

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and Order in International Relations

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Abstract

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) constitutes one of the most significant multilateral agreements of the post-Cold War era and has generated extensive debate within International Relations scholarship. Existing studies have primarily examined the agreement through realist, liberal institutionalist, and constructivist perspectives, yet its implications for international order remain underexplored. Drawing on the English School of International Relations, this article examines the extent to which the JCPOA contributed to the maintenance of international order, and what its subsequent erosion reveals about the resilience of international society. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative document analysis and process tracing grounded in primary sources, including the JCPOA, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, International Atomic Energy Agency reports, and official statements by the participating actors. The analysis centers on the primary institutions of international society, namely diplomacy, international law, balance of power, and great-power management. The article argues that the JCPOA constituted an order-maintaining arrangement through which major actors sought to reconcile non-proliferation objectives with regional stability and conflict avoidance. The United States' withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, however, exposed the fragility of institutionalized order in the absence of sustained great-power consensus. These findings demonstrate that the English School offers a distinctive framework for understanding both the formation and deterioration of the JCPOA, in that it emphasizes the relationship between shared rules, institutions, and international order.

Keywords: JCPOA; English School; International Order; International Society; Diplomacy; Great-Power Management.

Introduction

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in July 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), constitutes one of the most important multilateral diplomatic agreements of the post-Cold War period. Designed to address concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program through a framework of reciprocal commitments, monitoring mechanisms, and sanctions relief, the agreement was endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 and widely regarded as a major achievement of international diplomacy (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2015). Beyond its immediate nuclear dimension, the JCPOA constituted an effort by major international actors to manage a potentially destabilizing security dispute through negotiation, legal commitments, and institutional cooperation rather than military confrontation.

The significance of the JCPOA extends beyond the Iranian nuclear issue. The agreement emerged in an international environment characterized by increasing geopolitical competition, regional instability in the Middle East, and growing uncertainty concerning the effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Under such conditions, the successful conclusion of a complex agreement among states with divergent interests raised important questions concerning the maintenance of international order. At the same time, the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018 and the subsequent deterioration of the agreement generated new debates about the durability of international commitments, the resilience of international institutions, and the capacity of international society to preserve cooperative arrangements in the face of political disagreement.

The JCPOA has attracted substantial scholarly attention within International Relations. Existing studies have commonly examined the agreement through realist, liberal institutionalist, or constructivist perspectives. Realist analyses generally interpret the agreement as a product of strategic bargaining, coercive diplomacy, and calculations of relative power. Liberal institutionalist approaches emphasize the role of international institutions, monitoring mechanisms, and mutually beneficial cooperation in reducing uncertainty and facilitating compliance. Constructivist scholarship, in contrast, focuses on the role of norms, identities, and discursive interactions in shaping the preferences and behavior of the negotiating parties. Although these approaches have produced valuable insights, comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining the JCPOA as a mechanism of international order and to evaluating its implications for the functioning of international society.

This limitation is particularly important because the JCPOA involved several institutions traditionally associated with the maintenance of order in international relations. The agreement was negotiated through sustained diplomatic engagement, embedded in a framework of international law, supported by international organizations, and maintained through cooperation among major powers. Consequently, the JCPOA offers an important opportunity to investigate how states seek to manage conflict and preserve order through institutionalized practices rather than through coercion alone.

The English School of International Relations provides a useful framework for addressing this issue. Unlike approaches that prioritize either power, institutions, or norms as independent explanatory variables, the English School examines how order is maintained within an international society composed of sovereign states that recognize common rules, institutions, and interests (Bull, 2012). From this perspective, international order is not merely a consequence of material power but also the product of shared practices and institutions that facilitate coexistence among states. Hedley Bull

(2012) identified diplomacy, international law, balance of power, and the management of great powers as among the principal institutions through which international society preserves order. Subsequent English School scholarship has further emphasized the role of these institutions in maintaining stability and managing conflict within international society (Buzan, 2004; Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018).

The concepts of international system, international society, and international order occupy distinct but related positions within the English School framework. An international system exists when states interact and affect one another's decisions. An international society emerges when states recognize common interests and values and regard themselves as bound by a shared set of rules and institutions (Bull, 2012). International order, in turn, refers to the patterns of activity that sustain the elementary goals of social life among states, including security, stability, and the fulfillment of agreements (Bull, 2012). This conceptual distinction is important because the present study does not treat the JCPOA merely as an episode of strategic interaction within an international system; rather, it examines the agreement as an institutional arrangement through which international society sought to preserve international order.

Against this background, the article addresses the following research question: To what extent did the JCPOA contribute to the maintenance of international order, and what does the subsequent erosion of the agreement following the United States' withdrawal in 2018 reveal about the resilience and limitations of international society? The article pursues three objectives. First, it examines the JCPOA through the theoretical lens of the English School. Second, it analyzes the role of diplomacy, international law, balance of power, and great-power management in the negotiation and implementation of the agreement. Third, it evaluates the implications of both the establishment and partial breakdown of the JCPOA for the maintenance of international order.

The central argument advanced here is that the JCPOA embodied an order-maintaining arrangement created through the institutions of international society. The agreement reflected a shared interest among major actors in preventing nuclear proliferation, reducing regional instability, and avoiding military conflict. Through diplomacy, legal commitments, and verification mechanisms, the participating parties established a framework intended to reconcile competing interests within a common set of rules. However, the United States' withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 demonstrated that the durability of institutionalized order remains dependent upon the continued commitment of major powers to those rules and institutions. The trajectory of the JCPOA therefore illustrates both the capacity of international society to generate order and the limitations of that order when great-power consensus deteriorates.

This article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends existing studies of the JCPOA by focusing on its implications for international order rather than exclusively on its nuclear or strategic dimensions. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of the English School by showing how diplomacy, international law, and great-power management operated simultaneously in the negotiation and implementation of the agreement. Third, by examining both the creation and subsequent erosion of the JCPOA, the article highlights the strengths and limitations of international society as a framework for understanding the durability of multilateral agreements.

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative document analysis and process tracing. The analysis draws upon primary sources, including the JCPOA text, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, reports issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and official statements by the

principal parties to the agreement. These materials are examined alongside relevant English School scholarship and broader International Relations literature.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical foundations of the English School and clarifies the relationship among international system, international society, and international order. The third section presents the methodological framework. The fourth section analyzes the JCPOA as a mechanism of order maintenance, while the fifth section examines the implications of the United States' withdrawal and the subsequent deterioration of the agreement. The final section discusses the broader implications of the findings for English School theory and international order before presenting the conclusions.

The English School and International Order

The English School occupies a distinctive position within the discipline of International Relations. Emerging from the works of scholars such as Martin Wight, Hedley Bull, Adam Watson, and later Barry Buzan, the English School seeks to explain how order is maintained in a world characterized by political diversity and the absence of a centralized authority (Bull, 2012; Buzan, 2004). Unlike realism, which primarily emphasizes power and security competition, or liberal institutionalism, which focuses on cooperation through formal institutions, the English School is concerned with the broader social and normative foundations of international order.

The central contribution of the English School is its argument that international politics cannot be understood solely through the concepts of anarchy or power distribution. Although the international system lacks a world government, states do not interact in a purely conflictual environment. Rather, they form an international society in which they recognize common interests, shared rules, and institutions that regulate their behavior (Bull, 2012). Consequently, the English School holds a middle position between realist and liberal approaches. It accepts the realist insight that sovereign states remain the principal actors in world politics while simultaneously recognizing the importance of rules, norms, diplomacy, and institutions in shaping international outcomes (Dunne, 1998).

A central distinction within English School theory is the relationship among international system, international society, and international order. According to Bull (2012), an international system exists when states interact regularly and affect one another's decisions. International society emerges when states recognize common interests and values and regard themselves as bound by a common set of rules and institutions. International order, in turn, refers to the patterns of activity that sustain the elementary goals of social life among states, including security, stability, the limitation of violence, the keeping of agreements, and the preservation of sovereignty. These concepts are analytically distinct but closely related. While an international system may exist without a high degree of cooperation, international order is most effectively maintained when states operate within an international society characterized by accepted rules and institutions.

The concept of order assumes a particularly important place within English School scholarship. Hedley Bull similarly defined order as a pattern of activity that sustains the primary goals of society (Bull, 2012). At the international level, these goals include the preservation of the society of states, the maintenance of state independence, the limitation of violence, and the fulfillment of agreements. From this perspective, order is not synonymous with peace or harmony. Rather, order refers to the existence of stable arrangements that enable states to manage conflict and pursue coexistence despite divergent

interests and values. The maintenance of order therefore requires mechanisms capable of regulating interactions among states and reducing the likelihood of destructive conflict.

To explain how order is maintained, the English School identifies a number of primary institutions of international society. Bull (2012) emphasized five principal institutions: the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and the special managerial role of the great powers. These institutions are not formal organizations but rather enduring social practices that structure state behavior. Diplomacy facilitates communication and negotiation among states; international law establishes rules and expectations governing conduct; the balance of power prevents the emergence of overwhelming domination; and great-power management contributes to the preservation of stability by coordinating responses to major security challenges. Together, these institutions constitute the normative and practical foundations of international order.

More recent English School scholarship has expanded and refined this framework. Buzan (2004) distinguishes between primary institutions, which are fundamental social practices of international society, and secondary institutions, such as international organizations and formal regimes. He argues that international order is maintained through the interaction of both types of institutions. Similarly, Buzan and Schouenborg (2018) emphasize that contemporary international society has become increasingly global in scope and characterized by a growing density of institutional arrangements. These developments make the English School particularly useful for analyzing contemporary multilateral agreements that combine legal commitments, diplomatic negotiations, and institutional monitoring mechanisms.

The English School also provides a distinctive perspective on the JCPOA when compared with competing theoretical approaches. A realist interpretation would primarily view the agreement as the product of strategic bargaining and power calculations among Iran and the major powers. A liberal institutionalist perspective would emphasize the role of cooperation, verification mechanisms, and international institutions in reducing uncertainty and facilitating compliance. A constructivist analysis would focus on norms, identities, and the social construction of interests. While each of these perspectives captures important dimensions of the agreement, the English School offers a broader framework by examining how diplomacy, international law, and great-power management collectively contributed to the preservation of international order. In this sense, the JCPOA can be understood not merely as a nuclear agreement but as an institutionalized attempt by international society to manage a major security dispute through accepted rules and practices.

The English School is therefore particularly relevant to the present study. The negotiation, implementation, and subsequent deterioration of the JCPOA provide an opportunity to examine whether the institutions of international society were capable of maintaining order in the face of a complex international security challenge. By analyzing the agreement through the concepts of international society, order, diplomacy, international law, and great-power management, the article seeks to assess both the strengths and limitations of order-maintaining mechanisms in contemporary international relations.

International Order and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The concept of order occupies a central position in English School theory and provides the principal analytical framework for understanding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Hedley Bull defined order as “a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goals of social life” (Bull,

2012, p. 16). At the international level, these goals include the preservation of the society of states, the maintenance of state sovereignty, the limitation of violence, and the fulfillment of agreements (Bull, 2012). According to Bull, international order is maintained through the interaction of three fundamental elements: common interests, rules, and institutions. Together, these elements enable states to manage conflict and pursue coexistence despite differences in power, ideology, and national interests.

From the perspective of the English School, international order does not require complete harmony among states. Rather, it depends upon the existence of a minimum consensus regarding certain fundamental objectives. States may disagree on many political issues while simultaneously recognizing shared interests in avoiding war, preventing instability, and maintaining predictable patterns of interaction. The importance of common interests is particularly evident in the case of the JCPOA. Although Iran and the P5+1 states held divergent views regarding regional politics and security, both sides shared an interest in preventing a further escalation of the nuclear dispute and avoiding the costs associated with military confrontation.

The negotiations that led to the JCPOA reflected this convergence of interests. For Iran, the agreement offered the prospect of sanctions relief, reintegration into international economic networks, and recognition of its right to pursue a peaceful nuclear program under international safeguards. For the United States and its partners, the agreement provided a mechanism for extending the breakout time of Iran's nuclear program, strengthening verification measures, and reducing concerns regarding nuclear proliferation in the Middle East (JCPOA, 2015). While the specific interests of the parties differed, the agreement reflected a broader shared interest in managing a major international security dispute through diplomacy rather than coercion.

The existence of common interests alone, however, is insufficient to sustain order. Bull argued that order also depends upon rules that define acceptable conduct and establish expectations regarding state behavior (Bull, 2012). Rules enable states to coordinate their actions by providing standards of legitimacy, obligation, and compliance. In the case of the JCPOA, these rules were embodied in a detailed framework of reciprocal commitments concerning nuclear activities, verification procedures, sanctions relief, and dispute-resolution mechanisms (JCPOA, 2015). The subsequent endorsement of the agreement through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 further strengthened its normative and legal authority within international society (UNSC, 2015).

The JCPOA therefore constituted more than a political understanding among governments. It established a structured set of expectations regarding the conduct of the participating parties. The agreement specified technical limitations on uranium enrichment, restrictions on nuclear facilities, verification procedures implemented by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and mechanisms for addressing disputes concerning implementation. These provisions created a rules-based framework intended to reduce uncertainty and facilitate cooperation among actors with otherwise conflicting interests.

The third component of order identified by Bull is the existence of institutions. Within English School theory, institutions are not limited to formal organizations. Rather, they consist of durable social practices that regulate relations among states and contribute to the maintenance of order (Bull, 2012; Buzan, 2004). A distinction is commonly made between primary and secondary institutions. Primary institutions are fundamental practices of international society, such as diplomacy, international law,

balance of power, and great-power management. Secondary institutions, by contrast, are formal organizations and regimes created by states to pursue specific objectives, including the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the global nuclear non-proliferation regime (Buzan, 2004).

This distinction is especially useful for understanding the JCPOA. The agreement itself can be viewed as a secondary institution embedded within a broader framework of primary institutions. Its negotiation depended upon diplomacy, its implementation relied upon international law and verification procedures, and its sustainability required cooperation among the major powers involved in the negotiations. In this sense, the JCPOA was not an isolated diplomatic arrangement but rather part of a wider institutional structure through which international society sought to manage a significant security challenge.

Among the primary institutions identified by Bull, diplomacy played a particularly important role in the creation of the JCPOA. The agreement emerged after years of negotiations involving Iran, the P5+1, the European Union, and the IAEA. Diplomatic engagement enabled the parties to reconcile competing interests and transform a highly contentious issue into a framework of negotiated commitments. Likewise, international law contributed to the agreement's legitimacy by linking its provisions to existing non-proliferation norms and embedding them within the framework established by UNSCR 2231. The role of great-power management was equally significant, as the participation and coordination of the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom were essential to both the negotiation and implementation of the agreement.

At the same time, the subsequent trajectory of the JCPOA highlights the limitations of institutionalized order. The United States' withdrawal from the agreement in May 2018 demonstrated that even highly institutionalized arrangements remain vulnerable when political support among major powers deteriorates. From an English School perspective, this development does not necessarily invalidate the order-maintaining function of the JCPOA. Rather, it illustrates a central insight of the theory: international order depends not only on rules and institutions but also on the continued commitment of powerful states to uphold them. Consequently, the experience of the JCPOA reveals both the capacity of international society to generate cooperative solutions to security challenges and the fragility of such arrangements when great-power consensus breaks down.

The following sections examine in greater detail how the primary institutions of international society, namely the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, and great-power management, shaped the negotiation, implementation, and subsequent erosion of the JCPOA.

International Law and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

Within English School theory, international law constitutes one of the primary institutions through which international society maintains order. Unlike realist approaches, which tend to view international law as largely dependent upon the distribution of power among states, the English School regards law as an essential mechanism for regulating relations among sovereign states and facilitating coexistence in an otherwise anarchic environment (Bull, 2012). Drawing on the Grotian tradition, English School scholars argue that states do not merely compete for power; they also recognize common rules and legal obligations that enable stable and predictable interaction (Suganami, 2010).

For Hedley Bull (2012), international law contributes to international order because it establishes

common standards of conduct, clarifies rights and obligations, and provides a framework within which states can pursue their interests while limiting conflict. International law therefore performs both a normative and a practical function. Normatively, it defines legitimate behavior. Practically, it reduces uncertainty by creating expectations regarding the conduct of states. In this sense, international law is not separate from international order but one of its principal foundations.

The relevance of international law to the JCPOA is evident in both the negotiation and implementation of the agreement. Although the JCPOA was not formally adopted as a treaty under international law, it was embedded within an international legal framework and derived much of its authority from that framework. The agreement explicitly reaffirmed the rights and obligations of the parties under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) and specified detailed commitments regarding nuclear activities, verification procedures, sanctions relief, and dispute-resolution mechanisms (JCPOA, 2015).

The legal significance of the agreement increased substantially with the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 on 20 July 2015. Through Resolution 2231, the Security Council endorsed the JCPOA, called upon all member states to support its implementation, and created the legal framework through which previous sanctions measures would be modified or terminated upon verification of Iranian compliance (UNSC, 2015). From an English School perspective, the endorsement of the agreement by the Security Council reflected an attempt by international society to institutionalize a negotiated solution to a major security dispute through internationally recognized legal procedures.

A further manifestation of international law in the JCPOA was the central role assigned to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The agreement instituted extensive monitoring and verification arrangements designed to ensure transparency regarding Iran's nuclear activities. IAEA reports issued between 2015 and 2018 repeatedly confirmed Iran's implementation of its nuclear-related commitments under the agreement (IAEA, 2016; IAEA, 2017). These verification procedures provided an institutional mechanism through which legal commitments could be monitored and assessed, thereby strengthening confidence among the participating parties.

The dispute-resolution provisions of the JCPOA also illustrate the importance of legal and quasi-legal mechanisms in maintaining order. The agreement set out procedures through which disagreements concerning implementation could be addressed through consultation, review, and collective decision-making rather than unilateral action (JCPOA, 2015). Such provisions reflected the broader English School assumption that rules and institutions contribute to order by providing peaceful mechanisms for managing conflict among states.

At the same time, the subsequent deterioration of the agreement highlights the limitations of international law as an instrument of order maintenance. The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018 demonstrated that legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee compliance when political support among major powers weakens. Despite the continued existence of the agreement and the legal framework established by Resolution 2231, the effectiveness of the arrangement depended upon the willingness of its principal participants to uphold their commitments. From an English School perspective, this development illustrates an important point: international law contributes to order, but its effectiveness ultimately depends upon the continued support of states, particularly the major powers responsible for sustaining international society.

The experience of the JCPOA therefore demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of international law as a primary institution of international society. On the one hand, legal commitments, Security Council endorsement, and verification mechanisms facilitated cooperation and helped manage a major international security dispute. On the other hand, the erosion of the agreement after 2018 revealed that legal rules alone are insufficient to preserve order in the absence of sustained political commitment. The JCPOA thus provides an important example of how international law can contribute to the maintenance of international order while simultaneously illustrating the conditions under which such legal arrangements may become vulnerable.

Balance of Power and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The balance of power occupies a central place in English School thinking and is regarded by Hedley Bull as one of the primary institutions through which international order is maintained (Bull, 2012). Unlike purely realist interpretations, which often view the balance of power primarily as the outcome of competition among states, the English School treats it as a social institution that contributes to the preservation of international society by preventing the emergence of overwhelming dominance and reducing the likelihood of major conflict. In this sense, the balance of power serves not merely strategic purposes but also broader order-maintaining functions.

According to Bull (2012), the balance of power helps preserve the independence of states, limits the concentration of power, and contributes to the continuity of international society. Similarly, Little (2007) argues that the balance of power should be understood not only as a distribution of capabilities but also as a set of practices through which states seek to maintain acceptable political and security arrangements. From this perspective, the institution of balance of power is closely connected to diplomacy, international law, and great-power management.

The relevance of the balance of power to the JCPOA emerges from the widespread concern among regional and international actors regarding the potential consequences of Iran's nuclear program. Prior to the conclusion of the agreement, many governments feared that continued escalation of the nuclear dispute could alter regional security dynamics, increase the risk of military confrontation, and potentially trigger broader proliferation pressures in the Middle East. Whether these concerns accurately reflected Iran's intentions is less important for the present analysis than the fact that they influenced the behavior of the negotiating parties and shaped the diplomatic process that culminated in the JCPOA.

From an English School perspective, the agreement can be understood as an attempt to manage these concerns through institutionalized cooperation rather than through coercive balancing alone. The restrictions on uranium enrichment, limitations on nuclear stockpiles, redesign of the Arak reactor, and extensive verification measures established under the JCPOA were intended to reduce uncertainty concerning Iran's nuclear activities and thereby mitigate perceived threats to regional and international stability (JCPOA, 2015). In this respect, the agreement functioned as a mechanism for preserving strategic equilibrium while avoiding military confrontation.

The role of the balance of power is also evident in the participation of the major powers in the negotiation process. The involvement of the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany reflected a shared interest in preventing the escalation of a security issue that could have broader implications for regional and international order. Rather than pursuing unilateral solutions,

these actors sought to manage the dispute through a collectively negotiated framework endorsed by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (UNSC, 2015). Such cooperation is consistent with the English School view that the balance of power often operates in conjunction with diplomacy and great-power management as part of a wider effort to preserve order.

At the same time, the subsequent deterioration of the agreement illustrates the fragility of balance-of-power arrangements when political consensus weakens. The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018 reintroduced uncertainty about the future of the agreement and contributed to renewed tensions between Iran and Western states. From an English School perspective, this development demonstrates that balance-of-power arrangements are not self-sustaining. Their effectiveness depends upon the continued willingness of key actors to support the institutional mechanisms through which stability is maintained.

The JCPOA should therefore not be viewed simply as a technical nuclear agreement. It also served as an effort by major actors to manage perceived shifts in regional and international power relations through diplomatic and institutional means. By reducing uncertainty, limiting the risk of escalation, and providing a framework for monitoring and verification, the agreement contributed to the maintenance of strategic stability and thus fulfilled one of the core functions traditionally associated with the balance of power in English School theory. Nevertheless, the challenges that emerged after 2018 confirm that such arrangements remain vulnerable when the political foundations supporting them begin to erode.

Diplomacy and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

Among the primary institutions identified by the English School, diplomacy occupies a central role because it provides the principal mechanism through which states communicate, negotiate, and manage their relations within international society. Hedley Bull (2012) defines diplomacy as the conduct of relations between states and other entities in world politics through official representatives and peaceful means. For Bull, diplomacy is not simply a foreign-policy instrument but a constitutive institution of international society because it enables states to pursue their interests while preserving order and coexistence.

The significance of diplomacy in English School theory derives from its contribution to the maintenance of international order. According to Bull (2012), diplomacy performs several essential functions: facilitating communication among governments, negotiating agreements, gathering and transmitting information, minimizing misunderstandings, and helping to manage international crises. Through these functions, diplomacy reduces uncertainty and creates opportunities for cooperation even among states with conflicting interests. As Watson (1992) argues, diplomacy has historically been one of the most important institutions through which international society has regulated relations among sovereign states.

More recent English School scholarship has further emphasized the role of diplomacy as a mechanism for sustaining international society. Buzan (2004) argues that diplomacy serves as a primary institution because it creates predictable patterns of interaction and helps maintain the shared rules and expectations upon which international order depends. Likewise, Dunne and Reus-Smit (2017) note that diplomacy enables states with divergent political interests to participate in common institutional frameworks without requiring ideological consensus. From this perspective, diplomacy is particularly

important in situations where cooperation must be achieved among actors that possess fundamentally different political systems, security concerns, and strategic objectives.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action constitutes one of the most significant contemporary examples of diplomacy operating as an institution of international society. The agreement emerged after more than a decade of negotiations concerning Iran's nuclear program. Diplomatic engagement began with negotiations between Iran and the EU-3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom) in 2003 and gradually evolved into a multilateral process involving the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany. The negotiations culminated in the conclusion of the JCPOA on 14 July 2015 after nearly twenty months of intensive bargaining following the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 (European Union External Action Service [EEAS], 2015).

From an English School perspective, the negotiation process itself is as significant as the substantive provisions of the agreement. The JCPOA demonstrated that diplomacy could provide a framework for managing a highly contentious security dispute without resorting to military force. During the negotiations, the parties maintained fundamentally different positions regarding Iran's nuclear activities. Iran consistently emphasized its right to peaceful nuclear technology under Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while the United States and several European governments focused on concerns regarding nuclear proliferation and regional security. Despite these differences, diplomatic engagement enabled the parties to identify areas of overlapping interest and develop mutually acceptable arrangements (JCPOA, 2015).

The diplomatic character of the agreement is reflected in several of its key provisions. The JCPOA established detailed commitments concerning uranium enrichment, stockpile limitations, centrifuge numbers, verification procedures, and sanctions relief. These provisions were not imposed unilaterally but emerged through prolonged negotiation and reciprocal concessions. In this regard, the agreement illustrates one of Bull's (2012) central arguments: diplomacy enables states to reconcile competing interests through peaceful bargaining rather than coercive confrontation.

The role of diplomacy continued after the conclusion of the agreement. The JCPOA created a Joint Commission composed of representatives from Iran and the P5+1 to oversee implementation, review disputes, and coordinate compliance efforts (JCPOA, 2015). The creation of this body institutionalized diplomatic communication and reflected the English School view that diplomacy is an ongoing process rather than a single event. Through regular meetings and consultations, the Joint Commission sought to preserve cooperation and manage disagreements before they escalated into broader political conflicts.

The importance of diplomacy can also be observed in the reactions of international actors to the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. Although the withdrawal significantly weakened the agreement, the remaining participants, namely Iran, the European Union, Russia, and China, continued diplomatic efforts to preserve elements of the arrangement. European governments set up the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) and repeatedly reaffirmed their commitment to the agreement as a means of preventing its complete collapse (EEAS, 2019). While these efforts ultimately faced substantial limitations, they nevertheless illustrated the continued reliance of international society on diplomatic mechanisms to manage conflict and preserve order.

The JCPOA therefore provides evidence for one of the central propositions of English School theory: diplomacy is an indispensable institution for the maintenance of international order. The agreement

was achieved through sustained diplomatic engagement, implemented through institutionalized diplomatic mechanisms, and partially preserved through continued diplomatic efforts even after the emergence of significant political disagreements. At the same time, the difficulties encountered after 2018 reveal the limits of diplomacy. Diplomatic institutions can facilitate cooperation and reduce conflict, but their effectiveness ultimately depends upon the political willingness of states, particularly major powers, to uphold negotiated commitments. Consequently, the experience of the JCPOA confirms both the strengths and the limitations of diplomacy as an institution of international society.

Great-Power Management and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

Great-power management holds a distinctive place among the primary institutions identified by the English School because it reflects the unequal distribution of capabilities within international society. While all states are formally sovereign, they do not possess equal capacities to influence international outcomes. Consequently, certain states acquire special responsibilities for maintaining international order and managing issues that affect international peace and security. Hedley Bull (2012) argued that great powers play a crucial role in preserving international society because they possess the material capabilities and political influence necessary to address major international challenges. In this sense, great-power management functions as an institution through which order is maintained despite the absence of a central authority in world politics.

According to Bull (2012), great powers contribute to international order in two principal ways. First, they manage their relations with one another in order to prevent conflicts that could threaten the stability of the international system. Second, they cooperate in addressing broader international problems that affect the society of states as a whole. Great-power management therefore involves both competition and cooperation. While major powers frequently pursue divergent interests, they also recognize a common interest in preserving a minimum level of international order and preventing the escalation of conflicts that could undermine international stability.

The JCPOA provides a particularly useful case through which to examine the operation of this institution. The Iranian nuclear issue was not merely a regional dispute but a matter that engaged all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, alongside Germany and the European Union. The participation of the United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom reflected a shared recognition that the dispute had implications extending beyond the Middle East and potentially affecting the broader international order. From an English School perspective, the involvement of these actors illustrates the operation of great-power management in response to a significant international security challenge.

The negotiation process that culminated in the JCPOA required an unusual degree of coordination among major powers with otherwise divergent geopolitical interests. During the negotiations, the United States and Russia were experiencing increasing tensions over Ukraine, while strategic competition between the United States and China was becoming more pronounced. Nevertheless, these powers cooperated within the P5+1 framework to negotiate a common approach toward Iran's nuclear program. This cooperation reflected what Bull (2012) described as the managerial responsibilities of great powers: despite disagreements on other issues, they recognized a common interest in preventing nuclear proliferation and reducing the risk of regional instability.

The legal endorsement of the JCPOA through United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 fur-

ther demonstrates the role of great-power management. The unanimous adoption of the resolution by the Security Council in July 2015 constituted an important expression of collective support among the major powers for a negotiated solution to the nuclear dispute (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2015). Through this process, the permanent members of the Security Council collectively exercised their institutional authority to support and legitimize the agreement. From the perspective of English School theory, this illustrated an important example of great powers acting as managers of international order through established institutions and legal mechanisms.

The implementation phase of the JCPOA likewise depended upon continued cooperation among the major powers. The agreement's effectiveness relied not only on Iranian compliance but also on the willingness of the participating states to fulfill their own commitments regarding sanctions relief, verification procedures, and dispute-resolution mechanisms. In this respect, the JCPOA reflected a broader principle emphasized by the English School: international order is maintained not solely through rules and institutions but through the active support of the states possessing the greatest influence within international society (Bull, 2012; Buzan, 2004).

The subsequent deterioration of the agreement after 2018 provides an important test of the English School argument. The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA revealed how changes in the policies of a major power can significantly affect the stability of international arrangements. Although the remaining participants, namely Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the European Union, continued to support the agreement, the withdrawal of one of its principal architects weakened the political foundations upon which it depended. From an English School perspective, this development highlights both the strengths and limitations of great-power management. The successful negotiation of the JCPOA confirmed the capacity of major powers to cooperate in preserving order, while the subsequent erosion of the agreement illustrated the fragility of such arrangements when consensus among great powers breaks down.

The JCPOA therefore provides important evidence concerning the role of great powers in international society. Its creation reflected a shared commitment among major powers to address a potentially destabilizing security issue through diplomacy, international law, and institutional cooperation. At the same time, its later difficulties show that the effectiveness of great-power management depends upon sustained political commitment and continued agreement among the principal actors. The experience of the JCPOA thus supports a central proposition of English School theory: international order is significantly shaped by the willingness and ability of great powers to fulfill their managerial responsibilities within international society.

Conclusion

This article examined the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) through the theoretical framework of the English School of International Relations in order to assess its contribution to the maintenance of international order. The central research question asked to what extent the JCPOA contributed to the preservation of international order and what the subsequent deterioration of the agreement reveals about the resilience and limitations of international society. Drawing upon the English School's understanding of order as a product of common interests, rules, and institutions, the analysis explored the role of diplomacy, international law, balance of power, and great-power management in the negotiation, implementation, and subsequent evolution of the agreement.

The findings suggest that the JCPOA constituted an important order-maintaining arrangement within contemporary international society. The agreement emerged from a convergence of interests among Iran and the P5+1 regarding the management of a potentially destabilizing security dispute. Through diplomatic negotiations, legal commitments, verification mechanisms, and coordination among major powers, the participating actors established a framework designed to reduce uncertainty, prevent escalation, and preserve regional and international stability. In this respect, the JCPOA reflected the operation of the principal institutions identified by the English School as essential to the maintenance of international order.

The analysis further demonstrates that diplomacy played a central role in transforming a highly contentious security issue into a framework of negotiated cooperation. International law provided legitimacy, predictability, and institutional procedures for implementation and verification, particularly through the endorsement of the agreement by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 and the monitoring activities of the International Atomic Energy Agency. The agreement also reflected concerns regarding regional and international stability associated with the balance of power, while its successful negotiation depended heavily upon cooperation among the major powers. Collectively, these findings support the English School argument that international order is sustained not solely through material power but through a combination of shared interests, accepted rules, and institutionalized practices.

At the same time, the experience of the JCPOA reveals important limitations in the capacity of international society to maintain order. The withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in May 2018 exposed the fragility of institutional arrangements that depend upon continued political support from major powers. Although the legal framework of the agreement remained formally intact and other participants continued to support its implementation, the erosion of great-power consensus significantly weakened its effectiveness. This development highlights a central insight of English School theory: institutions and rules can facilitate cooperation and contribute to order, but their durability ultimately depends upon the willingness of influential states to uphold them.

The article also contributes to the broader literature on the JCPOA and International Relations theory. While realist approaches emphasize power and strategic bargaining, liberal institutionalist accounts focus on cooperation and formal institutions, and constructivist perspectives highlight norms and identities, the English School offers a broader framework that links these dimensions to the question of international order. The analysis shows that the value of the English School lies in its ability to examine simultaneously the interaction of power, law, diplomacy, institutions, and shared interests within a single analytical framework. Consequently, the JCPOA serves as a useful case through which to explore both the creation and the erosion of order in contemporary international politics.

More broadly, the experience of the JCPOA suggests that multilateral agreements continue to constitute important instruments for managing international security challenges. However, the durability of such agreements depends not only on their legal design or technical provisions but also on sustained political commitment among the principal actors involved. The case therefore illustrates both the possibilities and the limitations of institutionalized cooperation in contemporary international society. Future efforts to address complex international security issues are likely to face similar challenges, making the relationship between diplomacy, international law, and great-power management an enduring subject of scholarly and policy relevance.

Ultimately, the JCPOA confirms that international order is neither self-sustaining nor purely coercive. Rather, it is a dynamic and contested process that depends upon the continuous interaction of common interests, rules, institutions, and political commitment. The English School provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics and for explaining both the achievements and vulnerabilities of contemporary efforts to maintain international order. Future research could compare the JCPOA with other major non-proliferation and security arrangements in order to evaluate the conditions under which institutions of international society successfully preserve order despite changing patterns of great-power relations.

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