

# Perceptions of the Other: Iran's National Identity and Nuclear Policy

Written by Gianna Gayle Amul

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GIANNA GAYLE AMUL, JUN 14 2012

This article aims to address the way in which Iranian leaders' conceptions of their own national identity are influenced by American and Chinese perceptions of the Iranian nuclear program in ways that can potentially increase Iranian motivations to acquire nuclear weapons. The significance of this topic is relevant not only to the future of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in a "second" nuclear age, but also to the future of both American and Chinese relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Assessing this issue using existing theories may clarify American and Chinese strategic interests in Iran and may also shed further light on Iranian motivations.

### A Brief Review of Related Literature

At present, there has been relatively little analysis of the interaction between the American and Chinese perceptions of the factors motivating Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons. What has proliferated in the literature are analyses of the U.S.-Iran relationship, usually centered on both states' threat perceptions of each other and how these perceptions are manifested in their respective policies towards each other (Beeman 2005; Barsamian 2007; Fayazmanesh 2008; Milani 2010; Jones 2011). Beeman (2005) for example, argued that the media in both states had been used to "demonize" the other country and further asserted that the U.S. and Iran each "construct the other to fit an idealized picture of an enemy." Jones (2011) further suggested that the American news media helped expand U.S. government power by "increasing the likelihood of Americans looking unfavorably upon Iran's nuclear program" and by legitimizing the US government's efforts in taking action "against the alleged Iranian nuclear threat.

Despite the fact that China and Iran have a longer and richer history of relations with each other, relatively little has been written on the Sino-Iranian relationship in recent years, especially when compared to the ink that has been spilled over U.S.-Iran relations. Recent literature suggests that relations between China and Iran are founded on mutual pragmatism and solidarity (Garver 2007) with an element geared towards balancing the U.S. in international politics (Calabrese 2006; Burman 2009; Currier and Dorraj 2010; van Kemenade 2010; Lin 2011).

The existing literature on U.S.-Iran and China-Iran relations, surveyed separately, shows how the security model, domestic politics model and the norms model have all been used to explain Iranian motives for the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons. As Scott Sagan (1996/1997) has argued, the quest for nuclear weapons isn't always driven by national security concerns or even by domestic politics alone. Indeed, states also pursue nuclear weapons because they view acquiring them as symbols of national prestige, modernity, and identity for the state. Etel Solingen's (2007) analysis of Iran's nuclear logic diverged from Sagan's thesis when she pointed out that, apart from external threats and Iran's perceived vulnerability to the United States, Israel, and Pakistan, Iran's own domestic politics and foreign policy, geared essentially towards its own political survival, have antagonized the United States, the European Union, and Israel.

In order to address this gap in the literature, this article argues that, among the various factors that drive Iran's core leadership to pursue nuclear weapons, the dynamics of the American and Chinese perceptions of Iran's nuclear program give a more probable explanation at an individual level of analysis. This essay argues that American and Chinese perceptions of Iran, reflected in each of their policies toward Iran, contribute to Iran's own perceptions of

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them and, in turn, its motivations to “weaponize” its nuclear capabilities. Analysis of Iran’s “national identity conception” is then crucial to understanding this motivation and the framework for such analysis is briefly discussed in the next section.

## Framework of Analysis

Hymans’s psychological theory of nuclear proliferation is critical to understanding Iranian motivations, but has never been truly utilized to examine the possible motivations of Iran’s core leadership in their drive to complete their nuclear program. This essay, while not explicitly applying the theory to understand Iran’s motivations, will draw on Hyman’s national identity conception as part of a broader framework to explore other issues concerning national identity and motivations for proliferation. Most studies of Iran’s motivations are state-centric, which skews towards systemic and domestic levels of analysis. Hyman’s national identity conception (NIC hereafter) theory rests on the assumption that explaining Iran’s motivations is not about which theory best applies to Iran as a state, but which theory, in pragmatic terms, can best explain the actual decisions and statements of individual Iranian leaders. This study attempts to examine the major speeches of Ayatollah Khamenei and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the statements of Barack Obama and Hu Jintao that refer to Iran’s nuclear program. Including Ahmadinejad, Obama and Hu in this study diverges from Hyman’s methodology, which only looks into the top leadership of each country. In the case of Iran, that would refer only to Khamenei. However, this essay would like to suggest that the perceptions of other leaders can also affect the NIC of another- even a “less important” leader like Ahmadinejad. The source material for the following analysis is derived from critical speeches and statements that were delivered by these leaders in 2011 and early 2012.

On an individual level of analysis, the NIC refers to how the leader understands the natural positioning of the nation with respect to a “key comparison other (KCO).” A leader’s NIC includes two dimensions: “solidarity” and “status.” Solidarity refers to a leader’s conception of “our” interests as opposed to “theirs” and these values can often be seen in a “black and white dichotomy.” Status, on the other hand, refers to a leader’s conception of how “we” stand relative to “them” in the international order (Hymans 2006:22-23).

## The US and Iran: Three Decades of Antagonism

US-Iran relations have been antagonistic since the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, when Islamic revolutionaries ousted the U.S.-backed Reza Shah Pahlavi and held the U.S. diplomatic staff in Tehran hostage for 444 days. Increased tensions developed over three decades of threats and counter-threats. The American allegations about Iran’s nuclear weapons program have only served to compound an already antagonistic relationship. Today, on top of the multilateral sanctions backed by the UN Security Council, the U.S. has also imposed one of the most comprehensive unilateral sanctions regimes in the world on Iran, aiming to curtail its oil exports, which make up the bulk of the government’s budget, and particularly its hard currency. The longstanding U.S.-Israel alliance has also aggravated tensions due to the regional rivalry between Iran and Israel.

President Barack Obama, amid the accommodating stance that he showed Iran early in his term and despite occasional positive responses from Ahmadinejad and other secondary players, has recently demonstrated increasing impatience with the lack of a cordial response from Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran’s top leader, by imposing tighter sanctions on Iran over the last few months. Most notably, on December 31, 2011 President Obama signed into law a bill that denies third-party entities that do business with Iran’s central bank access to the U.S. financial system. This is aimed at reducing the revenue received by the Iranian government from oil and natural gas exports. Additionally, President Obama has repeatedly maintained that “all options,” including military action, are still on the table for preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability. In a press conference with Chinese President Hu Jintao in January 2011, President Obama stated that the P5+1 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), “will continue to offer the government of Iran the opportunity for dialogue and integration into the international community, but only if it meets its obligations (The White House 2011*Press Conference with President Obama and President Hu*).”

Since Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, he has been “demonized by a massive U.S. and Israeli disinformation

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campaign (Fayazmanesh 2008:229).” Since then, the US imposition of unilateral sanctions and continued threats of military action have only aggravated the already hostile bilateral relationship between the US and Iran. These policies have created a “siege mentality” in Iran and led to the longevity and reform-aversion of the current regime in Tehran (Fayazmanesh 2008:231). The rhetorical construction of the Iranian nuclear threat originated in the Bush administration and has been continued under Obama (Jones 2011:2). The ambiguity of Iran's nuclear program has enabled this rhetoric to be utilized to “offset the lack of evidence that could more fully substantiate claims of illicit nuclear activity in Iran (Jones 2011:16).” In Iran, on the other hand, American hostility has propped up earlier symbolic constructions of the U.S. as the “Great Satan” in Iran, while the Iranian leadership is caricatured as a cabal of “Mad Mullahs” in the West. This name-calling has nothing to do with a realistic assessment of the facts, but has a great affect on “the fulfillment of image expectations” on the part of each state (Beeman 2005:9).

## **China and Iran: Four Decades of Pragmatic and Balanced Partnership**

One critical difference between U.S.-Iranian and Chinese-Iranian relations is communication. China has maintained and strengthened robust bilateral relations with Iran for the past four decades while the US has had no direct channel to Tehran since 1979.

2011 marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Iran. It was only recently that scholars have looked at China-Iran relations to examine how this has affected both China's rise and Iran's regional aspirations. China-Iran relations have been described as being based on support for a multipolar international system and anti-hegemonic civilizational solidarity against the West, as well as mutual recognition of power and influence in their respective regions (Garver 2006; Garver 2011). This solidarity stems from the fact that Iran is a developing country that has been constantly pressured by “the West.” Chinese leaders see the U.S. as an “arrogant hegemonist bully bent on dominating the energy-rich region via subordination of Iran and Iraq (Garver 2006: 234).” Apart from anti-hegemonic solidarity, Iran and China share common interests in internal security, an organized energy market, and, most importantly, equal recognition and fair treatment in the international system (Baer 2008:244-246).

In terms of Iran's nuclear program, China's sympathy for the Iranian position signaled Beijing's suspicion of American rhetoric with regard to nuclear weapons possession and proliferation. (Garver 2006). China's recent support for tighter sanctions on Iran may be a reflection of China's efforts to be a “responsible stakeholder” or a result of the U.S. offering incentives like allowing China to participate at the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington. Whatever the case, this support should not be taken as a repudiation of the seemingly enduring partnership with Iran. Balancing out its economic development goals and its role as a responsible international actor, China's foreign policy towards Iran is characterized by “strategic opportunism” (Garver 2006). China is also generally opposed to imposing sanctions on other sovereign states, given its own experience of having been subject to economic sanctions in the past. It is also disinclined to support military force in conflict resolution. China's support and constant defense of Iran's “peaceful” nuclear program is based on three principles: (1) non-intervention in other countries' domestic affairs; (2) nuclear non-proliferation; and (3) constant flow of energy supplies from the Middle East (Calabrese 2006).

China has utilized both its permanent membership in the UN Security Council and its status as a rising power to assert that the Iranian nuclear issue needs to be resolved peacefully through dialogue and consultation, rather than using sanctions or military means that do not “fundamentally” address the problem. Despite Western pressure, China and Russia have, until recently, abstained from U.N. Security Council resolutions that impose further sanctions on Iran. Agreeing to the sanctions regime also came with a Janus face; China still preserves robust trade and diplomatic relations with Iran today, invariably serving its own national interests and balancing out U.S. power in the Middle East (Currier and Dorraj 2010:67).

## **Iranian Leaders' National Identity Conception**

The development of the Iranian leadership's conception of national identity can be derived from the dynamics between American and Chinese perceptions of Tehran. These two perceptions contradict each other but it can be

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argued that the corresponding policies from the two countries are motivating Iran's core leadership (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) to acquire and develop nuclear weapons, as Hymans's theory predicts leaders with oppositional-nationalist NICs will do. U.S. threats and sanctions operate on the Islamic Republic's leadership's fear, pride, and desire for survival, while China's sympathy operates on Iran's pride and historical self-conception as a great civilization.

Given historical antagonism and preliminary content analysis of speech acts, it can be argued that Iranian leaders' NIC vis-à-vis the US has been "oppositional nationalist" with an "us against them" perception since the birth of the Islamic Republic, coupled with a sense of status that believes that "we are naturally their equals, if not their superiors" (Hymans 2006:25). This categorization can be broken into two NICs: the oppositional and the nationalist.

Oppositional NICs imply that a leader is fearful when interacting with "them" and will consequentially have "higher threat perceptions," a "lower cognitive complexity," and a "greater urgency to act" in order to alleviate this sense of danger and fear (Hymans 2006: 30-32)." Ahmadinejad's threat perception alone is considerably high, given the following statement from his speech in the UN General Assembly in September 2011:

Who used the mysterious September 11 incident as a pretext to attack Afghanistan and Iraq, killing, injuring, and displacing millions in two countries with the ultimate goal of bringing into its domination the Middle East and its oil resources? (Ahmadinejad 2011b).

This statement shows the extent of Ahmadinejad's feelings of insecurity from the U.S. invasions of Iran's neighboring countries, Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, the statement accuses the U.S. government of secretly perpetrating the September 11 attacks in New York and the Pentagon, which shows either an excessively creative imagination on his part or a sign of decreasing ability to understand complex events (cognitive complexity). In an interview with the *Washington Post* before the aforementioned speech, Ahmadinejad made efforts to decrease danger and fear (in this case, lessening his own perception of danger from the US):

Iran and the U.S could cooperate in many affairs including security of Afghanistan, fighting narcotics, nuclear disarmament and reforming the economy of the world based on the condition that the U.S government accepts not to take any measures against Iran and other nations (Ahmadinejad 2011a).

Nationalist NICs mean that a leader's pride can lead to "higher relative potential power perceptions," "illusions of control," "the need to act autonomously," and to goals of "impressing" others to "reinforce his own ideas" (Hymans 2006: 33-34). Iran's leaders have been consistent on their view of the U.S. as "the leader of a cultural invasion" (2008: 138).

Khamenei's perception of Iran's relative power is evident from a Friday Sermon he delivered in Tehran in February 2012. The following statement reinforces strategic ambiguity as one of Iran's national strengths, thereby creating the illusion of Iranian control over American and Israeli military threats:

Military threats...show that America is unable to confront Iran in a logical way. They do not have a discourse against the discourse of the Islamic Republic. They cannot gain an advantage in the arena of intellectual and logical confrontation, so they are forced to resort to coercion. This means that coercion is America's only logic. Except for bloodshed, America does not have any means to advance its position. This will further undermine America's credibility in the eyes of the people of the world as well as the people of America (Khamenei 2012).

Ahmadinejad, in a February 2012 speech marking the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution, also reflects his nationalist NIC. During the speech, Ahmadinejad said:

We've been always ready to negotiate, but in a framework of justice and respect. It's the West who bring up a new excuses every day and convene and issue resolutions against us. I declare that, if you speak to us with the language of force and insults, the Iranian nation will never give in to your pressure (Reuters 2012, Iran Hints at Nuclear Breakthrough).

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With Chinese and Iranian leaders sharing “anti-hegemonic solidarity” and support for a multipolar international system, Ahmadinejad and Khamenei's NIC vis-à-vis China can be characterized as “sportsmanlike nationalist”. An interpretation of Hymans (and not Hymans himself) would imply that sportsmanlike nationalists are leaders who do not fear the other (China); reject a nuclear umbrella while refusing to “fall under the superpower's tutelage;” seek to build a “significant nuclear technology infrastructure for both the productive goal of boosting national development and the self-expressive goal of increasing their nation's international prestige;” if subjected to heavy international pressure, will draw on their pride to defend their nuclear policy; and resist the non-proliferation regime because of its “discriminatory character (Hymans 2006: 39).”

Iran's solidarity with and lack of fear of China is evident. Respect is also evident in China-Iran relations. On Khamenei's official website, he published his own views of nuclear energy and mentioned China's “great scientific advances” despite the crippling poverty and considerable technological backwardness of the People's Republic of China when it was first established in 1949 (2011). These warm feelings were manifested again in the following statement made by Ahmadinejad during a bilateral meeting with PRC President Hu Jintao in June 2011 marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the two countries establishing relations: “Iran is willing to enhance communication with China on international and regional issues, so as to boost international and regional security and stability.”

The meeting was held on the sidelines of the 10<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Kazakhstan, an organization in which Iran is an observer state. Sideline meetings have been useful venues for Iranian and Chinese leaders to privately discuss sensitive issues like the Iranian nuclear program. Over the last decade, meetings have also been held in Tehran, Geneva, and Beijing (Calabrese 2006:10). More recently, in February of this year, China's Assistant Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu visited Iran for a bilateral meeting on Iran's nuclear program. This was in critical preparation for future multilateral negotiations promised by Ahmadinejad at the same meeting with Hu Jintao, as he reiterated Iran's commitment to “hold dialogue with the six nations and resolve the Iranian nuclear issue through dialogue and cooperation (June 2011).” And just last week Ahmadinejad traveled to Beijing for the 11<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, where he once again held a meeting on the sidelines with Hu.

Whatever the result of the dialogue it is critical to acknowledge the role of China in influencing Iran to return to the negotiating table- whether out of solidarity or outright self-interest. The results of the *Majlis* election in Iran will be decisive in defining the direction for Iran's nuclear program and will be an opportune time, in terms of domestic politics, for Ahmadinejad to gain political leverage over Iran's nuclear program. The dualism of Iran's foreign policy does not only gravitate around Ahmadinejad but, more importantly, on Khamenei as the Supreme Leader (Ahmadi in Katouzian and Shahidi 2008; Salamey and Othman 2011; Rizvi 2012). This unique political structure has strongly influenced the direction of Iran's foreign policy.

Ahmadinejad and Khamenei hold a sportsmanlike nationalist view of China in terms of their constant reliance on the concept of national pride in defending Iran's nuclear policy. China also operates along the same principles, noting that sanctions and pressure will only harden Iran's strong nationalistic tendencies and therefore prove counterproductive.

China also notes that pressure will only generate domestic public support for the nuclear program in Iran. Indeed, a 2008 survey of Iranians found strong support for a “full nuclear fuel cycle capacity” that will benefit not only energy needs but that will also prove Iran's “technical competence that add to Iran's great power status,” and that provides an “independent source of energy that reduces Iranian vulnerability to outside pressure,” as well as “an existential nuclear deterrent: (Fair and Shellman 2008: 544). This was generally the same rhetoric that Ahmadinejad and Khamenei had been using in defending Iran's nuclear program in debates among policymakers about the relevance of a nuclear program to Iran (Loftian 2008). Iranian support for the nuclear policy supplements Ahmadinejad and Khamenei's perception that nuclear technology will contribute to national development and Iran's international prestige.

## Summary and Conclusions

Given the above analysis, it can be argued that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have nationalist NICs, but their solidarity

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perception depends on the "other." In the case of the U.S., both leaders exhibit an oppositional NIC. When dealing with China, on the other hand, both leaders exhibit a sportsmanlike NIC. These overlapping NICs increasingly point to a situation that both U.S. and Israeli leaders consider the worst-case scenario: a nuclear-armed Iran. As strongly nationalist leaders, Ahmadinejad and Khamenei both perceive higher levels of threat from aggressive U.S. rhetoric. As leaders with oppositional NICs, they exhibit an "us against them" mentality but also perceive that it is Iran's right to be treated fairly and equally in the international system. This has been one weakness of U.S. diplomacy on Iran, while it has been the strength of China's strategy. China has always treated Iran as an equal and, more importantly, as a strategic partner. Washington would do well to follow suit.

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