

# **Transatlantic Relations and its Impact on the EU's Strategic Autonomy towards Iran**

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## **Abstract**

The present study seeks to answer the question, of why the EU despite its political will to expand relations with Iran and its efforts, in particular, to maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) within the framework of the designed mechanisms, failed to exercise its strategic independence and fulfill its obligations within JCPOA? The findings show that the lack of European strategic independence is due to its transatlantic dependence on three levels: Institutional security deficit, Asymmetric interdependence in the economic sphere, and the preferences of European transnational corporations concerning US markets. At the level of the institutional security deficit, Given the United States security umbrella and the lack of military-defense independence, the European Union is forced to adjust its approaches to US interests and goals. At the economic level, the interdependence of economic, trade, and highly intertwined transatlantic investment interactions and the

asymmetry of this relationship (US strategic economic superiority) has severely limited the possibility of EU economic action independence. The methodology of this research is descriptive-analytical and the method of data collection in the library. In this regard, books, articles, documents, Internet resources, and comments of relevant officials have been used to collect data.

**Keyword:** European Union, US, Iran, transatlantic relations, Strategic autonomy.

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## **Introduction**

The European Union with 27 members, as an important international player in the economic and industrial fields; and the Islamic Republic of Iran as an important regional player, have a clear understanding of each other's advantages in establishing a normal relationship. On the one hand, due to several parameters of power such as economic-industrial power, technology, and soft and normative power, the EU is considered an influential actor in global and regional relations. On the other hand, the I.R. of Iran is an important regional player that plays a key role in regional security and has abundant energy resources that can meet some of the needs of the European countries.

In the EC/EU increasingly strained relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially after the Maastricht Treaty (1991) by which the EU achieved institutional cohesion, this question has always been, why despite differences in announced approaches and strategies of the EU towards Iran, the policies of EU have ultimately been in practice subject to US threats, pressure and containment approaches Against Iran? Although the Obama administration was given some form of acting identity by granting the EU some degree of independence in its approach to the transatlantic consensus, however, in the aftermath of the United States withdrawal from JCPOA and failure of the EU to comply with the obligations outlined in the JCPOA, The independence of the European Union in implementing its approaches to Iran was once again questioned. In this regard, the question of the present study is that what was the difference in the relations between the EU and Iran during the presidencies of Obama and Trump, and under the influence of transatlantic relations as the most important influential factor in the cooperation between Iran and the EU? Why, despite the transatlantic rift created during the Trump era and the political

will of European governments, the EU has failed to maintain the independence of its approach to Iran and give it an executive aspect? with considering the general situation of transatlantic relations (deep and complex economic and security dependencies), the present study hypothesizes that the relations between Iran and EU are not derived from Iranian and European variables, but are influenced by an external factor, deep transatlantic dependencies. The way of the EU relations with Iran (cooperation, non-cooperation, or confrontation) during the Obama and Trump eras illustrates this fact. Also, the behavior of the EU market and private and transnational corporations, which are deeply dependent on the US markets and have their own rational and risk-averse preferences, which was a major obstacle to the EU independent approach to Iran. To test the hypothesis, trajectories on both sides of the Atlantic were examined in three areas: trade - investment, military – security, and value - civilization. Then, its impact on the EU approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the two periods of Obama and Trump is examined.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The lack of consensus on a better explanation of some issues of international relations within the framework of a particular theory; leads us to Inter- paradigmatic studies. In this study, Neo-realism has been used to explain the military-security areas of transatlantic relations and also "complex interdependence" and "theory of preferences" to examine the dimensions of transatlantic economic relations and the pattern of behavior of the European market and companies in transatlantic relations and its impact on EU-Iran relations.

**Neo-realism and Transatlantic Military-Security Relations:** Peter Van Ham, a neo-realist expert, Emphasizes

European economic strength in global interactions and influencing some Atlantic policies, considering it as a factor for the emergence of a multipolar system (Naghieb Zadeh, 2003). From Van Ham's point of view, cooperation with friendly states for more benefits and acquisition of combined capabilities and power will be pursued to overcome distrust and fear in the path of the security impasse (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 1997: 196). In the context of such analysis, the European Union, under the umbrella of the United States and NATO, and the lack of an independent security mechanism, with emphasis on economic issues and soft power, tries to work with the hegemon to overcome its security impasses and to achieve mutual benefits and greater profits (Snyder, 2002).

Moreover, the EU is unable to play an active and effective role in the international system due to the lack of a strong independent military mechanism. The lack of this effective power in the EU is what drives it to consider American interests and goals. Given the element of legitimacy in hegemony due to the creation of a security umbrella over its partners and allies, the EU is forced to legitimize hegemonic approaches in the absence of an independent military mechanism that can free itself from security impasses. Some of the reasons for the EU's lack of strategic independence are analyzed in important global issues, especially the Iranian nuclear issue, and the EU's inability to establish mechanisms to maintain the nuclear deal in this regard.

**The Complex Interdependence Model and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Relations:** The "complex interdependence" model, which was introduced after World War II to explain economic relations, was popularized in Richard Cooper's articles on "economic interdependence" and later by Keohane and Nye in the book "Power and Interdependence: Transitional Global Politics" developed

(1977). Relying on fundamental assumptions based on economic, technical, social, and environmental cooperation capacities and the benefits of economic dependencies, this theory was a major challenge to mainstream theories of international relations (Byers, 2017:377). From Keohane and Nye's point of view, in this theory, power and interdependence are interrelated and explain the cost-benefit of an interrelationship (Rana, 2015: 293). To understand the role of power in interdependence, Keohane and Nye use the two concepts of "sensitivity" and "vulnerability". Sensitivity means the degree to which actors are sensitive to changes in a particular subject, and vulnerability is the degree to which actors can control their responses to sensitivity. The three components of multiple channels of communication, lack of hierarchy between subjects, and the diminishing role of the military are the most important features of this model from Keohane and Nye's perspective. The most important propositions of the complex interdependence model for explaining transatlantic economic relations are:

1. The willingness of states to enter into cooperation agreements with each other under conditions of anarchy and interdependence;
2. Severe interactions of trade and investment in interactions and exchanges between actors;
3. The role of international institutions and regimes in prioritizing absolute achievements (Keohane & Nye, 2001: 7-10).
4. The growing importance of multinational companies and banks in economic relations;
5. Asymmetry in economic interdependence;
6. Complex interdependence makes cooperation inevitable (Rana, 2015: 294).

**The Theory of Preferences and Explaining the Pattern of Market Behavior of European Companies in Transatlantic Relations:** Andrew Moravcsik explains the preferences of groups, institutions, and companies domestically and internationally in an article entitled "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics"(1997). In his view, this theory has an intermediate approach between Robert Gilpin's theory of international political economy, in which politics determines economics, and the liberal theory, in which economics determines politics (Moravcsik, 1997: 515-516). From Moravcsik's point of view; first, the main players in international relations are national and transnational individuals and private groups who are rational and risk-averse to gain benefits in the face of scarce resources.

Second, the preferences of states as a dependent variable are the result of the preferences of important national and international groups and companies, which are determined in a state of interdependence in a transnational environment (Moravcsik, 2001: 7-8). Thus, from Moravcsik's point of view, the foreign policy decisions of governments are the aggregation of the priorities and preferences of the domestic groups of that country. For example, although the EU's official and announced policy was to counter US sanctions and maintain JCPOA by establishing trade mechanisms with Iran, However, the cost-benefit and risk-averse Behavioral pattern of European companies concerning their asymmetric links and interdependencies with the US companies and market, was the main obstacle to the implementation of these mechanisms. The withdrawal of 50 European companies from Iran after the Trump administration's withdrawal from JCPOA due to US secondary sanctions (International Crisis Group Report, 2018: 14-15) and the inability of the European Union to fulfill JCPOA obligations can be analyzed and explained in this framework.

## **I-Foundations and institutionalization of transatlantic Relations**

At the end of World War, I, American economic power placed it in a strong position to shape post-war Europe. However, in the 1920s and 1930s, the United States pursued a policy of isolation and subsequently withdrew from Europe and did not join the League of Nations. In Europe, difficult economic conditions led to a decline in the power of democracies and the rise of extremist political movements, and eventually, Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 plunged continental Europe into the most destructive war in human history (Pollack, 2005: 8-10). World War II had two important consequences for transatlantic relations: It weakened the Europeans and made the United States a European power (Verheul, 2012:7-8). Relations between the two sides of the Atlantic gradually became institutionalized through bilateral treaties.

The Atlantic Charter (1941) was one of the first agreements to be formed on the formation of transatlantic relations between some European countries and the United States. This charter considered Europe and the United States as an extension of civilization and value (Atlantic Charter, 1941). Subsequently, the United Nations Declaration (1942) pledged the signatory states to use all their forces in the war against the Axis Powers and to avoid separate peace with them (Declaration by United Nations, 1942). With the Marshall Plan (1948) and the Washington Pact (1949), these relations found a coherent and strong framework. The Marshall Plan, while reviving the economies of European countries after the devastation of World War II, effectively and practically prevented the domination of communism in Europe. That plan together with Truman's political plan to prevent the influence of communism completed Europe's dependence on the United States (Hanhimaki et al,



2012:15-16). The Washington Treaty, which followed the Brussels Pact (1948), to secure Western Europe against communism led to the foundation of NATO in 1949. The process of institutionalizing transatlantic cooperation accelerated after the end of the Cold War. The Transatlantic Declaration was one of the most important efforts of both sides of the Atlantic to push cooperation to new issues and challenges.

The "New Transatlantic Agenda" was on the agenda of the Madrid Summit (1995) to expand cooperation on new global issues and challenges, such as the Bosnian war (1992-1995) and the threat of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East (The New Transatlantic Agenda, 1995: 3-6). In the economic and commercial fields, new agendas were considered in the 90s. "Transatlantic Economic Partnership" (1998) was put on the agenda to reach bilateral agreements in the economic-commercial and technical fields (Transatlantic Economic Partnership,1998:11-14). Following this process, several treaties were formed to expand the fields of cooperation. By the end of the Cold War, Europe and the United States as a whole had made extensive institutionalizations to deepen transatlantic relations in most subject areas and at all levels.

Table 1. Institutionalization and evolution of transatlantic relations

| Year | Agreed issues in the transatlantic solidarity   |
|------|---|
| 1941 | Atlantic Charter: Being on a Civilization and Value Stage - Principles of Defense and Collective Security         |
| 1942 | UN Declaration: Principles of Collective Defense and Security - Introduction and Foundation of the UN             |
| 1945 | US military presence in Europe  |
| 1947 | Europe Recovery Program: Providing Economic Assistance to Europe to Strengthen the Western Bloc Against Communism |
| 1948 | Marshall Plan: European Economic Revival - Preventing Communism   |

|              |  |
|--------------|--|
|              | from Dominating Europe - Underlying Transatlantic Economic Cooperation   |
| 1948         | Brussels Pact: Principles of Defense and Collective Security against the expansionism of the Former Soviet Union   |
| 1949         | Washington Pact: Principles of Defense and Collective Security - Foundations of NATO   |
| 1949         | NATO: Principles of Defense and Collective Security and the Establishment of the American Security Umbrella in Europe  |
| 1952         | Establishment of the US European Command (UCAM)  |
| 1956<br>1961 | Establishing formal political relations between the European Union and the United States: Representation of the European Commission in the United States in Washington (1956) and Representation of the United States in the European Union in Brussels (1961) |
| 1990         | Transatlantic Declaration: Regular political dialogue between the EU and the United States at the summit   |
| 1995         | New Transatlantic Agenda (Madrid Summit): Expanding and Deepening Cooperation  |
| 1998         | Transatlantic Economic Partnership and ...   |

*Source: author*

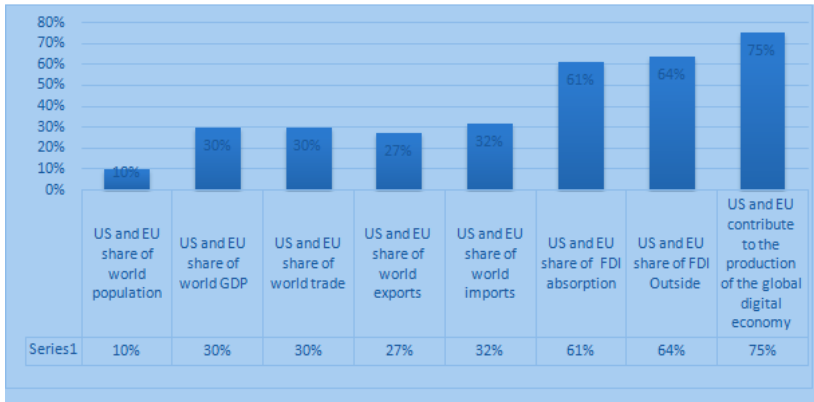
## **II-The Parameters and Trajectories of Transatlantic Relations**

To understand the bilateral relations of the Atlantic and its impact on the approaches and patterns of behavior of the European Union towards Iran, the most important parameters and trajectories of transatlantic relations are examined.

**Transatlantic Economic, Trade and Investment Parameters:** The EU-US economic relationship, known as the "Transatlantic Economic Relations", is the driving force behind trade and the global economy. The EU and the US are also the largest economic and trade players of the world and the largest trading and investment partners. The United States and the European Union as a whole have dedicated to themselves, more than 30 percent of global trade, 64 percent of global investment, and 61 percent of global investment. also trade between parent

and subsidiary companies accounts for more than one-third of global trade.

Figure 1. The share of the transatlantic economy (European Union and the United States) in global economic indicators (2020)

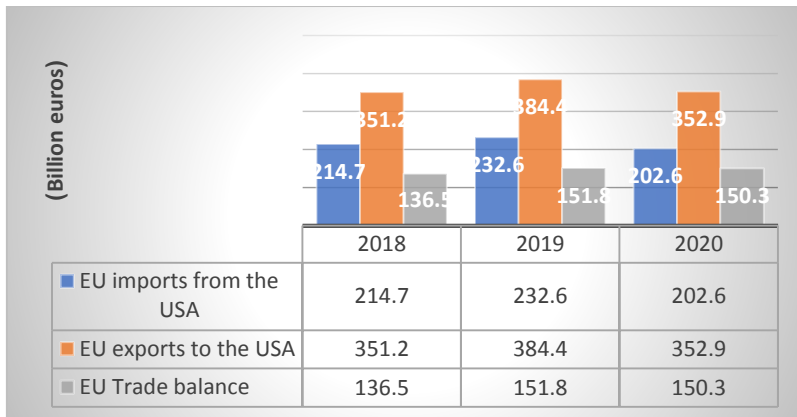


Source: author (Data from Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2021)

The United States and the European Union, with a population of 800 million, will have dedicated to themselves 30 percent of global GDP, 27 percent of global exports, and 32 percent of global imports by 2020. They have 30% of world trade (EU 17% and US 13.4%) (Hamilton & Quinlan, 2021:2-3).

**Trade-in goods:** In terms of trade in goods, the United States was the main destination for EU exports, accounting for 18.3% of total EU exports (compared to 10.5% in China). The United States also ranks second among the import partners of the EU, accounting for 11.8% of its imports (Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2021:3).

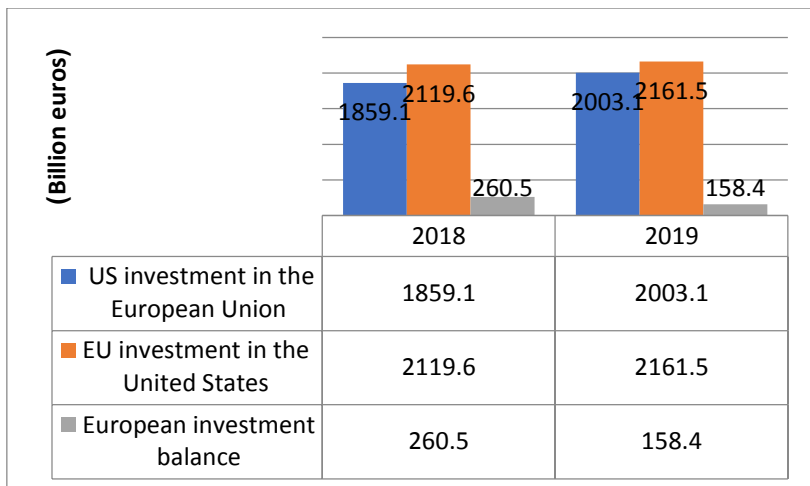
Figure 2. The EU Trade (27 Member States) and the United States in the field of goods (2020-2018)



*Source: author (Data from European Commission, DG TRADE, 2021)*

**Trade-in services:** In the field of trade-in services, the United States is the largest trader of civil services and the European Union is the largest trader of services in all regions of the world. Four of the top ten export markets for US services are in Europe. Europe accounts for 39% of total US services exports (\$ 345 billion) and 42% of total US services imports (\$ 245 billion) in 2019 (The Transatlantic Economy 2021, 2021:6). Sales of affiliate services in Europe in 2019 reached \$968 billion. European companies are the main providers of affiliate services in the United States, accounting for 55% of total sales of affiliate services worldwide. Of the \$ 1.2 trillion in foreign affiliate sales of the United States in 2018, \$ 638 billion was the sale of affiliate services to European companies (Hamilton & Quinlan, 2020:7).

Figure 3. the Volume of bilateral foreign direct investment of the European Union and the United States (2019-2018)



*Source: author (Data from European Commission, DG TRADE, 2021)*

More than 60% of the EU direct foreign investment is made annually in the United States. In 2019, the EU accounted for 64% of the \$ 4.5 trillion in global investment in the United States, reaching \$ 2.9 trillion by 2020. Conversely, 60% of the total US foreign direct investment in the world is made in the European Union, which is equivalent to \$ 3.6 trillion by 2020(Statista, 2020).

**Other trade and investment sectors:** In the area of intra-firm trade and products, 63% of US imports from the EU and 39% of US exports to the EU in 2019 were inter-company trade. By 2020, Europe will account for approximately 60% (\$ 17.3 trillion) of the total foreign assets of American companies worldwide. Conversely, 49% of total US production in 2019 (\$ 1.5 trillion) came from the European Union. In the global digital economy, the United States and Europe produce about 75 percent of the world's digital content (Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2021:8).

In the employment sector, US-affiliated companies employed approximately 4.9 million workers in Europe in 2019. also, foreign subsidiaries owned by the European majority in 2019 directly employed 5 million American

workers. 33% of the 14.4 million people hired in 2018 by US-affiliated companies worldwide live in Europe (Transatlantic Economy 2021, 2021: 20-21). In the field of energy economics, European companies are the largest foreign direct investors in the United States. Four of the top five buyers of solar and wind energy in Europe are American (Wilson center reports, 2021). In the transatlantic innovation economics sector, the bilateral currents of the United States and the European Union are the most intense international currents in research and development. In 2020, US subsidiaries spent \$ 33 billion on research and development in Europe. In the same year, R&D expenditures by foreign affiliates in the United States totaled \$ 66.9 billion, of which 45.1 billion (67%) were invested by European affiliates (The Transatlantic Economy 2021, 2021:15).

**The Transatlantic Military-Security Parameters:** The security and military relations between the EU and the United States, which is at the heart of transatlantic relations and is referred to under various headings such as strategic partnership and bilateral special relations, is a broad set of common security norms and goals based on strong and enduring common values. The United States and Europe share most of their security goals, such as combating terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and increase of military capabilities to manage government crises around the world (Lachmann, 2013: 139). Apart from bilateral security and military relations, transatlantic security and military indicators are reflected in NATO and US military bases in Europe. The most important element of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is Article 5, which established a collective defense mechanism based on Western values and peacekeeping. Henceforth, the defense of

Europe came under the umbrella of the United States (Zandee et al, 2020: 60-61).

Another important dimension of transatlantic relations with NATO is the military bases of the United States on European soil. The first American base in Europe, which housed a significant number of troops, dates back to World War I. At the end of World War II in 1945, large numbers of American troops were permanently stationed in Europe. In 1952, the US European Command (UCOM) brought in Europe, the Navy, the Air Force, and elements of the military under a single command to better organize the US military presence. The United States bases and forces in Europe now have the following three different types (main operational base, vanguard base, and security cooperation base) of military installations in the UCOM area (heritage report, 2018: 200-202).

**The European-American Army:** This army was founded in 1952. The army is based in Heidelberg, Germany. The core of this army is composed of four combat brigades and air transport brigades located in Germany and Italy and has 16 key and important bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands (U.S Army Base in Germany report, 2013: 15).

**US European Navy:** This force is responsible for more than 20 million square miles of ocean and more than 67% of the coastline operated by the US Sixth Fleet based in Naples. The naval air base at Sigonella (Sicily - Italy 1959), the naval base at Soda Bay (Crete-Greece), and the naval base at Rota (Spain) is the most important naval bases. The force has several submarines in the area under the auspices of UCOM and has a fleet of P-3 patrol aircraft and an EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft from US bases in Italy, Greece, Spain, and Turkey (Wood,2018: 122).

**US Air Force in Europe:** Organized as the 8th Air Force in 1942, it was rebuilt in August 1945 with 17,000 aircraft and

450,000 personnel. The US Air Force has eight main bases in 114 separate geographical locations in Europe (heritage report,2018: 123-124).

**US Marine Corps in Europe:** Established in 1980 through a memorandum of understanding to establish the Marine Corps in Europe, and in 1989 more than 180 Marines became active in 45 locations in 19 countries across Europe. It has commanded in Babylon, Germany, and approximately 1,500 Marines dedicated to supporting UCOM and NATO.

**US Special Operations Command:** This force is under the command of the UCOM unit, to plan peace and operational control of Special Operations Forces in unconventional warfare under the UCOM (Wood,2018: 125).

**US Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe:** The deployment of these weapons in Europe in the context of creating a balance of terror with "inevitable reciprocal destruction" involved a sustained confrontation. This issue has been influenced by the "confront as soon as possible" approach (Rogers, 2005: 37). In this context, to balance and prevent possible Soviet expansion in Europe as the main and strategic ally of the United States, as well as to prevent a direct attack on the mainland of the United States, tactical nuclear weapons were deployed under NATO "nuclear sharing" strategy in Europe. The United States deployed its nuclear weapons on European soil in September 1954, when gravitational nuclear weapons first entered a British base (Fuhrhop et al, 2020). The number of these weapons on European soil has at times reached 7,300 warheads. It is currently estimated that 480-150 tactical nuclear weapons are deployed at six bases in Europe and in five European countries (2018 Index of U.S. Military Strength,2018: 123). Most experts rate these weapons, including B61-3 and B61-4, at 200 each. The Europe-based nuclear weapons are seen not only as a deterrent to protecting NATO member states but also as an



important "glue" to maintain Europe's transatlantic relations with the United States. Today, NATO merely emphasizes the political importance of nuclear sharing (Ghorbani and Dehnavi, 2016: 146).

**Common Value Parameters of Transatlantic Relations:**

Another characteristic of transatlantic relations is the value and civilization foundations and the so-called "softer side" of relations (Ilgen, 2020). One of the reasons that make transatlantic relations different from all other bilateral and multilateral relations in the international system is the common values and interests between Europe and the United States, which, under the name of the "Western complex", have created close ties and interests between them. Europe and America have historical and civilizational depths and common foundations under the principles and values of liberalism. Both sides of the Atlantic are born of the Enlightenment and have somewhat similar worldviews about the existing world order (Rossbach, 2019:47-48). From the perspective of some transatlantic researchers, American influence in post-World War I Europe was essentially an "invited empire." The culture and civilization-oriented view of US-European relations believes that the common cultural and civilizational roots of the two sides of the Atlantic and the common values around its axis have shaped the priorities and interests of the two actors and converged on global issues.

Thus, although they may disagree on some global issues and sometimes their approaches are inconsistent, they are both under the axis of the "West" and the values of Western and liberal democracy, which represent the civilization that is founded on Christianity. Therefore, under this concept, any other value and culture that conflicts with the values of Christianity, the two sides of the Atlantic will adopt the same policies towards it (Lundestad,1986).

From a value point of view, the European Union and the United States are democracies that are based on democracy and liberalism. In this regard, liberal peace between liberal democracies and the war against dictatorial states is a value and capability. Therefore, in this view, the same political and value foundations lead to the formation of interests and priorities and lead to the coordination and coherence of the approaches of these two actors and the adoption of the same positions on important global issues. From this perspective, the sharing of priorities, interests, and goals of both sides of the Atlantic in line with Western values has found an unprecedented alignment, and strategic unity prevails between them on important global issues. They do not differ in principle from the sharing of interests and the definition of existing threats to their values and interests, and the level of differences between them is merely bargaining for greater benefits (Riddervold & Newsome, 2018).

In the context of such a view, "strategic culture" is the main foundation for shaping and consolidating transatlantic relations. The two sides of the Atlantic are committed to maintaining a world order based on their shared worldview for better global governance and the establishment of global justice. In this regard, some believe that even the convergence of Europe in the post-World War II period is the result of a strategic culture formed in transatlantic relations. Proponents of such an approach see the creation of a strong and convergent Europe against communism and the subsequent economic aid from the United States under the Marshall Plan, and then various plans for the institutionalization of transatlantic relations as direct support for European integration. Many even see the formation of European integration as an American project, arguing that the process of European integration was made possible by the guarantee and security umbrella of the United States and that

post-World War II Europe was not possible without a US security umbrella to ward off security threats in Eastern Europe (Burton, 2020: 78-80).

### **III-Explaining Iran-EU Relations in the Context of Transatlantic Relations**

Looking at the history of EC/EU relations with Iran after the Islamic Revolution in the construction and reformist governments (under critical and comprehensive dialogue and turning it into the conditional dialogue) and subsequently with the introduction of Iran's nuclear program, the role of the United States in directing approaches and EU policies were reflected in how it dealt with Iran. With the introduction of Iran's nuclear program in 2002 and the International Atomic Energy Agency's 2003 report on Iran's nuclear activities, the entire focus of the European Union, along with the United States, shifted to Iran's nuclear program (Magri & Perteghella, 2017: 107). Subsequently, the EU almost sided with the threat and pressure of the United States, despite the differences in its approach to dealing with Iran, which advocated a diplomatic approach with leverage of the Sanction.

**New Paradigm of Transatlantic Partnership towards Iran:** With Barack Obama taking office in 2008, reviving transatlantic partnerships to meet the most important global challenges has been a priority for US foreign policy. US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton during the Obama administration (2009-2009) argued that "on most global issues, the United States has no closer ally than the Europeans (Clinton, 2009)." During a visit to the Munich Security Conference (2009), Obama's Vice President Joe Biden also stated that the US approach would be "partnership with its allies" and would only continue when it had to (Biden, 2009). The Obama

administration and its foreign policy team have put an end to the hypothesis that with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of new powers, the transatlantic partnership has ceased to exist, proposing closer ties with key European allies address many of the challenges ahead. The United States needs to show that a new era in transatlantic relations has begun with the goal of overcoming global challenges. From the perspective of Obama and his team, if the United States wants to use the help of its allies to secure common interests, it must also address the concerns of key allies and avoid unilateral approaches to important global issues that have a significant impact on the interests of European allies (Hamilton and Foster, 2010: 2).

In this regard, a great effort was made to establish traditional bonds of trust and patterns of cooperation. However, as Biden pointed out at the Munich Security Conference, the Obama administration expected more cooperation with US policies on major global issues in return for more attention to its European allies. One of the most important issues was the Iranian nuclear issue. In response to the EU's role in this issue, the Obama administration expected more cooperation within the framework of US policies to put pressure on Iran under the approach of diplomacy and pressure. The EU's alignment with the US policy of sanctions and pressure between 2012 and 2015 and the imposition of hard sanctions by the European Union against Iran was established within the framework of such an approach. Obama's multilateralism approach, and addressing the concerns of European allies, was increasingly welcomed in the European Union. According to a 2009 Transatlantic Trend poll, public support in Europe for Obama's foreign policy was four times higher than for George W. Bush. According to the poll, Obama's popularity in the European Union (77%) was

higher than his popularity in the United States (57%) (Transatlantic Trends, 2009).

The decision to award Obama the Nobel Peace Prize for what he called "strengthening global diplomacy and cooperation among nations" was a sign of optimism about the United States' approach to partnering with its allies in overcoming global challenges. The EU approach (prioritizing diplomacy and negotiation alongside the pressure of sanctions), which was ignored during the Bush administration, somehow returned to the context of EU-Iran relations when Obama took office in the United States, as the new administration The United States sought to emerge and formed an unprecedented consensus in transatlantic relations to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue. In this regard, from 2008 to 2013, the European Union became one of the main supporters of sanctions against Iran and imposed the toughest oil, insurance, and industrial sanctions against Iran, so that during this process, EU-specific sanctions along with US and UN sanctions came into being (Lohmann, 2016:939-940).

In general, the analysis of the EU's pattern of behavior towards Iran during the Obama administration indicates that Europe is actively acting within the framework of a common approach with the United States (Lohmann, 2016:941). Within the framework of the new paradigm of transatlantic participation, the Obama administration sought to accompany the European Union in building a transatlantic consensus by giving it an actor identity and involving the European Union in key global political and security issues. In return for granting the EU some degree of independence of action, flexibility in its policies and multilateral approach, and the participation of European allies in important global politics and issues, the Obama administration sought to assist the EU in securing common interests and security on both sides of the Atlantic. In

return for the relative practical independence, it found in world politics, the European Union implicitly agreed to follow transatlantic guidelines on important global issues, especially on the Iranian nuclear issue (Vasconcelos and Zaborowski, 2010: 15). Therefore, the two sides of the Atlantic, realizing the need for cooperation in the form of transatlantic frameworks and guidelines, decided to reach a consensus in dealing with Iran through a diplomatic approach alongside the leverage of the sanctions (Bruton, 2010: 34).

**The Transatlantic Divergence and Europe's Inability for Strategic Independence:** Under the Trump administration, completely different conditions were created in the relations between the two sides of the Atlantic, and consequently, the little independence of the European Union in foreign policy in general and in the issue of Iran's nuclear program and the maintaining of the JCPOA, in particular, became apparent. Thus, the answer to the question of why the EU, contrary to official statements, could not implement the mechanisms of maintaining the JCPOA and establishing trade channels with Iran, can be explained in the absence of an independent defense mechanism, economic interdependence, and preferences of groups and companies within the EU which profound intertwining interests of trade and investment with US companies. In this context, during the Trump era, while European governments expressed their support for JCPOA, European companies and the private sector (as influential domestic groups in the decision-making process of governments and the EU institution) withdrew from the Iranian market for fear of secondary US sanctions. This lack of economic sovereignty of the European Union as a whole has severely affected the foreign policy discourse of European governments in maintaining their commitments to Iran and

Created a rift between the Brussels bureaucratic elite's approach (government discourse) to maintaining the nuclear deal and the economic and trade reality between Iran and Europe (Geranmayeh & Rapnouil, 2019: 8-9).

The high independence of the European private sector and the restriction of the announced policies of the European governments, especially in the functional area (economic and commercial) on the one hand, and the complex /asymmetric interdependence with companies and private sectors in the United States, on the other hand, Has been severely overshadowed the EU's decisions and policies regarding Iran (IISS, 2019: 3). The withdrawal of the United States from JCPOA in 2018 was a good indication of how the deep interdependence between the market and companies on both sides of the Atlantic affected the behavior and policies of the European Union. The European Union, led by three European countries, despite efforts to revive JCPOA through mechanisms such as the Blocking rules, SPV, H-SPV, INSTEX, and the offer of a \$15 billion credit line to buy Iranian oil, etc., and despite this fact that Iran adhered to all its commitments, failed to take an independent approach to Iran, and ultimately remained silent in practice in the face of US secondary sanctions against Iran and the withdrawal of European companies. Despite various EU political statements regarding the establishment of mechanisms for trade with Iran, almost all European companies in Iran, which resumed operations and investments in Iran after the JCPOA agreement, announced that they were leaving Iran due to US sanctions (International Crisis Group Report, 2018: 14-15).

**The US Secondary Sanctions:** Shortly after the announcement of the US withdrawal from JCPOA, 70 companies announced that they were leaving Iran or ceasing their activities. Fifty companies belonged to large companies in

European countries, which cited secondary sanctions by the United States as the reason for leaving the Iranian market (Adesnik & Ghasseminejad, 2018: 2). This was while some of these companies such as Total, Peugeot, Royal Dutch Shell, Citroen, Renault, etc. had good profitability in the Iranian market. Fear of US secondary sanctions was so great that a month after the US announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA, trade between Iran and Germany fell by 50 percent (Financial Times, 2018). Among the companies exiting the Iranian market, 9 French companies, 8 German companies, and 6 Italian companies had the highest share in the cessation of economic relations with Iran. All of these companies stated that the main reason for leaving Iran was US secondary sanctions and compliance with US law, which would penalize non-US companies that account side with Iran if they did not comply with US sanctions. This issue goes back to the rational and risk-taking pattern of European companies, which takes place in the framework of European companies' commercial and investment affiliations with the US market, against the small volume of the Iranian market (Katzman, 2021: 38-39).

Many analysts believe that in addition to the EU's security and military affiliations with the United States under the umbrella of the United States, there is also asymmetric interdependence in the economic fields that the United States has maintained its strategic superiority. An example of such strategic superiority in the economy can be seen in the requirement of European companies to take into account the considerations of the United States in trade and investment with companies or other countries (in the form of a policy of threats and secondary sanctions). In a report examining US secondary sanctions against Iran and their impact on the European economy, the Council on Foreign Relations referred to the US policy of threatening and pressuring European companies to



impose secondary sanctions as The “weaponization “of US sanctions. The report cites US secondary sanctions against European companies as a major challenge to the European economy, targeting Europe's strategic independence. Europe's vulnerability stems mainly from its asymmetric interdependence with the US economy as well as the dominance of the dollar in international equations (Geranmayeh & Rapnouil, 2019: 2-3). This has led the United States to use it as leverage to advance its policies. According to the report, with the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the imposition of primary and secondary sanctions, EU companies canceled nearly \$24 billion worth of contracts with Iran in the context of asymmetric interdependence and large financial and monetary exchanges with the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the economic dependencies and high trade and investment on both sides of the Atlantic, which leads to shaping the preferences of European companies and taking into account US guidelines in the economic field; secondary sanctions also move European corporations to a more rational and risk-taking pattern. In this context, in 2017, when was the culmination of EU-Iran relations after the JCPOA agreement and after the lifting of three sanctions (by the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations) against Iran, exports and imports of goods between EU and Iran were \$11 billion and \$10 billion (Trade balance \$1 billion for the EU) and exports and imports of services were \$2 and \$1 billion (trade balance of \$1 billion for the EU). Whereas, Exports and imports of EU goods to the United States were \$376 billion and \$256 billion in the same year (positive trade balance of \$120 billion for the EU),

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<sup>1</sup> According to the European External Relations Council, the subject matter and amount of these contracts were as follows: Airbus and Iran Air (\$ 19 billion), Total investment in South Pars (\$ 2 billion), Iran Railway investment. (\$ 1.5 billion), contract for solar infrastructure (\$ 500 million) and contract for car sales to Iran (\$ 500 million).

and exports and imports of services were \$236 and \$213 billion (the positive trade balance \$23 billion for the European Union). Therefore, the behavior and preference of European companies to leave Iran in the framework of the theory of preferences are rational and appropriate to the behavioral pattern of risk-averse (Geranmayeh & Rapnouil, 2019: 2-3).

### **Conclusion**

The present study sought to answer the question of why the European Union, despite its political will to expand relations with Iran and in particular, its efforts to maintain JCPOA, could not exercise its strategic independence and fulfill its obligations under JCPOA? In this regard, and to test the hypothesis, the deep and complex dependencies of the EU and the United States in three dimensions of military-security, trade-investment, and value-transatlantic civilization were examined in the framework of theories of neorealism, complex interdependence, and theory of preferences. To test the hypothesis, the deep and complex dependencies of the EU and the United States in the three dimensions of military-security, trade-investment, and value-transatlantic civilization were examined in the framework of theories of Neorealism, Complex interdependence, and the theory of preferences. The research findings indicate that the EU's lack of strategic independence and subsequent compliance with US policies and guidelines towards Iran is due to the EU's transatlantic dependencies on three levels of institutional security deficit, asymmetric economic interdependence, and transnational corporate preferences in association with the markets of the United States. At the level of the institutional security deficit Due to the United States' security umbrella and the lack of a strong independent military mechanism, the EU is unable to play an active and effective role in the international system, and Due to the lack of

the defense-military independence forces, the EU has to consider US interests and goals.

Institutional security deficits in general, have led to the pattern of behavior of the European Union in many important global issues, in which the issue of Iran can also be analyzed. At the economic level, the interdependence of economic and high and intertwined transatlantic interactions on the one hand, and the asymmetry of this interdependence (in favor of the United States in the context of the policy of threat and the imposition of secondary sanctions) leading to us strategic economic superiority and has severely restricted the EU's economic independence. The third level concerns the preferences of the market and the EU private and transnational corporations and their rational and risk-averse behavior patterns. Indeed, the high independence of the EU private sector, especially in the functional (economic and commercial) fields on the one hand, and the complex/ asymmetric interdependence with private companies and sectors in the United States, have severely overshadowed the EU formal decisions and policies on Iran. This issue along with the leverage of US secondary sanctions against European companies and the cost-benefit behavior and risk-averse of companies has been a major obstacle to the independent approach of the EU toward Iran.

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