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Nuclear programme of Iran and the Great Powers:

A battle of narratives

By

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The term “Great Powers” may seem an anachronism in our times. In the post-Cold war era, few nations can stake claim to playing an equally significant and prominent role in world affairs. Yet, permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) – China, France, Russia, UK and the US – and some of the leading developed nations have been pro-active in playing a mediatory role in international conflicts. In most cases, the contact group that has worked on a conflict or issue has comprised of large regional powers (such as Japan and Russia in the case of the Six Party Talks with North Korea), which are actually affected by the issue. The question of Iran’s violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in pursuit of a nuclear weapons programme has been a unique case, which has brought together for the first time the three most powerful entities in the international system today – the US, EU (especially UK, France and Germany) and China.

Yet, it is evident that the international community is highly divided when it comes to Iran – not only about the degree to which there should be concern, but also about the nature of the concern itself. Iran’s nuclear programme is perceived considerably differently not only within the country, but also in the cities of Washington (US), Moscow (Russia), Beijing (China), Tel Aviv (Israel) and Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). Therefore, both from the perspective of deterrence as well as counter-proliferation, a better understanding of the variation in perceptions of Iran’s nuclear

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programme and how Iranian propaganda has shaped them yields significant insights as to how to address the country's challenge.

However, perceptions are not shaped in isolation. The external environment that shapes perceptions of policy-makers and the public alike includes narratives – both historical and cultural – as well as arguments used in the public domain by stakeholders in the debate. It is also impossible to ignore the fact that the arguments in the nuclear debate today could well become part of the historical narratives in a future conflict. Even after Russia and China censured Iran along with the rest of the world at International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), there remains such divergence of opinion on the issue that the debate on the Iranian nuclear programme continues to be a so-called 'battle of narratives'.

In fact, the debate on Iran's nuclear programme has for far too long, hinged on cost-benefit analyses; it has not been adequately understood as a 'battle of narratives'. This distinction is important. Cost-benefit analyses, which most nuclear policy scholars favour or resort to by default, do produce options for the policy-maker. However, they do not tell us how those options will be accepted by the international community when they are exercised. Cost-benefit analyses are often overly mechanistic in their structure and are frequently unable to project how any of the options being discussed will impact historical attitudes among adversaries or among allies. For instance, how often do we ponder about what the Chinese public, much less the Iranian public, would think about the US in 2050, if the US were to attack Iran's nuclear facilities tomorrow? This is why choosing the right public narratives to frame the issue is often as important as – if not more important than – choosing the right options to deal with the tangible problems arising from that issue. Moreover, while choosing the narratives, it is crucial that our hypotheses do not become the assumptions that inform our narratives and that our narratives are shaped keeping in mind the adversary's narratives. This paper aims to study and flesh-out some of the dominating narratives that are being used by various stakeholders to shape perceptions about Iran's nuclear programme and some of the significant perceptions that have solidified in this environment.

1. Iran's relationship with Great Powers

Iran's relationship with major powers has been riddled with suspicion and discord for over a century. Although Iran was never actually colonised, it was twice a victim of occupation by duelling great powers; it was occupied by the UK and Russia during World War I and II due to its petroleum resources as well as for geopolitical reasons. The country's relationship with the US has been particularly fragile at least since the 1930s, when former Iranian ruler Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's (1941-79).

Iran also faced a major intervention from the superpower during the Cold War (1945-91). The CIA-backed coup in 1953 that overthrew the then Iranian Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadeq

(1951-53) was only the first of several instances. The US-backed regime of Mohammad Reza was continually troubled during the 1960s by Marxist groups, which were backed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Although the events of the 1979 Revolution, including the siege of the US embassy in the capital Tehran, meant that Iran became isolated and equidistant from both the US and USSR, the Iran-Contra scandal in the early 1980s highlighted once again the blunt pragmatism in US policies towards Iran.

Four major events in 1988-92 irrevocably altered Iran's relations with the rest of the world: the end of the eight-year long war with Iraq brought the regime out of existential anxiety; the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic and former Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (in office 1979-89), allowed the country to move away from a foreign policy dominated by ideology towards one based on pragmatism; the end of Cold war and the break-up of the Soviet Union meant freedom from the fear of an invasion from the north and new-found amity with Russia; the Gulf war of 1991 effectively removed Iraq as the dominant factor in Iran's security calculations, increased Iran's focus on Israel as the primary enemy, and introduced US ground forces in the proximity of Iran's topographically vulnerable south, stoking new fears.

Iran's controversial uranium enrichment programme has led to its isolation and a growing confrontation with the international community in recent years. Iran's consistent refusal to roll back its enrichment programme and inadequate transparency in enforcing IAEA safeguards on it have become a cause for concern since incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came into power in 2005,

2. Perceptions and Narratives: Why do they matter?

For reasons that go beyond history, although the security consequences of Iran developing a nuclear weapon are such that hardly any country is willing to welcome the idea, disagreements surrounding the intent of Iran's nuclear programme and what to do about it continue. Viewed through the prism of Western opinion, Iran is one of the few countries in history that have pursued a nuclear programme while actively denying intentions to develop a nuclear weapon (and certainly the only member of the NPT to do so). The vigorousness of Iran's denial is often a cause for debate in the West. Questions abound: Is Iran telling the truth? Should Iran be trusted? To what extent does the current Iranian regime represent the people? Is Iran a threat to international peace and security? If Iran will acquire a weapon, when will it happen? What will be its consequences?

It is no accident that diverse approaches that deal with Iran's nuclear issue range from Containment to War to Engagement. It is the result of the variation of perceptions of the Iranian programme among international actors. When governments of various nations voice their

narratives in the public realm and at international forums, they actively or passively end up shaping the perceptions of their own public on the issue. Therefore, a study of narratives around the nuclear programme is indispensable to understand the direction of the debate on Iran's nuclear programme.

It is also important to note that Iran's regime and its public are also active shapers of the global debate on the country's nuclear programme. Equally important is the fact that Iran is a nation where narratives have a life of their own and as a nation that has largely remained sovereign for millennia, narratives have greatly influenced attitudes towards the rest of the world. Iran's extraordinary ability to conduct multilateral negotiations with a host of nations (including the P5) and to continue the enrichment programme in the face of ever-increasing sanctions, begs questions as to how exactly Iran is shaping perceptions across the world about its nuclear programme. The Iranian public, for all practical purposes are not in a position to shape the global debate on the country's nuclear programme. And yet, Iranian citizens have a mind of their own, as research for this paper demonstrated. Of the multiple narratives put out by the regime, only a few are accepted by the public – not without criticism. Also, as seen during the post-election protests after June 2009, the Iranian public is no longer a silent stakeholder that is willing to allow the debate over the nuclear programme to affect its economy and society.

Thus, at least four narratives on Iran's nuclear programme are distinguishable in the public debate on Iran's nuclear programme (referred to by this paper as “pitches”).

- **Adversarial Pitch.** This is the perspective of the US and UK among others vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear programme, which asserts that the Iranian nuclear programme is aimed at acquiring a nuclear weapon. According to US president Barack Obama, Iran's quest ‘would start a nuclear arms race in the Middle East’. The underlying assumptions of this narrative are that there are multiple undesirable consequences of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon for the security of the US and Israel and that among other things, Arab states in the Middle East would disregard their commitment to NPT and jump-start their own weapons programmes.
- **Supportive Pitch.** This characterizes the perspective of nations that resist the adversarial perspective to Iran while actively supporting the sustenance of the regime and/or its nuclear programme (exemplified by the stance of Russia and China). The generic undercurrent of this pitch is to disallow the use of a military option against Iran's nuclear programme.

- **Tehran Pitch.** The Tehran regime's propaganda under the Ahmadinejad administration has both internal and external aspects. Externally, the narrative is one of Iran pursuing a peaceful civilian nuclear energy programme in line with its rights under the NPT regime. Internally, the regime describes the nuclear programme as a national effort at progress in the Science & Technology arena.
- **People's Pitch.** The Iranian Public's perspective is hardly a pitch given that it is seldom heard in the international public debate and consists of multiple narratives. The only way it has thus far influenced the international debate on Iran's nuclear programme, has been through pressure by Iranian diaspora groups on Western governments. There are two main undercurrents to most of these narratives: (1) that the Iranian people are distinct from the regime in Tehran; and (2), that sanctions and any potential military option would only hurt the Iranian people and would not only defeat the objective of the actions but would amount to an act of cruelty against the Iranian people.

An elaboration of these four sets of narratives will establish how conflicting narratives are shaping one of the most important questions in international affairs debates today: 'What is the objective of Iran's nuclear programme? And is it an unacceptable threat to world security? What should be done about it?' While the last question which hinges on cost-benefit analyses of various options has been over-analysed in the media in recent years, the first two questions can only be answered through narrative analysis.

The Adversarial Pitch

Given the amount of newsprint that has been dedicated in Western media to articulate the concerns of the US and allies about Iran's nuclear programme, this paper will only briefly touch upon the perspective of the main critics of Iran's nuclear programme – the US, UK and their allies – as this perspective is fairly well-known.

The primary arguments presented by the US and allies with respect to Iran go along these lines. Iran's uranium enrichment programme is in contravention of Iran's 1968 commitment as a signatory (ratified in 1970) to the NPT. Iran's uranium enrichment programme is aimed at the development of a nuclear weapon. The current Iranian administration of Ahmadinejad, unlike its predecessors, is unwilling to blink when confronted with sanctions and seeks to develop a weapon¹. Iran could spur a chain of defections of member countries from the NPT through sheer precedent. Iran could undo the international non-proliferation regime as it stands. Given historical animosities, the fear of Iran's nuclear weapons status could force Arab countries in the region to either withdraw from NPT or start clandestine nuclear programmes. By thus increasing

¹ Ray Takeyh, Charlie Rose show, 3 February 2006, <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/552>

tensions in the Middle East, this has political, economic and energy security consequences for the rest of the world. If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, the technology and/or device could then be supplied to a pro-Iran terrorist group in the Middle East such as Hezbollah which would imperil the peace and security of Israel and either directly or by consequence, threatens the Arab world. The prevailing animosity between Iran and Israel could mean that if Iran gained a nuclear weapon, confident in the power of nuclear deterrence (given Israel's status as a de-facto nuclear weapons state), Iran could 'pursue a wide variety of aggressive actions against the US, Israel or any other country'².

These arguments are added to by other key stakeholders such as Israel, which has characterised the Iranian regime as a 'messianic, apocalyptic cult'³. It has also been suggested that the Iranian regime seeks to gain a status of "strategic ambiguity" similar to that of Israel, or of Pakistan and India (pre-1998), which will permit the regime the confidence to disturb the balance of power in the Middle East without fear of disproportionate consequences. The Israeli narrative about Iran's nuclear programme also includes claims that 'mutual deterrence would never work' with a country like Iran as it is led by a totalitarian regime which could not care less about the fate of its people. However, the Israeli narratives, particularly by conservative governments, have sometimes been ahead of themselves and suffered from lack of accurate intelligence and questionable motivation, as evidenced by the fact that the assertion that 'Iran is on the threshold of acquiring an operational nuclear weapons option' has been repeated for over a decade⁴.

However, the adversarial pitch is hardly monolithic; there are considerable differences between the US narrative and that of the Europeans (i.e. UK, France and Germany). Iranian support to non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas that target Israel, the Mahdist Army and others active in Iraq, as well as the possibility of Iran backing attempts to overthrow Arab regimes, are all major concerns for the US⁵. However, these are not significant concerns for the Europeans. Among the Europeans, there is even a divergence of narratives between camps of the UK and France on the one side and that led by Germany on another. Indeed, this divergence expressed itself through the failure of the EU-3's (UK, France, Germany and High Representative of the European Union) Framework for a Long-Term Agreement offer in 2005. In particular, a discussion on 'regional security issues' to address Iranian concerns, which was expected from

² Ken Pollack et al., *Which Path to Persia?*, Brookings Institution Press, 2009, p.16

³ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. See Jeffrey Goldberg, "Netanyahu to Obama: Stop Iran – Or I Will," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 31, 2009. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200903u/netanyahu>

⁴ Geoffrey Aronson, *Israel and the strategic implications of an Iranian nuclear weapons option, in Iran's nuclear program*, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006, p.100-101

⁵ Ibid., p.17-23

the Paris guidelines of 2004, was given a brush-over, and instead the French and British reassurances from Security Council meetings were reiterated⁶.

The Supportive Pitch

Russia's recent perspectives on Iran

The current state of relations between Russia and Iran is unprecedented in their history. The two nations have harboured deep suspicion against each other for more than the last 200 years since the consolidation of modern Iran's borders by the then ruler Nadir Shah (1736-47) Iran still feels aggrieved for the loss of the Caucasus to imperial Russia. During the Cold War, the Shah entered into a strong alliance with the US and allies including Turkey and Israel in a bid to thwart any potential Soviet design on Iran. The shooting down of a Soviet drone in 1976 by an Iranian fighter aircraft is said to have halted Soviet aerial reconnaissance on Iran and may have increased the former's apprehensions about the latter. 'Death to the USSR' was a popular slogan in post-Revolutionary Iran. The Islamic Republic had no love lost for the atheist communists, even more so after Moscow supported Marxist insurgent groups in Iran starting from the 1950s and well into the 1980s. The USSR's support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) was another major stumbling block in their bilateral relations. However, the fall of the communist regime changed Iranian attitudes towards Russia; barely a year after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Iran placed an order with Russia for MiG-29s and Su-24s. Thereafter, their relationship witnessed an upsurge⁷.

Russia's ties to the Iranian nuclear programme have been controversial. After the revelation of Iran's underground enrichment facility at Qom (Qom province), London's (UK) *the Sunday Times* reported that the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had confronted Russia with evidence of Russian scientists believed to be assisting Iran in a 'nuclear weapons programme'⁸. This led to much speculation on whether as claimed by Russia, its assistance to Iran's nuclear programme was truly within the permissible limits of nuclear co-operation permitted by the NPT among member countries, or if the assistance extended to the extent of covert moral and material support to an Iranian nuclear weapons programme (ostensibly through supply of technical knowhow, weapon design and manpower).

In effect, Russia's moral support to Iran's nuclear weapons programme is of greater concern to the West than material support. Material support to a potential Iranian nuclear weapons

⁶ The Paris guidelines of 2004 on which the Framework negotiations were based, was supposed to cover the regional security issues.

⁷ <http://www.meepas.com/iranandrussiapart1.htm>

⁸ Uzi Mahanimi, 'Israel names Russians helping Iran build nuclear bomb', *The Sunday Times*, October 4, 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6860161.ece

programme can be counter-productive for Russia for several reasons. If Iran used Russian-supplied highly enriched uranium (HEU) to build a bomb and then tested it, technical nuclear forensics methods can be used to trace the origin by sampling the fall-out. It would also mean the creation of another nuclear power in Russia's backyard, hardly comforting for the government. Further there would be a political domino effect among the Arab countries due to the emergence of a nuclear Iran, which would drive them deeper into the arms of the Americans. Even if the US does not permit Arab countries to retaliate with their own violations of the NPT, they would be forced to accept pleas from Arab countries to enter into 123 agreements (such as being negotiated in the case of United Arab Emirates, UAE) to supply civilian nuclear technology to the latter. This in turn would change the domestic energy production in the Middle East and allow the Arab countries to export more oil. The result could be a slump in world oil prices, or at least a glut of Arab oil, which would affect Russia's own oil exports in the world market.

Further, if Russian involvement in an Iranian nuclear weapons programme were to be confirmed, it would affect Russia's international standing, at least in the short-term. And the Americans are less likely to ignore such a transgression now than they were in the case of China right through the 1980s-90s⁹. Further for Russia, 'the centrality of an intimate relationship with the US has remained fundamental on both economic and geopolitical grounds'. According to noted Russian liberal thinker, Alexei Arbatov, the first priority of Russian foreign policy is to prevent the emergence of regional hegemony in Europe, the Far East, and South Asia¹⁰. West Asia follows as a corollary.

However, some would argue that keeping the Iran issue on the boil, without allowing it to boil over suits Russia's economic interests. Iran's restricted ability to export oil to Europe as a result of the sanctions means that Europe's dependency on Russia's oil only continues to grow. Another version of this argument says that having dealt with the Iranians, the Russians feel helpless to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold and view the event as inevitable. Therefore, they have decided to do their best to delay the event by using their assistance to Iran's civilian nuclear programme, while simultaneously extracting concessions from the US using such "non-existent leverage over Iran" as a pretext.

There is little doubt that Russia understands Iran's nuclear motivations. In 2007, after Iran decided to henceforth celebrate 9 April as the National Day of Nuclear Technology, Russia's Itar-Tass News Agency wrote, "Russian and international experts had repeatedly pointed out that the intention of Iranian authorities to come to large-scale enrichment would be of practical significance only if the country had at least ten nuclear power plants...observers note an inconsistent pace of building centrifuges and nuclear power plants, and it remains unclear why

⁹ Refer China's proliferation of nuclear technology to Algeria, Pakistan and allegedly, North Korea.

¹⁰ Alexei Arbatov cited in Ilya Prizel, *National Identity and Foreign Policy*, Cambridge University Press, p.245

Iran is in haste to produce nuclear fuel that can be claimed by the energy sector only in a long term”¹¹.

But today, Russia no longer talks of the problem of trust in Iran’s programme. Instead Russia says that there isn’t enough proof to say that Iran is pursuing a weapon. In diplomatic nuance, this amounts to dropping a position of ambivalence and a cautious hardening of stance in favour of Iran. A number of counter-narratives have been advanced to explain Russia’s stance: Russia stands to profit from the volatility of international oil prices resulting from a standoff over Iran; Russia finds Iran an issue that gives it leverage in talking to the US; and that Russia sees Iran as an issue that keeps the US engaged and focused away from Russia itself¹².

China’s recent perspectives on Iran

China does not have much historical baggage to carry from its past dealings with Iran. However, China’s growing relations with Iran have coincided with the former’s rise in the international arena. Since it signed the NPT in 1992, China has taken an active role in promoting the global non-proliferation regime¹³. China has voted against Iran twice in Security Council resolutions concerning the latter’s nuclear enrichment activities.

And yet China’s reliance on Iran as a supplier of oil for its energy-hungry economy has ballooned over the last decade. Iran is now the third biggest source of crude oil for China and bilateral trade amounted to \$28 billion in 2008. China’s state-owned oil giants China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and China Petroleum & Chemical Corporation (Sinopec) among others have won some of the most lucrative bids for exploration in the oil and gas fields of North and South Fars, and South Azadegan.¹⁴ This has led to what seems to be a bizarre schizophrenia in Chinese policy toward Iran, wherein sanctions against Iran are opposed, but American initiatives to sanction Iran are not vetoed at international forums.

However, China’s strategy may be more logical than suspected. Professor Dingli Shen of Fudan University has described five considerations which shape China’s thinking on Iran’s nuclear

¹¹ Itar-Tass, “Iran celebrating day of nuke technology”, 9 April 2007, <http://www.iiss.org/whats-new/iiss-in-the-press/press-coverage-2007/april-2007/iran-celebrating-day-of-nuke-technology/>

¹² See Pollack and others, *Which path to Persia?*, Brookings Institution Press, 2009 for a detailed discussion of the explanations of Russia and China’s stance

¹³ It is in some ways ironic that China’s proliferation of nuclear technology to Pakistan in the ‘80s may have indirectly assisted Iran’s nuclear program, given the role of AQ Khan’s networks in proliferation Iran. See Simon Henderson, ‘Investigation: Nuclear Scandal – Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan,’ *The Sunday Times*, September 20, 2009, available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6839044.ece>

¹⁴ Pascal Trouillard, China could bend on Iran nuke sanctions: experts, AFP, 18 October 2009, available at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h3IEoUXCeIWbFXTiX0v0OjWaYCYQ>

programme: respecting Iran's right to a civilian nuclear programme, perpetuating the nuclear non-proliferation regime, maintaining bilateral energy and economic ties with Iran, protecting relations with the US, and promoting China's international image¹⁵. China's public stance on Iran has therefore been largely pragmatic. And notwithstanding the steady correlation of its interests with Iran, China's stance has undergone a fair amount of change over the past few years. At the start of the controversy about Iran's nuclear programme, China's stance was that the problem was one of Iran rebuilding trust with the international community. The way out, according to China, was to let the IAEA take the lead on the issue¹⁶. Nonetheless, this argument did not stop China from voting against Iran in UN Security Council resolutions.

Since the US invasion of Iraq, China has striven to strengthen its ties with both Russia and Iran in a bid to prevent US military action against the remaining members of the 'Axis of Evil'¹⁷. But by 2006, as Iran's stance on the programme became more rigid and its confrontation with the P3 (US, UK, France) increased, China seems to have sensed that a military attack on Iran by the West or Israel could no longer be ruled out. Its standard argument thereafter was that the 'Iranian nuclear issue . . . should be properly resolved through diplomatic negotiations'. This change in argument of the Chinese is significant. Starting in 2007, despite constant reiteration of their determination to continue the enrichment programme, as if in response to a gradual dilution of support from the covert allies (i.e. Russia and China), Iran engaged in a series of exchange of proposals with the P5+1 in the Geneva negotiations.

Come 2009, the Obama administration has rewired strategy for Iran following a hiatus after the flawed Iranian elections. By August 2009, the military option started to seem more distant than earlier presumed, and more sanctions (especially gasoline sales to Iran) seemed more imminent. China's latest argument is that 'more sanctions will not solve the problem', but asserts this without defining whether or not the problem is one of the US and allies' lack of trust in Iran's programme, Iran's violation of the NPT (a normative issue), or Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. In other words, China has chosen to render its stance on Iran more ambiguous over the past three years¹⁸. Indeed, as the October 2009 talks proved the interaction of Russian and Chinese perspectives with those of the US and allies will largely determine the level of international pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear enrichment programme, whatever may be the end purpose.

¹⁵ Dingli Shen, 'Iran's nuclear ambitions test China's wisdom', *The Washington Quarterly*, spring 2006, 29:2, pp.55-66.

¹⁶ UN Security Council process verbal, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Jephraim P Gundzik, 'The US and that "Other" Axis', Asia Times Online, June 9, 2005 available at <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/GF09Ad08.html>

¹⁸ 'Dim outlook for expanded sanctions against Iran,' Reuters, September 2009 <http://www.reuters.com/article/gc08/idUSTRE58N3E920090924?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=11604>

However, it is clear from a study of Russian and Chinese media¹⁹ and UN Security Council debates that of the eight narratives cited in the US and allies' pitch (see section titled 'Adversarial pitch' above), only narratives one through five resonate with Russia and China. Iran's regional security concerns are not of paramount importance to the Russians and Chinese, but the fact that these concerns (despite assurances from elements of the former president George Bush's administration and EU) have not been taken up²⁰ is an element that makes the Russians and Chinese distrust US intentions about Iran.

The Tehran Pitch

Since 2005, the regime in Tehran has embarked on a massive effort to shape internal public opinion on the nuclear programme. What is *not* said in propaganda is often as important as what is said. It is fairly common for nuclear programmes to be sold by governments to their public through nationalist propaganda. But in the case of Iran, perhaps because of its NPT obligations, the regime has almost never claimed (even internally) that nuclear weapons are a right of Iran and hence their attainment a national objective. The Iranian regime's internal stance on the nuclear programme is more curious when we see the terms in which it is actually couched.

Internally, the Iranian regime portrays the nuclear programme as a matter of 'advancement of science and technology.' The regime thus showcases the nuclear programme as part of a national effort of progress and modernization. Considerable amounts of human resources and finances have been allotted to the programme. The nuclear programme is also geared at capturing the youth constituency²¹. Indeed, youth who are part of the pro-regime Basij volunteer militia are often among the most vociferous supporters of the nuclear programme, as evidenced by the prominent posters put up by the Central Committee of the Basij which depict Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei surrounded by a halo in the shape of the sign of the atom²².

Indeed, Iranian media on occasion reports Shiite clerics reiterating Ayatollah Khamenei's remark that nuclear weapons are un-Islamic. In his 2005 analysis of Iranian conservative and reformist media, Tehran University professor Hossan Seifzadeh describes how 'the Islamic Republic needs to maintain its peaceful nuclear technology . . . to sell (itself) to the domestic audience as a

¹⁹ Various reports in *The People's Daily*, Xinhua and Itar-Tass.

²⁰ For a more detailed analysis of the assurances about "regional security concerns of Iran", see Sverre Lodgaard, *Is bombing Iran unavoidable?* in *Iran's nuclear program – realities and repercussions*, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2006

²¹ Of relevance here is the fact that the scientists and technicians involved in the Iranian nuclear program are among the youngest in any nation's nuclear program. For instance, the average age of scientists at the Esfahan enrichment facility is just 25 years. Elahe Mohtasham, "Revealed: Iran's nuclear factory," *The Sunday Times*, 1 May 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article387202.ece>

²² A prominent poster put up by the Central Committee of the Basij outside the former Shah's palace in Tehran on the occasion of Nowroz in 2008 read "Happy Innovation and Prosperity year" under a picture of Khamenei with a halo in the shape of the sign of the atom.

relevant and modern political regime’²³. He says that ‘the nuclear technology [programme] has become a . . . source of domestic legitimacy for the regime’. Seifzadeh says that in its pro-nuclear propaganda, the regime attempts to ‘eradicate the notorious label implicating the Islamic Republic as a ‘reactionary force’ against technological development’.

An important characteristic of the regime’s propaganda is that it is often couched in historical narratives – the foremost of which is the effort to equate the nuclear issue with that of the nationalization of the petroleum industry under Mossadeq²⁴. The Mossadeq story is indeed a very important national narrative in modern Iranian history. As the last US ambassador to Iran, John Limbert, points out the Mossadeq story – involving the popular Iranian prime minister who was overthrown in the CIA sponsored coup after he nationalised the then largely American and English controlled petroleum industry in Iran – is one of the key narratives that influences Iranian negotiating postures on almost any issue²⁵. With respect to the nuclear issue, the Mossadeq story serves at least two objectives of the regime. One, it allows the regime to showcase the nuclear issue as being one of Iran pursuing its legitimate rights (since enrichment per se is permitted by the NPT) while resisting detractors and hostile forces in the West. Two, the Mossadeq narrative includes the West’s naval blockade of Iran during the Mossadeq interregnum and which impacted Iran adversely. Thus, any additional sanctions on Iran would be portrayed as part of a continuum of efforts to stymie the country’s growth.

A second overarching pattern in the regime’s propaganda is the use of religion. This is often done by linking the themes of Islam, science and technology, and Persian identity (conflating Persian nationalism and Islamic religious identity/Shia sectarian identity is not a novelty for the Islamic Republic)²⁶. One example of this is the new 50,000 Rial note (one of the lower and most common currency denominations), which was released in 2007 featuring a map of Iran with the sign of the atom super-imposed on it. Below the map is printed a quote attributed to Prophet Mohamed: “If science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it.”

A third pattern relates to the use of the arts. In February 2007, a symphony titled ‘Nuclear Energy’ was slated for performance by the orchestra of Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in Tehran’s Azadi Square, to mark the 28th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution²⁷.

²³ Hossan Seifzadeh, “Iran’s assertiveness in maintaining its peaceful nuclear technology: foreign effectiveness and domestic efficiency”, *Perceptions*, Autumn 2005: 125-151

²⁴ Ibid. (note: Seifzadeh does not refer to the narrative as propaganda)

²⁵ John W. Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling the ghosts of history*, United States Institute of Peace Press, September 2009

²⁶ One example of this is the new 50,000 Rial note (one of the lower and most common currency denominations), which was released in 2007 featuring a map of Iran with the sign of the atom superimposed on it. Below the map is printed a quote attributed to Prophet Mohamed: “If science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it.”

²⁷ Mehr news service, “Iran to Mark Islamic Revolution Anniversary with "Nuclear Energy" Symphony”, January 26, 2007

These attempts to use the arts sometimes border on the farcical. (In April 2006, an Iranian news channel aired a religious dance programme at the end of which the deputy supervisor of an important Shia shrine was presented with a container of UF₆! The presenter declared with pride that it was the first nuclear product of the Islamic Republic of Iran, produced in its own nuclear facilities)²⁸.

The nuclear programme has indeed become a domestic political issue for the Islamic Republic and, importantly, an election issue. To the regime, its greatest achievement over the past 30 years is restoring sovereignty to the Iranian people, i.e. the elimination of foreign intervention in Iranian policy-making. The three most significant achievements of the Islamic Republic, as showcased by the regime, relate to the “restoration of Iranian sovereignty” through: (1) elimination of foreign influence and ownership from domestic industry and politics after the 1979 revolution and maintaining a stance against former imperialist powers (primarily the US and previously the USSR and UK); (2) successful defence of the homeland from Iraqi aggression, such as during Iran-Iraq war; and (3) starting and sustaining the nuclear enrichment programme, despite the opposition of the West. The nuclear issue is therefore seen by the regime as a major political achievement. It is not surprising that there are frequent references to the nuclear programme during the annual celebrations of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution²⁹.

The regime has also left no stone unturned in bringing the Iranian nuclear programme into the daily life of Iranians. This has been done in several, even if somewhat idiosyncratic, ways. The new 50,000 Rial note is only the beginning. 2008 was declared as the year of ‘science and technology’, with atomic icons being placed on public display. There are two distinguishable conceptual steps in this propaganda effort: first, to equate progress in science and technology in general with mastery of *nuclear technology*, and next to describe advancement in matters of science as the preordained destiny of Shias and, in fact, of all Muslims. Thus, the propaganda creates a self-fulfilling syllogism whose consequence is that nationalistic and conservative sections of the Iranian public maybe convinced that the international community’s effort to halt Iran’s nuclear programme is an effort to interfere with the scientific progress of the Persian civilization and the destiny of the *Ummah*.

²⁸ MEMRI, “Iranian Leaders watch dance celebrating Iran’s Uranium enrichment Capabilities”, 11 April 2006 available at <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP115606>

²⁹ See for instance, this report dated January 2006 in various Iranian media: “Government spokesman Gholam-Hossein Elham said that the Iranian nation will celebrate a nuclear victory during the Ten-Day Dawn ceremonies marking the anniversary of the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution (February 11-20)”.

The People's Pitch

However, it was observed in the course of primary research for this paper that the Iranian public's perception of the nuclear programme is not entirely (as of 2008) shaped by the regime's propaganda. In fact, opinion on the programme is divided. Iranian society is highly diverse and, while everyday citizens are concerned about the country's economy, the rich elite have suffered little from international sanctions. However, there is a significant Iranian middle class that has been increasingly vocal in recent years. The Iranian middle class has been described as a 'Trojan horse in the Islamic Republic which champions liberal values'³⁰. Irrespective of the nature of their values, which is beyond the scope of this study, the middle class has been hurt by the regime's obduracy in pursuing the nuclear enrichment programme. Sanctions imposed by the international community, together with the generous subsidies for the poor administered by the Ahmadinejad government, have resulted in hiked prices for commodities. When Iran failed to block a UN Security Council vote that imposed sanctions in 2005, the failure created a national debate - though not about the nuclear programme, but about the fact that the sanctions hiked the price of tomatoes³¹. In addition, the strengthening of ties with unique allies – namely Russia and China – is taking its own toll. Private entrepreneurs, who make up about 20 per cent of the economy and provide many jobs in the cities, were hurt by a recent influx of Chinese goods³². In short, the economic costs of the sanctions have been pivotal in creating an opinion of any kind whatsoever among the middle class about the nuclear programme, and they have probably had an even greater impact than the narratives of the West or the Tehran regime by themselves. It should not have been surprising that the majority of protesters during the post-election protests in June 2009 came from the middle class.

Most of the people that were met in the course of this research in Iran were from the country's burgeoning middle class and urbanites³³. The rural population, which is believed to be a significant political base for Ahmadinejad, has a vocal minority who support the President's championing of the nuclear programme. However, the results of the research were revealing. Most urban-dwellers were indifferent to the nuclear programme and viewed it as a pet project of the regime that has little to offer the people³⁴. Even more interestingly, most interviewees

³⁰ Abbas Milani of Stanford University quoted in "Our Allies in Iran", New America Foundation paper, accessible at www.newamerica.net/node/1208

³¹ See Hooman Majd, *The Ayatollah begs to Differ*, Doubleday Books, 2008, p.123-24

³² See "Iran's middle class rebels against Ahmadinejad", Sydney Morning Herald, May 31, 2009 available at <http://www.smh.com.au/world/irans-middle-class-rebels-against-ahmadinejad-20090531-brrh.html>

³³ Snowball method was for the interviews and given the restrictive nature of any research within the country, the questions were often open-ended.

³⁴ These interviews were conducted in summer of 2008 and were occasioned by the Israeli "war games over the Mediterranean to attack Iran" and by a war of rhetoric between the Bush administration, Israel and Iran. Public perceptions of the regime may have changed in the aftermath of the Iranian Presidential elections in 2009 and the change of administration in the United States. Most of the interviewees had a deeply negative personal opinion of

thought that the sanctions against the country were a consequence of the West's distorted impression of Iranians as a "terrorist nation." The belief seemed to be that the sanctions against Iran were not as a result of its controversial nuclear programme, but in reality were part of the US 'Global war on Terror' and had the intention of making Iran give up its alleged support to terrorism. These interviewees felt that the sanctions, by implication, were branding them as terrorists and expressed the deep offense that they took to this.

Across socio-economic strata, a significant proportion of the population also believes that sanctions against Iran were part of Western and Israeli hostility toward the country, and were suspicious that the West's pressure on Iran is unlikely to end, even if Iran rolled back its nuclear programme. For reasons discussed earlier, there was considerable hostility towards Ahmadinejad and more than once, the interviewee compared the Iranian President to President Bush to show distaste for him.

Among the interviewees, youth ages 20 to 25 were most dissatisfied with the regime and found its intervention in their personal lives and lifestyle highly disconcerting. Some of the youth also spoke of how their parents had enthusiastically participated in the Islamic revolution, but now privately expressed disillusionment with the regime since and were worried about the direction in which the nation was going. Most of the youth longed to leave the country and go abroad. However, they felt frustrated by the long delays in obtaining a visa to visit even European countries. This frustration was expressed both against the regime and against the European countries which denied or delayed their legitimate requests for visas. It is such readings of the West's actions that are shaping Iranian public opinion about the nuclear programme rather than abject nationalism.

3. How these narratives are shaping the debate

The interaction of these four sets of narratives (or pitches) has been the pre-eminent factor in shaping the pace of progress of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme; this was true even when the P5+1 voted together for sanctions against Iran. For instance, in 2006, the US and the UK asked Iran in the UN Security Council for an immediate halt to the enrichment programme and to accept the 'package' proposed by the P5+1 nations. Iran was accused of having a long history of duplicity with respect to its nuclear programme and was therefore a serious threat to international peace and stability. Russia, on the other hand, felt that suspension of the enrichment programme should only be an 'interim measure' until trust can be restored in Iran's nuclear intentions. China, too, found the core issue to be one of Iran 'rebuilding trust' and to allow the IAEA to take the lead in addressing the issue³⁵.

President Bush. As one interviewee, a middle-aged, educated family man in Tehran described what he thought of Americans: "A good people, under a bad government".

³⁵ UN Security Council proceedings, 2004-08 (Analysis written by author for the Repertoire of the Security Council)

It also worth noting that, over time, the arguments for and against accusing Iran of violation of its NPT obligations, and for taking a tough stance against it, have changed but only marginally. As of September 2009, on the adversarial perspective side, the arguments of the US and the UK that Iran's nuclear programme poses a threat to 'regional stability' has more or less vanished; Iran's programme is now described as a clear danger to international security and the norms of the NPT (in that order of priority).

In terms of the Supportive perspective, towards the end of 2008, Russia no longer talks of the problem of trust in Iran's programme. Instead Russia says that there isn't enough proof to say that Iran is pursuing a weapon. In diplomatic nuance, this amounts to dropping a position of ambivalence and a cautious hardening of stance in favour of Iran. As discussed later in the paper, Russia's stance does not seem to be based on any real doubts about Iran's programme. Instead, it is a conscious diplomatic manoeuvre. However there is evidence to indicate that since the Obama administration's overtures to Russia such as the withdrawal of missile defence facilities in Eastern Europe, Russia's strained relations with Arab states over the Iranian nuclear issue and growing international opinion against the programme, Russia's own stance vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear program has diluted to an extent as seen from President Medvedev's announcement of readiness to support more sanctions against Iran.

China's stance has undergone a degree of change and no longer talks of the trust factor. Instead, China's argument is that 'more sanctions will not solve the problem', without defining its nature – whether the problem is related to the US and its allies' lack of trust in the programme; Iran's violation of the NPT (a normative issue); or Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon. In other words, China's stance has grown more ambivalent over the past three years³⁶.

4. Conclusion

Several approaches have been discussed among the US and allies in recent years about the best possible strategy to prevent Iran from achieving what is believed to be the objective of its nuclear programme: weaponization. These response strategies have included, among other things – military attack, containment and deterrence, and engagement³⁷. It is indubitable that for any of these approaches to be credible and legitimate, international public opinion needs to form a consensus of support for that approach. One of the key findings of this study is that support can

³⁶ Dim outlook for expanded sanctions against Iran, Reuters, September 2009 <http://www.reuters.com/article/gc08/idUSTRE58N3E920090924?pageNumber=2&virtualBrandChannel=11604>

³⁷ Fareed Zakaria, "Containing a Nuclear Iran", Newsweek, 3 October 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/216702>; A more nuanced discussion of the options in Pollack and others' "Which Path to Persia?", includes (from pacifist to hawkish) Persuasion, Engagement, Invasion, Airstrikes, allowing an Israeli military strike, regime change (through a popular uprising, support to an insurgency, or support to a coup d'état) and Containment

be garnered by first comparing the contrasting narratives to Iran's nuclear programme and then choosing the right narratives to counter/defeat those emanating from Tehran.

It is also significant that each of the four pitches described in this paper views the Iran's nuclear programme with a different degree of urgency. The interaction of these four pitches/perspectives (and the narratives that inform them) has either hastened or slowed down the nuclear enrichment programme at various periods, particularly over the past five years. This is largely because of the impact that they have had on perceptions about the programme among the various stakeholders. Thus, understanding the Iranian nuclear debate to be a 'battle of narratives' and ultimately a matter of selecting the right narratives to shape the debate and diplomatic agenda can greatly help in addressing the challenges arising from Iran's nuclear enrichment programme.

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