian team of negotiators²³ approached the then European diplomatic team engaged in the deal.²⁴ The 2005 proposal was very similar to the agreement reached in 2015. In fact, Toscano makes crystal clear that “a solution would have already been possible in 2005 under the reformist Khatami presidency when the Iranians — but not the Americans and the Europeans — were willing to

20 About the role of prerevolutionary Iran in the United States' geopolitical strategy in Central Asia and Middle East, see, among many others, Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Claudia Castiglioni, “No longer a client, not yet a partner: the US–Iranian alliance in the Johnson years,” *Cold War History*, 2015, 15 (4): 491–509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1019868>.

21 For all the quotations from the 2003 offer, the source is the copy of the document available at: http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/us_iran_roadmap.pdf. Accessed 26 September 2016. (Emphasis and spelling have been retained in all the quotations.)

22 Ibid.

23 It has to be noted that 2003 Iranian top negotiators were the same ones who signed the JCPOA in 2015: current Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

24 For analysing the 2005 proposal and its subsequent refusal, see Michael Axworthy (2013), quot P. 384. and Gareth Porter, “US rejected 2005 Iranian offer ensuring no nuclear weapons,” *Inter Press Service*, 7 June 2012. Available at: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/06/us-rejected-2005-iranian-offer-ensuring-no-nuclear-weapons/>. See also Richard Dalton, Paul von Maltzahn, Steen Hohwü-Christensen, Guillaume Metten, François Nicoullaud and Roberto Toscano, “Iran is not in breach of international law,” *The Guardian*, 9 June 2011. All the authors were former EU ambassadors to Iran or former negotiators.

accept an agreement not so different from the one reached last summer [2015].”²⁵ As Osborne and Morrison summarised,²⁶ in the document sent to European negotiators,²⁷ Iran “proposed the continuous presence of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency at Iran’s enrichment facilities, immediate conversion of all low-enriched uranium to fuel rods for power reactors (precluding the possibility of further enrichment) and no processing of spent fuel rods, ruling out the possibility of plutonium production. In return, Iran demanded that the West allow it to carry on with its programme of peaceful nuclear enrichment.” However, what is particularly interesting, and remains usually unnoticed, is the fact that Iran asked the European Union for a “Declaration of EU Policy to Guarantee Iran’s Access to EU Markets and Financial and Public and Private Investment Resources” as well as a “Declaration of EU Recognition of Iran as a Major Source of Energy Supply for Europe.” In addition, Iran proposed the “[e]stablishment of a Joint Counter-Terrorism Task Force” and “of a Joint Export Control Task Force.”²⁸

Both the Iranian proposals appear focused not only on nuclear matters but also on key regional security issues. In particular, the 2003 one seems to assume “common” interests between the United States and Iran in Central Asia and the Middle East, based mainly on stabilising Iran’s neighbouring countries — Afghanistan and Iraq — and fighting radical Islamic terrorism. Moreover, the Iranian offer of withdrawing its support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine would have been an important stabilising move whose positive effects should have irradiated to the whole Middle East. This, coupled with the *de facto* acceptance of Saudi Arabia’s road map for two states, would have represented also a fundamental shift in the Islamic Republic’s approach to the Gulf States, traditionally marked by stern confrontation.

Iran’s geopolitical capacity before and after the deal

Since the JCPOA’s full implementation, the Islamic Republic of Iran has enhanced its engagement in security and economic projects with all its neighbours. However, Iran had been involved with them well before the nuclear deal’s conclusion. In fact, it acted as a mediator in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict from the onset of the crisis in 1992.²⁹ Iran played the mediator role also in the Tajik civil war³⁰ and according to Akbarzadeh “Iran acted responsibly within an internationally set framework to bring the civil war to an end, and encouraged the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan to maintain its commitment to the peace process.”³¹ During the Georgian–Russian conflict in 2008, Iran fully supported the territorial integrity principle. Therefore, it did not recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia and by doing this it improved its prestige and influence in the region.³² Moreover, in 2006 — when Russia cut its gas supply to Georgia — Iran had offered Tbilisi low cost gas representing a potential alternative energy source.³³ From the very beginning,

25 Roberto Toscano, “Nucleare iraniano, chi sono gli ultimi nemici del disgelo” [in Italian], *La Repubblica*, 17 January 2016. Available at: http://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2016/01/17/news/iran_usa_commento_toscano-131443601/. Former British negotiator Peter Jenkins wrote that “[h]aving served on the UK’s Iran Nuclear negotiating team in 2004 and 2005, I know that in March 2005 President Hassan Rouhani and Minister Javad Zarif, then in different roles, were ready to offer a deal very similar in its essentials to the JCPOA.” Peter Jenkins, *In Celebration of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran*, 17 January 2016. Available at: <https://lobelog.com/in-celebration-of-the-nuclear-agreement-with-iran/>.

26 Peter Morrison and Davis Osborne, “Iran has the right to peaceful nuclear enrichment,” *The Guardian*, 6 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/06/iran-nuclear-enrichment-elections-bargain>. Accessed 28 September 2016.

27 The original text of the document is available at http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Iran_Proposal_Mar232005.pdf.

28 See footnote 21.

29 Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, “Iran’s Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis,” in *Contested borders in the Caucasus*, ed. Bruno Coppeters (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1996), Chap. VII, 318–330.

30 See, among others, Benton Clark, “Iran and the civil war in Tajikistan,” *Journal of Central Asian & Caucasian Studies*, 2014, 9: 18.

31 Akbarzadeh (2015), quot., 9–10.

32 Kornely K. Kakachia, “Iran and Georgia: genuine partnership or marriage of convenience?” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 186, Settembre 2011. Available at: https://www2.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_186.pdf. Accessed 2 November 2016.

33 Kakachia (2011), quot., 3–4.

Iran had been involved in the American-led invasion of Afghanistan.³⁴ Intriguingly enough, Iran cooperated with the United States, in both security and (covert) negotiations operations.³⁵

The main difference between the Iranian foreign policy before and after the end of the nuclear deal is the full recognition of its regional role. In other words, since the JCPOA's signature, Iran has been implementing a foreign policy which is no longer being prevented and stigmatised by the international community. It is the first time that this has happened since the birth of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and the related hostage crisis which marked the relations of the Republic with the United States from the very beginning. The need of a normalisation of the relationship with the United States represented a sort of precondition for acknowledgement of its regional role³⁶ and this can explain why since 2009 Iran has been looking for secret bilateral talks with the United States beyond the formal 5 + 1 negotiations framework.³⁷ It is revealing that shortly after the JCPOA's signature and before its full implementation, the United States "expected" Iran to be invited to the meetings in Vienna aimed at resolving the Syrian conflict.³⁸ On 7 April 2016, during a meeting ahead of the Gulf States' Foreign Ministers in Bahrain, Secretary of State Kerry urged Iran to help end the war in Yemen and Syria, "and help us to be able to change the dynamics of this region." He also added that Iran should "prove to the world that it wants to be a constructive member of the international community and contribute to peace and stability."³⁹

The international acknowledgement of Iran's status is going to enhance its role in all the regions it belongs to or it is culturally and historically linked to: the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.⁴⁰ In March 2016, Iran — which has only enjoyed the status of observer since 2005 — applied for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's

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- 34 A 2013 Report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) defines Iran's policy on Afghanistan over three decades as "broadly constructive and often generous, albeit not consistently transparent. Its Afghanistan strategy is complex and multifaceted but also adaptable and quite pragmatic." Bruce Koepke, "Iran's Policy on Afghanistan: The Evolution of Strategic Pragmatism," SIPRI, September 2013. Available at: http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=464. Accessed 27 September 2016. See also Emma Hooper and Roberto Toscano, "Sources of tension in Afghanistan & Pakistan: perspectives from the region in 2013 & 2014": 6. Iran, 10/2014, CIDOB Policy Research Project. Available at: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/stap_rp/perspectives_2013_2014/sources_of_tension_in_afghanistan_pakistan_perspectives_from_the_region_in_2013_2014_6_iran/language/eng-US. Accessed 27 September 2016.
- 35 On this topic, see the analysis of Barnett Rubin — former advisor to Ambassador Brahimi, special UN representative to Afghanistan from 1997 to 1999 and from 2001 to 2004 — of the importance of Afghanistan in the relationship between the United States and Iran: "The U.S. and Iran in Afghanistan: Policy Gone Awry," MIT Center for International Studies, Audit of the Conventional Wisdom, October 2008. Available at: <https://cis.mit.edu/publications/audits-conventional-wisdom>. Accessed 23 February 2017. See also the repeated acknowledgements by Ambassador James Dobbins — former US Special Representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan — of such a role, as for example in *After the Taliban: Nation Building in Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, 2008); "Negotiating with Iran: reflections from personal experience," in *The Washington Quarterly*, January 2010; and "Engaging Iran" in *The Iran Primer*, The United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, 2010 (updated in August 2015). Available at: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/engaging-iran>. Accessed 29 September 2016. See also Flynt Leverett, *Dealing with Tehran: Assessing US Diplomatic Options Toward Iran* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2006), 11–12 and Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett, "The U.S. need a completely different approach to Iran." Available at: <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2013/01/31/the-u-s-needs-a-completely-different-approach-to-iran/>. Accessed 29 September 2016.
- 36 In 2009 Milani wrote that "Iranian foreign policy is as U.S.-centric as it was before the 1979 revolution." Moshen Milani, "Tehran's take," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August Issue 2009. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2009-07-01/tehrans-take>.
- 37 See Mark Landler's account of an Iranian attempt to establish a secret channel in 2009. "For Hillary Clinton and John Kerry divergent paths to Iran nuclear talks," *The New York Times*, 3 May 2016. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/politics/for-hillary-clinton-and-john-kerry-divergent-paths-to-iran-nuclear-talks.html?_r=0. Accessed 26 September 2016.
- 38 See John Kirby, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson, "Daily Press Briefing", Washington D.C. October 27, 2015. Available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/10/248870.htm>. Accessed 27 September 2016. See also Secretary of State Kerry's words and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's reaction in Mohammed Harshad and Francois Murphy, "Kerry sees new Syria talks next week, does not rule out Iran role," 23 October 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-talks-idUSKCN0SH1LN20151023>. Accessed 26 September 2016. The pressure on the United Nations Secretary General for withdrawing the invitation he made to Iran to attend the January 2014 summit, one-and-a-half years before the JCPOA's signature, is an example of the United States' longstanding opposition to Iran's participation in Syria talks. See Martin Chulav and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Russia attacks UN withdrawal of invitation to Iran," *The Guardian*, 20 January 2014. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/un-ban-kimoon-withdraws-invitation-iran-geneva-talks-syria>. Accessed 26 September 2016.
- 39 According to Agence France Press. "Kerry urges Iran to help end wars in Yemen, Syria", *Randburg Sun*, 7 April 2016. Available at: <http://randburgsun.co.za/afp/160215/kerry-urges-iran-to-help-end-wars-in-yemen-syria>. Accessed 30 September 2016.
- 40 Foreign Minister Zarif, during a meeting with his Azeri counterpart in the final weeks of the negotiation process which led to the JCPOA's signature, said: "We consider no ceiling for the expansion of relations with regional countries whether in the Caucasus or in Central Asia." See "Iran sees no limits to ties in Caucasus and Central Asia." Press TV, 13 April 2015. Available at: <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/04/13/406087/Iran-vows-to-up-ties-in-Central-Asia>.

full membership, previously denied to it due to the then ongoing sanctions.⁴¹ For what concerns the greater Eurasian space's economic agenda, Iran — using its fresh financial resources made available by the sanctions' removal⁴² — is increasingly engaging in many projects which exploit Iran's unique position as the Central Asia corridor's terminal. Among the most important ones are the Armenia–Iran railway and the already operational Iran–Turkmenistan–Kazakhstan railway,⁴³ both belonging to the International North South Transport Corridor project. The Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline, running from Azerbaijan to Turkey — within the wider Southern Gas Corridor project — is going to make Iran's gas reserves easily available for Europe. As Berman effectively stated, Iran is becoming “Eurasia's newest power broker” and the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline in particular “would help turn the Islamic Republic into an indispensable energy source for the Eurozone.”⁴⁴ Such a role — once fully developed — would be very similar to that of “Major Source of Energy Supply for Europe” envisioned in the Iranian 2005 proposal for settling the nuclear deal. In addition, the Chabahar port project — which would give India an easy access to Afghanistan and Central Asia avoiding passing through Pakistan — was planned by 2003; however, it was not until 16 May 2016 that Iran and India signed a bilateral agreement to develop it.⁴⁵ India and Iran are also planning the Chabahar–Gujarat subsea gas pipeline.⁴⁶ Finally, during his visit to Iran in February 2016, Georgian Energy Minister said that “[t]he Georgian and Iranian sides are at this stage studying possibilities of the import of Iranian gas to Georgia. Possibilities for implementation of various other investment projects in the energy sector will also be discussed.”⁴⁷ Shireen Hunter, relying on the functionalist approach, states that Iran, thanks to its geographical position, can become a vital link for the Europe to South Caucasus', Afghanistan's and Pakistan's road and rail networks.⁴⁸

It is worth noting that, after its visit to Iran in 2016, the International Monetary Fund issued a Concluding Statement where it stated that “[t]he government is implementing far-reaching, ambitious reforms to support a sustained acceleration in growth” and that “[r]eal GDP is projected to grow by at least 4.5 in 2016/7.”⁴⁹ Economic conditions' improvement — supported by free access to international financial markets — will not only further enhance Iran's involvement in regional infrastructure projects, but will also increase Iran's bilateral trade with most of its

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- 41 However, at the 2016 annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, members failed to reach an agreement on initiating the accession process for Iran. For an interpretation of Iran's (potential) membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a symbol of the growing importance of geopolitical determinants of Iran's foreign policy with respect to the ideological ones, see Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: ideology and realpolitik in Iranian foreign policy,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 2015, 69 (1): 88–103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.934195>. For an updated analysis of Iran's will to participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, see Kevjn Lim, “Iran's Shanghai dream. The perks and pitfalls of joining China's security club,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 2016. Regarding the future role of Iran within the Organization, it is interesting what President Putin's foreign policy advisor Sergey Karaganov wrote on August 2016: “[t]he Shanghai Cooperation Organization (...) is now considering the possibility of admitting Iran and some other countries. Although the SCO is not very active yet, it has made one more step towards becoming the core of an emerging Greater Eurasia or even a community of Greater Eurasia. Cooperation between China and Russia may play a central role in it. In contrast to the model promoted by the United States, there will be no hegemon in the Eurasian community. China will be the economic leader, but other powerful players — Russia, India, and Iran — will be able to counterbalance Chinese influence.” Available at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/How-the-World-Looks-From-the-Russian-Perspective-18303>. Accessed 27 September 2016.
- 42 John Brennan, director of the US Central Intelligence Agency, said that “[t]he money, the revenue that's flowing into Iran is being used to support its currency, to provide moneys to the departments and agencies, build up its infrastructure,” as reported in Jay Solomon and Carol E. Lee, “US sent cash to Iran as Americans were freed,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 2016. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sent-cash-to-iran-as-americans-were-freed-1470181874?mg=id-wsj>. Accessed 29 September 2016.
- 43 In February 2016, the 6,462-mile journey from Zhejiang province to Tehran has been completed by a cargo train in 14 days. Such a route has not only the potential to increase China–Iran bilateral trade, but it can also enhance economic and commercial Iran's ties with all the transit countries. Iran can become also a rail hub connecting Central Asia and China to Europe. See Catherine Putz, “The first direct train from China arrives in Iran,” *The Diplomat*, 16 February 2016. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/02/first-direct-train-from-china-arrives-in-iran/>. Accessed 30 November 2016.
- 44 Ilan Berman, “Iran's Eurasian adventure,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 2016.
- 45 See Tarique Ata, “India and Iran sign ‘historic’ Chabahar port deal,” *BBC News*, 23 May 2016. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36356163>. Accessed 29 September 2016.
- 46 See the report “One belt, one road: an economic roadmap,” (46) of The Economist Corporate Network, 2016.
- 47 As reported in “Georgian energy minister visits Iran,” *Civil.ge*, 15 February 2016. Available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28984>. Accessed 15 November 2016.
- 48 “Iran as regional catalyst,” *Lobe Log*, February 2016, <http://lobelog.com/iran-as-regional-catalyst/>. Accessed 29 September 2016.
- 49 International Monetary Fund, “Iran: concluding statement of an IMF staff visit,” 3 October 2016. Available at: <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/10/03/MS100316-Iran-Concluding-Statement-of-an-IMF-Staff-Visit>. Accessed 15 November 2016.

Eurasian partners. With China, in particular, bilateral trade is expected to exceed 600 million dollars in the next decade.⁵⁰ China — which represents Iran's biggest commercial partner — has been engaged in improving its commercial, military, energy and economic ties with Iran well before the JCPOA's full implementation.⁵¹ In April 2015, China anticipated Iran's return into the international financial community by officially accepting it as a founder member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.⁵²

In the first-ever trilateral meeting between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia held in Baku on 8 August 2016, Iran further engaged in both economic and strategic cooperation with these two Eurasian partners. However, behind the declared intentions,⁵³ what counts is the fact that in the past — until Azeri President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Teheran on 23 February 2016 and the Azeri, Iranian and Russian Foreign Ministers' summit in April 2016 — the relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have not been easy at all. President Aliyev's statement expressed during the February meeting that “[w]e want peace, harmony and cooperation in the region. Today, Iran and Azerbaijan play a stabilizing role in the region”⁵⁴ represents a proof of how Iran's geopolitical current and future role in Central Asia is perceived by its closer neighbours.⁵⁵

As far as Iranian–Russian relations are concerned, after the nuclear deal they appear to be in continuous evolution.⁵⁶ During the last months of the negotiations, Russia actively engaged in positively concluding them.⁵⁷ In August 2016, Iran took an important but domestically disputed decision allowing Russia to use the Iranian Shahid Nojeh Air Base for conducting bombing missions on Northern Syria. After protests in the Iranian parliament about the issue,⁵⁸ Iran's defence minister announced the end of such a concession. Ostovar states⁵⁹ that “this was a shocking reversal of long-standing Iranian policy” claiming that “the Syrian conflict had

50 See Golnar Motevalli, “China, Iran agree to expand trade to 600 billion in a decade,” 23 January 2016. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-23/china-iran-agree-to-expand-trade-to-600-billion-in-a-decade>. Accessed 15 November 2016.

51 See Shannon Tiezzi, “China is already preparing for a post sanctions Iran,” *The Diplomat*, 8 April 2016. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/chinas-already-preparing-for-a-post-sanctions-iran/>. Accessed 30 November 2016; Franz-Stephan Gady, “China wants to deepen military ties with Iran,” *The Diplomat*, 17 October 2015. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/china-wants-to-deepen-military-ties-with-iran/>. Accessed 30 November 2016.

52 See Reuters Agency's “China says Iran joins AIIB as founding member.” Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-aiib-iran-idUSKBN0MZO8720150408>. Accessed 30 November 2016.

53 According to the Russian Official President's website, the final declaration “covers cooperation areas such as joint fighting against terrorism, settling regional conflicts, working together on the Caspian Sea and developing ties in the energy sector, transport and other areas.” Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52666>. Accessed 30 September 2016.

54 As reported by Trend Agency. Available at: <http://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2498289.html>. Accessed 30 September 2016.

55 It has to be also noted that — as referred by Alex Vatanka, “Baku's choice,” *How Iran and Russia are wooing Azerbaijan*, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 August 2016 — during the April Summit the most important pledge made by the three foreign ministers was that of noninterference in each other's domestic affairs.

56 According to Nikolay Kozhanov, the JCPOA didn't change so much the Iran–Russia relationship, given the fact that their agenda “is much broader. Both countries are deeply involved in talks concerning Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Iraq, Syria and the Post-Soviet Central Asia. In many cases, they are interested in cooperating on these regional issues” (14) and he offers the legal status of the Caspian Sea, the fight against drug and human trafficking, cross-border crimes and terrorist organisations in Asia as main examples of such a cooperation. In: *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2015). Available at: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_Kozhanov_web_Eng.pdf. Accessed 26 September 2016. For an updated and extremely insightful assessment of Iran–Russia relationship after the deal, see John W. Parker, “Russia-Iran: strategic partners or competitors?” Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy's Working Paper, 2016.

57 Interestingly enough, as reported by *Russia Now*, on 14 June 2016, the Chairman of the Russian Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Research Director at the Valdai International Discussion Club, Fyodor Lukyanov, talking to the Iranian Republic News Agency, “said (...) that Moscow is looking for Tehran's active role in the region and across the globe. (...) [F]ollowing the removal of United Nation Security Council's anti-Iran sanctions, Moscow believes that Iran should play an active role in the region or even in the world. (...) He also called for Iran[s] membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, adding that the move would expand the Islamic Republic[s] relations with Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Khazakystan Armenia and other members of the union. Iran is an important part of Eurasia, he said, describing the absence of Tehran in that regional union as a shortage for that body. ‘Iran is a powerful country and should play a pivotal role in the region,’ he said. Touching upon the removal of anti-Iran sanctions, he said Iran should also join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).” Available at: <http://russia-now.com/en/60356/moscow-looking-tehran-active-role-region-world/>. Accessed 27 September 2016.

58 As reported by Al-Monitor. Arash Karami, “Iran officials defend Russian use of Hamadan base,” *Al-Monitor*, 17 August, 2016. Available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/iran-russia-syria-hamadan-airbase-fighter-jets.html>. Accessed 29 September 2016.

59 Afshon Ostovar, “Soldiers of the revolution. A brief history of Iran's IRGC,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2016.

compelled Iran to rethink one of the ideological cornerstones of the Islamic Revolution.” Although the novelty of the move is undeniable, it could be interpreted as further proof of the increasing importance of geopolitical determinants vis-à-vis the ideological ones in Iran’s foreign policy.

Finally, shortly after the JCPOA’s full implementation, Iran made two offers for mediating in regional conflicts. The first one was in April 2016, when Foreign Minister Zarif told his Armenian and Azeri counterparts that Iran was ready to play again the role of mediator for the settlement of the Nagorno–Karabakh crisis.⁶⁰ The second one was in September 2016, when Iran’s Ambassador to Pakistan — during a talk in Islamabad on 28 September 2016 and covering, among other topics, the Kashmir dispute — said that Iran is seeking stability in the region and is ready to help settlement of regional conflicts. Regional stability, in fact, is perceived by Iran as a precondition for any project aimed at economic integration among neighbour states. Such an imperative need is backing not only Iran’s offers for mediation in regional conflicts, but also its recent strategy towards the Caspian Sea’s legal status dispute. Since 1991, the existing agreements between Iran and the Soviet Union have been challenged by Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan without so far reaching a comprehensive and widely accepted solution. However, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif, during a meeting with his Kazakh counterpart in April 2015, said that Iran pursues negotiations to determine the legal status of the Caspian Sea with seriousness and strong interest. Moreover, after defining the Caspian as the sea of peace and friendship among littoral countries, he said it should prepare grounds for trade and economic cooperation among them. Interestingly enough, the Kazakh Foreign Minister supported Zarif’s statement and added that Iran, as an economic power in the region, can play a leading role in promoting peace.⁶¹ Such a statement — very similar to that expressed by the Azeri President one year later⁶² — is further proof of neighbours’ positive perceptions about Iran’s role for regional stability and economic growth.

From “pariah” state to “player” status in the greater Eurasian space

The Iran nuclear deal shows the entanglement between the diplomatic and political levels in the United States’ foreign policy-making process. The negotiations’ long impasse can be defined as a strategy which succeeded in obtaining the international ostracism of Iran. Such a process of ostracising is similar to that of “stigmatisation” one, originally theorised by Zarakol⁶³ and further by Adler-Nissen⁶⁴ through applying Goffman’s stigma theory⁶⁵ to international relations. Zarakol — who detailed how three former empires (Turkey, Japan and Russia) joined international society while maintaining an inferior status — did not apply her conceptual framework to Iran. However, she wrote that “[a]spects of my argument apply to states such as Iran...as well.”⁶⁶ When Zarakol’s argument is applied to Iran, its imperial legacy, the fact of being a “thorn between East and West” and its desire of belonging to — and to be acknowledged as part of — international society appear as the main drivers of the Iranian attempts for ending the nuclear deal. With its offers — in particular the very comprehensive 2003 bargain — Iran sought to be accepted by the international society as a peer member. International recognition of its great-power status, in turn, was needed in order to legitimately pursue a central role in regional politics. This interpretation of Iran’s

60 As reported in Iran Front Page press agency. Available at: <http://ifpnews.com/news/politics/security/2016/04/iran-offers-to-mediate-between-armenia-azerbaijan/>. Accessed 29 September 2016.

61 As reported in “Iran sees no limits to ties in Caucasus and Central Asia.” Available at: <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/04/13/406087/Iran-vows-to-up-ties-in-Central-Asia>. During the same meeting, Zarif significantly said that “We consider no ceiling for the expansion of relations with regional countries whether in the Caucasus or in Central Asia.”

62 See footnote 47.

63 Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live With the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

64 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, “Stigma management in international relations: transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society,” *International Organization*, 2014, 68 (1): 143–176, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000337>.

65 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on The Management of a Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1963).

66 Zarakol (2012), quot., 9.

behaviour in offering the United States generous proposals of dispute settlement can fit Sakwa's definition of Russia's foreign behaviour as neorevisionist.⁶⁷ In fact, Iran too "wishes not to destroy the existing constitution of international society, but to modify it in a way that would give Russia [Iran] what is perceived to be its due weight and to ensure that hegemonic powers apply their normative declarations to themselves as well as to others." As proof, the discursive approaches of both President Rowhani and Foreign Minister Zarif to international relations underline the importance of multilateralism and the need for cooperation.⁶⁸ Sakwa claims that "Russia doesn't seek to challenge the existing world order. Hence, rather than being a revisionist power, Russia is neo-revisionist" (p. 214). The same holds true for Iran and therefore it can be defined as a neo-revisionist power.⁶⁹

As long as the JCPOA will be integrally fulfilled by all the actors involved, Iran is going to play an increasingly active role not only in the Middle East and Central Asia, but in the greater Eurasian space. Some US foreign policy and intelligence analysts suggested — even during the nuclear deal — a different approach to Iran within a wider shift of the US foreign policy towards the Middle East and Central Asia.⁷⁰ The role Iran played during the US-led invasion of Afghanistan should indeed represent proof of its importance as a regional player. Whether or not the Obama Administration had Iran in mind as a strategic partner for its foreign policy strategy in the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia regions when Secretary of State Kerry signed the JCPOA in July 2015, Iran has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of its potential role in stabilising those regions.⁷¹

Stability and security in the Caucasus and Central Asia appear indeed to be Iranian foreign policy's main objectives. In fact, Islamic radical terrorism and out-of-control drug trafficking would undermine any perspective of economic recovery and growth for Iran. Some authors have demonstrated how, since the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini

67 See Richard Sakwa, "Russia and Europe: whose society?" *European Integration*, 2011, 33 (2): 197–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2011.543526>.

68 See, for example, Rouhani's statement at the 68th United Nations General Assembly on September 2013 where he said that "[a]t this sensitive juncture in the history global relations, the age of zero-sum games is over" and that "[i]n foreign policy, (...) the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a regional power, will act responsibly with regard to regional and international security, and is willing and prepared to cooperate in these fields, bilaterally as well as multilaterally, with other responsible actors." Statement by H. E. Dr. Hassan Rouhani President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Sixty-eight Session of the United Nations General Assembly (New York, 24 September 2013). Available at: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/68/IR_en.pdf. Accessed 28 September 2016. On his part, Zarif stated that "the world is now moving toward a state of mutual interdependence." And that "Iran will expand and deepen its bilateral and multilateral relations through meaningful engagement with a wide range of states and organizations, including international economic institutions. Multilateralism will play a central role in Iran's external relations." (From an essay adapted from the policy paper Foreign Minister Zarif submitted in August 2013 to the Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly, during his confirmation process. Zarif, Mohammad Javad. "What Iran really wants: Iranian foreign policy in the Rouhani era." *Foreign Affairs*. 93 (2014): 49. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-04-17/what-iran-really-wants>. Accessed 27 September 2016.)

69 This definition of Iran is not alternative to Milani's one of Iran as a "regional status quo power." See Moshen Milani, "Iran's transformation from revolutionary to status quo power in the Persian Gulf." Paper presented at a meeting held on 16–17 November 2004 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC; Mohsen M. Milani, "Iran, the status quo power," *Current History*, 2005 (1): 30–36.

70 See Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett (2013), quot. In particular 1-11 and 387-395. See also the report *Iran: Time for a New Approach* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004).

71 In April 2016, the SIPRI and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies organised a meeting in Tbilisi for exploring new trends in Caucasus' conflicts. During the works, it was outlined that "[a]ny intensification of violence in the South Caucasus, for example over Nagorno-Karabach, would have important repercussions for Iran in terms of border security, refugee flows and damage to energy infrastructure it has constructed together with Armenia" adding that "[r]e-establishing Tehran's role in the peace process could well have a positive effect." For a summary of the works, see Neil John Melvin and Ekaterina Klimenko, "Shifting conflict and security dynamics in the Caucasus: the role of regional powers", 1 June 2016, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/shifting-conflict-and-security-dynamics-caucasus-role-regional-powers>. Accessed 05 November 2016. The European Parliament's Directorate-General for External Policies also is thinking about Iran as mediator for the Nagorno-Karabach conflict. In fact, in its June 2016 Report, it states that "[t]he EU-Iran dialogue should also look beyond the common concerns in the Middle East. Some examples include the stabilization of Afghanistan and mediation of conflicts such as the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan." In: *A EU Strategy for Relations With Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, June 2016, 21. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/578005/EXPO_IDA\(2016\)578005_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/578005/EXPO_IDA(2016)578005_EN.pdf). Accessed 2 November 2016. Concerning Afghanistan, the quoted SIPRI report (See footnote 33) states that "President Rouhani is in a strong position to cooperate constructively with the international community, and especially the USA, on the stabilization of Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. Indeed, it could act as a political springboard for engagement with the international community on a number of broader political issues of mutual concern." (p.7.)

in 1989, Iranian foreign policy has increasingly been guided more by material factors than ideological ones.⁷² Moreover, it has been characterised by what some analysts have defined as “prudent pragmatism.”⁷³ The analysis of the Iranian offers for solving the nuclear deal has confirmed the interpretation of Iran as a status seeker whose pragmatic foreign policy is led by geopolitical determinants and is mainly aimed at preserving the existing international order.

In August 2013, shortly after his appointment as Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif wrote that:

[a]s a solid regional power in this era of intense transition in global politics, Iran stands in a unique position. Given its large landmass and unique geographic position along the east-west transit route, Iran, since antiquity, has enjoyed a preeminent position in its region and beyond.(...) Any objective analysis of Iran's unique attributes within the larger context of its tumultuous region would reveal the country's significant potential for a prominent regional and global role. The Islamic Republic can actively contribute to the restoration of regional peace, security, and stability and play a catalytic role during this current transitional stage in international relations.⁷⁴

Similarly, speaking to the Asia Society and the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, on 27 September 2013, President Rouhani said that:

Iran has actual and potential capabilities for enhancing its role in the world arena.(...) Iran's millennial culture and civilization, its exceptional Iranian state continuity rooted in millennial, its distinguished geopolitics, the characteristics that foster Iran's social stability in the midst of a region in turmoil as well as the pool of its well-educated youth, all in all, enable us to confidently look to the future and aspire to assume the major role in the global level that our people deserve; a role that no actor in global politics can ever ignore.⁷⁵

After the conclusion of the nuclear deal, legitimately and fully returned into the fold of the international community, Iran is now ready to play a peculiar and pragmatic role in the greater Eurasian space whose importance will increasingly be evident.

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72 See Moshen Milani, “Iran's Gulf policy: from idealism and confrontation to pragmatism and confrontation,” in *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability*, ed. Jamal S. Suwaid (Dubai: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 1996); Shireen Hunter, “Iran's pragmatic regional policy,” *Journal of International Affairs*, 2003, 56 (2): 133–147.

73 “The Islamic Republic is increasingly prudent. Particularly near Iran's own borders, the Islamic regime has tended to support the status quo with regard to territorial integrity, has avoided major military provocations, and has shown a preference for working with governments over substate movements,” in *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, eds. Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Jerrold D. Green (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2001), 3. For a similar conclusion drawn by the analysis of the Islamic Republic's behaviour during the Caucasus' and Central Asia's regional conflicts, see James Barry, “Brothers or comrades at arms? Iran's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan,” in *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy*, eds. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2016), 59–74; Brenda Shaffer, editor. *The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, July 2006; Geoffrey Gresh, “Coddling the Caucasus: Iran's strategic relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, 2006, 1 (1): 1–13. See also Akbarzadeh (2014), cit.

74 From an essay adapted from the policy paper Foreign Minister Zarif submitted in August 2013 to the Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly, during his confirmation process. Zarif, (2014). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2014-04-17/what-iran-really-wants>. Accessed 27 September 2016.

75 Available at: <http://www.president.ir/en/71857>. Accessed 27 September 2016.

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