

Strategic Narratives and Iranian Foreign Policy into the Rouhani Era

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Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has recently come through the first electoral test of his presidency with parallel elections held at the end of February for the Majles (Iran's parliament) and Assembly of Experts (a clerical body charged with overseeing the work of Iran's Supreme Leader, and potentially the choosing of his successor). While Rouhani has over a year left before facing the electorate himself in Iran's next presidential elections, the recent vote was seen as a key measure of public support for his administration's handling of the country's nuclear negotiations, his economic policies, and his message of moderation in Iran's international affairs. The last point is especially significant, as the narrative that Rouhani is looking to promote represents a significant change from that of the previous administration under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, this is tempered by different narratives emanating from the various centres of power in the Islamic Republic, and the recent elections provide us with a useful juncture at which to pause and reflect on how these might be assessed.

Strategic Narratives

Readers familiar with the literature and debates around soft power, public diplomacy and communication in international relations may be aware of the important contributions made in recent years by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle with their work on strategic narratives. Their 2013 book [Strategic Narratives](#), and its [subsequent iteration](#) vis-à-vis soft power (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014) has provided a valuable analytical framework for understanding how states project narratives in the international system. Strategic narratives are, according to Miskimmon et al (2013, p.2),

'...a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want.'

Such narratives are usefully typologised via three different levels, namely 'system narratives' (referring to the way that the international system is structured), 'identity narratives' (regarding the contested identity of actors/nations in international affairs), and 'issue narratives' (concerning why a policy is needed and how it might be implemented).

In their book, Miskimmon et al (2013, pp.128-139) use Iran's nuclear programme as a case study to highlight what happens when competing narratives clash. In the narrative contestation between the West and Iran over its nuclear programme, the authors conclude that Iran, under the Ahmadinejad administration, managed to outmanoeuvre their opponents by shifting from scientific and legal to geopolitical and theological discursive foundations when a deal appeared close. In essence, both the US and Iran were looking to project their own narratives on how the international system should look, via the nuclear issue, while also seeking to appeal to their respective domestic constituencies. Ahmadinejad also sought to reach out in his own way, by writing an open letter to then-President Bush, an approach he continued following Obama's move into the White House, even when diplomacy appeared to be off the table. Indeed letters, be they private or public, have been an enduring feature of Iran-US diplomacy in recent years, as I have [written elsewhere](#). Their use by Ahmadinejad and others demonstrates an understanding of how their circulation can be used as a means of demonstrating a desire to reach out, even when relations remain strained.

Soft War

Fast forward to 2016 with the post nuclear deal political landscape we now find ourselves in, and the contestation, while still apparent, has been partly set aside to accommodate a shared desire for a deal to be made. However, the stalling of nuclear negotiations during the Ahmadinejad presidency coincided with a more sceptical narrative emanating from Tehran, that of a 'soft war' being waged against the Islamic Republic. The phrase entered Iran's foreign policy lexicon as a result of the attempted penetration of Western media and cultural programmes and cyber-attacks on Iran (Wastnidge, 2015, p. 372), and was arguably a defensive manifestation of soft power, with Iran seeking to resist what officials termed a 'cultural NATO' from penetrating Iran. It is a theme that has been deployed by Iran's Supreme Leader, and used as a justification to expand its presence in cyberspace with websites such as 'psyop.ir' under the moniker of 'Soft War and Psychological Operations' (Wastnidge, 2015, p. 373). This is a narrative that remains part of the Islamic Republic's strategic thinking, particularly amongst the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and it arguably acts as something of a brake against those who seek to promote closer ties with the West, and the US in particular.

Rouhani's Strategic Narrative

Rouhani, and his foreign minister, Mohamad Javad Zarif, have been equally, if not more skilful in weaving a compelling narrative to help bring about the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA), whereby Iran would receive sanctions relief in return for curtailing its nuclear programme and putting it under increased international scrutiny. Campaigning in 2013 under a banner of 'wisdom and hope', part of his election campaign was based on a promise to resume talks over Iran's nuclear programme. He used his previous experience as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator (from 2003-2005) to highlight how his approach avoided punitive economic sanctions and UN resolutions against Iran that pock-marked the Ahmadinejad era, utilising the symbol of a key to emphasise his aim of 'unlocking' Iran's problems. Following his election victory, [Rouhani spoke](#) of his desire to enhance mutual trust between Iran and other countries, avoid extremism and build trust over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Direct talks with the US soon followed, paving the way for a succession of interim deals and confidence building measures that finally led to the JCPOA.

Rouhani was also able to make a change to the previous structure of the nuclear negotiating team, putting the Foreign Ministry in charge of negotiations, as opposed to the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council who had previously been in charge. This move, which was backed by the Supreme Leader, meant that the negotiations were brought closely under the Rouhani administration's control. This allowed seasoned diplomats, such as Zarif (previously Iran's Ambassador to the UN) and Abbas Araghchi (a career diplomat with many years' experience working in Iran's Foreign Ministry) to take the lead in negotiations. What may seem, on the face of it, to be a procedural move is important because it allows proponents of diplomacy to come to the fore, and with it the ability to couch arguments in diplomatic language that can help smooth negotiations over such a vital issue. Zarif is well-known from his previous role at the UN in New York, and [Araghchi](#) also has a reputation as a highly accomplished diplomat.

This allowed a narrative to be formed that appeared more conciliatory, but also maintained Iran's rights to nuclear power, the [following quote](#) from Zarif being indicative of this approach:

'We hope to be able to make progress towards resolving this issue in a timely fashion based on respecting the rights of the Iranian people to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, including enrichment, at the same time making sure that there is no concern on the international level that Iran's nuclear programme is anything but peaceful.'

Thus we have an example of how an issue narrative is being developed around the nuclear negotiations that draws on key national and international narratives – as seen in the references to Iran's maintaining of its right to nuclear

power, but also assuaging international concerns about its intentions.

Rouhani's speeches to the UN General Assembly, one of the most closely observed forums for states to project their narratives on to the world stage, referred to the optimism that the talks had produced. Tellingly, in [his 2014 address](#), he also linked progress on the nuclear issue to the wider international fight against Islamic State, insofar as it would pave the way for further cooperation. Thus Rouhani was finding common ground with his interlocutors, and also linking the nuclear issue narrative to a wider international narrative about the ongoing fight against terrorism. This is combined with Rouhani and Zarif's active social media presence (both are active on Twitter), which shows the power of harnessing new communication ecologies to project a state narrative, as Roselle et al (2014) cover in their discussion of strategic narrative and soft power.

Competing or Complimentary Narratives?

We have seen how differing narratives emanate from the Islamic Republic. This is in part due to the dualism that exists in the power structures of the Iranian polity, but this should not necessarily force a reading based on the oft-repeated reformist/hard-line dichotomy that has typified much media analysis of the recent, and most likely future elections. Rouhani, while harnessing much popular support from reformists, is more of a pragmatic moderate in the mould of former President Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and his approach has the blessing of the Supreme Leader Khamenei. It should be remembered that Khamenei himself called for '[heroic flexibility](#)' in the nuclear negotiations, while maintaining certain 'red lines' that should not be crossed in the process. Ultimately, Khamenei is the final authority on key issues in Iran's foreign policy and his agreement with the nuclear deal, and empowering of Iran's foreign ministry in completing it, is an acknowledgement of the need to employ a narrative couched in the language of pragmatic diplomacy rather than revolutionary zeal.

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