

# Testing the *Hubris* Model of Foreign Policy Decisions: Iran in March, 2012

by Lloyd S. Etheredge

A modern *hubris* model of foreign policy decision making, applied to several historic American cases (Etheredge, Can Governments Learn?, Pergamon Press, 1985), can be tested again for the case of Iranian decision making and the escalating political conflict (and a possible violent and self-destructive end of the current regime) that is likely to emerge next month. The enclosed article by Ray Takeyh (Washington Post, February 17, 2012) discusses features of the messianic Iranian psychodrama that are key markers of the *hubris* syndrome as it is studied by political psychologists. Takeyh is right: This is the kind of syndrome that is a state-of-the-art challenge. Even the sophisticated use of Alexander George's framework of coercive diplomacy by America and its allies (designed to maximize the possibility of rational decision making and nonviolent outcomes) may not be able to meet the challenge.

## **A Comment About *Hubris* Models**

The ancient Greeks perceived *hubris* to be at work, often, in world politics and human behavior: They perceived *hubris* as a cause, for example, of crime and what we would call violations of human dignity and human rights. The perpetrator of a crime was acting with *hubris* and disregard for the victim. The early Greek political scientists would have had little difficulty perceiving *hubris* in the recent behavior of the financial alpha predators whose grandiose ambition for money was part of a syndrome that ignored any ethical obligation for their institutions or the welfare of others and that produced the worst global economic crisis since the Depression.

The term *hubris* can be used as a moral criticism of arrogance (e.g., Fulbright's The Arrogance of Power). However, in its modern scientific development the term refers, rigorously, to a multifaceted psychological syndrome and to a species of hierarchical psychodramas with several unexpected features. For example, political psychologists see two "self dramas" of A.) messianic and hegemonic ambitions and self-assurance in inevitable success alongside B.) a vulnerable, threatened, and insecure self that might be readily and totally destroyed by outside forces and enemies. Thus: During the Cold War, the more messianic (non-Kennan) and self-assured promoters of America's global role as a Superpower in a world-historic battle against Communism also lived with a stark, insecure, and coexisting Domino Theory potential drama in which it

all could unravel very quickly. [Early generation Communist leaders often mirrored the syndrome in their own world-historic ambitions, their stark insecurity and fear of American attack, and drive for a nuclear arms race.]

It may be easier to see the *hubris* psychological syndrome/theory in the current Iranian case: During the Cold War, many Americans saw America's Superpower status as realistic, its global responsibility as a genuine ethical imperative, and its foreign policies as essentially rational judgments and necessities. In the Iran case, the psychological power of the syndrome will be more apparent since Iran is not seen as a Superpower and the messianic dramas of a Persian Empire rebirth and Islamic moral superiority can be seen from the outside. To Westerners, it is an obvious exaggeration and over-dramatization if Iran's leaders truly imagine themselves as surrounded by mortal enemies - the US and the UK, Israel, NATO and its allies, a rebuilding Iraq, a changing Syria, etc.

### **Forecasts**

The *hubris*/hardball syndrome has features of Realpolitik but it is overdramatized and oddly wired. Messianic psychodramas operate in the parts of the brain that link the imagination (visual cortex) directly to motivation, emotion, and the fight-flight mechanisms in the amygdala. The capacities of the brain (e.g., in the neo-cortex) for rational thought and language often operate inside the powerful drama, in tactical calculations. It requires an unusual humanity, and even spiritual growth, to achieve statesmanship and wisdom and to engage strategic rationality from a larger context.

To outsiders, it may be obvious that the current Iranian government will be stopped before it can acquire nuclear weapons. The scenarios include Israeli air strikes but, also, a combination of economic hardship, growing internal political illegitimacy, and new communications technology and social media fueling street protests surrounding the elections in early March 2012. And, then, a replay of the 1953 coup expressing a full application of professional skill and resources from a range of foreign intelligence agencies who have been preparing, if called upon, for the task. The realistic question may only be how quick and violent the end of the regime will be: Egypt - or Libya, or Syria? Will NATO forces need to secure the oil fields during the political turmoil, supported by a "No Fly" zone? Will Iran's professional military remain neutral in the internal battle or will it face the assured death of many of its members and the destruction of its air power and other capability by US and NATO forces if it loyally follows irrational orders to close the Straits and attack American forces?

Is there hope? Always. However, the messianic self-assurance and hegemonic ambitions are not in a conversation with the stark fear of vulnerability and destruction. And the rational and even the verbal abilities of the brain are at a physical distance from both psychodramas with connections that need to be strengthened by thought and dialogue. Today's *hubris*/hardball syndrome is only a non-learning baseline of behavior: It is where Iranian decision making is starting. There are better potential - albeit problematic - futures that are possible. <1>

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<1> The *hubris* syndrome has three dimensions: a.) the contours of policy thinking; b.) characteristic misperceptions and misjudgments, and c.) features of the policy process (e.g., a kind of "groupthink" secrecy and insularity - typically, that prevent learning). There also are d.) characteristic personalities who are drawn to power and who energize and maintain the syndrome. For example, the model of a nonlearning baseline fits with the Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq, including its self assurance and its moral conviction, its stark fears of nuclear weapons and terrorism, its use of dramatic overlays with poor grasp of local realities, and the influence of a personality like Vice President Cheney's who strengthened the syndrome.

The characterization of the syndrome as a non-learning baseline is illustrated by the restructuring and learning effects in Iraq via Dr. (General) Petraeus (his doctorate is from Princeton) who could draw upon social science research to rethink doctrine and connect to the local reality.

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## **Why Iran Thinks It Needs the Bomb**

by Ray Takeyh

[The Washington Post, February 17, 2012]

Bombastic claims of nuclear achievement, threats to close critical international waterways, alleged terrorist plots and hints of diplomatic outreach — all are emanating from Tehran right

now. This past week, confrontation between Iran and the West reached new heights as Israel accused Iran of a bombing attempt in Bangkok and others targeting Israeli diplomats in India and Georgia. And yet, on Wednesday, an Iranian nuclear negotiator signaled that Tehran wants to get back to the table.

What does Iran really want? What, as strategists might ask, are the sources of Iranian conduct?

The key to unraveling the Islamic republic lies in understanding Iran's perception of itself. More than any other Middle Eastern nation, Iran has always imagined itself as the natural hegemon of its neighborhood. As the Persian empire shrank over the centuries and Persian culture faded with the arrival of more alluring Western mores, Iran's exaggerated view of itself remained largely intact. By dint of history, Iranians believe that their nation deserves regional preeminence.

However, Iran's foreign policy is also built on the foundations of the theocratic regime and the 1979 revolution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini bequeathed to his successors an ideology that divided the world between oppressors and the oppressed. The Islamic revolution was a battle for emancipation from the cultural and political tentacles of the iniquitous West. However, Iran was not merely seeking independence and autonomy, but wanted to project its Islamist message beyond its borders. Khomeini's ideology and Iran's nationalist aspirations created a revolutionary, populist approach to the region's status quo.

Iran's enduring revolutionary zeal may seem puzzling because, in many ways, China has come to define our impressions of a revolutionary state. At the outset, ideology determined Beijing's foreign policy, even to the detriment of its practical interests, but over time, new generations of leaders discarded such a rigid approach. Today, there is nothing particularly communist about the Chinese Communist Party.

By the 1990s, Iran appeared to be following in the footsteps of states such as China and Vietnam, as pragmatic leaders such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and reformers such as Mohammad Khatami struggled to emancipate their republic from Khomeini's onerous ideology. But what makes Iran peculiar is that this evolution was deliberately halted by a younger generation of leaders such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who rejected the pragmatic approach in favor of reclaiming the legacy of Khomeini. "Returning to the roots of the revolution" became their mantra.

Under the auspices of an austere and dogmatic supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a “war generation” is taking control in Iran — young rightists who were molded by the prolonged war with Iraq in the 1980s. Although committed to the religious pedigree of the state, the callow reactionaries have at times been critical of their elders for their passivity in the imposition of Islamic cultural restrictions and for the rampant corruption that has engulfed the nation. As Iran’s revolution matures, and the politicians who were present at its creation gradually fade from the scene, a more doctrinaire generation is taking command. Situated in the security services, the Revolutionary Guard Corps and increasingly the elected institutions, they are becoming more powerful than their moderate elders.

This group’s international outlook was shaped by the devastating Iran-Iraq war. In the veterans’ self-serving view, Iran’s failure to overthrow Saddam Hussein had more to do with superpower intervention and less to do with their poor planning and lack of resources. The Western states and the United Nations, which failed to register even a perfunctory protest against Iraq’s massive use of chemical weapons, are to be treated with suspicion and hostility. Struggle and sacrifice have come to displace dialogue and detente.

As with Khomeini, a central tenet of the young conservatives’ foreign policy perspective is that Iran’s revolution was a remarkable historical achievement that the United States can neither accept nor accommodate. The Western powers will always conspire against an Islamic state that they cannot control. The only way Iran can be independent and achieve its national objectives is through confrontation. The viability of the Islamic republic cannot be negotiated with the West; it has to be claimed through steadfastness and defiance.

Iran’s nuclear program did not begin with the rise of this war generation. The nation has long invested in its atomic infrastructure. However, more so than any of their predecessors, Iran’s current rulers see nuclear arms as central to their national ambitions. While the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations looked at nuclear weapons as tools of deterrence, for the conservatives they are a critical means of solidifying Iran’s preeminence in the region. A hegemonic Iran requires a robust and extensive nuclear apparatus.

The maturing of the nuclear program has generated its share of nationalistic fervor, and the regime has certainly done its share to promote the importance of the atomic industry as a pathway to scientific achievement and national greatness. From issuing stamps commemorating the program to celebrating the enrichment of uranium, the clerical regime believes that a national commitment to nuclear self-sufficiency can revive its political fortunes.

The problem with this approach is that, once such a nationalistic narrative is created, it becomes difficult for the government to offer any concessions without risking a popular backlash. After years of proclaiming that constructing an indigenous nuclear industry is the most important issue confronting Iran since the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951, the government will find it difficult to justify compromises. The Islamic republic's strategy of marrying its identity to nuclear aggrandizement makes the task of diplomacy even more daunting.

Yet, Iran's determination to advance its nuclear program has come at a considerable cost. Today, the country stands politically and economically isolated. The intense international pressure on Iran has seemingly invited an interest in diplomacy.

From Tehran's perspective, protracted diplomacy has the advantage of potentially dividing the international community, shielding Iran's facilities from military retribution and easing economic sanctions. Iran may have to be patient in its quest to get the bomb; it may have to offer confidence-building measures and placate its allies in Beijing and Moscow. Any concessions it makes will probably be reversible and symbolic so as not to derail the overall trajectory of the nuclear program.

Can Tehran be pressed into conceding to a viable arms-control treaty? On the surface, it is hard to see how Iran's leaders could easily reconsider their national interest. The international community is confronting an Islamic republic in which moderate voices have been excised from power.

However, it may still be possible to disarm Iran without using force. The key figure remains Khamenei, who maintains the authority and stature to impose a decision on his reluctant disciples. A coercive strategy that exploits not just Khamenei's economic distress but his political vulnerabilities may cause him to reach beyond his narrow circle, broaden his coalition and inject a measure of pragmatism into his state's deliberations. As with most ideologues, Iran's supreme leader worries more about political dissent than economic privation. Such a strategy requires not additional sanctions but considerable imagination.

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