Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

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In February of 2012, the International Atomic Energy Association (hereafter IAEA) released a statement to the press regarding Iran's continued non-compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (hereafter NPT). The NPT obliges participant states to be transparent about their nuclear program. This includes opening up suspected nuclear facilities for inspection by the IAEA. The press statement stated that "the Agency team requested access to the military site at Parchin. Iran did not grant permission for this visit to take place." (IAEA, 2012) Understandably the international community has shown nervousness around this issue and has since placed sanctions on Iran's central bank and energy sector. Iran continues to claim that its nuclear program is for benign purposes however suspicion remains as to Iran's motives. In this essay both Iran and Tehran will be used interchangeably to denote the current Iranian regime and we will critically assess the international community's response to Iran's nuclear ambitions.

We will show in this essay that the international community is divided on the Iran issue, with these divisions apparent at the highest level of the UN Security Council. We will assess the US/Israel response to Iran's growing nuclear program and their preferred means of countering it, as well as showing how this clashes with the response from China and Russia. We will show that Realist theory best defines the actions of these countries and highlight the limitations of Liberal theory, but firstly we will discuss Iran's own claims about its nuclear program.

Iran has claimed that its growing nuclear program is being developed in order to alleviate its dependence on fossil fuels as its main source of power generation. It has been claimed that Iran's energy requirements show an annual growth of around 8% (Jackson, 2009: 1159-1160) and that Iran "considers that from 2014, oil and natural gas production will no longer be sufficient to meet its domestic energy needs." (Jackson, 2009: 1159-1160) Therefore the claim that Iran is developing nuclear power for civil and peaceful purposes holds a certain degree of weight. However, Iran has huge reserves of oil and gas which they can fall back on which has raised suspicions about its nuclear program as it appears to make "little economic sense." (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 263) This is important to note because the amount of nuclear energy that Iran plans to produce – 7,000MW by 2020 (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 258) – requires a significant amount of uranium and enrichment facilities which opponents of Iran's program claim could be used to develop a nuclear weapon.

As a designated Non-Nuclear Weapons State, Iran has to abide by the NPT and this Treaty obliges Iran to comply with IAEA directives and requests. It has been claimed by Iran's leadership that the current regime "assiduously states its commitment…to its NPT obligations." (Huntley 2006: 730) Yet in 2002, a group of Iranians that were hostile to the government, brought to light that Iranian officials withheld information from the IAEA about its uranium enrichment, in turn breaching its NPT obligations. This has clearly raised suspicions about Iran's true motives and further highlights the global scepticism of Iran's nuclear ambitions. If Iran has no intentions of utilising its nuclear program in a military capacity, and conforming to its obligations under the NPT, then it should not be denying access to its facilities. As a result of this blatant non-compliance, the international community are apprehensive of believing Iran's claims, because if Iran is concealing uranium enrichment activities, then "it is not implausible that there are…covert facilities that remain unknown even to intelligence services." (Kreps and Fuhrmann, 2011: 208) Furthermore, it is not implausible that Iran is intent on building nuclear weapons in order to provide for her own security.

Since there is no global authority to police the international community, Realist theory in International Relations

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dictates that "security can…only be realised through self-help." (Baylis et al, 2011: 95) In the Middle East, Israel is known to possess nuclear weapons therefore, in order to maintain a balance of power; it could be argued that countries such as Iran should also possess nuclear weapons. However, Iran's rhetoric toward Israel in the past has been laced with violent intent. In 2001, the (then) President Rafsanjani stated that Israel should be attacked with nuclear weapons (CNN, 2001) and, as recently as February 2012, Iran has said that it would launch pre-emptive strikes on Israel. (Blomfield, 2012) This has led to a security dilemma as both countries strive to provide for their own security, thereby increasing the other's insecurity. In making these threats towards Israel and defying UN treaties, Iran has incurred the wrath of the USA and we will now focus on the combined Israel/US response to Iran's nuclear program.

Both Israel and the US are vehemently opposed to Iran's nuclear program and its potential to be weaponised. From an Israeli perspective, it is easy to understand why. Iran has not only outright threatened Israel, as we have seen, but it has shown "support for anti-Israel terrorist organisations such as…Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine." (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 265) Both Israel and the US "have implied that an affirmative response, indicating that military force might frustrate Iran's current nuclear program." (Kreps and Fuhrmann, 2011: 161) This attitude exhibited by Israel is understandable in relation to Realist theory as Israel believes that her survival is under threat from Iran. However an attack by Israel on Iran could prove to be counterproductive as it could seriously destabilise the region further, impact global economics as well as mobilising other Islamic countries to rise up against the Israeli's. Israel has previously attacked Syria's nuclear facilities in 2007 and although this set Syria's nuclear program back significantly, it did not eliminate it, therefore it is important to note that any pre-emptive attack made by Israel on Iran's nuclear program would not entirely wipe out Iran's program.

It has been said that "the best possible outcome of military force would be delaying Tehran's ability to build nuclear weapons by around five years." (Kreps and Fuhrmann, 2011: 183) Iran already possesses the knowledge, if perhaps not the technology, to enrich uranium to weapons grade. It could be argued that by attacking suspected nuclear facilities, this only delays enrichment practices however it could further Iranian desire to build a nuclear weapon, which Israel could ultimately prove to be the testing ground for. Moreover, this further increases the security dilemma, as well as decreasing regional stability, as these attacks will only culminate in more attacks. This leads to a strong possibility of leading to a protracted conflict in the region. With conflicts already in place in Afghanistan, civil unrest in Syria as well as the ongoing issues created by the deposing of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, it could be argued that another conflict in the Middle East would be best avoided. However, since 2003, the US has adopted a foreign policy towards Iran, as well as voicing veiled rhetoric, similar to that directed towards the now deposed Ba'ath regime in Iraq.

Prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Washington had stated that if Iraq did not stop from developing weapons of mass destruction then "serious consequences" (UN, 2003) would be imposed upon it. In 2006 the US warned Iran that if it's nuclear program stayed "on its present course, the international community…'will impose **meaningful** consequences' on it." (Tarock 2006: 646 – my emphasis) The actions of the US towards Iraq have been widely condemned by other UN member states that were in favour of a UN led role in disarming Iraq by peaceful means. This shows that within the international community that there are divisions and it is the divisions over Iran and her nuclear ambitions that we now turn our attention.

The divisions in the international community, especially within the members of the UN Security Council regarding Iran, are vital to assessing its fragmented response. We have seen how the US wishes to counter the perceived threat of Iran's nuclear programme however, both China and Russia have not only endorsed Iran's nuclear ambitions but they have also provided assistance to President Ahmadinejad's regime. Iran has built a nuclear plant in the seaport of Bushehr and this was built with Russian assistance. (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 258) Furthermore it has been said that China "has also trained Iranian nuclear technicians and supplied two research reactors" to the regime. (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 262) This is essential to assessing the international community's response as a divided one, as there is no consensus among them. Russia and China's attitudes towards Iran's nuclear programme are clearly at odds with the attitude shown by the US. Similarly, the UK and France "have engaged Tehran in an effort to influence its nuclear deliberations." (Bowen and Kidd, 2004: 267) In assisting Iran's nuclear program by exchanging knowledge and equipment, China and Russia are risking diplomatic conflict with the US, UK and France. This is

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important as it critically highlights the divisions at the core of the UN.

Until the IAEA can clarify the situation regarding the status of Iran's nuclear programme, then arguably it could be argued that it would be best if the international community come together as one to remain faithful to the institutions that they form a part of. The UN Charter calls for collective security but this requires a collective response in order for the Charter to hold weight. The response to Iran's nuclear ambitions from the international community thus far has been far from collective. If the international community were to agree on one direct course of action, then such tactics would leave Iran isolated and could persuade the current regime to comply with its NPT obligations peacefully. Sanctions have been imposed upon Iran in an attempt to bring them into line and attempts have also been made to urge them to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). (UN, 2012) Should Iran ratify the CTBT then it would show their commitment to using nuclear power for peaceful means, however Iran remains reluctant to do so. This is not surprising as (at the time of writing) neither the US or China have signed up to the CTBT. Neither have Israel. This further highlights the fragmentation of the international community but also the hypocrisy of some states that wish to impose treaties on other countries yet do not wish to be part of the same treaty.

This fragmentation also highlights a significant issue with liberal theory, in that it places huge emphasis on the importance of institutions in international relations. From this fragmentation, exhibited by the key states within the international community, we can see that states are following their own agendas in order to pursue their own national interest. This pursuit of national interest, along with the action taken by the US in 2003 in Iraq, has shown the institution of the UN to be essentially impotent. This is a massive problem for the international community however it is a problem that the current Iranian regime is now exploiting and arguably, needs to be countered collectively to ensure global stability.

In conclusion we have seen that the international community is divided on Iran's nuclear programme. We have seen that this fragmentation and lack of collective action has not dissuaded Iran from pursuing its nuclear program. The violent rhetoric from the Israeli's and the US has only been shown to increase tensions in the region. We have seen that there is a tendency amongst the majority of states to let the sanctions imposed by the UN take effect rather than impose a military solution favoured by the US and Israel. The fallout from military action could arguably destabilise global oil supply which would negatively impact on the global economy. The tendency to put faith in institutions to help solve the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions is critical to liberal theorists yet, as we have seen, Israel has attacked perceived nuclear weapons building facilities in the past and a realist would argue that they will do it again in order to maintain their status in the region. It is clear that Iran has no intentions of stopping its nuclear program in the short term and if the international community wish to influence the Ahmadinejad regime in complying with its NPT obligations, it is going to have to put any differences aside, establish a strategy and be a group of nations united in the one purpose.

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