Spring 3-23-2016

Diplomacy of Alienation as a Fundamental Threat to International Security: The Case Study of Iran

Henrietta Toivanen
Claremont McKenna College

4-28-2016

Diplomacy of Alienation as a Fundamental Threat to International Security: The Case Study of Iran

Henrietta N. Toivanen
Claremont McKenna College

Recommended Citation

Toivanen, Henrietta N., "Diplomacy of Alienation as a Fundamental Threat to International Security: The Case Study of Iran" (2016).
2016 Claremont Colleges Library Undergraduate Research Award. Paper 3.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cclura_2016/3

2016
Claremont Colleges Library
Undergraduate Research Award

Junior Award Winner

Henrietta Toivanen
Claremont McKenna College

Research Project

"Diplomacy of Alienation as a Fundamental Threat to International Security: The Case Study of Iran"

Diplomacy of Alienation as a Fundamental Threat to International Security:

The Case Study of Iran

Introduction

The most severe security threat facing the international community relates to the policy of alienating diplomacy and its implications – the destabilizing strategies employed by states that have become misperceived as revisionist, the counterstrategies adopted by other states as a response to these radical approaches, and the potential for stability that is lost through the isolating policies. Diplomacy of alienation is deeply ingrained in systemic-level great power competition, and creates a situation that limits states' interactions with each other, which can lead to mutual misinterpretation of state motives. It also limits the alienated states' foreign policy choices, constraining their ability to demonstrate their true intentions through legitimate mechanisms and leading them to adopt radical and extreme foreign policy approaches. This reinforces and legitimizes the perception of these states as rogue and revisionists within the international community. As a result, the international community adopts counterstrategies that only increase the destabilizing effects to international security and further make the alienated states feel insecure. This constitutes a self-fulfilling feedback loop based on a security dilemma, which accumulates insecurity and conflict in the international community, and also has negative implications due to lost potential stability. Iran is analyzed as a country that has gone through these dynamics, but that has also demonstrated progress as a result of reversed alienation and reengagement efforts from the international community.

Theoretical Framework

According to the family of theories that fall under the realist paradigm, the international system is characterized by anarchy, implying that there is no international authority that can enforce state action or limit the use of force.[1] The system is based on self-help, where states rely on their own capabilities in achieving their security and global objectives. Due to this, power is seen as the key consideration for states, comprising wealth, population, technological sophistication, and other factors that enable states to strengthen their security, mainly through military capabilities.

As states form together the international community, there is also a broader context of security that relates to the stability of the global order and the coherence of the international system. In its current form, it is based on the Westphalian system and liberal hegemonic order that values sovereignty, consent, and noninterference with the internal affairs of other states.[2] Just as individual states face threats originating from a variety of levels, so does the international community. Threats to international security are defined as factors that have the capability and intent to disrupt the international order, decrease the legitimacy of agreed norms, and otherwise harm the effective functioning of the international system on a multinational level.[3] The referent object, or the entity that is being threatened, can be the international order itself, or the fundamental concepts that hold it together, such as sovereignty or territorial integrity.

Different strands of realism have contrasting views on the main factors that motivate state behavior. In the neoclassical realist framework, security-seeking states are defined as entities that

---

[1] Alan Collins, *Contemporary Security Studies (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 13.
[2] John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
[3] Liz St. Jean, "The Changing Nature of "International Security: The Need for an Integrated Definition," *Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University*, http://www.iusafs.org/pdf/stjean.pdf.

prioritize sovereignty and security and consider power as a means, rather than as an end, as it enables them to achieve a strong and stable position in the international community. The framework, however, also defines revisionist states that are driven by the elemental forces of power and expansion and aim to "increase, not just preserve, their core values and to improve their position in the system."[4] Security-seeking states will be content with a cooperative and secure status quo, since they are already "kings of the hill," even if this prevents them from gaining further territory. Revisionist states, on the other hand, are motivated to pursue improvements in their relative position in the system through competition and confrontational policies.[5] This division between states is also the basis for the difference between defensive and offensive realism, respectively, and the two theories' contrasting perceptions of the main factors driving state behavior.

Despite the state of the world as a self-help system, cooperative interactions are still possible within the realist framework as a means to attain security.[6] Variables that make cooperation between states possible include the permanence of the states' relationship, the mutual gains that only cooperation creates, the increased costs of noncooperation, and the confidence-building measures that increase the expectation of the other sides' cooperation.[7] The key threat is the possibility of the other actors' defection, so all of these factors lead to circumstances where deception becomes a less optimal strategy. If a state considers the partner to be motivated by power, rather than just security, it won't trust it to cooperate and will thus adopt a confrontational approach itself.[8] This will lead to a

[4] Randall Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 72-107.
[5] Charles Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
[6] Joseph Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, No. 2 (Fall 2015): 51-86.
[7] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, No. 2 (January 1978): 167-214.
[8] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*.

security dilemma, in which the means that a state uses to increase its security lead others to feel insecure and increase their capabilities, leading the first state to find itself in a worse position.[9]

In neoclassical realism, informational variables about state motives, and status as security-seeking or power-seeking state, are seen as the key factors behind the decision to collaborate. An individual state can decide to collaborate instead of unilaterally pursue power, but only if "both states are sure that the opposing state is a security seeker (and if both also know that the other knows this)."[10] This emphasizes the role of interaction and signaling in defining state-to-state relations, as "the information that states have at the beginning of their interaction can determine the future path of their political relationship."[11] A correct perception of the partner states' motives and status as a security seeker or power-seeker enables states to have rational expectations about the counterpart's responsive behavior and make informed choices on their foreign policy approaches, leading them to adopt optimal strategies.

The nature of states as security-seeking or power-seeking, as well as their relative power status in the international system, determines their foreign policy interactions. Revisionist states are always going to be seen as a threat by states that are security-oriented, but the states' relationship depends on whether the revisionist state is a great power or close to one, or whether it is a weaker power that aims to achieve a higher power position and is also willing to use asymmetrical and unconventional strategies in the process. In the former case, security-seeking states can use external balancing to counterweight the revisionist state to increase their own security.[12] But when the revisionist state cannot yet significantly influence the balance of power in the international system, security-seeking states won't balance against it. The smaller revisionist state might also not pose

---

[9] Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," 167-214.
[10] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation.*
[11] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation.*
[12] Collins, *Contemporary Security Studies.*

significant enough a threat that to justify a military attack, even if it is utilizing radical and destabilizing foreign policy strategies.

With revisionist states, other traditional foreign policy approaches are also not considered viable options. First, the ability to bandwagon with these states is limited due to lack of trust and imbalance in the states' prioritization of security and power interests. Furthermore, bandwagoning can be considered to constitute a form of appeasement and includes unequal exchange where the weaker state makes "asymmetrical concessions to the dominant power and accepts a subordinate role."[13] But by their nature, revisionist states will not accept this position, as it limits their ability to pursue a higher power position, even if it provided more security. Thus, in this situation, the security-seeking status quo states seek to alienate the less powerful revisionist states from the international system.

Great powers that are power-seeking, however, can create collaborative interactions with the smaller revisionist states and use them as a balancing tool. In this scenario, the states that are alienated by security-seeking states are simultaneously propped up by those that are also power-seeking. This essentially creates a dynamic equilibrium where the concurrent alienation and sustenance leads the smaller revisionist states to fall outside of the international system. They don't have an incentive to change their relationships with either side, however, as mending relations with security-seeking great powers would risk making the supporter state feel threatened. On the other hand, the continued backing that the smaller states receive from the revisionist great powers makes security-seeking states unwilling to reconsider their relations with them.

Diplomacy of alienation, whether initially self-imposed or enforced by other states, is maintained through its role as a balancing tool in great power competition. Its continuance,

---

[13] Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In."

however, is also related to two other powerful mechanisms. First, alienation leads to limited interaction between states and decreases the availability of information, leading to the possibility of states' false perceptions of each other's motives. States can develop a mistaken notion of another state as power-seeking, or continue considering it as one despite a change in behavior and motivations. Secondarily, the isolated states become limited in their foreign policy options as a result of alienation, decreasing their ability to signal their intentions and motivations correctly. In the absence of a full spectrum of accepted foreign policy choices, the alienated states have a stronger tendency to adopt unconventional strategies that are seen as radical and threatening by the rest of the international community. As the other states are operating in a fog of uncertainty due to the lack of interaction, they often draw conclusions too rapidly about the intention of the actions of the alienated states and find reasons to reinforce their image of these states as revisionist.

As states choose their foreign policy responses according to these false notions of the other state as greedy, these presumed motivations become self-fulfilling for the alienated state. When they are approached according to their misinterpreted status, they are forced to respond based on how a state with those motivations would – by adopting radical foreign policy strategies. This initiates a powerful feedback loop that is maintained by the continued lack of interaction, as the isolation disables new informational variables from influencing the states' perception of each other and allows for continued misinterpretation of state motivations. The feedback loop represents a two-way causal relationship that can be initiated at any of its stages, with the reciprocal confrontational strategies and counterstrategies feeding it and forcing the alienated state to depend solely on itself in providing its security. Thus, the situation reflects a self-help system that is taken to the extreme.

The dynamics that emerge in this situation pose the greatest threat the international community faces, as the resulting condition accumulates effects that threaten the stability of the

current international order. Especially given the strong bond that the feedback loop has on great power competition, these clustering effects can create a time bomb that can be set off by a disruption in the relative power dynamics between states. Even if this doesn't happen, the accumulating effects themselves are deeply destabilizing to the international community. Alienation causes isolated states to adopt confrontational strategies that include engaging in state sponsorship of terrorism; developing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs; pursuing highly advanced offensive capabilities; and adopting asymmetric tactics, including cyberattacks. As a counter-response to these, the international community often chooses actions that reinforce the negative consequences to international security and creates conditions where the alienated state lacks any incentive to respect international norms and act collaboratively. Alienation also leads to secondary effects within the alienated states that are threatening from the perspective of human security. These can include economic inequality; societal instability; and authoritarianism and oppression of the people as the state leadership prioritizes its foreign policy objectives and prevents the population from interfering with its strategies.

In addition to these concrete destabilizing effects arising from the security dilemma, the situation is also a threat to international security due to the opportunity cost and lost potential stability from disabling the alienated states from acting as full members of the international community. They could contribute significantly more to international diplomacy, global trade, and other aspects of multinational affairs, but their misperceived status prevents them from being considered legitimate actors. The unrealized potential stability and security in international affairs is difficult to quantify, explaining why states don't recognize the significance of this threat.

Recent history has included a set of states that have experienced the dynamics of alienation at varying levels. Examples include Cuba, South Africa, North Korea, Burma, and Iran. Some of

these have isolated themselves as a consequence of domestic politics, such as Burma, while others have become isolated as a result of larger-scale dynamics, such as Cuba in the Cold War context. In the cases where the international community has started the alienation, there have been legitimate reasons to believe that the states' motivations are incompatible with the status of the international system. This is the case for North Korea, based on its authoritarian regime and deeply military-oriented foreign policy, and South Africa during the apartheid era.

Iran is a clear example of country that has experienced the repetitive patterns of alienation and has responded with a confrontational foreign policy strategy after the country went through an Islamic revolution in 1979.[14] Many countries perceive Iran as a radical revisionist state that doesn't follow the norms of behavior in the international community, which has given them a reason to isolate the country. The United States has described its approach as a "general containment policy toward political and economic isolation."[15] It sees Iran as a rogue state with aims to establish itself as a regional hegemon, which would interfere with U.S. interests: "Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology, its obstruction of the Middle East peace process, its involvement in the Beirut attacks of the 1980s and the 1996 Khobar Towers (Saudi Arabia) bombing of an American troop residence, and providing lethal aid to violent non-state actors in Lebanon, Iraq, the Palestinian territories and Afghanistan are viewed by the United States as obstacles to rapprochement."[16]

Iran has responded to this approach as the feedback loop assumes, with a confrontational foreign policy that based on its notion that the United States is overreaching its influence in the region: "The United States is viewed by the Iranian government as a hostile, interventionist state attempting to topple the Iranian republic, indicated by the U.S. role in the 1953 coup d'état of the

---

[14] Edmund Herzig, "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia," *International Affairs* 80, No. 3 (2004): 503-517.
[15] Akan Malici and Allison Buckner, "Empathizing with Rogue Leaders: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Asad," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, No. 6 (2008): 783-800.
[16] Mir Sadat and James Hughes, "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan," *Middle East Policy Council* XVII, No. 1 (Spring 2010).

legal Iranian government, vehement rejection of the Islamic Revolution, disregard for Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, the shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane, imposing economic sanctions, freezing of Iranian financial assets, resistance to Iranian nuclear progress for clean energy, and threats to invade or attack Iran."[17] This shows the mutual perceptions that Iran and the United States have of each other as greedy, which has led to the creation of a security dilemma that rationalizes confrontational foreign policies and makes the mutual perceptions to become self-fulfilled.

Consequences of Alienation

As outcasts, alienated countries lack the incentive to maintain a positive and cooperative reputation in the international community, as they will be considered revisionist in any case. The strategies adopted as a consequence of disenfranchisement can all be interpreted as offensive methods of projecting power and considered illegitimate in the current international system. The international community's destabilizing confrontational responses lead to reinforced mutual misperceptions, which reflects how the dynamics of alienation lead to the self-fulfilling conditions.

One way for alienated states to project power is to sponsor terrorist groups. The strategy contains the important aspect of force multiplication, which becomes increasingly important for states as their foreign policy options become more limited.[18] Iran has used a variety of terrorist groups to project its power regionally and globally. It has been considered the most active state sponsor of terrorism during the past decades, with activity in providing arms, training, financing, planning and other assistance to Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), as well as other

---

[17] Sadat and Hughes, "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan."
[18] Stephen Collins, "State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat," *Politics & Policy* 42, No. 1 (2014): 131-159.

antigovernment militants.[19] While the total Iranian support to many of these groups declined after the 9/11 attacks, in line with a global restraint in state sponsorship of terrorism that the events precipitated. After 2010, Iran has resumed a more active position in assisting terrorist groups, presumably as a reaction to assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, heightened threat of a military attack from Israel and the United States, and increased economic sanctions.[20] The Quds Force, the Iranian military's special operations division, has an essential role in using the terrorist sponsorship activities to achieve Iran's strategic objectives.[21]

Iran's nuclear program is another example of its confrontational foreign policy. Iran is a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and has agreed to IAEA safeguards and surveillance since 1974.[22] It has developed civilian nuclear capabilities since the early 1970s through the Atoms for Peace program, but all outside help ended following the revolution in 1979.[23] The events caused the country's nuclear aspirations to halt before a revival in late 1980s as a consequence of the Iran-Iraq war.[24] The country started further increasing its efforts to achieve nuclear capabilities in the 1990s, after which the initial accusations of weapons development emerged.[25] In 2002, "IAEA has identified nuclear sites, equipment, and activities that, contrary to its obligations, Iran failed to report to the IAEA."[26] In 2007, intelligence from the United States assessed that the nuclear weapons development efforts had been discontinued, but new evidence in 2009 revealed that a second

---

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Anthony Cordesman, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 15, 2007.
Collins, "State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat," 131-159.

[22] Greg Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program," *Council for Foreign Relations*, March 10, 2010, http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Shahram Chubin, "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2010, last updated August 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/politics-irans-nuclear-program.

[25] Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program."

[26] "Contemporary Practice of the U.S. Relating to International Law," *American Journal of International Law* 99, pp. 253.

uranium enrichment facility had been built in Qom.[27] The following year, an IAEA report further emphasized the suspicions of continued Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons.[28]

The development of nuclear arms by Iran is motivated by its aim to create deterrent hedge against foreign attack and the nuclear capabilities that Israel possesses, which can both be seen as rational calculations. However, its drive towards achieving these capabilities is furthered by a sense that the international community aims to restrict its rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, suppress the country's technological development, and alienate the country from the international community.[29] This has provoked the country to feel a lack of legitimacy, respect, and dignity as a power player in the international community, and led the country to see the nuclear program as a strategic option for guaranteeing its security.[30] The country's nuclear program poses a severe international security threat also due to its potential to precipitate a regional nuclear arms race, as it makes the countries in the Middle East feel insecure and rationalize their need for creating matching programs.[31]

Additionally, Iran has sophisticated capabilities in missile technology, developed in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war.[32] Iran purchased the initial capabilities and production lines for ballistic missiles from North Korea, and has subsequently developed an indigenous missile program.[33] In addition, it has started developing unmanned aerial vehicles modeled after Western designs, as well as space launch capabilities.[34] Iran has also focused on gaining extensive capabilities

---

[27] Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program."

[28] Ibid.

[29] Chubin, "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program."

[30] Clifford Kupchan, "Iranian Beliefs and Realities," *The National Interest* 81 (Fall 2005): 106.

[31] Nodir Ataev, "Economic Sanctions and Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Iran," Central European University, Department of Economics.

[32] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Country Profile: Iran," last modified October, 2015, http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/iran/.

[33] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Country Profile: Iran."

[34] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Country Profile: Iran."

in the cyber domain, which as an asymmetric field provides potential for strategic advantages.[35] All of these sophisticated technologies indicate a continuing effort in Iran to enhance their offensive capabilities to attain security and ability to protect territorial sovereignty. Due to isolation, the state has been forced to adopt these radical approaches to pursue its security-seeking goals.

As a response to Iran's radical foreign policy strategies, particularly its nuclear and missile programs, the international community has established a sanctions regime against the country through the United Nations Security Council.[36] Individual countries and regions have also established separate sanctions programs as a response to the proliferation threat, including the United States through additional unilateral sanctions. Iran has also become isolated from the international banking system, as banks are discouraged from "providing loans, export credits, and other financial services to Iran."[37] The Iranian sponsorship of terrorism has also induced other responses that limit the country's participation in the global economy. The country has been designated by the U.S. State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism, leading to the imposition of additional sanctions that include a ban on arms-related exports and sales, dual-use items, and a prohibition of receiving economic assistance.[38]

The sanction regime and other isolating economic policies have led to destabilizing effects to the global economy and overall international security. Iran is a major oil producer internationally, and is located along the Strait of Hormuz, which is critical in the supply chain of oil from the Persian Gulf to the global oil market.[39] Iran has threatened to seal off the strait from international

---

[35] Atlantic Council, "Iran's Growing Cyber Capabilities in a Post-Stuxnet Era," April 10, 2015, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/iran-s-growing-cyber-capabilities-in-a-post-stuxnet-era.
[36] Ataev, "Economic Sanctions and Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Iran."
[37] "Continuing U.S. Efforts to Discourage Iran's Nuclear Program," *The American Journal of International Law* 101, No. 3 (July 2007): 666-668.
[38] United States Department of State, "Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview," *Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm.
[39] Peter Pham, "Iran's Threat to the Strait of Hormuz: A Realist Assessment*," American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy* 32, Issue 2 (2010): 64-74.

use as a response to military actions from the United States or Israel, which would disable the shipments of one-fifth of the world's daily use of oil.[40] This possibility creates a significant threat to international security, both in economic terms and through creating the possibility of escalating a preventive war.

As a side effect of the international sanctions and other alienating efforts, Iran has also sustained severe human security implications in its domestic environment. The economic consequences of sanctions have worsened the state of the already weak economy and hurt the general population, whereas the elites have found tools to circumvent the negative implications and costs.[41] In addition to economic suffering, the population has also experienced the effects of alienation from the international community. The freedom to travel internationally, study abroad, engage in international trade, and many other activities are more challenging for Iranian citizens.[42] The human rights record of the government also reflects the negative effects of alienation to the general population. Iran has been criticized for limiting the freedom of speech, disregarding fair trials and the rule of law, and overall repressing its population in a variety of areas. All of these effects have been intensified as a result of alienation, as the government has found further ground for radical approaches to maintain stability.

All of these consequences are a reflection of the security dilemma that has emerged as a result of Iran's outcast position in the international community. These strategies and counterstrategies have severe destabilizing effects on the international community and pose a threat to international security. However, a more significant reason why these dynamics are so threatening to global stability stems from the potential risks that the international community has fortunately avoided so far, including nuclear war. At times, Israel and the United States were on the cusp of

---

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ataev, "Economic Sanctions and Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Iran."
[42] Ibid.

attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, but fortunately the conditions never escalated to kinetic war. The Stuxnet cyberattack, however, demonstrates that the Israel-U.S. side had willingness to confront Iran and possibly take their offensive further. The end result could have been very different, if the conditions and internal deliberations in the countries had been slightly more aggressive.

Furthermore, the situation is a threat to the international security due to the intangible costs related to the missed potential of stability and security to the global community. Iran has a significant stake in some of the most pressing international security challenges based on its geographical position and regional relations, including the Sunni-Shi'ia sectarian tensions, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Due to its alienated position, Iran has usually not been included as a legitimate party in the negotiations, which has disabled the utilization of the country's political resources and interests as a leverage to solve the conflicts. With regard to the conflict in Syria, for example, the country was first invited by the United Nations to participate in the Geneva-II peace talks in 2014. Pressure from the United States, however, led to the withdrawal of the invitation.[43] Iran has continued its participation in the conflict through arming Shi'ite militias and collaborating with Russia, which further exemplifies how the country is forced to project its power through radical strategies. In addition, there are opportunity costs related to the defensive and offensive capabilities that countries have deployed as a result of the heightened threat they experience from Iran. If the countries adapted their perceptions of each other and developed more cordial relations, based on accurate threat considerations, these resources could be used more effectively to attain security.

Solution

---

[43] Stratfor, "Iran: What It Means to Be Disinvited to the Syria Talks," January 21, 2014,
https://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical-diary/iran-what-it-means-be-disinvited-syria-talks.

The international community's ability to end the diplomacy of alienation depends, first and foremost, whether or not the targeted state is revisionist or only misperceived as one. The feedback loop functions the same way in both situations, so a key first step is determining what the specific circumstances are with the state in questions. In essence, this means that the strategies towards reintegrating alienated states must be highly individualized and tailored to fit the specific conditions. Overall, if the state in question is truly power-seeking and revisionist, then the international community can only incentivize it to end its radical foreign policy approaches if the state is given means to gain a more powerful position and reach its objectives through more legitimate strategies. But given the role that the diplomacy of alienation has in great power competition, this would be seen as giving in to the opposing side and allowing it to gain power through its proxy state. Thus, the solution to ending the diplomacy of alienation in these conditions requires a shift in the relationship between great powers. This is a function of complex dynamics between the states, however, and the mechanisms that could be used to precipitate this change are very limited. Thus, the solution should be focused on circumstances where there is potential for an interruption in the feedback loop that could lead to the reintegration of the alienated state.

A promising opening for shifting away from alienating diplomacy, however, can emerge when there is a disruption in the dynamics of the self-fulfilling feedback loop. First, this can be the result of the isolated state escalating its radical approaches, which can lead to a change in the relations between the great powers. The escalation of radical strategies can turn the supporter state against its proxy and incentivize it to cooperate with the opposing side to restrain the radical state. In these conditions, the feedback loop has accelerated to a breaking point, where the destabilizing foreign policy strategies of the revisionist small power are also becoming a security threat to the supporter state. Now, a consensus can be reached within the international community to take a more forceful approach against the revisionist state, leading to measures that can end the

destabilizing effects that threaten the collective security of the global community. This scenario would seem relatively rare, however, as the smaller revisionist states have learned to strike an equilibrium where they can use the great power competition in their benefit and continue using their radical approaches as a means of projecting power in the international community.

Secondly, the disruption in the dynamics of the feedback loop can emerge in the form of a changed status of the revisionist state and its motivations. If the state starts to reconsider the benefits of pursuing power unilaterally as an alienated state, as opposed to according to international norms of behavior, it may conclude that the latter option is preferable in the current conditions of the world. Especially as the international community as a whole is becoming more interconnected, the benefits of cooperation are increasing and the opportunity costs of being outside the system are becoming more burdening. The challenge is, however, that the iterations of the feedback loop reinforce the current perceptions that states have of each other. Alienating diplomacy ensures that states continue to see each other as opponents and consider the other side as revisionist, even if there are reasons to change notions about the states' motivations and their behavioral compatibility with international norms.

The solution to a scenario where the revisionist state has fundamentally changed its priorities must address the different dimensions of the feedback loop. States need to critically consider their assumptions about other states' driving motivations and be receptive to changing their notions, if there is a reason to do so. This new approachability will also incentivize the alienated states to start respecting international norms and act collaboratively. This will also provide a basis for addressing the second challenge, as the changed perceptions will eventually enable the reintegration of the alienated states to the international community and grant them access to the full spectrum of foreign policy choices that are in accordance with the current international order. As this happens, the

countries also gain ability to use their diplomatic resources and interests as a means to deescalate some of the most pressing conflicts that threaten international security and stability.

These aims can be achieved through embarking on an interactive dialogue that enables both sides to increase their knowledge of the other side's intentions and motivations, as well as create clarity about the expected responses the counterpart will take. Changing states' false perceptions about each other's driving motivations requires the feedback loop to decelerate, in order for new informational variables to be taken into account. The focus needs to be on the factors that enable states to cooperate in the first place – creating iterated interactions, ensuring mutual gains from cooperation, emphasizing the opportunity cost of noncooperation, and decreasing the risk of deflection.

Given the multiple sources that feed the security dilemma that results from alienating diplomacy, and especially the linkage to great power competition, this requires one of the states to take a risk and start convincing the other state of its true intentions. One means of doing this is costly signaling, which essentially constitutes a leap of faith from a state to increase its adversary's security and aims to demonstrate the state's status as a security seeker: "An effective costly signal convinces the adversary to revise its information about the state, reducing its estimate that the state is greedy, thereby increasing the willingness of an opposing security seeker to cooperate."[44]

International institutions are in an important role in enabling states to take this risk, as they can act as a legitimate forum for interaction and provide a mechanism for states to send transparent signals about their intentions and motivations. When costly signaling is done through international institutions, the associated risks are also lessened. The feedback loop can eventually be halted, leading to circumstances where "the security dilemma is eliminated and neither state has incentives

---

[44] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation.*

to compete, even if material conditions would otherwise fuel insecurity and competition."[45] Thus, this very realist problem can be approached through a liberal solution that bases its legitimacy on international institutions and cooperation.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which was signed in July 2015 between Iran, the five UNSC permanent members, and Germany, is an example of costly signal that can act as a precipitating factor for the shift in mutual perceptions.[46] The agreement details the steps that the country will take to terminate its nuclear proliferation efforts in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions. The agreement is built on security concerns and aims to disarm Iran of the capability of developing nuclear arms, but it also lessens the risk of a foreign attack in Iran and acts as an initial confidence-building measure between the country and the West. The agreement poses risks for both sides, however, as Iran is willingly disarming its nuclear weapons capabilities, and the West is allowing Iran to access financial resources that could be used to build offenses in the future.

The nuclear agreement can be employed as an initial platform for ending the confrontational consequences of the feedback loop of alienation and finding new areas for cooperation between Iran and the West. The JCPA connects the issue of nonproliferation to economic benefits; a similar linkage framework could be used next to address other problematic issue areas in Iran's foreign and domestic policies. Promoting human rights, strengthening civil society, and legitimizing the rule of law are examples of challenges that Iran could be encouraged to improve on, if these issues were linked to incentives such as additional financial benefits or diplomatic recognition. These actions would start to change the mutual perceptions that the two sides have of each other, and start granting Iran legitimate foreign policy tools that it currently doesn't have access to due to its economic and political isolation.

---

[45] Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation.*
[46] Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Country Profile: Iran."

Obstacles to Solutions

When the diplomacy of alienation is mainly driven by great power competition and concrete reasons to believe that the revisionist power is using its radical approaches to project its power, the key obstacle is at the core of these dynamics. As stated, these conditions will only shift when there are incentives for the other side of the great power equation to change its stance, which requires a change in the relationship between the great powers. If, on the other hand, the diplomacy of alienation is maintained through mutual misperceptions, the key obstacles to ending isolation relate to factors in domestic politics and individual state leadership of the involved countries. If the domestic-level general population, elites, and individual leaders continue perceiving a high threat level from the opposing side, they are not open to taking in new informational variables that could result in adapted perceptions and shifting foreign policy approaches.

In the classical realist paradigm, states are seen as unitary actors and essentially as 'black boxes' that only respond to systemic-level variables. Relaxing this assumption to include factors at the domestic and individual levels, however, is necessary for developing a more comprehensive understanding of how the obstructive dynamics related to alienation arise in the real world. The divergent and conflicting threat perceptions of different constituencies within nations create friction that will have an impact on the state's multinational interactions with other countries. Even if systemic level considerations included perfect conditions for states to interact, cooperate, and change their misperceptions, the challenges arising from the domestic and individual levels can prevent any changes from happening.

The factors influencing the internal threat perceptions within states include the issue's strategic or emotional priority; the interpretation of the atmosphere of tension and mistrust in the state's relations with other actors; and the observer state's perception of its vulnerability in the

situation.[47] Additionally, threatening cues often involve actions or events that "imply the betrayal of a trust or the performance of an illegitimate action – the infringement, in some sense, of rules of the game governing relations between the actors involved."[48] All of these factors relate to the threat of deception and the danger that states don't behave according to the expected and accepted norms. This possibility is a strong disincentive for leaders to take any steps towards enhanced interaction and integration, which will consequently prevent changes in their perception of the other state's motivations.

The dynamics that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union provide an important case study of the successes and failures of engagement and integration policies towards states that were previously perceived as opponents. In this context, the NATO integration process can be seen as a form of costly signaling. The military alliance took a strong approach towards interacting with former Warsaw Pact members in the Eastern block of Europe, which in many cases resulted in their full integration both economically and in security terms as NATO members.[49] Poland provides one example of a former Warsaw Pact member that has successfully become a full member of the European community, as it is one of the fastest growing economies in Europe and a strong contributor to the NATO alliance. The key for successfully changing mutual perceptions and initiate the integration process relates to the historic experiences and internal drive to integrate within the target countries: "Attracted by both the prosperity that the European Union promised and the security that NATO's Article 5 common defense commitment delivered, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the first three new entrants, were keen to anchor themselves in the west.

---

[47] Raymond Cohen, "Threat Perception in International Crises," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, No. 1 (Spring 1978): 93-107.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

Notably, each of these countries had had a searing experience under Russian domination, creating a natural impulse to escape the shadow of their larger, eastern neighbor."[50]

However, the NATO integration efforts have not automatically resulted in mended relations and successful integration. The idea of Russia becoming a NATO member floated around in early 2000's, with a genuine aim of integrating the country in the security alliance. In the following years, however, the relations went to the opposite direction. As a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea, many states again perceive the country as revisionist and radical. This shows how difficult it is to assess state intentions and create expectations about their behavior, and what the risks of a failed costly signaling can be. Studying empirical examples of states with diverse historical experiences and domestic circumstances is crucial in understanding the role of domestic politics and individual leadership in creating effective engagement policies and avoiding miscalculations.

The obstacles that can prevent Iran from becoming accepted as a full member of the international community are also a function of internal politics and individual leaders. The domestic political sphere of Iran is divided and turbulent, with internal power struggles and conflicting views about the intentions of other countries. There is also severe disagreement in the international community, and within individual states, about the logic of approaching Iran as a negotiation partner and granting it legitimacy. This was demonstrates in the debate within the United States government, where certain politicians took it as their objective to "keep U.S.-Iranian relations trapped in a spiral of suspicion, demonization, and counterproductive rivalry."[51] These dynamics create a reinforcing effect in the feedback loop and enable continued antagonistic perceptions: "Won't continuing to treat Iran as a pariah reinforce its own hard-liners' claims that the "Great Satan" is irrevocably hostile, and give them every reason to continue the activities that still concern us? At the very least,

---

[50] Edward Joseph, "NATO Expansion: The Source of Russia's Anger?" *The National Interest*, May 1, 2014.
[51] Stephen Walt, "Why Do So Many People Want So Little From the Agreement With Iran?" *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2015.

isn't assuming the worst about Iran – something the United States has done for decades – just a self-fulfilling prophecy?"[52]

This does not need to be Iran's position in the world, however.[53] The country's leadership is assessed as rational and security-oriented, as opposed to inherently radical and expansionist: "Overall, Iran's motivations for backing radicals are primarily strategic, though ideology does play a role. Unlike Pakistan, domestic politics is not an important driver of Iran's support for terrorism. Ties to terrorists and to militant substate groups in general give Iran several strategic advantages."[54] If the international community is able to engage with the country in a way that outweighs the security advantages that the current foreign policy strategies have, there is tremendous potential for cooperation. The challenge will be on deciding how to approach the ideological conflict within the country – whether to engage with these components, or prevent them from interfering with the rational aspects of the country's policymaking community.

There are several hopeful signs that this process is possible to initiate and implement. Even though there were clear reasons for the international community to perceive Iran as revisionist at the time of the revolution, and following the country's radical foreign policy approaches, there are now several signals that indicate a reason to change these assumptions. First, the fact that several countries, including Russia and China, have continuously perceived Iran as a rational state and developed important security and economic alliances with it, which demonstrates that Iran is indeed motivated by security priorities. Second, the recent success of the nuclear agreement shows Iran's willingness to reengage with the West and accept the norms of the current international order, which also creates a rationale for states to diminish their threat perceptions of the country. Several states,

---

[52] Ibid.
[53] Malici and Buckner, "Empathizing with Rogue Leaders: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Asad," 783-800.
[54] Daniel Byman, "The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism," *The Brookings Institution, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy*, Analysis Paper No. 16, May 2008.

including many in Europe, have already started to shift their assessment of Iran's motivations and engage with the country economically and diplomatically. In the months following the JCPA, Iran has already welcomed trade delegations from France, the United Kingdom, Italy, India, and multiple other states.[55] The country was also granted a legitimate role in the relaunched Syrian peace negotiations, which is a sign that the United States and Saudi Arabia might also be changing their views about the strategic implications of engaging with Iran.[56]

In addition to these current signs of the shifting mutual perceptions, the past also provides a powerful indication that Iran is capable of extensive collaboration with the international community, including the Unites States. During the Cold War and prior to the Islamic revolution, the United States maintained very cordial relations with the Shah-ruled Iran.[57] This is a strong indication that there are no systemic-level reasons that would make the states incompatible for collaboration. If both sides see enough utility for the partnership and consider their interests to be aligned, cooperation can be established and both sides can be experience a threat of deflection that is sufficiently low.

Iran's inclusion as a full member of the international community creates considerable potential for enhanced international security conditions and increased stability particularly in South Asia and the greater Middle East. One of the issue areas where Iran's inclusion could make significant contributions towards improved international security is the situation in Afghanistan, where there all regional players have critical convergent interests in countering drug trafficking,

---

[55] Cameron Glenn, "Economic Trends: August and September," *The United States Institute of Peace*, October 5, 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/oct/05/economic-trends-august-and-september.
[56] Thomas Erdbrink, Sewell Chan, and David Sanger, "After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2015.
[57] Alireza Nader, "The Days After the Iran Deal – Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy," *RAND Corporation*, 2014.

developing infrastructure, and managing water issues.[58] Iran has already played an important role in the country, as it was a key contributor in the process that led to the establishment of the new Afghan government after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, before U.S.-Iran relations froze as a result of President Bush associated the country as a part of 'the axis of evil'.[59] During this period, Iran used its influence on the behalf of the United States in its relations with the Northern Alliance and other parts of the Afghan opposition.[60] Iran has a legitimate interest reestablishing its role in this issue area and improving the condition of the fragile country. Solving the situation in Afghanistan has been an enormous challenge to the international community and resulted in continued regional instability, and bringing Iran and its resources back into the equation could result in greatly improved security and stability in in South Asia.

The conflict in Syria is another area where the changed perceptions of Iran could lead to significant implications to international security and stability. In its current position, Iran projects its power through funding Shi'ite militias and supporting the Assad government with Russia. Western and Iranian interests in the conflict are strongly aligned in many ways, however, and enhanced relations could enable genuine military and diplomatic cooperation in these areas.[61] This could increase the possibility of a sustainable solution to the conflict that has already killed over 250,000 Syrians, and greatly improve the stability of the greater Middle East. Solving the Syrian conflict through Iranian help could also create synergies in other unstable hostilities in the region, including Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the latter, Iran and Syria have been key countries obstructing the peace between Arabs and Israelis, as the states see it to be incompatible with their

---

[58] Sadat and Hughes, "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan."
[59] Ibid.
[60] Chubin, "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program."
[61] Erdbrink, Chan, and Sanger, "After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria."

own regional and strategic interests.[62] Changed Iranian relations with the West would change the state's cost-benefit analysis, however, and incentivize it to shift its views of the best solution to the conflict.

The international community's next steps need to focus on capitalizing the value that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action brings as a form of costly signaling, and turning the agreement from a security guarantee into a vehicle of interaction and integration. Enhanced trade relations and the inclusion of Iran in diplomatic negotiations can be used as further confidence-building measures to enable shifts in the perceptions of the states' domestic constituencies and leadership. The challenge is that the improving relations may first create an intensification in hostile perceptions and actions in certain factions within the countries, if the changing status quo results in lost financial or political benefits. Following the JCPA, there have been accelerating Iranian cyberattack activity against the United States, and increasingly hostile political rhetoric within certain American interest groups.[63] The best option for all sides is to patiently restrain from overreactions and escalation, and wait for the domestic politics within states to regain balance and reach a new stable state that accepts the changed relations.

Conclusion

Diplomacy of alienation is a threat to the security and stability of the international community, but it is also a policy that is difficult to reverse. At its core, it is driven by systemic-level great power competition, but it can also be maintained as a residual of these dynamics in the form of misperceptions that states have of each other's motivations. Both of these scenarios lead to a condition that constitutes a self-feeding security dilemma, creating layers of antagonistic history and

---

[62] Jubin Goodarzi, "Iran and Syria," *The United States Institute of Peace*, updated in August 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria.
[63] David Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "Iranian Hackers Attack State Dept. via Social Media Accounts," *New York Times*, November 24, 2015.

hostile relations, which will always stay at the back of the minds of domestic constituencies and national leaders. As the case of Iran demonstrates, however, the international community can engage with the alienated countries incrementally and start building confidence through measures such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. A tremendous amount of analysis, understanding, and strategic thinking is required for states to reestablish confidence and start changing their perceptions of other states' motivations. As a statement from Ayatollah Ali Khamenei demonstrates, however, these efforts will not be futile and will be reciprocated in the correct conditions: "Show us if really anything other than your language has changed. -- Should you change, our behavior will change too. -- My expectation is, in the coming months, we will be looking for openings that can be created where we can start sitting across the table, face to face, diplomatic overtures that will allow us to move our policy in a new direction."[64] This prospect should reenergize the international community to pursue rapprochement and mend relations with states that are lost in the confinement of alienating diplomacy that are based on misperceptions.

Bibliography

Asmus, Ronald. *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Ataev, Nodir. "Economic Sanctions and Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Iran." Central European University, Department of Economics.

Atlantic Council. "Iran's Growing Cyber Capabilities in a Post-Stuxnet Era." April 10, 2015. http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/iran-s-growing-cyber-capabilities-in-a-post-stuxnet-era

Bruno, Greg. "Iran's Nuclear Program." *Council for Foreign Relations*, March 10, 2010. http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811

Byman, Daniel. "The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism." *The Brookings Institution, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy*, Analysis Paper No. 16, May 2008.

---

[64] Sadat and Hughes, "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan."

Chubin, Shahram. "The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program." *United States Institute of Peace*, 2010, last updated August 2015. http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/politics-irans-nuclear-program

Cohen, Raymond. "Threat Perception in International Crises." *Political Science Quarterly* 93, No. 1 (Spring 1978): 93-107.

Collins, Alan. *Contemporary Security Studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Collins, Stephen. "State-Sponsored Terrorism: In Decline, Yet Still a Potent Threat." *Politics & Policy* 42, No. 1 (2014): 131-159.

Cordesman, Anthony. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Al Quds Force, and Other Intelligence and Paramilitary Forces." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 15, 2007.

Erdbrink, Thomas, Chan, Sewell, and Sanger, David. "After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria." *The New York Times*, October 28, 2015

Glaser, Charles. *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Glenn, Cameron. "Economic Trends: August and September." *The United States Institute of Peace*, October 5, 2015. http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/oct/05/economic-trends-august-and-september

Goodarzi, Jubin. "Iran and Syria." *The United States Institute of Peace*, updated in August 2015. http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria

Herzig, Edmund. "Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia." *International Affairs* 80, No. 3 (2004): 503-517.

Jean, Liz St. "The Changing Nature of "International Security: The Need for an Integrated Definition." Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University. http://www.iusafs.org/pdf/stjean.pdf

Jervis, Robert. "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma." *World Politics* 30, No. 2 (January 1978) 167-214.

John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011)

Joseph, Edward. "NATO Expansion: The Source of Russia's Anger?" *The National Interest*, May 1, 2014.

Kupchan, Clifford. "Iranian Beliefs and Realities." *The National Interest* 81 (Fall 2005) 106.

Malici, Akan and Buckner, Allison. "Empathizing with Rogue Leaders: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Asad." *Journal of Peace Research* 45, No. 6 (2008) 783-800.

Nader, Alireza. "The Days After the Iran Deal – Continuity and Change in Iranian Foreign Policy." *RAND Corporation*, 2014.

Nuclear Threat Initiative. "Country Profile: Iran." last modified October, 2015. http://www.nti.org/country-profiles/iran/

Parent, Joseph and Rosato, Sebastian. "Balancing in Neorealism." *International Security* 40, No. 2 (Fall 2015) 51-86.

Pham, Peter. "Iran's Threat to the Strait of Hormuz: A Realist Assessment*." American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy* 32, Issue 2 (2010) 64-74.

Sadat, Mir and Hughes, James. "U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan." *Middle East Policy Council* XVII, No. 1 (Spring 2010)

Sanger, David and Perlroth, Nicole. "Iranian Hackers Attack State Dept. via Social Media Accounts." *New York Times*, November 24, 2015.

Schweller, Randall. "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In." *International Security* 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994): 72-107.

Stratfor. "Iran: What It Means to Be Disinvited to the Syria Talks." January 21, 2014. https://www.stratfor.com/geopolitical-diary/iran-what-it-means-be-disinvited-syria-talks

United States Department of State. "Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview." *Bureau of Counterterrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*. http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm

Walt, Stephen. "Why Do So Many People Want So Little From the Agreement With Iran?" *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2015.

"Contemporary Practice of the U.S. Relating to International Law." *American Journal of International Law* 99, pp. 253

"Continuing U.S. Efforts to Discourage Iran's Nuclear Program." *The American Journal of International Law* 101, No. 3 (July 2007): 666-668.