The Implications for Name-Calling “Irrationality”:

How U.S. Considerations of Iran and North Korea as Irrational Affect the Current Nuclear Order & Nonproliferation Efforts

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This essay will explore the question: What are the implications of a U.S. policy that labels certain regimes as “irrational” for pursuing nuclear weapons? I will first define “irrationality” for the purposes of this paper to better understand how it has been applied and why it matters to foreign policy. Then, I will use Iran and North Korea as case studies of regimes that have been labelled by the U.S. as irrational when recent academic literature has argued that both regimes have been strategic, rational, and survivalist. I will then explore the implications of a U.S. response predicated on the notion that these regimes are irrational, which leads me to the following conclusions: 1. Calling a regime “irrational” when it is not drums up domestic support against perceived enemies and favors U.S. hegemony, and 2. This U.S. foreign policy approach rarely helps nonproliferation efforts and can actually harm them. In short, I discover that using the “irrationality” label does good for certain U.S. interests and harms others.

To begin, it is necessary to define what “irrational” means in terms of regimes, world leaders, and their actions. For the purposes of this paper, I will first define “rational” and then set the definition of “irrational” as a refutation of “rational.” Here, the word “rational” describes a world leader or regime that makes decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis of achieving certain goals and taking risks, but with the ultimate restriction that such actions will not be suicidal or utterly destructive to the regime, as the primary goal for leaders and regimes is to thrive[[1]](#endnote-1). Thus, I will define “irrational” as a word that describes world leaders and their regimes as incapable or unwilling to make basic cost-benefit analyses to preserve the survival of their regime and prevent wholly suicidal or utterly destructive outcomes. It is important to note that these definitions deliberately focus on the prosperity of the regime and its leaders as the primary goal, not necessarily the people. It then follows that certain regimes may prioritize the regime’s longevity and stability more so than the quality of life of the average citizen without qualifying as an irrational regime. Moreover, irrationality cannot and should not be used as a euphemism to describe regimes that are simply unlikeable or contrary to U.S. interests. If irrationality can be tailored to each state’s preferences and biases, the U.S. would certainly be labeled as irrational by other states for its aggressive interventionist foreign policy in various places.

The reason it is important to distinguish between irrationality and hostility or un-likability is that the assumption of irrationality limits the possibilities for negotiations, deterrents, and overall policy options for the U.S. If a regime is irrational, no amount of bargaining or threats will stop it from engaging in behavior that could be suicidal – meaning, the regime may launch a nuclear attack although it will nearly guarantee a fatal retaliation. Hostile regimes can certainly be a threat or adversarial towards the U.S.; however, as long as they are rational, there are policy options and diplomatic approaches to choose from that can ultimately persuade the regime that the costs of pursuing nuclear weapons will outweigh the benefits. For this reason, the label “irrational” is a heavy accusation to levy against a state and should not be conflated with a hostile regime. In the next few sections, I will discuss why Iran and North Korea are actually rational states, which shapes how the false accusation of irrationality can bolster U.S. nuclear hegemony but harm nonproliferation efforts.

*Case Study: Iran*

In recent history, the U.S. has considered the Iranian regime to be irrational, which in turn, justifies the idea that we cannot permit them to pursue nuclear weapons programs to any degree, under any circumstance, because they cannot be trusted to act with their own survival in mind. While U.S. officials and presidents have not always used the exact term “irrational”, their concept of the Iranian regime is one that is so evil and wildly malignant that they cannot be reasoned with or trusted to make strategic cost-benefit analyses. In President George W. Bush’s State of the Union Address of 2002, he said “Iran aggressively pursues [nuclear] weapons and exports terror,” and that Iran and nearby states “constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” and are “the world’s most dangerous regimes [that] threaten [the U.S.] with the world’s most destructive weapons.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In using the words “Axis of Evil” and “threaten”, President Bush depicts Iran as a regime that is not only unafraid, but eager to use nuclear weapons simply to advance their nefarious agenda no matter the cost. This rhetoric implies that Iran does not act as a rational state and thus cannot be deterred by an assured second strike.

Other relevant examples include an interview in which Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, a close ally of the United States, said that when considering Iran, or “a militant Islamic regime, [he] wouldn’t be too sure [Iranians] can put their ideology before their survival. So, [he doesn’t] think you can bet on their rationality.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The fact that a major U.S. ally in the region believes that Iran will not prioritize their survival corroborates the idea that the U.S. also considers Iran to be irrational. One last example is an interview in which Republican Senator Lindsay Graham repeatedly described Iran as having a “desire to destabilize the world” and mentioned that “the regime is dangerous and [he] thinks they’re crazy.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Once again, the word “irrational” is not necessarily used, but the message is that the U.S. will not even consider certain policy options to be on the table, since they cannot and should not make deals with a regime that is “crazy”. With this in mind, I will address why this claim to irrationality is untrue and what the implications are of a foreign policy that is based on this perspective.

In the previous examples and others, Iran is repeatedly described as “aggressive,” “hostile,” and completely governed by radical, Islamic terroristic ideology. These reasons are cited as explanations for why Iran must be beyond the scope of reason and impossibly unpredictable. However, these allegations fail to take into account the geopolitical, strategic, and defensive reasons that Iran had for pursuing nuclear weapons in the first place, which will eventually illuminate Iran as entirely rational. Iran felt it needed credible protection against external threats which is in direct contrast to the narrative that Iran is on the offensive with the goal of causing global destruction. Perhaps the most compelling threat to the regime’s survival was the Iraqi invasion to seize Iranian territory which unraveled into the debilitating Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.[[5]](#endnote-5) Even after the war ended eight years later, Iran was reeling from massive casualties and the worry that it could be attacked again.[[6]](#endnote-6)

U.S. policy towards Iran also does not often take into account Iran’s perspective on its global position and isolation. This is problematic because this omission once again allows the U.S. to frame Iran as unfathomably aggressive when Iran perceives itself to be acting defensively. Moreover, Iran felt betrayed by the UN Security Council Resolution 479 which was issued when the Iran-Iraq War began, because it treated Iraq and Iran as equal aggressors instead of condemning Iraq for invading Iran and compelling them to withdraw from Iranian territory.[[7]](#endnote-7) Although later Security Council resolutions more directly addressed Iran’s concerns in identifying Iraq as an aggressor and threat to Iranian security, Iran felt isolated outside of the protection of global institutions like the UN.[[8]](#endnote-8) Ultimately, this fueled notions that Iran had to act completely alone in shoring up its military and diplomatic leverage to achieve real national security.

Another reason Iran felt isolated and threatened enough to pursue nuclear weapons is the fact that several states that border it are not friendly and actually have a large U.S. military presence and influence, including Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and nuclearized Pakistan.[[9]](#endnote-9) This military presence is especially unsettling for Iran because it witnessed the U.S. conventional forces crush Iraq in mere months, which it could not do for years.[[10]](#endnote-10) The assumption is that Iran could not fend off a U.S. invasion with its conventional forces and prevent the U.S. from toppling its regime, as happened to Saddam Hussein and the Taliban in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively.[[11]](#endnote-11) Thus, if we concede that Iran has faced these legitimate security threats, then Iran can no longer be solely aggressive and bent on destruction.

Rather, Iran’s choice to pursue a nuclear weapons program was strikingly similar to that of other states’, namely, domestic political agendas, the symbolic power of nuclear weapons, and security interests.[[12]](#endnote-12) There is much evidence of this, as Iranian officials did not impulsively or even unanimously decide to pursue nuclear weapons, and instead, had factions that deliberated between giving up their program for security guarantee from the U.S. and building the bomb on their own despite the possible ramifications in the international community.[[13]](#endnote-13) Thus, Iran is rational simply because it weighed the costs and benefits of a nuclear weapons program and ultimately decided this would bolster national security, regional status, and the regime on the domestic scale.[[14]](#endnote-14) Finally, while the U.S. may not fully understand the internal politics or information that led to Iran’s nuclear policy or agree with its decisions, a certain rationality and strategy underlies Iran’s decisions nonetheless.[[15]](#endnote-15)

If we accept that Iran is indeed rational despite U.S. claims, then we must assess the implications of a U.S. foreign policy on Iran predicated on the notion that they are irrational. I posit that the hallmarks of such a foreign policy would include: 1) the refusal to make any negotiations that *could* result in trade-offs, concessions, and or anything resembling the like; 2) doing so on the basis that any form of a nuclear weapons program for the “irrational” regime would spell absolute destruction for the United States and the world without evidence to substantiate these threats; and 3) elements of dehumanizing rhetoric to imply that the regime or leader is fundamentally unhinged. Each aspect sheds light on what U.S. foreign policy can and has looked like when it treats Iran as an irrational regime.

Because the U.S. took this hardline stance, the attempts over the recent decades to halt the nuclear-related activities in Iran have been largely unsuccessful. Iran, in turn, was frustrated that we would not sufficiently take into account their rational and valid reasons for nuclear energy and possibly nuclear weapons. Thus, it follows that Iran refused the past deals, which appeared as evidence to the U.S. that Iran could not be reasoned with, although showed evidence of the opposite. One example of such a deal is in 2006 when Iran announced it had begun enriching uranium to 3.5%, which is the average amount for civilian reactors.[[16]](#endnote-16) The UN Security Council introduced an agreement to eventually become a resolution which included the requirement of Iran to completely suspend all enrichment and reprocessing of uranium, even at low levels, and allow accountability monitoring indefinitely. Although the U.S. proposed some incentives in the form of information-sharing on civil aviation and agriculture, Iran rejected the agreement because of the suspension of enrichment but said that this deal was a good foundation for “long-term cooperation between the two sides.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Because Iran has expressed their aims to reach an independent fuel cycle and achieve sustainable nuclear energy, it should be no surprise to the U.S. that Iran would not take a deal that bans uranium enrichment indefinitely.[[18]](#endnote-18) A director at the Center for American Progress stated in 2006 that “It is likely that the administration’s new strategy [towards Iran] will backfire and only strengthen Tehran’s hard-liners.”[[19]](#endnote-19) Thus, the formation of U.S. foreign policy that sees Iran as irrational will actually hamper nonproliferation efforts and undermine the central aim of U.S. nuclear policy.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In contrast, the United States has more recently treated Iran as a rational actor and refrained from the name-calling rhetoric and approach. The best example of this is the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated between Iran, the U.S., the EU, China, France, Russia, the UK, and Germany.[[21]](#endnote-21) This deal was groundbreaking on both ends – the ambiguous Iranian nuclear weapons program would be stalled and the Iranian regime would be granted the recognition and autonomy it sought to continue its scientific and technological advances to use nuclear energy.[[22]](#endnote-22) Furthermore, UN Security Council issued a resolution to nullify previous resolutions that pertained to “the Iranian nuclear issue” and create restrictions on nuclear programs that would affect *all* UN member states.[[23]](#endnote-23) In doing so, the international community and more specifically, the United States altered its approach towards Iran by acknowledging that it, like any other rational state, could be persuaded to cooperate for the right price. This comprehensive deal has been the best possible bet that Iran would not acquire nuclear weapons or ever threaten their use. Thus, the JCPOA is evidence that a more multidimensional, understanding approach yields better results for nonproliferation than a hostile one based on the accusation that Iran is irrational. Although this deal might implicate the U.S. as losing its hardline hegemony in the nuclear world order, the JCPOA is evidence that a “rationality-based” foreign policy will better promote nonproliferation efforts around the world.

To conclude the case study of Iran, the irrationality label may solidify the U.S.’s wide-reaching influence in the global community, but it has little chances of the promoting nonproliferation that we claim to seek. In fact, the only unambiguously positive implications from this irrationality-based foreign policy is that it drums up domestic support. Studies from the Pew Research Center show that in 2006, when the U.S. was attempting to make hardline deals with Iran, 46% of American cited Iran as a “great danger to world peace”, which grew by 20% in just three years.[[24]](#endnote-24) The American public has often responded much more positively to harsh rhetoric against our enemies to feel secure at home, and this implies that a narrow foreign policy based on irrationality will continue to have positive implications for the constituents and supporters of U.S. officials at home.

With this analysis in mind, I suspect that pulling out of the Iran deal would be popular among President Trump’s base and perhaps the wider populations, but extremely harmful to nonproliferation efforts. It would revert to the mindset that Iran cannot be trusted with negotiations or that any acknowledgement of their right to pursue nuclear energy is unacceptable. If President Trump were to do so, I claim it would fall under my hallmarks of a foreign policy based on regime irrationality and would perhaps bolster the U.S. as a hegemonic bully, but detract from limiting the spread of nuclear weapons.

*Case Study: North Korea*

North Korea is the most obvious example of a nuclearized regime that the U.S. deems wholly irrational and incapable of self-preservation. The rhetoric from U.S. officials is harsh and insistent on the idea that Pyongyang is completely unstable and would not respond to reason. Nikki Haley, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the UN, said in a 2017 UN Security Council speech: “We are not dealing with a rational person [Kim Jong-un]. If this was any other country, we would be talking about that, and it wouldn’t be an issue. This is not a rational person, who has not had rational acts, who is not thinking clearly.”[[25]](#endnote-25) This example proves the point that a U.S. foreign policymaker has labeled the Kim regime as “irrational”, fundamentally different from other states, and unable to weigh costs and benefits of their actions. Furthermore, former President Obama has called Pyongyang “irresponsible” and “erratic”,[[26]](#endnote-26) while President Trump has made more provocative and extreme comments like, “Rocket Man is on a suicide mission,” when speaking to the United Nations.[[27]](#endnote-27) This statement, like Haley’s, bluntly states that North Korea is suicidal and therefore, unwilling to preserve the survival of their own state.

No matter how convincing the façade of madness, it is important parse the underlying reasons for North Korea’s nuclear posturing to better attempt nonproliferation. While we can concede that the North Korean regime is brutal and repressive to its own people, “even a morally bankrupt state has a set of national security concerns that are rationally derived the anarchic structure of the international system.”[[28]](#endnote-28) Professor Youngwon Cho cites three reasons that North Korea has been compelled to pursue nuclear weapons in the face of few other options for regime survival: a lack of conventional and economic power, the real U.S. nuclear threat and South Korea as a U.S. puppet, and that their own nuclear program would be the most “effective and efficient” means of achieving all of its aims.[[29]](#endnote-29) The fragility of the regime is further intensified when we recall that about two decades ago, the U.S. government and others predicted the Kim regime would collapse multiple times – first from the lack of aid from Russia and a worsening economy, and then from the installation of the even more brutal Kim Jong-il.[[30]](#endnote-30)

From the statements above, I believe the most important one to note is that the intense U.S. military threat has been one of the main factors in spurring North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Of Cho’s three reasons for North Korean nuclearization, this is the one that is most accessible for U.S. policymakers to understand and the only factor the U.S. can impact directly. To recall, the U.S. considered using nuclear weapons to end the Korean War and then deployed U.S. nuclear devices to South Korea in the 1950s, which continued to grow the arsenal until the U.S. withdrew these weapons in 1991.[[31]](#endnote-31) Clearly, these threats have lasted several decades and have posed serious questions of whether or not the U.S. would decide to decimate North Korea. A quotation in Cho’s article points out that the U.S. military presence and aggressive posturing has caused North Korea to “live under the shadow of nuclear threat for longer than any other nation.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Thus, taking into account the vulnerabilities of the Kim regime, especially the U.S. nuclear threat, the decision to build a nuclear bomb is entirely rational on the part of Pyongyang to ensure its survival.

If we accept that North Korea’s nuclear weapons are part of a rational decision-making process and are for their *survival*, then we must also accept that it would be *irrational* for them to completely renounce their nuclear weapons without any incentives or trustworthy negotiations. If the reason for North Korea to give up their weapons is simply so that the U.S. will not invade or attack them, then that point is moot, as they have lived under that threat for decades. Rather, the U.S. would benefit from a strategy that acknowledges North Korea’s priorities and vulnerabilities as a regime, even if our strategy ultimately serves U.S. interests. By taking the North Korean perspective into account, we will maintain valuable negotiating credibility among the Kim regime and ultimately have a better chance at nonproliferation.

One example in which the U.S.’s mischaracterized perception of Pyongyang foiled these negotiations is the Agreed Framework signed between the United States and North Korea in 1994.[[33]](#endnote-33) At the start, the Agreed Framework actually represented collaboration and the acknowledgment of North Korea’s goal of nuclear energy while maintaining positive diplomatic relations. Within the agreement, the United States would give North Korea two light water reactors and fuel oil in return for the relinquishing of its gas-graphite reactors and fuel cycle facilities.[[34]](#endnote-34) Moreover, North Korea would not withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty, which it had threatened to do, and the two sides would normalize their wavering diplomatic relations.[[35]](#endnote-35)

U.S. Congress, however, maintained the view that North Korea was hostile, irrational, and could not be negotiated with. Hecker states that congressmen “immediately” opposed funding to build the light water reactors for North Korea, on the grounds that negotiation at all “rewarded bad behavior.”[[36]](#endnote-36) When the U.S. ultimately failed to fulfill its obligations under the Agreed Framework, North Korea’s suspicion of the U.S. returned full force and convinced the regime that once again, national security would have to be achieved in isolation. Building off of this precedent, North Korea and Washington engaged in the Joint Denuclearization Statement in 2005, but the negotiations went sour after the U.S. imposed sanctions on North Korea, which was cited as a “breach of the pact”.[[37]](#endnote-37) From this accumulation of failed agreements and evidence that the U.S. is an unreliable negotiator, North Korea finally decided that nuclear diplomacy would not be possible, and declared its nuclear status in 2006.[[38]](#endnote-38) By these examples, it is clear that U.S. foreign policy predicated on North Korea’s supposed irrationality contributed to the failures of bilateral agreements and spurred on Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program.

Today, we have continued this policy of treating North Korea as a regime that ultimately cannot be reasoned with or trusted. When North Korea tests a new missile, the news headlines suggest that “crazy” Kim Jong-un *might* start a nuclear war with America, just because it can.[[39]](#endnote-39) This media reaction falsely perpetuates the narrative that North Korea has nuclear weapons because they are capriciously threatening global security, similar to the rhetoric on Iran. Once again, this narrative fails to take into account the reasons *why* these regimes have acquired nuclear weapons, which then might illuminate how the U.S. can compromise with these regimes to uphold their security interests with a less robust, or extinct, nuclear weapons program. Without these considerations, the U.S. has little chance of making any headway or new inroads with the Kim regime on nonproliferation efforts in any sense.

Taking the above analysis into account, I predict that the imminent talks between the Trump administration and Kim Jong-un will not be successful in the long-term. Similar to the Iranian situation, the current administration is aware that Trump’s constituents value strongman rhetoric and the lack of compromise on the basis that the U.S. is extremely powerful and should not concede to lesser goals.[[40]](#endnote-40) Furthermore, the broader American public is convinced that North Korea is irrational and would be highly critical of any agreement that proved U.S. compliance with North Korea’s nuclear status.[[41]](#endnote-41) If that is the case, then the United States may ask North Korea to completely denuclearize, but no concessions whatsoever will materialize unless major changes to our foreign policy are made. Such changes would include the promise of congressional unity to uphold U.S. commitments in agreements, the considerations of North Korea’s security objectives, the reduction of a U.S. military presence in the Korean Peninsula, and the cooperation with China, South Korea, and other players. Of course, these changes may not be possible for policymakers who wish to keep the image of the unquestioned hegemonic role of the U.S. for its constituency; however, a remnant of such changes may be necessary to make any meaningful progress towards nonproliferation.

*Conclusion*

To conclude, the United States has viewed certain regimes that have acquired nuclear weapons as irrational, or incapable of being reasoned with or prioritizing their own survival. In particular, the U.S. has formed foreign policy strategies based on this notion in dealing with Iran and North Korea. These assumptions discount the history and security threats that propelled both states to rationally pursue nuclear weapons. In the end, such a policy indulges the domestic base of the United States and promotes the idea that the U.S. is the hegemonic ruler of the nuclear world order. However, these policies are *not* the best way to promote proliferation efforts and even thwart attempts at nonproliferation. Therefore, while a policy based on another state’s “irrationality” can be popular, the negative implications make this policy unwise and ineffective in achieving our ultimate goal of less nuclear weapons in the world.

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