

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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IRANIAN PERSPECTIVES OF STRATEGIC STABILITY AND  
THEIR NUCLEAR PROGRAM DECISION MAKING

by

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Michael L. James is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Lt Col James entered the Air Force in 1996 as a graduate of the Mississippi State University ROTC program. Upon completion of Undergraduate Space and Missile Training, he was assigned to the 740th Missile Squadron, Minot AFB, ND. Following his initial combat crew tour, he was competitively selected for instructor/evaluator duty at the USAF Officer Training School, Maxwell AFB, AL. He was then assigned to the 1st Space Launch Squadron, Cape Canaveral AFS, FL where he served as an Air Force Launch Crew Commander for the Delta II Launch Vehicle in support of Global Positioning System (GPS) Satellite Launch Operations. He was then assigned to Patrick AFB, FL in a variety of staff positions to include Chief, Inspections and Exercises, Chief, Launch and Range Strategic Planning, and Director of Staff. Lt Col James was then assigned to the Air Force Research Laboratory at Wright-Patterson AFB, OH culminating in an assignment at Headquarters Air Force Research Laboratory where he served as the Chief, Space, Cyber and ISR Technical Requirements Branch responsible for the Air Force \$4 billion Space, Cyber and ISR Science and Technology investment. He was then assigned to the 64th Intelligence Squadron and served as Commander, Cyber Operations Flight and Director of Operations. Lt Col James was then assigned to the 63rd Intelligence Squadron where he served as the Senior Air Reserve Technician, Director of Operations and Squadron Commander. Prior to attending Air War College, Lt Col James served on the Air Staff at the Pentagon as the Program Element Monitor (PEM) and Primary Action Officer (AO) for all Air Force Reserve Command & Control, and Global Integrated Intelligence, Surveillance, & Reconnaissance programs.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines Iran's perspective of its strategic stability and the national interest and objectives that guide their nuclear program decision making. This paper also explores the various factors that shape Iran's view of itself, its neighbors, and others around the globe. An understanding of Iranian strategic stability perspectives will allow the United States to better develop and execute strategy to achieve its desired political end states. A key component of Iranian strategic stability involves the notion of strategic security. Iran's nuclear program is a key component of its strategic security. Iran's acceptance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, also known as the Iranian Nuclear Deal, reveals much regarding Iran's nuclear program decision making, prioritization of national interest and perspectives relative to strategic stability. An examination of Iranian perceptions of strategic stability led to the conclusion that Iranian strategic stability revolves around three national interest. The national interests/concerns that influence Iranian strategic stability are; 1) strategic security (i.e. threats from external actors), 2) autonomy (i.e maintaining the existing leadership and system of governance), and 3) economic security. These national interests serve as the foundation for Iranian perspectives of strategic stability. Additionally, United States national security concerns relative to Iran are identified and compared with the national interests and/or strategic stability concerns of Iran. Finally, this paper provides recommendations focused on improved diplomatic efforts and the use of a whole-of-government approach in order to better address and solve United States national security concerns regarding Iran.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

## Introduction

Iranian views of strategic stability have changed over time, two distinct periods are pre and post Iranian Revolution, identified respectively as during the Shah of Iran's regime and after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. There are a myriad of factors that influence Iranian views of their strategic stability. This paper examines Iranian strategic stability from an *Iranian* perspective. Furthermore, the central research question is what does Iranian nuclear program decision making say about their perspectives on strategic stability? A qualitative approach is used to argue that Iranian national interest concerns influence their nuclear program decision making. Kayhan Barzegar, former Harvard research fellow and Director of the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran, Iran characterized strategic stability under the Shah of Iran's regime as being defined "within comprehensive economic, political, and military proximity with the Western bloc and its regional allies." Additionally, Barzegar contends that "during the Islamic Republic, that [earlier] strategy reversed and making a distance from the West and reliance on independent national relations have become significant.<sup>1</sup> According to Barzegar, Iran's views on its strategic stability are shaped by its understanding of strategic stability in the region. It is in this context that "strategic issues in Iran's foreign policy such as establishing political coalitions, adopting deterrence policies, arms control and rivalry, cultural, economic, and energy integration policies, and even the advancement of the country's nuclear activities have been formed".<sup>2</sup> As it relates to Iran's nuclear program, much debate has been made regarding the true intentions of their program. Iran contends that its nuclear program is for

peaceful and/or civil purposes and points to its need to be less reliant on fossil fuels to supply its energy needs. The United States and others in the international community have concerns and contend that Iran is building the capability to develop and eventually obtain a nuclear weapon. It is this fundamental disagreement that drives United States foreign policy with regard to Iran.

With regards to the Iranian Nuclear Program, in the book *Living on the Edge: Iran and the Practice of Nuclear Hedging*<sup>3</sup>, author Wyn Bowen brings up the question of whether or not Iran is using a strategy of nuclear hedging to advance its nuclear program in an effort to move closer to nuclear weapons capability. The book provides a relatively objective perspective regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, from the discovery of undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities in 2002, through the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action by Iran and the P5+1 in 2015.

The book is relevant in discussions of Iranian strategic stability in how it connects Iranian pursuit of “peacefully nuclear energy” to less reliance on outside nation states. A key concept identified in the book is the desire for Iran to operate as a sovereign (i.e. autonomous) nation with little to no outside influence. It is my assertion that Iranian concerns regarding their national interest influence their nuclear program decision making and overall strategic stability. Iranian national interests/concerns that influence Iranian strategic stability are; 1) strategic security (i.e. threats from external actors), 2) autonomy (i.e. maintaining the existing leadership and system of governance), and 3) economic security. One area this paper will give particular attention to is Iran’s nuclear program decision making as it relates to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The overarching factors of strategic security, autonomy, and economic security will address the question “what does Iranian nuclear program decision making say about their perspectives on strategic stability?”

## **Thesis**

Iranian national interest concerns influence their nuclear program decision making.



# Iranian Strategic Stability

## Introduction

The mere definition of strategic stability has in itself presented a challenge. As such, it is appropriate for this discussion of Iranian strategic stability to take a broader look at how strategic stability is defined. “There is no consensus on the definition of strategic stability nor is there common understanding of what it comprises; it is also reasonable to assume that there probably never will be.”<sup>4</sup> Vijay Shankar, former Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Forces Command of India, published a rather insightful article in the Strategist, entitled “What is Strategic Stability?”<sup>5</sup> In the article, Shankar compared and contrasted the traditional view of strategic stability (i.e. The Cold War Paradigm) with a new “Alternative Characterization”. It is the latter definition that is best suited for describing Iranian perceptions of their strategic stability. “For the Cold Warriors, strategic stability was a military rationale. It was all about surviving a first nuclear strike and then credibly being able to respond with a massive retaliatory nuclear strike.”<sup>6</sup>

Applying the Alternative Characterization of strategic stability as defined below gets at the true nature of what is Iranian strategic stability and how is it defined.

So, it is not in the Cold War paradigm - which sought strategic stability in parity of nuclear arsenals in terms of capabilities, numbers, conceptual permissiveness of limited nuclear war fighting and conformity of intent - that one can find understanding of strategic stability. Not either can pure military analysis of inter-state relations provide comprehension of what makes for strategic stability. An alternative characterization perhaps lies in a holistic inquiry into the matter where the parts determine, and in varying degrees, influence the whole. Following this thread, nine determinants of strategic stability may be identified, these include: civilizational memory, recent history, geographical context, political proclivity, social structures, economic interests, religious orthodoxy, technological prowess, leadership and military power. The real question to now answer is what manner, proportion and to what intensity do these determinants influence inter-state relations?<sup>7</sup>

As Shankar stated, “the real question to now answer is what manner, proportion and to what intensity do these determinants influence inter-state relations? A report in these terms would



offer an insight into strategic stability; this conceivably provides a more sophisticated approach to the matter.”<sup>8</sup>

To understand Iranian perspectives on strategic stability is to understand Iranian history because Iranian interpretations of strategic stability are not formed in a vacuum. In fact, Iranian views of strategic stability are shaped by a number of factors to include internal, external, and historical dynamics. The Iranian perspective of national greatness traces its roots to the Persian Empire founded under Cyrus the Great in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC.<sup>9</sup> Iran’s decline in relative power and frequent interventions by the great powers over the past two centuries have instilled elements of insecurity, resentment, and distrust toward the West and Russia.<sup>10</sup> These feelings of insecurity, resentments, and distrust toward the West and Russia invigorate the desire to both achieve and maintain autonomy. Relative to the sense of national greatness, Iranians also perceives a right of regional hegemony. The Iranian people desire to return to an era of greatness, similar to that of the Persian Empire. Iran sees itself as the rightful leaders of the Middle East and desire recognition as a significant global player.

Iranian national interests run parallel with views and/or perceptions of their own strategic stability. Iran seeks to ensure its national security by way of protecting itself from external attacks. Iran also seeks to maintain its government and leadership. “Iran is a fundamentally defensive state. It is principally concerned with its own stability and regime survival, and its main strategic goals are to mitigate its relative isolation while deterring potential attack from multiple regional adversaries.”<sup>11</sup> Underpinning the Iranian desire to 1) protect itself (i.e. strategic security) and 2) maintain its leadership and system of governance (i.e. autonomy), is the need to 3) ensure internal stability with a vibrant economy (i.e. economic security). These are three primary national interest concerns of the Iranians. The essence of Iranian strategic stability

is defined by ensuring these national interests concerns are satisfied. In the next three sections, I will take a look at these national interest concerns as components of Iranian strategic stability and demonstrate how they influence Iranian nuclear program decision making.

### **Iranian Strategic Security**

A critical component of Iranian strategic stability is the ability to defend itself from external threats. The ability to defend against external threats is strategic security. Real and/or perceived external threats have led Iran to pursue military capabilities to deter aggression. To the extent that these threats are real, having a nuclear deterrence capability appears to be a rational course of action. Iran sees external threats emanating from countries in the Middle East as well as the United States. With regard to the United States, these threats are not merely perceived. In an interview with the New York Times after a historic nuclear deal was concluded with Iran, President Obama stated, “Even with your adversaries, I do think that you have to have the capacity to put yourself occasionally in their shoes, and if you look at Iranian history, the fact is that we had some involvement with overthrowing a democratically elected regime in Iran,” In his interview with the New York Times, President Obama was referring to the 1953 CIA coup that overthrew Mohammad Mosaddegh, a secular democratic leader who nationalized Iran's oil industry. “We have in the past supported Saddam Hussein when we know he used chemical weapons in the war between Iran and Iraq, and so, as a consequence, they have their own security concerns, their own narrative.” The Reagan administration re-established diplomatic relations with the Iraqi dictator in the 1980s, providing intelligence that facilitated Iraq's invasion of Iran. This part of the historical record is rarely brought up in the United States domestic discourse on Iran and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

The recent security alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has also heightened Iran's concerns relative to Saudi Arabia. "An alliance between Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and the United Arab Emirates under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ) is seen as multiplying the threat. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi share hawkish views on Iran's role in the region."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Israel has declared that Iran cannot have a nuclear weapon, indicating that Israel would take whatever steps are necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The Iranian ballistic missile program, much like the Iranian nuclear program has also been of much debate. In recent years, Iran has invested in the development of its ballistic missiles. Focusing more so on accuracy than range. A move that some point to as signaling a concern of threats from regional states/actors. Recently, the United States has mentioned setting additional Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) conditions regarding Iran's ballistic missile program and Iran's presence in the region. Senior foreign policy adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Akbar Velayati, in comments he provided to Iranian media on 17 Oct 2017 stated "to say that they accept the JCPOA but should negotiate on Iran's regional presence or talk about Iran's missile defenses is to set conditions on the JCPOA, and this is not at all acceptable."<sup>14</sup> The Iranians see criticism of their ballistic missile program as illegitimate and see their ballistic missile program as a critical deterrent against regional states such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Iran also perceives the United States' massive military arms sales to Saudi Arabia as undermining Iranian strategic security.<sup>15</sup>

As it relates to their nuclear program's ability to transition to a nuclear weapons program, Iran has been accused of engaging in a long and deliberate strategy of nuclear hedging. So is Iran using a strategy of nuclear hedging to advance its nuclear program in an effort to move

closer to nuclear weapons capability? There is much debate around this question, I would contend that Iran has developed a certain level of nuclear deterrence in their ability to reach a nuclear weapons capability threshold. In other words, there is nuclear deterrence value in just being “close” to developing a nuclear weapon. The signing of the JCPOA by Iran signaled which national interest was most important at the time. Clearly allowing for more transparency and confidence building measures around the Iranian nuclear program was worth having international economic sanctions lifted.

### **Iranian Autonomy**

Iranian autonomy refers, in part, to the ability to maintain the Iranian leadership and system of governance. For other countries this can be viewed as the desire to prevent regime change. Iranian autonomy also alludes to the desire to operate in a sovereign manner. To conduct internal affairs free of outside influence and pressure. Given the national greatness perceived by the Iranians, they see it as Iran’s right to serve as the regional leader in the Middle East.

Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony began under the Shah, prior to the Islamic Revolution, when Iran was seen as the "keeper of the Gulf."<sup>16</sup> Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has indicated in speeches, press releases, and even social media his disdain for United States attacks on Iranian autonomy. Social media outlets such as Twitter have become a preferred method of promoting his ideology. For example, on 27 Dec 2017, Khamenei released the following Twitter messages meant to highlight United States domestic and foreign policy;



**Khamenei.ir** @khamenei\_ir · 27 Dec 2017

Reagan was both wiser and more powerful than Trump. They took measures against Iran: they shot down one of our passenger aircrafts. But where is Reagan, and how powerful is the Islamic Republic now?



**Khamenei.ir** @khamenei\_ir · 27 Dec 2017

The U.S. gov. commits oppression inside the U.S., too. U.S. police murder black women, men, & children for no justifiable reason, and the murderers are acquitted in U.S. courts. This is their judicial system! And they slam other countries' and our country's judicial system. #BLM



**Khamenei.ir** @khamenei\_ir · 27 Dec 2017

Our main enemy—the U.S. regime—leads the most corrupt and oppressive govt. According to news we've received, they're still supporting ISIS and the like. They support the Saudi tyrannical ruling family in their crimes against #Yemen, & support Zionist atrocities in #Palestine.

These messages by Khamenei, are indicative of the deep and long lasting distrust many Iranians have regarding the United States. The United States' involvement in overthrowing the regime of Prime Minister Muhammad Mussadeq, and their support of the Shah, serves as one source of content between Iran and the United States.<sup>17</sup> Iran continues to have concerns about United States attempt to bring about regime change, as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran perceives United States policies as an attack on Iranian autonomy and therefore remain resistant and suspicious of United States foreign policy relative to Iran and the Middle East.

### **Iranian Economic Security**

Iranian economic security as a component of its overall strategic stability has evolved over time. Iran's security policy is often described as a blend of Islamic and nationalist objectives, these factors, however, have carried less weight in recent years than have more standard political considerations. Geopolitics has reasserted its importance, and economics has grown from a foreign policy irrelevance to a leading factor. Preserving regional stability and improving Iran's economy has forced the clerical regime to cultivate neighboring governments, even at the expense of revolutionary principles. As a result of this shift, Iran often favors far more cautious policies than its Islamic and nationalist ethos might otherwise dictate.<sup>18</sup>

While the P5+1 consisting of China, Russia, France, United States, United Kingdom, and Germany States may have viewed the JCPOA as a “nuclear” deal, for Iran it was an “economic” deal. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who presided over the JCPOA, presented the JCPOA to the Iranian people as an agreement that would usher in a new age of economic prosperity for Iran. While the signing of the JCPOA and lifting of United Nations sanctions has created jobs due to investments by western companies such as Boeing, these gains were counterbalanced by decreases in the global oil prices which causes less than expected revenues for Iranian oil. In 2016, GDP growth was 4.5%, recovering to 2014 levels after it plummeted to 0.4% in 2015. Before President Rouhani took office, 15.5% of the country was unemployed. When sanctions peaked between 2011 and 2014, Iranians saw their incomes drop by more than 20%, to just over \$5,300 on average. At one point, the Iranian rial fell by up to 80%, the price of basic goods skyrocketed and the economy suffered a period of hyperinflation.<sup>19</sup> Sanctions cost Tehran about \$50 billion in lost revenue each year, the importance of economic security overrode the desire for advancements in the Iranian nuclear program which led to Iran seeing the advantages of signing the JCPOA.

*So what does strategic stability look like for Iran?* While Iranian national interests and concerns inform their view/perception of strategic stability, what strategic stability looks like from an Iranian perspective is Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other hostile powers being held at bay. Iranian acceptance and compliance with the JCPOA, as a result of their nuclear program decision making, keeps those hostile powers at bay because clear Iranian compliance garners United Nations and international support.

## Iranian Nuclear Program Decision Making

Iran's nuclear program was intended to increase Iranian national pride and unite the population behind the regime.<sup>20</sup> Iranian national interest concerns influence their nuclear program decision making. Iranian nuclear program decision making is shaped by their desire to support the three national interest of 1) strategic security (i.e. threats from external actors), 2) autonomy (i.e maintaining the existing leadership and system of governance), and 3) economic security. Additionally, Iranian national security concerns can be determined by examining their National Security Strategy and sources of foreign policy (see table 2.1).<sup>21</sup>

**Table 2.1**  
**Drivers of Iran's Foreign Policy Compared**

Selected Issue	Revolutionary Islam	Geopolitics	Nationalism	Ethnicity	Economics	Actual Policy
Defense spending level	—	Low	High	—	Low	Low
Ties to revolutionary movements	Strong ties to Muslim groups, particularly Shi'a	Ties to groups in key states, such as Iraq	Ties to groups in the Gulf region, Central Asia, and other historical areas of interest	Reject most ties; strong ties to governments	Reject most ties that might hinder trade or stability	Cautious ties to various religious groups; decline in support in recent years
Relations with the Gulf states	Competition and rejection of legitimacy	Attempt to decrease U.S. influence	Seek recognition of Iran's leadership	Avoid policies that might anger Arab Iranians	Seek close ties to gain goodwill of West, improve oil cooperation	Steady rapprochement
Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus	Support for religious groups	Balance Azerbaijan (and Turkey) with Armenia	Seek influence in Tajikistan, other Persian areas	Strong ties to governments to prevent ir-redentism	Pursue close economic ties	Pursue economic ties; good relations with regional governments
Relations with the United States	Reject ties	Recognize U.S. power; avoid confrontation; minimize U.S. influence	Reject ties, particularly if perceived as subordinate	—	Seek good relations with Washington	Continued resistance to normalization

Iran's National Security Strategy outlines six key areas of concern; 1) Acceptance and recognition of the Islamic revolution and the Islamic regime, 2) Guarantees for Iran's territorial integrity and security, 3) Extraction of Iran's natural resources and conversion to economic welfare, 4) "Regional hegemony" in the sense of influence and veto rights over occurrences in Iran's near

environment and in the “heart of the Middle East” (Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, etc.), 5) Recognition of its leading international status, 6) Leadership of the Islamic camp.

### **Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 14 July 2015 between the Iran and the P5+1 consisting of China, Russia, France, United States, United Kingdom, and Germany States was a landmark nuclear deal to address concern regarding Iran’s nuclear program. A fully implemented JCPOA would “ensure the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear programme”, “reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons” and “will produce the comprehensive lifting of all United Nations Security Council sanctions as well as multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear program, including steps on access in areas of trade, technology, finance and energy.”<sup>22</sup> While the P5+1 may have perceived the JCPOA as a “nuclear” deal, I would contend that Iran saw the JCPOA as an “economic” deal. From a purely Iranian perspective, the JCPOA affords Iran the opportunity to provide transparency regarding its nuclear program. Through the JCPOA, the Iranians are able to prove to the international community that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes in keeping with both scientific and economic justifications. As previously mentioned the JCPOA was primarily an economic deal for the Iranians. Iranian acceptance and compliance with the JCPOA would allow for the lifting of several United Nations sanctions aimed at the Iranian economy.

The sanctions lifted by the JCPOA not only addressed the United Nations sanctions but also multilateral, bilateral, and national sanctions targeted at Iran’s nuclear program, trade, technology sector, financial institutions, and energy related industry. The P5+1 envisioned that the JCPOA would allow for more transparency regarding Iran’s nuclear program and allow the



P5+1 countries to gain confidence in Iranian assertion that their nuclear program was exclusively for peaceful purposes. The JCPOA reflects “mutually determined parameters, consistent with practical needs, with agreed limits on the scope of Iran’s nuclear program, including enrichment activities and Research & Development. The JCPOA addresses the P5+1 security concerns by way of comprehensive measures providing for transparency and verification.”<sup>23</sup> One of the transparency measures addressed in the JCPOA is a measure to include a long-term International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) presence in Iran. The JCPOA calls for 25 years of monitoring and verifications of uranium ore concentrate produced by Iran from all of their uranium ore concentrate plants/facilities. Additionally, the JCPOA calls for 20 years of containment and surveillance of centrifuge rotors and bellows. The JCPOA also has provisions and measures for the use of IAEA approved and certified modern technologies including on-line enrichment measurement and electronic seals.

Iran’s acceptance and compliance with the JCPOA demonstrates how Iran measures its strategic stability. Both the strength of the Iranian military and the strength of the Iranian economy are important components of Iranian strategic stability. However, Iranian nuclear program decision making insofar as acceptance and compliance with the JCPOA clearly demonstrates the importance economic relief is regarding overall Iranian strategic stability.

## **United States and Iran Relations**

There are a number of factors, both internal and external, that influence Iran's perspective of its strategic stability. Outside factors include historical relations with foreign powers such as the United States and European countries. As it relates to Iranian strategic stability, this section will focus primarily on United States and Iranian relations because the United States has remained the most dominant and influential global power since the end of the second World War. Currently the United States maintains a strained "diplomatic" relationship with Iran. This strained relationship has not always been the case. The United States first established diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) in 1850. Diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran ended in 1980 as a result of the Iranian hostage incident. No formal diplomatic relations currently exist between the United States and Iran. However, contacts are carried out through the Iranian Interests Section of the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy in Tehran.

Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1980 Iranian hostage incident, Iran was a critical ally of the United States. In fact, the United States maintained a long and productive relationship with Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, the "Shah of Iran". Additionally, the United States supported the coup against Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 and aided in the re-installment of the Shah of Iran soon thereafter. United States economic interest in Iranian oil appears to have driven its interest in both Iran and the broader Middle East. The United States engaged in quid pro quo foreign policy with Iran. With U.S. assistance, Mohammad Reza carried out a national development program, called the White Revolution; that included construction of expanded road, rail, and air networks, a number of dam and irrigation projects, the eradication of diseases such as malaria, the encouragement and support of industrial

growth, and land reform. He also established a literacy corps and a health corps for the large but isolated rural population.<sup>24</sup>

During the Cold War, Iran served as a strategic ally of the United States. Iran benefited from this relationship through an influx of United States funding and assistance. In exchange, United States investments in Iran solidified continued access to Iranian oil. Iran and the United States enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship until the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Dissatisfaction of the government and specifically the Shah led to the Iranian Revolution. The Shah was overthrown and the religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini captured power, openly criticizing the United States as the “Great Satan.”<sup>25</sup> The Iranian Hostage incident causes an end to diplomatic relations and the United States froze billions of dollars of Iranian assets in the United States.

Supported by the United States in 1980, Saddam Hussein launched a war against Iran and starts the Iran/Iraq war which lasts for eight years at the cost of over a million lives. In 1986, the United States found itself in the middle of controversy as a result of the Iran-Contra affair when it was discovered that the United States was selling weapons to Iran to support a covert war in Central America. The United States and Iranian relationship continued to remain contentious throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Iranians mined the Persian Gulf, the United States attacked Iranian oil installations, and the United States downed an Iranian civilian passenger jet, killing 290 people.

During the 1990s, Iran due to its support of Hezbollah, was the constant target of United States accusations of being a state sponsor of terrorism. An attack on the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish community center in Argentina were blamed on Hezbollah and Iran indirectly. In 1995, the United States placed additional economic sanctions on Iran. The 2000s brought about the

discovery of undeclared Iranian nuclear facilities in 2002. The United States served as a lightning rod to bring about international action against Iran's nuclear program. United Nations resolutions and sanctions between 2006 and 2008 called for an end of Iranian uranium enrichment. Additional United Nations sanctions were imposed upon Iran in an effort to target Iranian oil exports. The economic sanctions served to stir up internal discontent and paved the way for Iranian nuclear program discussions.

Changes in American and Iranian leadership opened the door for a nuclear deal. A 2013 call between United States President Barack Obama and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani marked the first exchange in over three decades between top leadership of the United States and Iran. The exchange would serve as the beginning of a dialogue that would eventually lead to the Iranian nuclear deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

### **United States National Security Concerns**

The United States has long valued the concepts of international security and stability, these values are codified in the National Security Strategy that shapes our foreign policy. The United States National Security Strategy serves as the overarching document that guides our country's priorities, vision, and direction. United States national security concerns relative to Iran are identified in the current National Security Strategy (NSS) released 18 December 2017. The National Security Strategy calls out Iran no less than 17 separate times and specifically states the need to "work with partners to deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear weapon and neutralize Iranian malign influence."

The National Security Strategy (NSS) states that the "United States seeks a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power

hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market.” As it relates to the Middle East and Iran, the National Security Strategy goes on to state that “for years, the interconnected problems of Iranian expansion, state collapse, jihadist ideology, socio-economic stagnation, and regional rivalries have convulsed the Middle East.”<sup>26</sup> The current NSS goes on to further describe the current Iranian government as a dictatorship which is at odds with the CIA assessment that categorizes Iran’s government as a theocratic republic.<sup>27</sup> A theocratic republic, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, has components of a theocracy and a republic. Iran has a supreme religious leader and it has representative democracy. Iran in fact, as the CIA correctly assessed, is not a dictatorship. According to the CIA, a dictatorship is a form of government in which a ruler or small clique wield absolute power (not restricted by a constitution or laws).<sup>28</sup> Words matter and so do facts. The National Security Strategy addresses threats both real and perceived. The National Security Strategy identifies Iran as a “rogue state”, a “dictatorship”, their efforts at regional hegemony as “destabilizing”, and as state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>29</sup>

The United States, as articulated in its National Security Strategy, views Iran as a ballistic missile threat and priorities enhanced missile defense for a layered missile defense system focused on North Korea and Iran to defend the homeland against missile attacks.<sup>30</sup> The United States has identified its national security concerns regarding Iran as follows;

“The Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world. It is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our partners.”

The objectives laid out in the United States National Security Strategy are at odds with those of Iran’s national interests and the objectives identified in Iran’s National Security Strategy. Acceptance and recognition of the Islamic revolution and the Islamic regime, is not provided by the United States, in fact, as mentioned previously the United States refers to Iran as a

dictatorship in their latest National Security Strategy. Iranian aspirations for regional hegemony and recognition of its leading international status as are characterized as “destabilizing”. A basic lack of an understanding of adversarial perspectives will lead to continued diplomatic stalemates between the United States and Iran.

## **Recommendations**

I offer two concepts to consider (CTCs) as they relate to the following recommendations. The first CTC is “understanding Iranian strategic stability concerns will enable the United States to address national security concerns related to Middle East regional stability”. The second CTC is “concerted diplomatic efforts by the United States will lead to improved relations with Iran.”

### **Implement a whole-of-government approach**

United States Strategy that relies disproportionately on the military instrument of power has often led to a failure to meet desired political endstates. Consideration of the political environment leads Clausewitz to generate his famous second definition of war as “merely the continuation of policy by other means.”<sup>31</sup> Since war is a continuation of politics, it would be prudent to ensure that all efforts are focused on meeting the political endstates. However, a nation does not have to go to war to meet its political endstates or more specifically put, a nation need not only utilize its military to meet political endstates. Often the best way to achieve the desired political endstate is employing a whole-of-government approach. The whole-of-government approach is defined as using all the instruments of power, expressed as DIMEFIL for diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement, to respond to a strategic challenge. The reason for introducing the whole-of-government concept was to reflect the reality that military power alone cannot solve our national security problems.<sup>32</sup>

During the Cold War, due to economic, diplomatic, and military power, the United States and the Soviet Union were the two global superpowers. Today, given the United States global power in the economic, diplomatic, and military spheres of influence, one could argue that it holds a hegemony in the global environment.

### **Increase diplomatic engagements**

A hegemony is one state holding a preponderance of power in the international system, allowing it to single-handedly dominate the rules and arrangements by which international political and economic relations are conducted.<sup>33</sup> As the saying goes, if you want to know what someone's priorities are then take a look at where they spend their money. The United States spends more on its military than the next eight countries combined. More than China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, India, France, United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany.<sup>34</sup> United States defense spending in 2016 was \$611 Billion versus \$595 Billion for the next eight countries, of which five of the eight are allies of the United States. The overemphasis of the military to address political endstates is symptomatic of a larger issue of misaligning national instruments of power. Evidence of this overemphasis can be seen in recent efforts to reprioritize government spending to "revitalize" the military. The State Department, the United States lead for diplomatic engagements and foreign policy, recently suffered budgetary cuts apparently in an effort to further increase military spending.<sup>35</sup> The overreliance of the military instrument of power has created a diplomacy deficit.

## Conclusion

This paper has asserted that “Iranian concerns regarding their national interest influence their nuclear program decision making and overall strategic stability”. These national interests that influence Iranian strategic stability are; 1) threats from external actors (i.e. strategic security), 2) maintaining the existing leadership and system of governance (i.e. autonomy), and 3) economic security. A clear demonstration of Iran’s nuclear program decision making in action was their acceptance of the JCPOA. Iran sees the JCPOA as a way of addressing its need to ensure its national interest of “economic security” is met. The lifting of the United Nations sanctions provides Iran the space it needs to grow its economy. Of course there are those that contend that Iran’s acceptance and compliance with the JCPOA is simply a part of its grand strategy of nuclear hedging. In effect Iran would simply be buying itself time to advance its nuclear program closer to a nuclear weapons capability. Critics of the JCPOA and proponents of Iran executing a nuclear hedging strategy assert that;

“Iran will be a nuclear-weapons threshold state operating more than 5,000 centrifuges, with more than 14,000 additional ones at hand but deactivated—assuming the July 14 accord is implemented and survives its infancy. It will be openly engaged in research and development on advanced centrifuges. Its heavy water reactor and its underground second enrichment facility will both be modified but otherwise intact and in use. Iran will have successfully defied multiple UN Security Council resolutions by refusing to suspend uranium enrichment, to dismantle illicitly built nuclear infrastructure, and to make a full declaration regarding its past clandestine nuclear activities or fully address IAEA inquiries about them.”<sup>36</sup>

While these concerns are certainly valid, the fact still remains that Iran makes calculated decision regarding its nuclear program based on a cost-benefit analysis of other national interests. As it relates to nuclear program decision making and the JCPOA, Iran has signaled that the national interest of economic security outweighed considerations relative to the advancement of their nuclear program.



United States military power is not enough to provide the enduring peace, stability, and influence that political endstates often demand. The relationship between ends and means is critical in determining a nation's success or failure in meeting its political endstates. United States strategy that relies disproportionately on the military instrument of power has often times led to a failure to meet desired political endstates. Colin S. Gray in *Why Strategy is Difficult*, summed this assertion up best when he stated "First, strategy is neither policy nor armed combat; rather it is the bridge between them. The strategist can be thwarted if the military wages the wrong war well or the right war badly. Neither experts in politics and policymaking nor experts in fighting need necessarily be experts in strategy. The strategist must relate military power (strategic effect) to the goals of policy".<sup>37</sup> Employing a whole-of-government approach that includes the diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement instruments of national power will serve the United States best in addressing national security and strategic challenges. Failure to employ a whole-of-government approach is why despite overwhelming military power, the United States has sometimes struggled to achieve its political objectives.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)<sup>38</sup>, a common assessment error is falling into the trap of mirror imaging. An example of the failure/consequence of mirror imaging can be found in a report completed by the Congressional Research Service<sup>39</sup> where Admiral David E. Jeremiah addressed the failure to predict the Indian nuclear test in May 1998. Many in the intelligence community pointed to mirror imaging as a major factor in the failure to predict the Indian nuclear test. A concept closely related to mirror imaging is the rational actor hypothesis which attributes rational behavior to one group according to the definitions derived from one's own culture. Mirror imaging and the rational actor hypothesis are frequent and dangerous assumptions because other countries in fact do not always behave and react in the same manner as

the United States. The United States should guard itself against mirror-imaging and any deterrence strategies must be mindful of mirror imaging because in deterrence the adversary gets a vote; therefore, United States strategies must be derived from adversarial perspectives and what they fear and value.<sup>40</sup>



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, "A Nuclear Deal Could Change Iran's Understanding of 'Strategic Stability' in the Region", *Iran Review*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Document/A-Nuclear-Deal-Could-Change-Iran-s-Understanding-of-Strategic-Stability-in-the-Region.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Bowen, Wyn, Matthew Moran and Dina Esfandiary. *Living on the Edge: Iran and the Practice of Nuclear Hedging*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Shankar, Vijay, What is Strategic Stability, *The Strategist*, 12 Oct 2015

<sup>5</sup> Shankar, Vijay, What is Strategic Stability, *The Strategist*, 12 Oct 2015

<sup>6</sup> Shankar, Vijay, What is Strategic Stability, *The Strategist*, 12 Oct 2015  
The Cold War Paradigm

There is no consensus on the definition of strategic stability nor is there common understanding of what it comprises; it is also reasonable to assume that there probably never will be. Yet, the awkward irony is that nations of every predilection individually clamour for strategic stability and therefore rises the need for determining its significance. For the Cold Warriors, strategic stability was a military rationale. It was all about surviving a first nuclear strike and then credibly being able to respond with a massive retaliatory nuclear strike. Moony mirrored rationality, mutually assured destruction and a willingness to fight limited nuclear wars (as if control over the escalatory ladder existed!) were of the essence. But as history so starkly illustrated, such an approach catalyzed great instability at the regional level and if the regional players were themselves nuclear weapon states then stability persistently teetered on the brink.

<sup>7</sup> Shankar, Vijay, What is Strategic Stability, *The Strategist*, 12 Oct 2015

An Alternative Characterization

So, it is not in the Cold War paradigm - which sought strategic stability in parity of nuclear arsenals in terms of capabilities, numbers, conceptual permissiveness of limited nuclear war fighting and conformity of intent - that one can find understanding of strategic stability. Not either can pure military analysis of inter-state relations provide comprehension of what makes for strategic stability. An alternative characterization perhaps lies in a holistic inquiry into the matter where the parts determine, and in varying degrees, influence the whole. Following this thread, nine determinants of strategic stability may be identified, these include: civilizational memory, recent history, geographical context, political proclivity, social structures, economic interests, religious orthodoxy, technological prowess, leadership and military power. The real question to now answer is what manner, proportion and to what intensity do these determinants influence inter-state relations? A report in these terms would offer an insight into strategic stability; this conceivably provides a more sophisticated approach to the matter. Intuitively, the absence of strategic stability is perceived as a proneness to friction and conflict between states.

<sup>8</sup> Shankar, Vijay, What is Strategic Stability, *The Strategist*, 12 Oct 2015

The Cold War Paradigm

<sup>9</sup> Ward, Steven R., *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009

<sup>10</sup> McInnis, Matthew J., *Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution*, American Enterprise Institute, May 2015

<sup>11</sup> McInnis, Matthew J., *Iran's Strategic Thinking: Origins and Evolution*, American Enterprise Institute, May 2015

<sup>12</sup> Mamedov, Eldar, *Europe and Iran's Threat Perception*, [lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/](http://lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/)

<sup>13</sup> Mamedov, Eldar, *Europe and Iran's Threat Perception*, [lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/](http://lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/)

<sup>14</sup> Buonomo, Thomas, U.S., *Iran Need to Engage in Substantive Negotiations on Regional Issues*, <http://lobelog.com/u-s-iran-need-to-engage-in-substantive-negotiations-on-regional-issues/>

<sup>15</sup> Mamedov, Eldar, *Europe and Iran's Threat Perception*, [lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/](http://lobelog.com/europe-and-irans-threat-perception/)

<sup>16</sup> Kam, Ephraim, *From Terror to Nuclear Power: the Meaning of the Iranian Threat*, (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2004), p 31-33

<sup>17</sup> Kinzer, Stephen, *All the Shah's Men*, Jerusalem: Carmel, 2005

<sup>18</sup> Byman, Daniel et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001

<sup>19</sup> Qiblawi, Tamara, *A beginner's guide to Iran's presidential election*, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/16/middleeast/iran-election-beginners-guide/index.html>

- <sup>20</sup> Chubin, Shahram, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, Washington: Carnie Endowment, 2006, p 26
- <sup>21</sup> Byman, Daniel et al., *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001
- <sup>22</sup> United States Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, dated 14 July 2015
- <sup>23</sup> United States Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, dated 14 July 2015
- <sup>24</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Reza-Shah-Pahlavi>
- <sup>25</sup> Dabashi, Hamid, Aljazeera, "Who is the Great Satan?", <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/09/great-satan-150920072643884.html>
- <sup>26</sup> United States and Trump, Donald, *National Security Strategy of the United States*: The White House, 2017
- <sup>27</sup> CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>
- <sup>28</sup> CIA World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>
- <sup>29</sup> United States and Trump, Donald, *National Security Strategy of the United States*: The White House, 2017
- <sup>30</sup> United States and Trump, Donald, *National Security Strategy of the United States*: The White House, 2017
- <sup>31</sup> Beyerchen, Alan "Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War", *International Security*, vol.17, no.3 (Winter 1992) 68
- <sup>32</sup> Meiser, Jeffrey W., "Are Our Strategic Models Flawed?", *Parameters*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Winter, 2016-17) 84
- <sup>33</sup> Goldstein, Joshua S. and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations: 10th Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2013) 49
- <sup>34</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Military Expenditures Database, April 2017
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- <sup>36</sup> Singh, Michael, *Addressing Threats to National Security: Iran*, John Hay Institute, 18 January 2016
- <sup>37</sup> Gray, Colin S., "Why Strategy is Difficult," *Joint Force Quarterly* 22, 1999) 9
- <sup>38</sup> Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, U.S. Intelligence and India's Nuclear Test: Lessons Learned, 2 June 1998
- <sup>39</sup> Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report, U.S. Intelligence and India's Nuclear Test: Lessons Learned, 2 June 1998
- <sup>40</sup> Headquarters Air Force Strategic Deterrence and Nuclear Integration, *Air War College Call for Research Topic*, 2017

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