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Iranian Nuclear Conflict - is Coercive Diplomacy Theory Working?

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ABSTRACT

Since the end of the Cold War, coercive power has been increasingly deployed in the diplomatic toolkit. Using military threats to gain an advantageous negotiating position is a historical and well-known practice in international relations. In a hyper-globalised and trade-dependent world, geoeconomic instruments have also found favour as an alternative to military action. In this paper, we analyse and apply the theory of coercive diplomacy to the longstanding Iranian nuclear conflict. We analyse the network effects that the U.S. and its allies use to raise the economic costs of non-compliance, forcing Iran for negotiations.

Keywords: Iran, US-Iran relations, Nuclear diplomacy, Coercive diplomacy theory, Geoeconomics, JCPOA, Nuclear proliferation

INTRODUCTION TO THE IRAN CONFLICT

Iranian Nuclear Ambitions

Iran's first nuclear reactor was supplied by its then ally United States in 1967, and Iran ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1970 (Davenport, 2021). The Iranian Revolution of 1979 installed an anti-Western theocratic regime led by the Ayatollah Khomeini; one of its leading causes was growing public sentiment against westernisation of Iran by the "Great Satan" United States (Binyon, 2020; Knowles, 2019). That year marked a critical turning point in Iran-American relations as revolutionaries held US diplomats hostage in its embassy in Tehran, and although released a year later, the episode created permanent animosity and suspicion in the relationship between the two countries (History Channel, 2019).

In the 1980's, Iran continued developing its nuclear program with the help of nuclear powers Pakistan, China and USSR (Davenport, 2021). In this time, Iran also started promoting its

influence in the Middle-East region using various Shi'ite proxies (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). In the 1990's the US Congress passed a series of laws sanctioning Iran, aiming to restrict the transfer of technologies that could aid its nuclear program (ibid.). At the top of the US's long grievance list against Iran are suppression of human rights, state sponsorship of terrorism and anti-Semitism.

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush openly called Iran as one of the "Axis of Evil", countries that support Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and sponsor terrorism, and are threats to the peace of the world (Glass, 2019). Fearing for its own national security in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 as many high-ranking officials in the Bush-Cheney administration confirmed that Iran would be next, a 'golden deal' through back-channels was offered to the US making numerous concessions regarding its nuclear and geopolitical goals, in return for security guarantees (Daalder, 2003; PBS News, 2007). The US chose not to respond to the proposal.

Efforts for a diplomatic resolution regarding its nuclear program derailed during the presidency of hardliner Ahmadinejad, when Iran began publicly announcing its nuclear achievements (VOA English Service, 2012). In retaliation, between 2007-12 the US and its allies assassinated several Iranian nuclear scientists, and released a computer virus that destroyed one-fifth of Iran's nuclear centrifuges (Kushner, 2013; Meikle, 2012). The U.N. Security Council also passed six resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran for continuing its nuclear program, and while they managed to setback development, they didn't deter Iranian nuclear ambitions (Security Council Reports, 2020).

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

In 2013, a reformist government led by President Hasan Rouhani came to power in Iran, elected on a platform for reintegrating the country into the international system. Years of sanctions and inflation had ruined the Iranian economy; to escape political isolation, the government sought to resolve the nuclear dispute. Back-channel talks between the Obama administration and Iran led to productive negotiations; the key players in the talks included the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif; his counterpart in the US, John Kerry; and Wendy Sherman, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the US lead negotiator with Iran (Sherman, 2018). An interim deal was concluded in late 2013, with the final Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed between Iran and the P5+1 countries on 15 July 2015 in Vienna (Williams, 2015). The deal carefully balanced the interests of all signatories, as well as concerns of third parties like Israel and Saudi Arabia (Sherman, 2018). It severely and pragmatically curtailed Iran's civilian nuclear program, and inerted potential dual-use facilities. Iran consented to heavy IAEA surveillance of its nuclear installations, and even as late as March 2018, and IAEA with an international

team of investigators verified that Iran was following its obligations under the JCPOA (Dixit, 2018).

In late April 2018 Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly revealed a cache documents and surveillance pictures and that Iran is still clandestinely continuing it nuclear weapon ambitions, while criticising various aspects of the deal (Tibon and Landau, 2018). The key points of contention were the "sunset" clauses in the deal under which many controls of the JCPOA start expiring after a decade (ibid.). Donald Trump also supported Netanyahu publicly, and in May 2018 the US government unilaterally withdrew from JCPOA and initiated a 'maximum pressure' campaign by reimposing crippling sanctions on Iran, and encouraged its allies to follow suit (White House Briefings, 2018).

Developments after 2020

In November 2020, the Iranian parliament legislated its Atomic Energy Organisation to significantly expand production capacity at its nuclear sites and increase uranium enrichment levels to 20%; Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said that his country will continue enriching beyond these levels if in the national interest (FARS, 2021; Middle East Monitor News, 2020). In January 2021, Iran proclaimed it had started production of uranium metal, which can be used as the core of a nuclear weapon; its stockpile of enriched uranium-235 was more than twelve times the limit agreed to under the 2015 JCPOA deal (BBC, 2020, 2021). In February 2021, Iran informed the IAEA that it is suspending the voluntary transparency protocols established under JCPOA, including long-term IAEA supervision (IAEA Board of Governors, 2021). A month later the IAEA was able to reach an agreement with Iran which allowed them to temporarily continue essential monitoring activities (IAEA, 2021; IAEA Board of Governors, 2021). In March 2021 China signed a comprehensive economic deal with Iran, where it will invest a much-needed US$400b over 25-years, bringing Iran firmly inside the "Sino-sphere" (Fassihi and Myers, 2021). It is speculated that the Chinese will help Iran in its nuclear program in the future if sanctions are lifted.

In April 2021, an explosion at the heavily guarded Natanz nuclear enrichment plant destroyed "a large proportion" of centrifuges, which is said to setback Iranian goals for a bomb (Erlanger, 2021b; Reuters, 2021; Wintour, 2021) In retaliation Iran ramped up its enrichment, and as of May 2021, reached 63% purity, and closing in on the 90% required for weapons grade uranium (Murphy, 2021). The Israeli attacks on Natanz came as the P5+1 countries resumed "indirect" negotiations with Iran for a mutually compliant deal (Crowley, 2021). Two working groups were set up in Vienna, one tasked with discussing the removal of US economic sanctions, and other negotiating with Iran for terms under which it can limit its nuclear enrichment for compliance (Erlanger, 2021a). Multiple rounds of negotiations have followed in the last two years, with

both side trading accusations with the rare statement of positive progress on the talks. From mid 2022, deadly protests have broken out in Iran, initially starting over morality policing and women's rights, but more recently demands have expanded to wider civil rights and even regime change (Haq, 2023). Amidst this turmoil, Iranian commercial and military hardware contributions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine complicated the negotiations (Norman, 2023).

In September 2022, the Iranian president said during his UN General Assembly speech that he is interested in a deal, but requires further guarantees from the US. Joe Biden responded in his UNGA speech that the US is prepared to meet its obligations if Iran steps up its own. Despite these kinds of public declarations, by late 2022 it appears that talks have largely collapsed, with no deal on the horizon any time soon, with key disagreement over allowing IAEA to continue monitoring Iran's nuclear facilities (Davenport, 2021; Norman, 2023).

CONFORMITY TO COERCIVE DIPLOMACY THEORY

Military and Diplomatic Coercion

Using military or other coercive threats to gain an advantageous negotiating position is a historical practice and theoretical concepts of were initially formalised in models by George and Schelling in the 1960s followed by work from later authors (Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp, 2016; Schelling, 2008; George *et al.,* 1994; Exchange, 2022). They outline conditions conducive for a successful coercive campaign, ranging from high costs of non-compliance to credibility behind the military threat, assurance from future demands and creating a sense of urgency for resolution; however the Iran scenario does not meet many of the ideal conditions.

For example, the credibility of military intervention was at its peak in 2003 when the US invaded neighbouring Iraq under the pretext of WMDs. A deal at that time would have achieved major US strategic objectives regarding the Iran nuclear program. Even after two decades of diplomacy and conflict, the US objectives are largely the same. According to Jervis, "the Iranians don't respond to pressure, but without pressure they don't respond" (Jervis, 2013, p.108). The theory also aptly predicted the conditions under which the target state Iran would be motivated enough to pursue peaceful negotiations (George *et al.,* 1994). The unpopular war in Iraq and the two-decade long intervention in Afghanistan and its botched withdrawal makes another US-led military campaign in the Middle-east highly unlikely in the middle-term, thereby reducing the credibility of the military threat on Iran (Baker, 2019). This doesn't rule out precision strikes on key military and nuclear assets, personnel and infrastructure, but is far from the "hot war" scenario that coercive diplomacy theory was designed to prevent (Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp, 2016, pp. 478–479).

Furthermore, Trump set a remarkable precedent with radical shifts in US foreign policy becoming a possibility between presidencies. It is arguable whether his "maximum pressure" campaign

post-withdrawal from JCPOA was successful or not. Trump's unilateral actions were largely not supported by his allies and other signatories of the JCPOA, and diplomatic coercion is not as effective without a united and coordinated response, hurting overall US strategy. Iran's key motive in returning to the negotiating table time and again are the harsh economic sanctions and commercial isolation. But Iranian incentives are substantially lowered without the guarantee that a deal of any form will stop more demands in the future. A future US or Israeli administration can easily renege on key promises and wish to delay or remove "sunset" clauses of the deal limiting nuclear activity in Iran, or advocate for regime change, which has been a stance in previous US administrations (Daalder, 2003).

Economic Coercion

The United States is a leader in utilising geoeconomics as a means of statecraft and coercion (Blackwill *et al.,* 2016, pp. 152–179). Geoeconomics is defined as the intentional usage of economic policy instruments to achieve foreign policy objectives and can theoretically be a pure substitute for military interventions (Blackwill and Harris, 2016, p. 20; Ripsman, 2006, pp.3–5). But pursuing economic coercion is challenging since states generally don't occupy the same influence over the economic sphere as in the political sphere (Luttwak, 1990, p.22).

The Iran nuclear conflict can be analysed via a geoeconomics framework established by Darren Lim (Lim, *et al.,* 2019; Lim and Mukherjee, 2019; Lim and Ferguson, 2020). Firstly the sender state (US) has some clear policy objectives regarding the target (Iran), in this case dismantlement or deterrence of Iran's nuclear capabilities. Next, the sender must have mechanisms to achieve these geoeconomic goals. The two key mechanisms through which the US coerces Iran are the "supply effects'', by which Iran is prevented from exchanging its produce (oil) for money to gain material advantages in terms of other critical goods, including inputs required for its nuclear program; and "networks effects", by which the US utilises its chokepoint and panopticon control over the global financial system to damage Iran's banking and monetary system (Hirschman, 1980, pp.14–17; Farrell and Newman, 2019, pp. 45– 46). Finally, the economic impacts of these mechanisms translate into costs for the political economy of Iran. The severity of the costs determine trade-offs the Iranian leadership has to make, i.e. continue living under sanctions or negotiate a deal.

Sanctions must be enforced rigorously for them to be effective because of the principal-agent issues that arise (Early and Preble, 2020). The US strategy for promoting compliance to their sanctioning regime on Iran has evolved over the past three decades and can be divided into roughly two phases (ibid.). In the first phase, which the authors of the paper term as "going fishing", the US Treasury under the Bush administration tried to target as many violators as

possible. However this did not achieve a substantial deterrence effect; prosecution time was consumed in catching "small fish", the resulting fines for noncompliance were minuscule, and the Iranian nuclear program continued to progress despite their efforts. This changed when the Obama administration decided on "whale-hunting", focussing on the high-profile violators resulting in the largest fines in US sanctioning history. Targets were chosen as non-US based financial institutions continuing business in Iran. This strategy later combined with legislations such as the CAATSA[1] deterred companies and countries from transacting with Iran, promoting compliance and at the same time improving the US bargaining position in JCPOA negotiations as Tehran found itself isolated in the global economy.

This leads to the "network effect" theory developed by Farrell and Newman (2019) (Farrell and Newman, 2019). The asymmetric economic networks and interdependence created by globalisation can be weaponized by states which control the central nodes (ibid., p.45). In 2012, to raise costs for Iran, the US and EU jointly utilised their jurisdictional powers over SWIFT, an international payments system and CHIPS, the US dollar payments system, to deny service to Iranian businesses and institutions (ibid., pp. 58–61, 65–70). A lack of alternative systems effectively leaves Iran's banking and financial services sector frozen; re-entry into the SWIFT system is an integral issue in the negotiations and a high priority for Iran (Al Jazeera, n.d.).

SUMMARY

Based on the above analysis, it is observed that it is primarily the economic coercion and sanctions that eventually led the target state Iran towards negotiations, and while the diplomatic and military strategy didn't adhere to the classical coercive theory, they helped raise the non-economic costs of noncompliance. Blanchard (1999) discusses the conditions for successful economic sanctions and the Iran case fulfills these major requirements (Blanchard and Ripsman, 1999). High political, economic and non-economic costs were imposed on the Iranian regime in a coordinated strategy leaving the country in isolation.[2] But it should be noted that immense coercive pressure on Iran converts into additional political support for the regime, in what is termed as the "rally around the flag effect" (ibid., pp.227–228, 248). This can be seen in the current national sentiment favouring conservatives and hardliners (Motamedi, 2021). Iranian leadership and propaganda machine consistently blame the US/Israel for internal unrests, building a narrative for concretising domestic unity and claiming the prerogative for retaliatory attacks (Gritten, 2022).

[1]Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, 2017

[2]It can be argued whether China is supporting Iran. Iran is increasingly becoming part of the Sinosphere, but not to the extent of North Korea, which is highly supported by China, is one the reasons why similar sanctions on North Korea haven't worked

Medium term Prospects for Peaceful Negotiation

Based on the above analysis, idealist and realist perspectives are discussed and how domestic factors can be detrimental or conducive for the longevity of any deal and Western interests in the medium term.

The idealist perspective: Deal puts Iran back on the globe

The fundamental shift for achieving a diplomatic solution in the medium term is US acceptance of a restricted and monitored civilian nuclear program in Iran (Sherman, 2018). The previous US policy of zero-enrichment in Iran was neither enforceable, nor acceptable to the Iranian regime (ibid.). Several high level Iranian leaders including the Foreign Minister emphasised that Iran can return to full compliance with the current JCPOA "within a day" if all other signatories, particularly the US, start complying with their obligations under the deal (@JZarif, 2020, 2021). Specifically, the Iranians want oil and financial sanctions which have crippled their economy to be lifted as soon as possible. Iran is an energy superpower but unable to transact its oil freely and this is the primary reason they are reentering the negotiating table. There will be no deal unless Iranians start receiving the economic incentives promised to them under the JCPOA (Eqbali, 2021; Rezaian, 2013).

The Biden administration, full of officials who negotiated the previous deal, is willing to reach a diplomatic solution with Iran as they realise that Israeli/US attacks on Iran nuclear facilities is not a long term strategy for deterrence, and neither is a full-scale war (Office of the Spokesperson of U.S. Department of State, 2021; Vohra, 2021). As Jervis (2013) points out, Iranian domestic perceptions of US policy are vastly different than what the Western media portrays and policymakers would like to believe (Jervis, 2013, p.111). It is the most educated and modernised country in terms of HDI indicators in the Middle-east, but the effects of trade sanctions trickle down and disproportionately affect its rising middle class, who struggle with hyperinflation and authoritarianism (Bakhtiari, 2020; Rezaian, 2013). Young Iranians are less bothered about the religious zealotry that plagued their parents' lifetime, and instead look to their grandparent's generation as an era of modernisation and progress (Awaad, 2020; Basravi, 2019). Given the transforming societal fabric, it could be expected that Iran will be inclined to continue under the terms of a deal, if once again part of the interconnected globe and because of substantial internal pressures.

There is a narrowing window of opportunity under which a return to the JCPOA or similar can be negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 countries. Any successful outcome of negotiations will have to include the US reversing its 'maximum pressure' campaign and lifting all sanctions against Iran, which for its part must comply with strict monitoring and limits on its nuclear program as outlined in the JCPOA. The aim for the US should be that Tehran's most likely

paths to a nuclear weapon are severed. Re-establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Iran and the US, while unlikely in the near-term, would certainly help rekindle mutual peaceful cooperation in the long-term.

The realist perspective: Deal is dead on arrival

An equally compelling argument exists for a no or on-paper deal. Iran insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, however it is clear that the recent expansion of the program serves multiple objectives; it improves Iranian bargaining power in ongoing negotiations, at the same time brings the country closer to a weapon (Monitor, 2013). Sanctions are not new to Iran, however Iranian behaviour in the past two years has been a departure from norm. Iran calculates that the long-term strategic goals it can achieve by either becoming a nuclear power or by gaining the upper-hand in negotiations to dismantle its nuclear arsenal far outweigh the short-term fallout from ramping up its nuclear program. Iranian resolve to continue nuclear enrichment is evident in the messaging coming out of Tehran in the past year, even after multiple standoffs and strikes from the US and assassinations of key military and nuclear personnel (Holmes, 2020; Smith and Pfeffer, 2020).

It is unclear whether domestic political consensus emerges within Iran for a long-term diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis. Iranian presidential elections in June 2021 returned a more conservative presidency to succeed the moderate Rouhani (Brennan, 2021; Motamedi, 2021). Hardliners see Iran as an ancient culture with a proud history and aspire to return their country to the glory and power it once occupied in the region. They philosophically oppose any kind of deal with the West, and study recent examples of nuclear proliferation in Iraq, Libya and North Korea when determining their own strategy. They see that if the US chooses to, it can invade and topple authoritarian governments with Anti-American ideologies under dubious pretexts, like in Iraq. They see Gaddafi's renouncement of nuclear and biological weapons in 2003 in exchange for building warmer ties with the West as a grave mistake; when the moment came during the Arab Spring, NATO/US airstrikes turned the tide leading to his downfall (Logan and Brunnstrom, n.d.). On the other hand they learn from North Korea's successful nuclear quest, and how US coercive and military strategy may become teethless after acquiring nuclear status (Garlauskas, 2021). Thus hardliners may continue nuclear enrichment beyond the current levels either openly if "no-deal" or clandestinely if an "on-paper" deal, with promises they don't intend to keep for long.

These scenarios are thought provoking for US defense policy hawks. Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons is critical for maintaining international peace and security. Iran's quest for a weapon is already renewing proliferation activities from its neighbours in the Middle-East region and other states seeking nuclear power, all of which would significantly threaten global peace

and stability (The Economist, 2021). US allies in the Middle-east have neither tolerance nor commitment for a full scale "hot war" in the region (Alaaldin, 2020). But there is also no international support for a Trumpian Iran policy, as evidenced by the failure of the US-supported UNSC resolutions extending the arms embargo on Iran (UN Security Council Reports, 2020). US's own priorities have pivoted in the past two decades and in the future are focussed domestically or in the Indo-Pacific region to curtail a rising power China; commentators argue that an Iran deal could be the "high-point" for a wider US withdrawal from Middle-east affairs post-Afghanistan (Cropsey and Roughead, 2019). Iran is gradually aligning in the Sino-Russo Sphere for strategic objectives, and is increasingly seeking to fill the power vacuum in the Middle-east by enhancing its Shi'ite influence through proxy control of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and others. So perhaps the only path to achieve a peaceful and stable outcome is to let Iran cement its status under a nuclear umbrella (Waltz, 2012).

CONCLUSION

Well into its fourth decade, the Iran nuclear conflict continues to develop with no clear resolution in sight. Iranian resolve to build nuclear capabilities in defiance of American military and economic sanctions is matched equally in behind the scenes multi-party negotiations for a peaceful agreement. The conflict was analysed through several theoretical frameworks and the paper discussed how economic coercion play an increasingly important role in the modern diplomatic toolkit. Increased economic interdependence and weaponization of asymmetric economic and trade networks by the US and allies largely forced Iran to the negotiating table. Targeted military coercion is also employed but takes a secondary stage in contrast to Cold War era diplomacy. Whether this translates into a peaceful deal for both the sender and target states remains to be seen. There are idealistic and realistic possibilities which could play out depending on how the costs of non-compliance imposed on affect internal Iranian social and political factors.

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