

The Iranian Nuclear Program: Realist vs. Constructivist Models

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SEAN PAUL ASHLEY, AUG 18 2012

Realism, as defined by Jack Snyder, is a model of international relations in which “self-interested states compete for power and security”[1] through the exercise of coercive power and diplomacy. Constructivism by contrast, identifies “persuasive ideas, collective values, culture and social identities”[2] as the central forces shaping international politics. This paper concedes at the outset that both motives have served as central engines of the Iranian nuclear program since its 1967 inauguration under the Shah, and have influenced its long-term objectives at large. An examination of three critical issues leads this paper to argue that ideological motives are uppermost in powering the Iranian nuclear program, to the detriment of long-term Iranian objectives in the region. The issues leading to this conclusion are as follows: First, this paper asserts Iranian long-term objectives are not defensive in nature, but are rather the expansion of influence and achieving regional preeminence. Second, this paper established that constructivist motives at the domestic level outweigh strategic concerns at the regional level. Third, this paper determines that the predominance of constructivist motives hobbles Iran in achieving these objectives in the region.

Accordingly, this paper shall be structured as follows. First, Iran’s realist motives shall be discussed with respect to its regional insecurities. Second, constructivist strategic incentives for Iranian nuclear proliferation shall be addressed. Following this, the focus shall move inwards, towards the ideological motives at the domestic level, and Iranian political culture. Then, the role of international forces shall be considered with regards to shaping Iranian ideological outlook on proliferation. Realist forces at this level shall also be analyzed. Subsequently, both motives shall be weighed to determine which commands greater control over Iranian nuclear ambitions. Finally, in view of the analysis given, Iran’s actions, and Iran’s long term objectives, this paper will conclude that the Iranian nuclear program serves as a handicap in achieving said objectives, citing the isolation and resistance Iran has faced in pursuing its nuclear program.

The immediate strategic argument in defense of Iran’s nuclear ambitions finds that Iran’s need to assuage its regional insecurities has historically posed a powerfully strategic incentive “to craft a viable deterrent capability against an evolving array of threats”[3]. According to Tayekh, the actions of a hostile Saddam, who “waged a merciless eight year war against [Iran] in which he deployed chemical weapons against Iran troops”[4], gave Iran a protracted and brutal lesson in the strategic advantages conferred by weapons of mass destruction. Manochir Dorraj complements Takekh’s diagnosis of Iran as “prisoners of insecurity” in suffering the eastwards threat of Taliban regime in Pakistan. With “several Iranian diplomats...massacred and the Afghan Shi’ite minority suffering severe persecution”[5], by 1998 Iran and Aghanistan nearly came to full-fledged conflict, and, despite the aversion of same, Iran was made acutely aware of the “sectarian Sunni-Shi’ite violence” that isolated it within the Arab world. Thus, as Volker Perthes notes, flanked by “two nuclear armed states, Pakistan [nuclear by 1998] and Israel...of which the former is a direct neighbor and fragile state with strong Sunni fundamentalists currents [and] anti-Shiite violence, and the latter an enemy”[6]. Iran has found itself facing a nuclearized, potentially hostile and, in the Iraqi case, outright coercive “bad neighborhood” that placed Iran in a position of prolonged strategic discomfort. Accordingly, farming Iranian motives as an attempt to redress strategic weaknesses by virtue of nuclear deterrence seems, at the outset, well founded.

However, if strategically defensive considerations remain uppermost in powering Iranian proliferation, then the

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subsequent toppling of the Taliban and Hussein in 2001, ought to have slowed Iran's nuclear ambition. That it has not seems to demonstrate that Iranian motives require explanation beyond immediate regional vulnerabilities. First, as observed by Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, "with the demise of Saddam's regime in neighboring Iraq, an Iranian nuclear weapons program has lost any compelling strategic rationale"[7]. Clifton Sherill lends credence to this view, claiming Iraq was the sole regional aggressor who had both "pursued nuclear arms [and] used chemical weapons against Iran"[8]. By contrast, Afghanistan was far outgunned by Iranian conventional military capability, and presented no grounds for resort to nuclear force. Pakistan seems even more remote justification for nuclearization, having "no major bilateral disputes with Iran"[9], and also preoccupied with its problems in India. Indeed, any potential strategic contention between the two would be exacerbated, rather than mitigated, by Iran's ascent as a nuclear rival. Finally, Israel, has never sought military confrontation with Iran, and vice versa. Thus, there can be little sympathy for the argument that Iran pursues proliferation "because the country is located in a rough, nuclearized neighborhood"[10].

However, the absence of immediate regional rivals, does not fully discredit the strategic argument. As Tayekh asserts, "with Saddam gone, America has emerged as the foremost strategic problem for Iran and the primary driver of its nuclear weapons policy"[11]. The United States has heightened Iran's strategic insecurity in two respects. First, despite emerging as the putative least of three evils, as opposed to Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian regime has, quite rightly "[felt] encircled by the US military presence in these two countries"[12]. Further, in addition to "the substantial augmentation of American military power on Iran's periphery"[13], the Bush doctrine seemed to indicate that America had both the will and the inclination. With "the doctrine of preemption espoused by the Bush administration"[14] set in place a precedent for unleashing American military power "against any nation deemed to be a threat to U.S. interests and national security"[15]. In tandem with the "characterization of Iran as a member of the axis of evil"[16], and the exercise of this preemptive precedent against another putative member of the axis, Iraq, Iran was given ample grounds for fearing the consequences of preemptive American power projection. Accordingly, this line of argument finds that, in order to avoid failing prey to the regime change that claimed Iraq, Iran felt compelled to amass deterrent nuclear capabilities.

Nevertheless, if nuclearization was, a strategic choice, then it was a strategic blunder. By 2004, "it became clear that neither the US congress nor the American public would support additional military actions absent major new provocations"[17]. Whatever teeth the Bush doctrine had, were largely rhetorical post-2003. With "almost no discussion of US military action against Iran with respect to its sponsorship of terrorism"[18], which was the initial justification for its inclusion within the axis of evil, Iran was assured of strategic security even while pursuing its terrorist modus operandi of sponsoring Hamas and Hezbollah. However, what discussion did exist was "related exclusively to Iran's pursuit of nuclear arms"[19]. Nuclear proliferation would create the very same threats that, according the line of argument espousing an emphasis defensive strategy, Iran sought to deter. Thus, Clifton poses the central question of Iran's nuclear paradox: "why would Iran be willing to accept the risk of US military action in order to pursue nuclear weapons capability"[20]?

This question can be fully satisfied neither by a strategic conception of Iranian motives, nor by a defensive conception of its interests. Thus, with respect to the inadequacies of the latter conception, Iran's long-term interest is, according to Barry Rubin, the deeply ideological desire to become the predominant power in the region[21]. Mohsen Milani finds that Iran seized the opportunities offered by the permissive regional context produced after the removal of its adversaries in Iraq and Afghanistan, and immediately expanded its powers in both directions, assuming "heavy involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan"[22] thereby creating a sphere of economic influence in the region. It has further adopted the role of patron by empowering and protecting "the historically marginalized Afghan Shi'ites"[23]. With respect to Iraq "Iran was the first country to recognize the post-Saddam government in Baghdad"[24] and has since "provided Baghdad with more support than even the staunchest of the United States' allies"[25]. In addition to consolidating its sphere of influence eastwards and westwards, Iranian support of "the Sunni groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad"[26] constitute an attempt to bridge the sectarian divide that has prevented Iran from assuming a position of unopposed regional respect. These actions are hardly those of a power seeking to safeguard its own territory. Rather, Iran's actions in the region identify it as a revisionist power, intent upon permanent expansion of its sphere of influence. Thus, this paper asserts that, given the absence of immediate regional aggressors and adversaries, Iranian long-term interests in the region have proceeded under an expansionist

The Iranian Nuclear Program: Realist vs. Constructivist Models

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agenda.

This expansionist agenda has been magnified by Iran's historic emphasis on Iranian nationalism and regional preeminence and also by the current regime's necessity of burnishing its Islamic credentials both domestically and regionally. First, the nuclear program has allowed Iran to parlay international opposition into awakening a defiant national pride. Iranian aggrandizement is a policy with precedents: the Shah "launched a massive military build-up, inaugurated a nuclear power program, mobilized the country's rising oil income"[27] with the objective of assuming regional preeminence. Thus, as Dorraj notes "many Iranians regard access to nuclear capability as part of their national right".[28] This nationalist sentiment has been harnessed by the Islamist regime, that, according to Sherrill, "is compelled to oppose the existing Western dominated distribution of power in the international system"[29]. Thus, Iran's policy of "nuclear saber rattling" is, as judged by Ofira Seliktar "a rhetorical tool employed by the clerical regime as a means of mobilizing domestic and regional public opinion"[30]. In further demonstration of the fusion between nationalist populism and pan-Islamism, Dorraj finds that "to be the second nation next to Pakistan to have an "Islamic bomb" bears supreme significance"[31] in the Iranian agenda, as it would "allow [Iran] to enhance its appeal across the region despite sectarian differences"[32].

At the domestic level then, nuclearization has been, to a significant degree, midwived by concepts of Iranian national pride and Islamist anti-Westernism. However, the emphasis of domestic constructivist narratives emphasizing Iranian agency finds its counterpart at the international level: Iranian bitterness and victimization has been the product of long ill-treatment by Western powers. Iranian elites have been abetted in "making it appear that concerns over Iranian nuclear weapons are merely the latest attempt of the west to deny Iran its due respect"[33], by America's involvement in the 1953 coup against Mohammed Mossadegh, American support of Iraq during the eight year war, and three decades of US containment following the revolution. This Western disrespect has further been borne out over the nuclear issue, with Iran being "the target of one of the most intrusive and humiliating inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency, as well as heightened international sanctions. This has been made all the more galling by Israel's immunity "from the scrutiny of the International Atomic Energy Agency or the sanctions of Western nations"[34]. Thus, there is a pronounced frustration with what Iranians, quite rightly, "view as an American double standard that would maintain US strategic supremacy but deny nuclear capability to regional powers"[35]. Thus, despite US aggression towards Iran being held to a minimum, the image of America as the "Great Satan", bent on Iran's undoing, has arrayed Iran's nuclear policy against the US.

The constructivist argument as demonstrated, carries great weight in answering the question of "why, given all the sanctions imposed by the United States, [Iran does not] cry uncle and stop its nuclear program"[36]. However, two arguments can be raised in defense of realism, that assert the nuclear program has served Iran well in prosecuting its ideologically expanded foreign policy horizons. For one, Iran's position of nuclear ambiguity, affords "Iran an excellent bargaining chip for future negotiations"[37]. Learning from the North Korean example, in which "nuclear capability has not only kept Washington at bay"[38] but also exacted American concessions "to multilateral negotiations with Pyongyang [and offers] of economic incentives and security guarantees to entice"[39] nonproliferation, Iran has found in itself a valuable asset that can be potentially parlayed into diplomatic and economic strength, that may countermand US containment.

Second, by developing nuclear energy of its own, Iran would obviate itself of "[dependence] on Russia for its future energy needs"[40]. With fuel consumption in Iran doubling in the past two years[41], Iran claims to need nuclear satisfaction of its energy demand. The example of the political concessions Russia exacted from its Georgian dependents indicates that Iran cannot possibly become strategically secure, while setting store by Russian energy goodwill. Thus, the Iranians seem assured that robust nuclear powers are necessary to realizing regional preeminence.

Nevertheless, the realities of Iranian nuclear policy belie the realist argument proposing a nuclear antidote for energy insecurity and economic sanctions. For one, economic isolation and strategic insecurity has been the legacy of Iranian nuclear posturing. Iran's aggressive nuclear rhetoric has only heightened resistance to its expansionist agenda, as "Egypt, the Gulf cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan has all announced their intention to develop nuclear power"[42] in the wake of Iranian nuclear acceleration. Absent local allies, and having provoked

The Iranian Nuclear Program: Realist vs. Constructivist Models

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the ire of the United States, the sanctioned regime in response to Iran's suspected attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, ironically, required Iran to rely more on its Russian ally for aid, even in the construction of nuclear facilities. Further, the prospect of nuclear aggression assures prolonged US projection of troops along the Iranian periphery. In sum, Iran has made a strategic mess for itself by flirting with nuclear weaponization.. Second, Iran's development of enrichment capabilities necessary to creating nuclear weapons demonstrates that it is not satisfied with securing energy independence. This conclusion is further borne out by the rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has threatened Israel with nuclear aggression.

To press this point, the shift between the conciliatory nuclear policies of the Khatami presidency, and the brinkmanship, defiance and acceleration of the program that has characterized Ahmadinejad's disputes the argument in favor of external strategic motives. Clearly, domestic political shifts altered policy. With the Khatami government emphasizing peaceable nuclear development for energy purposes, Iran repaired relations between itself and Saudi Arabia, and reduced tensions with Lebanon and Jordan[43]. By contrast, the current "nuclear crisis and its provocative handling by Ahmadinejad has....reversed [Khatami's] progress"[44]. Admittedly, the reversal of Khatami's popularity was in some part, a backlash against the "axis of evil" speech, and the bellicosity of the Bush doctrine. However, Ahmadinejad's opportunistic seizure of the anti-American moment, and the immediate popularity of such a move indicate that both the Iranian government and civil society, were ready and willing to think ill of the United States. Even after America's subsequent declaration of "force to be an instrument of last resort"[45] and demonstrated preference for diplomacy, there has been little evidence of Iran's nuclear deceleration, and continued threats of nuclear weaponization.

In conclusion, ideological motives far outweigh strategic concerns in motivating the Iranian nuclear program, and its rhetoric concerning same. Realist models that place a premium on external forces and strategic insecurity do not, on the whole, stand up to scrutiny in explaining Iranian actions. Fears of US malevolence have been much heightened by the culture of Iranian victimization, and the pervasive sense of Western aggression that has characterized US-Iranian relations. Further, with nuclearization serving as a symbol of national pride, the nuclear program owes popular support to constructivist, rather than strategic appeal. Finally, with nuclear decision-making power concentrated in the hand of hard-liners and religious elites, the nuclear program allows the regime to enhance its self-image as an anti-Western and Islamic power. Though strategic concerns may have initially motivated the programs, and offer auxiliary justifications vis-à-vis deterring the US, powerful constructivist incentives, enhanced by the radical government currently in power, have been the central motives behind policy

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The Iranian Nuclear Program: Realist vs. Constructivist Models

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The Iranian Nuclear Program: Realist vs. Constructivist Models

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