Iran’s Nuclear Policy: Concealed Intentions, Suspicious Behaviours.

An Exploration of the Framing of Iran’s Nuclear Programme as a Threat to International Peace and Security

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Abstract

Since the public revelations of Iran’s concealed nuclear facilities in August 2002, and despite years of inconclusive technical investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Iranian regime has been widely suspected of pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions by Western officials, their regional allies, and analysts. Adopting a constructivist perspective, this paper argues that the limited belief in the exclusively peaceful aims of Iran’s nuclear programme is strongly conditioned by the framing of its nuclear activities as a threat to international peace and security. To this end, the article engages with the three main factors that have shaped this particular understanding of Iran’s nuclear activities. It first analyses the rogue-state status of the Islamic Republic of Iran in order to shed light on the trust-deficient and securitised context within which the nuclear issue has unfolded. This article then engages with the main threat-based assessments regarding the likely effects of nuclear weapons acquisition on Iran’s decision-making calculus. In light of its attributed identity and preferences as a rogue state, Iran is not expected to behave like other nuclear-weapon states; thus further securitising its pursuit of sensitive nuclear technologies.
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1. Introduction

On 24 November 2013, the P5+1 group of nations and Iran reached a historic agreement, with Iran agreeing to curb its most sensitive nuclear activities in exchange for partial sanctions relief.¹ The Joint Plan of Action, or ‘Geneva agreement’, introduced a long awaited rupture in the ‘Iran nuclear issue’ which, since the 14 August 2002 revelations that the country possessed two undeclared nuclear facilities on its domestic soil, had remained largely cyclical.² Indeed, the interactions between Iran and its negotiation partners were chiefly marked by a succession of failed negotiations, the escalation of punitive policies, and the acceleration of nuclear activities, especially during the Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2013).³

The Geneva agreement thus represented a major breakthrough in the stalled negotiations and strengthened the prospect of a near and peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue. Three main factors converged to make this interim deal a possibility. First, recent domestic developments within Iran witnessed the election of President Rouhani, the former lead nuclear negotiator during the period 2002 to 2005, and the coming to power of an administration of ‘moderates’ and highly experienced diplomats, who have advocated ‘moderation’ and ‘constructive diplomacy’ with the international community at large and the Western core-powers in particular (Rouhani, 2013a and b). Second, the US administration of President Obama is proving highly determined to resolve the Iran nuclear issue, and to withstand domestic opposition to the ongoing negotiations.⁴ The US views the Rouhani administration as a rare opportunity to engage Iran, with Secretary of State Kerry recently declaring that the world is ‘at a crossroads with respect to the relationship with

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¹ The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany form the P5-1. They have been leading the negotiations with Iran since 2006 when Iran was referred to the UNSC for its nuclear programme, with the aim of finding a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue.

² On 14 August 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an Iranian dissident group dedicated to the overthrow of the Iranian government, exposed that Iran possessed two undeclared nuclear facilities. The revelations were confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in its June 2003 report (IAEA Board Report, 2003).

³ Iran faced an extremely comprehensive regime of sanctions. The UNSC adopted six Resolutions against Iran; most of which were under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In addition, the US and the EU implemented unilateral sanctions which have placed considerable restrictions on Iran’s oil, banking, and financial sectors. The punitive policies, however, failed to achieve their desired goals (International Crisis Group, 2012; Khajehpour, Marashi and Parsi, 2013).

⁴ President Obama has threatened to veto any new sanctions legislation from Congress while talks are ongoing. In addition, an unprecedented coalition of advocacy groups, policy experts, and American officials have strongly campaigned against the imposition of new sanctions (Alman, 2014; National Iranian American Council, 2014).
Iran’ (US Department of State, 2014). Third, the highly volatile geopolitical dynamics within the Middle East region have strengthened the necessity of a peaceful and rapid resolution of the nuclear issue. The rapidly evolving theatres of conflict, particularly Syria, form the main priority of key powers inside and outside the region.

Whilst the negotiations between Iran and the P5-1 have continued to move forward positively, with new talks beginning on 18 February 2014 (BBC News, 2014), the possibility of a long-term deal with Iran remains fragile. Indeed, there continues to be limited belief among Western officials, their regional allies, and analysts, in the prospect of reaching a comprehensive deal with Iran which would assure that its circumscribed programme remains fully transparent and dedicated to peaceful uses only. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example, called the Geneva Agreement a ‘historic mistake’ (BBC News, 2013). The prevailing scepticism is, as this article demonstrates, conditioned by the framing of Iran’s nuclear programme as a threat to international peace and security.

This article identifies and examines the three main factors that have contributed to this threat construction and made the nuclear negotiations with Iran so difficult and perilous to this day. The analysis is based on the publications of leading Western think tanks, Iran experts, and statements of Western officials and their regional allies. Although wide-ranging, these sources all share the conservative perception of Iran’s external behaviour in general, and nuclear programme in particular, as security challenges for the international system. To this end, the article starts by engaging with the rogue state status of the Islamic Republic of Iran and how perceptions of its identity, interests, and foreign policy preferences have shaped understandings of its nuclear activities. Second, the article explores the two key motives that explain the resilient suspicion amongst officials and analysts that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions. The first is an attributed nuclear weapons rationale for Iran for strategic, domestic, and normative motives. The second is Iran’s apparent suspicious behaviour both prior to and since the 2002 revelations. The two factors, intentions and behaviours, are mutually reinforcing: they originate from, and

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5 President Obama seems to have renewed with his inaugural address of January 2009, in which he declared that ‘[t]o those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.’ The enemies of the US were thus offered a choice between integration in the international system and continuous isolation (Litwak, 2012: 3-4).
strengthen, the rogue state image of Iran. Thirdly, the article analyses how and why Western officials and analysts think nuclear weapons acquisition would affect the decision-making calculus of the Iranian leadership for the worse. Their elements of concern are twofold: would Iran behave like other nuclear weapons states? And how would domestic developments affect its future nuclear calculus? Their negative assessments make Iran’s pursuit of its nuclear activities a security threat.

The three aforementioned lines of inquiry all rely upon a constructivist framework of analysis, which helps to identify and contextualise the role that ideational elements have played in the securitisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s nuclear activities. Furthermore, such a perspective highlights the endogenous relations between ideas and the logic of particular actions. The significant issues of trust and confidence regarding Iran’s profound nuclear intentions and foreign policy preferences explain the Western state-actors’ reliance on coercive diplomatic strategies. This analysis thus departs from the conventional realist interpretations of the Iranian nuclear issue, emphasising how enemy images, trust deficit, and threat perceptions, have defined the dynamics of the conflict more than balance of power considerations.

2. Iran and the international system since the 1979 Islamic Revolution

This section argues that the issue of many Western policy makers, their allies in the Middle East region, and analysts does not lie with Iran’s nuclear activities per se, but with the shared beliefs and expectations that they hold of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s identity, interests, and foreign policy practices since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. More specifically, the meaning attributed to Iran’s nuclear technology is embedded in, and indicative of, their understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a rogue state and their entrenched antagonisms towards it. Thus, I explore how Iran has defined itself since the 1979 Revolution and how its foreign policy practices have, in turn, been interpreted as a threat to international peace and security. This constitutes the context within which the nuclear issue has unfolded since 2002.
2.1 Iran, a protesting power against Western dominance of the international system

The 1979 Islamic Revolution was a profoundly transformative historical event which not only abruptly ended the Pahlavi monarchy, but also turned Iran’s geo-strategic preferences upside down. Highly renowned Iran specialists Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (2007: 31-82) and Ruhi Ramazani (2013: 71-93) have characterised the 1979 Islamic Revolution as a revolt against both domestic dictatorship and the international system.

The revolution produced a new national narrative which significantly affected how Iran came to define its national interests and foreign policy practices. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, rejected the structure of the international system, especially its core-periphery dynamics between the ‘mostazafin’ (the oppressed) and the ‘mostakbarin’ (the oppressors). Guided by its formative slogans, ‘Neither West nor East, only the Islamic Republic’ and ‘independence, freedom, Islamic Republic’, Iran promoted a self-reliant foreign policy, which accentuated the value of independence and led it to fully re-configure its relationship with the West (Adib-Moghaddam, 2013: 150; Ramazani, 2013: 90-91). Previously identified as Iran’s greatest ally, the US was now perceived as the ‘Great Satan’ and the main threat to a just and fair international system. Importantly too, Iran perceived itself as the vanguard of an Islamic revolutionary movement and as uniquely gifted to bring worldwide justice (Ramazani, 2013: 134-135). As such, Iran promoted an anti-status quo and pro-Third World foreign policy (Ramazani, 2013: 91).

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6 Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, also known as the Shah, was the ruler of Iran from September 1941 until February 1979 when the Islamic Revolution forced him to leave his throne and the country. Throughout his reign, he sought to increase American involvement in Iran as a way of strengthening his power, both internally and externally (Ramazani, 2013: 50-67).

7 Ayatollah Khomeini was a key Iranian anti-government spokesman in the early 1960s and the leader of the Islamic Revolution. He became the first velayat-e faqih, or jurisconsult, of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. This unprecedented constitutional position gave him the highest authority to head the Iranian state on behalf of the hidden Twelfth Imam until he passed away in 1989.

8 Adib-Moghaddam (2013: 29-30) notes that the Shah was perceived as ‘a puppet’ of the United States by the Iranian revolutionaries. The Shah’s 1964 Status of Forces bill, which granted US military personnel diplomatic immunity for crimes committed on Iranian territory, was a particularly contentious issue.
2.2  Iran the rogue state

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran rapidly emerged as a security threat to regional and international stability and to Western interests. Its foreign policy behaviours contributed to the perception that Tehran no longer complied with international norms of behaviour. Examples of this commonly include Iran’s pro-active support for organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas; its refusal to recognise the state of Israel; its opposition to the Middle East Peace Process; and its systematic violations of Human Rights (Amuzegar, 2003: 45). The 1979 Embassy hostage crisis, for its part, epitomised the transformed identity and preferences of Iran towards the US, and profoundly altered their relationship from relative trust and friendship to mistrust and enmity.⁹

Thus, to the US, its regional and Western allies, and many analysts, the Iran that emerged after the 1979 Islamic Revolution represented an offensive threat. The character of its regime and its external behaviour were both problematic. Importantly, Iran and these states have structured their relations around institutionalised images and practices of enmity, trust and understanding deficits (Adib-Moghaddam, 2013: 150-172). As such, their negative representations of each other have proved resilient and have had significant political consequences, including systematic attempts to contain, isolate, and deter each other. Of critical importance to the analysis of the framing of Iran’s nuclear programme as a threat to international peace and security is that little confidence exists in the rogue state’s intentions and behaviour.¹⁰

3. The attributed nuclear weapons rationale of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Having established the context within which the nuclear issue has taken place, this section now examines the two main factors that have led to the suspicion amongst analysts and policy-makers that not only does Iran’s nuclear programme entail a military dimension but that the regime is also

⁹ On 4 November 1979, Iranian revolutionary students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran and took dozens of US staff hostage. They remained in captivity for 444 days. The students demanded the expulsion of the Shah from the US where he was taken for cancer treatment.

¹⁰ Former US Secretary of State Condolezza Rice, for example, recently declared when referring to Iran that ‘[y]ou absolutely can’t believe them or trust them’ (Cochran, 2013). Hilary Clinton, for her part, called the Islamic Republic a ‘threat to global security’ (Ackerman, 2014).
determined to flout and deceive its opponents. Indeed, the remarkably consistent nuclear energy rationale of Iranian officials that their nuclear programme is legal and for peaceful purposes only is rejected by Western policymakers and analysts, who instead argue that it is in Iran’s strategic, domestic, and normative interests to acquire nuclear weapons. The belief that Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons capability has been reinforced by the regime’s behaviour both prior to and since 2002, which, in turn, has strengthened perceptions regarding its rogue character.

3.1 Iran’s strategic, domestic and normative interests in nuclear weapons acquisition

This section presents the core arguments that have led Western officials, their regional allies, and analysts, to conclude that nuclear weapons would provide significant benefits to Iran. Their contentions broadly fall within the three proliferation models famously developed by Scott Sagan to explain states’ nuclear weapons rationale (Sagan, 1996-1997).

First, due to its strategic situation, Iran is often implicitly assumed to fit Sagan’s ‘security model’, which points to a state’s decision to build nuclear weapons in order to increase its national security against external threats (Sagan, 1996-1997: 55). This follows the neo-realist logic that states exist in an anarchical international system and rely on self-help to protect their national security. Since nuclear weapons have immense destructive and strong deterrent capabilities, states have a profound incentive to balance against any rival that has developed, or is in the process of developing, nuclear weapons by gaining access either directly (internal balancing) or indirectly (external balancing) to a nuclear deterrent themselves (Sagan, 1996-1997: 57). Thus, in the case of Iran, Anthony Cordesman (2012) argues that its efforts to develop nuclear weapons are a calculated response to its strategic disadvantage with its conventional military. Others point to ‘a

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References to Iran’s ‘development of nuclear weapons’ without qualification have been common. They have wrongly implied that it is a known fact when it remains an allegation. Analysts such as Jason Jones (2011) or Stephen Walt (2012) have taken issue with the public coverage of Iran’s nuclear programme.

During the period 2003 to 2013, the IAEA never concluded that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions. The Agency repeatedly noted that it was ‘unable to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran’ and, in some of its reports, referred to possible nuclear weapons connections. The 2007 and 2011 US National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs), for their part, concluded that Tehran halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003 and had not made the political decision to re-start it since (National Intelligence Estimate, 2007; Thielmann, 2012). Iran, however, has always denied that its nuclear programme once had a military dimension.
well-thought through asymmetric strategy to overcome Iran’s weaknesses’, especially the fact that it remains an isolated state in a conflict-ridden geopolitical environment and an adversary of several nuclear weapons states, including the US and Israel (Krause and Mallory IV, 2013: 15).

Within the prism of Sagan’s security model, nuclear weapons would provide Iran the strategic ability to deal with its acute security dilemmas.

Second, the domestic politics model has been indirectly applied to Iran. The latter relates to the domestic actors who encourage nuclear proliferation because they see nuclear weapons as instruments they can use to advance their own political or bureaucratic interests (Sagan, 1996-1997: 55). They tend to come from the scientific community, the military, or policy circles (Sagan, 1996-1997: 63-64). Ray Takeyh (2012: 10) contends that Iran’s scientists are determined to provide their country with ‘the full spectrum of technological diversity, including advances in nuclear science.’ In fact, Iran’s scientific community, including the Iran Atomic Energy Organisation, have sometimes acted as a pressure group against their government’s nuclear negotiation agreements. Furthermore, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is amongst the most fervent supporters of Iran’s nuclear programme and has been responsible for the security of the nuclear installations (Chubin, 2007: 54; Takeyh, 2012: 10). They have witnessed a significant expansion of their military activities and relative power position within Iran (Wehrey et al., 2009); thus heightening suspicions that domestic actors are actively pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions.

Third, Iran has been attributed normative incentives to develop nuclear weapons. Sagan’s ‘norm model’ contends that nuclear weapons serve important ‘symbolic functions’ in reflecting positively on a state’s identity (Sagan, 1996-1997: 73). Nuclear-weapon states tend to be seen as the most scientifically and technologically developed actors in the international system. According to this perspective, Iran would favour nuclear weapons proliferation as a legitimate action as a result of its self-perception as a modern and powerful state with significant regional leadership aspirations. Takeyh (2011), for example, places Iranian efforts to ‘obtain the bomb’ as a means to enhance its

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13 At the end of October 2003, about 500 engineering students and 240 faculty members wrote two different open letters, asking the government to be careful with its dealings with the IAEA (Hadian, 2004: 58). In October 2004, 1,375 professors signed a similar letter calling for the resumption of Iran’s enrichment activities following the conclusion of the Paris Agreement between Iran and the EU-3.
international standing and to lessen external attention on its support to terrorist organisations. In this perspective, nuclear weapons fit with Iran’s self-image.

In sum, Iran is assumed to have strong interests in pursuing nuclear weapons acquisition. This widely held suspicion is conditioned by a range of assumptions regarding Iran’s self-perceived geopolitical situation, domestic politics, and identity commitments; all of which contribute to strongly de-legitimising Iran’s official nuclear energy rationale. Furthermore, Iran’s attributed nuclear weapons ambitions are also structured by the state’s behaviour prior to and since the public revelations of its concealed nuclear facilities.

3.2 A strategy of nuclear ambiguity

This section argues that three main elements have contributed to the perception that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions: the clandestine history of parts of its programme; the regime’s lack of transparency with the IAEA; and the type and extent of its nuclear activities since the 2002 revelations.

Firstly, Iran carried many of its nuclear activities clandestinely, which has reinforced its image as a rogue state determined to deceive its opponents. Indeed, at the time of the public revelations on 14 August 2002, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was, under the “traditional safeguards”, aware of the existence of Iran’s uranium conversion facility in Isfahan only. It had not been informed of the large underground nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz and the heavy water production plant at Arak. Furthermore, in the long-term, the Natanz facility could support the production of a uranium-based weapon and the Arak facility, the necessary plutonium for a nuclear device; thus strengthening perceptions that Iran had pursued an illegal nuclear weapons programme.

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14 Iran has been a nuclear-non-weapon state-party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since 1970 and signed the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA in 1974. Under the Safeguards Agreements, the IAEA’s ability to inspect and verify the correctness and the completeness of a state’s nuclear programme is limited to its declared facilities. Iran has consistently argued that, under the terms of its Safeguards Agreement, it was not required to declare the Natanz and Arak facilities until six months before nuclear material was introduced.
Secondly, since the 2002 revelations, Iran has not offered the level of transparency and openness required by the IAEA in its successive Resolutions against Iran. The Agency is the only international organisation mandated to inspect and verify that the nuclear programmes of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty state-parties comply with their international obligations. Mark Fitzpatrick (2007: 41) contends that Iran’s behaviour is a critical issue since IAEA inspectors must be able to establish a full and comprehensive picture of Iran’s nuclear programme, including its history, to be able to detect and examine any potential changes. In a securitised context where trust deficit prevails, Iran’s opaqueness adds to the suspicion that it is intending to develop the technical capacity and material to build nuclear weapons.

Thirdly, since the August 2002 revelations, Iran has continued to significantly and steadily increase the necessary elements of a nuclear weapons capability; thus strengthening suspicions that the regime is bent on becoming a nuclear threshold state. Nuclear threshold states possess the necessary industrial infrastructures and scientific expertise to build nuclear weapons. They typically develop the complete fuel cycle, which includes uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing. These two technologies are considered sensitive because, although not restricted by the NPT, they can be put to weapons use (Fitzpatrick, 2008: 20). In the case of Iran, Fitzpatrick (2008: 13) notes that its programme reveals a ‘nuclear hedging strategy’, which aims at reaching the threshold of a break-out capability while remaining within the legal limits of the NPT. Cordesman (2012) similarly contends that Iran’s nuclear efforts have been such that ‘it can pursue nuclear weapons development through a range of compartmented and easily concealable programs without a formal weapons program’. In their views, Iran is keeping the option of ‘going nuclear’ open. In his January 2014 address to the US Senate Intelligence Committee, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, stated that ‘Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons. This makes the central issue its political will to do so’ (cited in Eslampour, 2014).

The benefits attributed to a nuclear threshold Iran are plural and can also be analysed within the prism of Sagan’s nuclear proliferation models (Sagan, 1996-1997). First, Iran’s assumed intent to

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15 Brazil and Japan, for example, have developed a latent nuclear weapons capability and could make a nuclear device in a short period of time should they wish to (Rublee, 2010).
develop a latent nuclear weapons capability could be analysed as the pragmatic response of an isolated state that faces uncertainty in an ever-changing and hostile geopolitical environment. Such a capability would strengthen Iran’s strategic ability to deal with future security dilemmas. Furthermore, a nuclear threshold capability would provide Iran with significant domestic and normative benefits without the political costs associated with publicly developing nuclear weapons, such as having to leave the NPT and being subjected to more sanctions and possibly military intervention (Patrikarakos, 2012: 287).

In sum, for Western officials, their allies, and the analysts who perceive Iran as a rogue state, the regime’s nuclear intentions and capabilities are interpreted in a securitised context marked by trust-deficit and worst-case assumptions. The regime is assumed to have rational motives for seeking to acquire the ultimate strategic deterrent and a symbol of high technological and scientific achievements. As for its behaviour, Iran’s actions both prior to and since the August 2002 revelations have confirmed representations that it is untrustworthy and that its official nuclear energy rationale cannot be taken-for-granted. In the nuclear issue, Iran’s intentions and capabilities are thus mutually reinforcing and contributing to the framing of its programme as a threat to international peace and security.

4. Threat-based assessments of the behaviour of a nuclear weapon Iran

This article now turns to the questions raised by Western observers and policymakers regarding the potential effects of nuclear weapons acquisition on Iran’s decision-making calculus. Two main sources of concerns have shaped the debate: first, whether Iran would behave like other nuclear weapons states and, second, how domestic developments would affect Iran’s future nuclear calculus. These security concerns are structured by the beliefs and expectations regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran’s identity, interests, and strategic preferences. As such, Iran’s regime type informs the use it would make of its nuclear capabilities.
4.1 The relevance of the norm of non-use and restraint

Nuclear weapons have occupied a paradoxical position in the international system as both guarantors of states’ security and immoral instruments that cannot be used and ought to be eliminated. Although they played a stabilising role during the Cold War (Sidhu, 2012: 410), the nuclear non-proliferation regime and counter-proliferation efforts have aimed at both preventing new states from acquiring nuclear weapons and disarming all nuclear weapons stockpiles. The normative and institutional impetus to eliminate nuclear weapons is strongly conditioned by the ‘nuclear taboo’ which emerged in the aftermath of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It strongly de-legitimises the utilisation of nuclear weapons, including the threat of; thus acting as a powerful social institution regulating the behaviour of nuclear weapons states during conflict situations.

As explored above, the Iranian regime is widely assumed to pursue a nuclear policy contrary to the global orthodoxy regarding nuclear disarmament. Furthermore, analysts who view Iran as a power-seeking state, such as Robert Danin (2012: 51-53), expect that the possession of nuclear weapons would strengthen the regime’s incentives to pursue its aims of becoming a regional hegemon and fundamentally altering the international system. A nuclear-armed Iran would feel protected against retaliation and empowered to directly challenge the Western core-powers and their allies. As such, Iran would not abide by the institutionalised norm of nuclear restraint. Specific concerns include Iran’s potential attempts to alter oil prices by threatening to close the Strait of Hormuz; increased support for its non-state allies, especially Hezbollah, and to the Shi’a populations in Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia; as well as an increased incentive to rely on its conventional military forces more aggressively (Danin, 2012: 51-52). Matthew Koenig (cited in Zenko: 2012), also argues that there is a risk that a nuclear weapon Iran would transfer the nuclear technology to terrorist groups. In addition, some analysts have emphasised that Iran’s likely use of its nuclear weapons capability is rooted in its religious and ideological identity. Alizera Jafarzadeh (2008: x), who first revealed the existence of the concealed facilities and a long-time

16 Danin (2012: 53) notes that Iran’s capacity to safeguard nuclear weapons remains an enigma; thus heightening the risks of ‘either accidental or unauthorised use.’
Iranian dissident, summarises the gist of the concerns: ‘inherent in Tehran’s version of Islamic rule is a lack of an ethical standard that would forestall the actual use of nuclear weapons. Tehran’s leaders have no moral ambiguities about using nuclear weapons to annihilate “global arrogance” and clear a path for radical Islamic rule.’ As such, the rogue Iran would not comply with institutionalised norms of nuclear behaviour. In their publication *Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran’s Proliferation Strategy*, Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji (2011) similarly take issue with Shi’a religious doctrine that would loath the martyrdom of the faithful. In these views, a nuclear-armed Iran would be more prone to risk-taking and less deterrable.

Moreover, International Relations and security studies scholars have assessed the likely behavioural implications of a nuclear-armed Iran; often drawing upon comparative perspectives (Kamp, 2012: 159-171; Waltz, 2012: 2-5; Zenko: 2012). Analysts such as Colin Kahl (2012: 157-162), have argued that a nuclear-armed Iran would behave more aggressively and take greater risks. The cases of recent proliferators, such as India and Pakistan, illustrate ‘the stability-instability paradox’: although the promise of Mutually Assured Destruction should create more stability in nuclear weapons states’ interactions, it actually ‘generates greater instability by making provocations, disputes, and conflict below the nuclear threshold seem safe’ (Kahl, 2012: 159).

In addition, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Democratic Republic of Korea have often been compared. They are both commonly conceived of as rogue states and the two greatest proliferation threats to international security (Cronin, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2006; Huntley, 2006). Iran and North Korea are also widely assumed to learn from each other’s nuclear experiences. Specifically, it is thought that Iran may be inspired by three key aspects of North Korea’s nuclear strategy. First, Iran could follow the ‘North Korea precedent’ in exercising its right of withdrawing from the NPT (Huntley, 2006: 732). Although Article X (withdrawal clause) is consistent with states’ sovereign right to define their national interests and security, it is highly contentious in the case of rogue states whose behaviours must be as contained as possible. Second, North Korea’s

17 Fitzpatrick (2006: 66) contends that there is ‘ample prima facie evidence that North Korea and Iran take pages from the other’s playbook.’

18 North Korea announced in October 2002 that it had secretly pursued plans for enriching uranium. It declared its immediate withdrawal from the NPT in January 2003; thus becoming the first state to terminate its membership (Habib and O’Neil, 2009: 379). In February 2005, North Korea claimed that it had acquired a nuclear capability and has since conducted three nuclear tests in October 2006, May 2009, and February 2013.
nuclear strategy helps to explain why Iran reaching the threshold of a break-out capability forms a security threat. Iran could decide to suddenly leave the NPT when it is ready to rapidly produce nuclear weapons. This is partly why all IAEA Resolutions and UN Security Council Resolutions since 2006 have continuously called on Iran to suspend its enrichment-related and reprocessing activities. Although the ambiguity surrounding the dual-use nuclear technology is acceptable for most states, it is a critical bone of contention in the case of a rogue state. As summarised by Chubin (2012: 99): ‘Enrichment per se is not dangerous. In the hands of a hostile and ambitious regime with a record of duplicity and treachery, it becomes another matter.’ Finally, it is feared that Iran may be tempted to use its nuclear programme as ‘a bargaining chip’, much like North Korea has done to extract concessions from its negotiation partners, especially the US in the context of the 1994 Agreed framework (Habib and O’Neil, 2009: 383). One could imagine that Iran would be prone to threaten or blackmail its enemies, especially the US, with use of nuclear weapons in an attempt to obtain sanctions relief or security guarantees.

This section has shown that the framing of a nuclear weapon Iran as a threat to international peace and security is strongly conditioned by perceptions of the Islamic Republic as a power-seeking entity with strong ideological commitments and threatening allies. It is also the result of comparative perspectives and lessons learnt from the behaviour of recent nuclear proliferators. The threat-based assessments of a nuclear-armed Iran have led policy-makers and analysts to widely debate whether, and under what conditions, the regime could be deterred if equipped with the ultimate strategic deterrent (Clawson and Eisenstadt, 2007).19 Furthermore, analysts and policy-makers have questioned the likely geopolitical consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran.20 Israeli military and political leaders have repeatedly warned that they view the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran as ‘an existential threat’, with Prime Minister Netanyahu calling President

19 The Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy, for example, contended that containment and deterrence are ‘less likely to work against leaders of rogue states more willing to take risks’; thus legitimising the new doctrine of pre-emptive action (US Department of State, 2002).

20 Should Iran become a nuclear-weapon state, its neighbours in the Middle East region may decide to mend ties with Tehran (bandwagon); seek protection from a nuclear-weapon state (external balancing); or develop their own nuclear capabilities (internal balancing) (Ford, 2012: 174). As such, a nuclear weapon Iran could increase the prospects of a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation and seriously undermine the non-proliferation regime (Danin, 2012: 51; Shavit, 2012).
Rouhani ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’ and expressing Israel’s determination ‘to stand alone’ if needs be (Haaretz, 2013).21

4.2. Logic of uncertainty and Iran’s nuclear calculus

This section analyses the security concerns pertaining to future developments in Iran’s domestic politics and how these may influence the regime’s nuclear rationale.

As Sagan (1996-1997) argues, decisions to develop nuclear weapons are not solely linked to the emergence of external security threats. Domestic actors and normative factors play a role too. In this respect, the incredibly complex nature of Iran’s domestic politics has contributed to the securitisation of Iran’s nuclear activities. Indeed, Iran’s domestic politics is extremely challenging to analyse, let alone predict (Rakel, 2009). It is thus very difficult to identify how domestic change would impact on Iran’s nuclear calculus in the future. More critically, the Iranian political spectrum is shaped by various factions who share different views on how best to pursue the country’s national interests. In particular, they disagree on whether Iran should ‘normalise’ itself, or, revive its revolutionary principles (Chubin, 2007: 52). The factions promote different priorities and means of engagement with external powers. As such, they are likely to share different views on the strategic, political, and normative benefits of Iran’s nuclear capabilities, and to advocate different uses of the nuclear programme (Arabatov, 2007: 66; Chubin, 2007: 52-53).

To a great extent, the significant contrast in the negotiation strategies pursued by the former Ahmadinejad administration and the current regime of President Rouhani illustrates this. The former advocated a return to founding principles of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, including at the discursive level, and a foreign policy of resistance against the Western core-powers and their allies. The Ahmadinejad regime also accelerated the country’s nuclear activities, and presented their scientific and technological achievements as a means to challenge their internal and external opponents and position Iran as the guide and role model of the developing nations. In contrast, the Rouhani administration is seeking to transform the nuclear issue into a geopolitical

21 Israel successfully conducted two preventive strike on nuclear reactors in Iraqi in 1981 and Syria in 2007. One could thus argue that Israel has a record of dealing unilaterally with what it deems to pose security threats.
opportunity for Iran to mend relations with the Western core-powers, including the US, as well as key regional actors in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia.

In sum, developments within Iran’s domestic politics will affect the regime’s decisions to make a nuclear device or to use it, whether directly or indirectly as a means of provocation. This makes Iran’s seeming ‘nuclear hedging strategy’ (Fitzpatrick, 2008: 13) and pursuit of sensitive technologies all the more problematic for its opponents.

5. Conclusion

This article has argued that three key and inter-related factors have contributed to the belief among Western policy-makers and analysts that Iran’s nuclear programme is a threat to international peace and security. First, Iran is widely perceived to be a rogue state since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Its identity, interests, and foreign policy preferences do not comply with international norms of behaviour, and have therefore constituted a security challenge for the Western core-powers and their allies in the Middle East region. As a result, there exists little trust and confidence in Iran’s intentions and behaviour. It is within this context that Iran’s nuclear activities and behaviour have been interpreted. Second, Iran is strongly suspected of pursuing nuclear weapons ambitions; a rational course of action in light of its strategic, domestic, and normative incentives. In addition, Iran’s nuclear behaviour both prior to and since the 2002 revelations have confirmed perceptions of its rogue identity and concealed nuclear weapons ambitions. Third, Iran’s nuclear programme is framed as a threat to international peace and security as a result of the prevailing mistrust and threat-based assessment regarding its likely behaviour if it was to acquire the ultimate strategic deterrent. As such, Iran’s regime type defines how its capabilities would be used. Furthermore, because of its rogue status, Iran’s future political developments cannot be predicted with any certainty, which further securitise the pursuit of its nuclear activities.

The framing of Iran’s nuclear programme as a threat to international peace and security has structured the responses of the US and the EU. Iran’s nuclear programme produced a security dilemma that has led them to employ hybrid strategies, which have integrated diplomatic
engagement and incentives with instruments of statecraft, especially policies of sanctions (Litwak, 2012: 95). The Iran nuclear negotiations proved largely unsuccessful until the historic November 2013 Geneva deal. Iran and the Western core-powers had, until then, acted toward one another in ways that confirmed the beliefs and expectations that they were enemies of each other. In so doing, they significantly reproduced their mutual structures of identities and interests; thus indicating that culture can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Should the terms of the Geneva Agreement be respected by all parties and a comprehensive agreement be reached, mutual trust and confidence between Iran and the West, especially the US, could strengthen; thus paving the way for a progressive transformation of their relations with potentially wider geopolitical ramifications (Slavin, 2014). To this extent, the nuclear issue may be currently transforming itself into a geopolitical opportunity, which would reduce Iran’s self-perceived need to resist and challenge the international system and de-legitimise the mutual processes of demonisation and estrangement.

6. Bibliography


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