

US-Iran Nuclear Standoff: A Constructivist Approach

Muhammad Shoaib

Abstract

This study uses the constructivist approach to analyse the US-Iran nuclear standoff and the subsequent US-Iran nuclear agreement. It identifies the normative and ideational causes of the nuclear standoff, the nuclear negotiation process and how constructivist methods influenced the existing discourses between Iran and the US. The paper argues that the underlying cause of the enduring US-Iran nuclear stalemate can be attributed to the ideologically driven and identity related discourses prevailing in both countries. When these discourses materialised in the form of policies and actions, they created a perpetual pattern of distrust and enmity between the two states. This socially constructed reality could only be reverted through the process of deconstruction, which involved greater interaction between the two states based on compromise, lenient policies and identifying areas of mutual cooperation.

Introduction

During the last 30 years, no nuclear programme received as much international attention and condemnation as that of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Being party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Iran

maintained a firm stance over its nuclear programme, claiming it to be for peaceful purposes, the pursuit of which is permitted without prejudice to all states that have ratified the treaty. Notwithstanding Iranian claims, the US, along with its Western allies, always remained suspicious of the Iranian nuclear programme. The US-Iran nuclear standoff dated back to the 1979 Islamic revolution and lasted until 2015 when an agreement was reached between the two countries. During this time, the US and its Western allies insisted that Iran was in pursuit of a nuclear weapon, and consistently applied both diplomatic and economic pressure with the aim of curtailing its aspirations. The international concern and protest had been there since the toppling of the Shah and the West sought to bring considerable changes to Iran's nuclear policy, regardless of the tactics and strategies employed by Iran.¹ Although, the economic sanctions on Iran and allegations in international forums were quite severe, Iranian people and its leaders remained consistent and expressed their support for a peaceful nuclear programme.

The US-Iran nuclear standoff was characterised by distrust and suspicion. The US had been demanding Iran to curtail its nuclear programme, because it feared that Iranian nuclear programme had military dimensions. Iran was pressured by the US and the West through imposition of sanctions that harmed the Iranian economy. Iran, on the

other hand, maintained its stance of not giving up its nuclear and missile programme as it feared that the US wanted to weaken Iran, and even if Iran gave up its nuclear programme, sanctions would not be lifted. The situation turned into an enduring impasse.

Although mainstream western literature had been floating a perspective portraying Iran as being evil with bad aspirations for the West. This perspective may have been based on false assumptions and understanding of the Iranian interests and policies. An alternative perspective could also have been used to explain the nuclear standoff between Iran and the US. Iranian foreign policy behaviour is difficult to understand due to its normative and revolutionary dimensions. In order to explain Iranian foreign policy in the post-revolutionary era, it is important to understand the basic discourses of the Islamic revolution and the nature of international normative environment. The study provides an alternate explanation of the Iranian nuclear crisis and how a solution was achieved through the US-Iran nuclear agreement and how it can be sustained in the future.

To further investigate and explain the issue, this paper seeks to answer these questions: What were the historical factors that gave birth to the US-Iran nuclear stalemate and how it had become an enduring one?; What is the P5+1 (the US, France, Britain, Russia, China and Germany) deal with Iran and what are the prospects of this deal?; What

measures could be taken by the US and Iran to incorporate a constructive change in their relations and hence an enduring solution to the nuclear crisis?

Since the Iranian perspective is mostly published in Farsi language, it becomes difficult to attain the original Iranian perspective. Most published material pertaining to the issue comes from western sources. Secondary sources of data collection will be used, primarily from published journals and newspaper articles.

Constructivist Approach

In order to chalk out an alternative policy discourse, which might be able to diminish the perpetual pattern of distrust between the two states, defining the ideational causes and identifying its roots would be helpful. This part defines a framework for the study of US-Iran nuclear debate and its ideational causes. The theory of constructivism is used to explain the US-Iran nuclear stalemate, and to identify measures according to constructivist change that can lead to a sustainable resolution of this issue.

The enduring US-Iran nuclear standoff was based essentially on shared ideas and narratives which corresponded to their suspicion of each other. The ideas were reinforced and became self-assertive on the basis of cultural differences and historical experiences. The interests and threats were

defined and these narratives were based on a shared understanding and knowledge of each other. It is therefore important to understand how ideas shape the decision making process and ultimately influence foreign policy.

Defining Constructivism

The most notable proponent of constructivism is Alexander Wendt. Constructivism considers ideas and shared knowledge as the creators of identity. Constructivist theories are concerned with how ideas define the international system, how this system defines the interests and identities of states and how states and non-state actors act within that system and reproduce it.²

Constructivism argues that international reality is socially constructed through structures which give meaning to the material world.³ Contrary to realism that mainly deals with material power and security, and liberalism that deals with economic interdependence and domestic level factors, constructivism incorporates the role of ideas and norms in the international system. The term “ideas” incorporates threats, interests, identities and other components of reality that are perceived by states and non-state actors. Constructivists argue that it is the subjective understanding of the material world that essentially influences the behaviour of states and non-state actors.⁴ For example, an increase in the size of the Indian military would not concern Bhutan, which has friendly

relations with India. However, the same increase in the size of Indian military would be viewed with greater concern in Pakistan, which is a traditional rival of India. Hence, a shared history and perceptions play a significant role in determining state behaviour in the international system.

Constructivism and Foreign Policy

Foreign policy analysis remained largely dominated by the traditional paradigms of realism and liberalism until the advent of the social theory of constructivism, which secured a significant place in international relations discourse. Traditional theorists, belonging to the realist and liberalist groups, focus on the nature of human beings, states and the international system.⁵ The significance of the process of identity formation was not brought into the realm of foreign policy analysis which significantly affects the decision making process of states and institutions. While rational and structural theoretical models argue that the interests of states are defined on the basis of their relative power position in the international system, constructivism argues that interests of the states are constructed on the basis of ideas that are generated through interaction between the states.

There are two levels on which constructivism works; first is the individual or internal state level, and second is the systemic or structural level.⁶ At the first level, constructivism

considers the internal traits of states and societies. Every state has its own set of values derived from its culture and its norms. The unique set of values may determine or define the interests of a state. The interests and ideas emerge from within a society and the decision-making process in any state is influenced by these ideational structures.

A second level on which constructivism works is the structural or systemic level.⁷ This includes the process of interaction and the creation of shared understanding. Alexander Wendt, a leading systemic constructivist thinker, argues that states are engaged in social relationships that derive meaning independent of the actual material environment.⁸ For example, the social relationship of the US with Britain and France is very different than with Iran and North Korea. Due to these social relationships, the nuclear programmes of the British and French are far less worrisome than those of Iran or North Korea. Wendt argues that the construction of intersubjective meaning and understanding of the international system and of each other as individual actors, determines the behaviour of states.⁹ At this level of constructivism, ideas and interests are generated by interaction between states and societies. The discourse between two states constructs the social identity of states which in turn shapes the social behaviour of states by defining their interests and positions in international relations.¹⁰ According to constructivist perspective, states assign

meanings to the material objects and act “on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them”.¹¹

Brief History of Iranian Nuclear Programme

A closer look at Iran’s nuclear programme will help explain the role of identity in the policy making process. The Western outlook towards Iran’s nuclear programme was essentially shifted from permissive to sceptical after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. After the 1953 US-backed coup that toppled the Mossadiq government, a Western supported monarch Raza Pahlavi was brought in as the new leader of Iran.¹² The US and some Western states including Germany, UK, and France supported Iran to develop a nuclear programme through technical assistance.¹³

The Tehran research reactor was built in 1967 and Iran became a signatory of the NPT in 1970. During the era of 1980’s, soon after the revolution, the West and the US withdrew their support and started to isolate Iran. The West pulled back the financial and technical support and all the nuclear research was halted. The support in the nuclear technology was withdrawn mainly because before the revolution Iran was ruled by a pro-Western elite which was trusted by the West. After the revolution, Iran has been governed by a political class that is more often than not described in the West as a small group of mad and irrational mullahs.¹⁴ In the mid 1990’s

Russia signed an \$800 million deal with Iran to construct the incomplete reactors.¹⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, Iran was once again abandoned by the world community. In 2002, serious debate began over the legitimacy of Iran's nuclear programme which it claimed to be for peaceful uses. Iran was suspected to have a hidden nuclear facility at Natanz. Iran ratified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) additional protocols in 2003, after the EU-3 group (France, Germany, and the UK) initiated diplomatic engagement with Iran and issued the Tehran Declaration.¹⁶ This declaration became the basis for further talks that yielded the 2004 Paris Agreement in which the EU 3 recognised Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy and Iran agreed to voluntarily suspend enrichment under IAEA.¹⁷ The IAEA additional protocols allowed inspectors to survey the Iranian sites. The diplomacy over the nuclear issue started to deteriorate after IAEA reported Iran's noncompliance to the additional protocols. The matter was further complicated following the public statement referring to Iran as part of the 'Axis of Evil'¹⁸ by then US President, George Bush. Anti-US sentiment started to flare in Iran even as Western European powers called for increased transparency and suspension of uranium enrichment by Iran. The Iranian reformist President Muhammad Khatami decided to suspend enrichment in 2004.

In 2006, under pressure from US diplomats, the IAEA, led by former Director General

Muhammad El Baradei, voted to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council for being unable to meet the requirements of IAEA additional protocols.¹⁹ This act called for harsher sanctions aimed at pushing Iran into suspending its enrichment activities. After the IAEA report and subsequent UNSC Resolution 1695, US-Iran relations degenerated further. Responding to the sanctions, no significant change in Iranian domestic policy was seen. The current identity formation in Iran is largely derived from the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979.²⁰

Iranian Identity Construction post 1979

In order to comprehend the contemporary Iranian nuclear ambitions and the role of identity construction, a study of the post 1979 era is important which has dominated the entire identity formation process in Iran. During the period of Muhammad Raza Shah, the model of rule was that of top-down autocratic governance – where political elite formulates policies which were then implemented through a chain of command via bureaucrats who pushed for modern development reflecting the model of the western world.²¹ An attempt was made thus to drive the Iranian development structure towards modernisation.

The Shah's attempts to modernise the county failed, however, the entire governance structure marginalised the social support system of the religious leadership.

Consequently, the Islamic clergy and the lower classes re-formed around the charismatic voice of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shah's policies were aligned with western socio-political values and beliefs, therefore, Khomeini's revolutionary ideology took a reactionary stance and rejected all aspects associated with Western states as being un-Islamic.²² In doing so, the Ayatollah created Iran's new identity which was in direct opposition to the West's subjective reality. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the public that had believed itself to be neglected by Shah's failed modernisation programmes submitted to this new reformation of Islam and society as a return to the true Islamic society. The introduction of Islamic discourse into the Iranian polity had three important aspects; "portraying of the other" in the form of demonising the West, "idealisation of the past" through adoption of Islamic ideology and portrayal of Islamic figures as heroes, and "distinguishing between westernisation and modernisation."²³

Khomeini strove to promote the image of a "global conspiracy" of imperial domination.²⁴ "He himself started writing to historians and urged them to show how the people struggled against tyranny, and oppression of stagnation and backwardness, and put the ideals... in place of Capitalist Islam, and false Islam, [and] in one word, American Islam".²⁵ Not only did opposition towards the West arise from a reactionary rejection of its social and cultural norms, but was literally institutionalised in the ideological structure of

the Islamic Republic of Iran since its conception in 1979.²⁶ Additionally, one of the essential goals of the post-revolutionary Iranian state is “the complete elimination of imperialism and prevention of foreign influence”.²⁷

Discourses and Shared Understanding in US-Iran Relations

Iran’s foreign policy was constructed by some important discourses articulated around the main theme of anti-western revolutionary identity.²⁸ These gave meaning to Iran’s foreign policy behaviour and distinguished it from the rest of the world. The discourse of Islamic revolution is the main resource for Iranian identity and has been directing the country’s foreign policy behaviour since the Islamic revolution. Its ideological context gave meaning to Iranian foreign policy behaviour towards the rest of the world. Some objectives of Iranian foreign policy are difficult to understand, unless they are interpreted within the ideological context.

The Islamic Republic of Iran remained a counter-status quo state, thus enabling it to build a particular identity in its foreign relations.²⁹ It challenged the dominating cores of oppressive powers within international relations and seeks to eliminate all kinds of colonialism and imperialism.³⁰ Iranian leaders often gave out strong statements against the West. Iran saw every action or policy from the West, especially the US, with suspicion and

often tried to neutralise the threat with harsh statements. After the Islamic revolution, Iranian diplomacy and political language towards West started to build on the discourse of enemy. Speeches by Iranian officials were largely dominated by the concept of enemy, without which most of the political speeches given by Iranian officials would be ineffective.³¹ This post-revolutionary idea of enemy was a sign of deep mistrust of Iran towards the West. Historical factors of oppression and domination of Persia over the centuries became the basis of the post-revolutionary discourse. Historical and religious factors helped in mainstreaming the construct of enmity towards the West. Harsh statements were used by the Iranian leadership during nuclear negotiations also. A similar construct started to emerge in the West where Iran was seen as a malevolent actor.

The West and the US considered Israel as a key ally in the Middle East, however the US perceived Iran as a rogue state, an inherent part of the “axis of evil” discourse. This perception did not allow the US to tolerate Iran’s independent achievement of nuclear knowledge as it feared that Iran could build nuclear weapons and greatly undermine the US’s political and strategic interests in the region.³² The US feared that a nuclear Iran would push other rival neighbours of Iran into acquiring deterrence capabilities of similar nature, instigating an arms race in the region.³³ This discourse was maintained in the

US media and by the policy makers, consequently resulting in deep-seated distrust between the two. Due to this environment of distrust, the US along with its Western allies always suspected Iran of being involved in the development of nuclear weapons, hence, imposing sanctions on Iran and threatening Iran of an armed response.

Current Dynamics of Iranian Nuclear Issue

In 2012, the US-Iran nuclear standoff entered another phase in which the US and Iranian leaders succeeded in resolving the matter through dialogue and interaction. The international community also put in serious effort to drive the Iranian nuclear issue towards resolution. Since 2013, the major powers group called the P5+1 (the United States, France, Britain, China, Russia and Germany) remained engaged in dialogue with Iran over its nuclear programme in order to reach a comprehensive nuclear deal. Several rounds of negotiations remained unsuccessful owing to the history of mutual distrust shared by the two states.

On November 24, 2013, in the Joint Plan of Actions (JPOA), the P5+1 group reached an interim nuclear deal with Iran, following intense negotiations that took place over several days in Geneva. Iran and six of the world's powers agreed on a "first step deal" meant to limit advancements in Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for easing some of the

economic sanctions that had deeply hurt Iran's economy.³⁴ The deal stipulated that Iran would commit to halt uranium enrichment above 5 percent and also neutralise its stockpile of near-20 percent enriched uranium.³⁵ Iran also committed to halting the progress of its enrichment capacity. It would also halt work at its plutonium reactor and provide access to nuclear inspectors. The initial deadline for the deal was July 20, 2014, which was not met. The negotiation period was further extended for a comprehensive deal to be concluded with the mutual consent of the parties. At the end of the interim deal, Iran and the six world powers once again failed to reach a comprehensive nuclear deal and the negotiation period was again extended for another six months.

On April 2, 2015, after the end of another round of talks between Iran and the P5+1 group, parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) were issued which became the foundation upon which the final text of the JCPOA had to be written by the June 30, 2015 deadline. Iran and the P5+1 group announced a specific and comprehensive understanding on limiting Tehran's nuclear programme for the next 15 years. Under the accord, Iran agreed to cut the number of operating centrifuges it had by two-thirds, to 5,060, all of them first-generation, and to cut its current stockpile of low-enriched uranium from around 10,000 to 300 kilograms for 15 years.³⁶ An American description of the deal also referred to

inspections “anywhere in the country” that could “investigate suspicious sites or allegations of a covert enrichment facility.”³⁷

Finally on July 14, 2015, Iran and the world powers reached an agreement on the nuclear programme of Iran. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was agreed between Iran and the P5+1 states through a historic compromise from both the sides. The comprehensive nuclear deal would limit the Iranian nuclear programme, stopping it from acquiring nuclear weapons. In return, Iran would be freed from the damaging economic sanctions in a step-by-step manner. The nuclear deal brought criticism and opposition from the republicans in US Senate. Hardliners in Iran also criticised the deal. The comprehensive nuclear deal means a thaw in US-Iran relations. It was made possible through a change in the tone of the political leadership on both sides. The success and sustainable results of the deal can be ensured only if there are continuous efforts to maintain trust between Iran and the US. A change in perception of each other would be required on both sides to maintain better relations.

Although both Iran and the US were determined to reach a comprehensive nuclear deal, it required extensive measures to reach a settlement. On its part Iran remained firm in its belief that being a signatory of the NPT it had the right to peaceful nuclear technology. Before the agreement, Iranian officials used strong words and aggressive statements. The

word “enemy” was used in the official statements, which clearly means that the rivalry was inherent in the shared knowledge and ideas. For a lasting change and better relations between Iran and the US, the prevalent discourse needs to be deconstructed. This could only be achieved by incorporating constructivist methods of deconstruction and then rebuilding the existing relationship.

Constructivist Change

The perceptions that were at play between Iran and the US underwent a transformation which helped them understand each other's interests in the region and also enabled a détente between the two countries. If the US' conception of Iran as a source of evil in the region continues, it will damage the relations between the two and further deform the image of Iran. Traditional theory of Neorealism does not cater for states and the leaders bringing fundamental changes in their perceptions regarding identity and interest.³⁸ In international politics, constructivism accounts for changes in values, norms and expectations. The only way is to deconstruct existing ideas through interaction, which would help reshape the intersubjective understanding between two states and eventually allow for a new relationship.³⁹ This process, to a certain extent, was observed during the final round of negotiations between Iran and the US in their nuclear talks, which ultimately led to a nuclear deal. The

sustainability of the deal again requires the process of deconstruction of the existing discourse of “enemy” and reconstruction of new ideas and norms.

The US policymakers should engage Iran intensely through symbolic concessions, such as, allowing Iran to enrich uranium as long as it remains below weapons grade. As a signatory to the NPT, Iran retains the right to have nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Furthermore, the US should assist and make efforts for a nuclear weapons free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. On its part, the Iranian regime must discard the idea that it needs to be anti-Western or anti-US to justify its existence. The current regime can greatly enhance its own survival prospects by engaging with the West. Iran’s economy was hurt by the great number of sanctions imposed on it. The lifting of these sanctions is helping the Iranian economy improve and has ensured better relations with the world. Constructivism accounts for the role of particular individuals and powerful leaders to influence international politics. In order to change the nature of relationship between the two states, leadership is required on both sides that rejects existing norms, perceptions and ideas that have driven the conflict.

The nuclear agreement signed between Iran and the world powers on July 14, 2015 and the subsequent implementation of the deal was a manifestation of the relentless effort by both the US and Iranian officials and also

effective interaction between the two sides. This interaction resulted in the deconstruction of ideas that had created distrust between the two sides at the systemic level. Notwithstanding the nuclear agreement, some dissent was seen at the domestic level in both the US and Iran. Since constructivism works at the macro level, deconstruction of ideas at the level of the state is essential for an enduring US-Iran relationship and also a sustainable solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Conclusion

The process of Iranian identity formation in the post 1979 Islamic Revolution era was at the root of the US-Iran nuclear standoff. Revolutionary ideology, emergence of anti-West sentiments and nationalism were the basis of Iranian national identity formation. The policies adopted by the US and Iran, based on the negative perceptions of each other, made the US-Iran nuclear standoff an enduring one. The discourse which was constructed by the either side fuelled distrust and suspicion. The July 4, 2015 nuclear agreement marked the beginning of the deconstruction process of existing ideas, and this process can be sustained only if the two sides continue dialogue and positive interaction. Iran should abandon its anti-West ideas and the US should use carrots rather than sticks while dealing with Iran, in order to make this nuclear agreement successful.

Iranian nuclear issue took to the centre stage in the global non-proliferation debate mainly due to its endurance and it being present in the most volatile region, the Middle East. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran the Iranian nuclear programme remained a target of the West and the US essentially due to the revolutionary ideology of Iranian leaders, which was seen as a threat to the allies of the West in the region. Meanwhile, in Iran, the US and its ally, Israel, were seen as a threat to the national security interests of the state and its nuclear programme. The process of securitisation in Iran, aligned with the Islamic revolutionary ideology and principles, further augmented the discourse which defined the US as an enemy. Harsh statements and policies of religious hardliners in Iran further established this discourse, which allowed the US and the West to believe that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons and trying to export its revolutionary ideology. Iran became a threat to the US' strategic interests in the region. Consequently, the discourse of "axis of evil" started to flourish and was ingrained in the thinking of the West and the US. Through these policies and actions, the idea of enmity was reinforced in the policy making process, eventually leading to a permanent distrust of each other. These ideologically driven and identity affected discourses were widely narrated through state-sponsored institutions and media, which eventually resulted in material responses and political deadlocks. This shared understanding did not allow either side to reach a permanent agreement

over Iranian nuclear programme. The reality of distrust, based on their knowledge of each other as an untrustworthy enemy, was constructed. The constructed reality could be changed only through a process of deconstruction which requires further interactions between the states based on concessions and compromise. The July 4, 2015 agreement between Iran and the world powers, with the US leading the negotiations, was a step towards the deconstruction process. Lack of trust on both sides still remains, however further deconstruction of existing discourse and creation of new norms through interaction and softer policies could bring a sustainable solution to the nuclear issue.

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