

Neorealism And The Relationship Of Iran And The United States

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Introduction

Relations between Iran and the United States are shaped by history, ideology, domestic politics, regional rivalry, economic sanctions, military power, and the nuclear question. Neorealism, or structural realism, offers a useful but incomplete explanation. It argues that states operate in an anarchic international system without a central authority capable of guaranteeing their security. Because intentions are uncertain and survival is the minimum goal, states monitor relative capabilities, form alliances, deter adversaries, and sometimes take actions that make others less secure.

The Iran-U.S. relationship illustrates a security dilemma: measures described as defensive by one side are interpreted as offensive by the other. Iran portrays missiles, regional partnerships, and nuclear capability as deterrence against stronger enemies. The United States and its allies view the same capabilities as instruments of coercion and proliferation risk. Neorealism clarifies this interaction but cannot alone explain revolutionary identity, historical memory, sanctions politics, or the role of international law.

Core Assumptions of Neorealism

Kenneth Waltz shifted realist analysis from human nature to international structure. States perform similar basic functions but possess unequal capabilities. The distribution of power—unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar—shapes incentives and constraints. States worry about relative gains because a partner's benefit may later be converted into military power. (Waltz, 1979)

Defensive realists argue that states usually seek enough power to remain secure and that excessive expansion can provoke balancing coalitions. Offensive realists argue that uncertainty encourages great powers to maximize relative power when opportunities arise. Neither branch assumes that every conflict is inevitable. Geography, technology, alliances, and the offense-defense balance affect the intensity of competition.

Historical Foundations of Distrust

Structural pressure operates through historical relationships. Iranians remember the 1953 overthrow

of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, U.S. support for the shah, and American backing for Iraq during much of the Iran–Iraq War. Americans remember the 1979 embassy seizure, hostage crisis, attacks attributed to Iran-supported groups, threats to partners, and confrontations in the Gulf.

These memories influence threat perception. Leaders interpret new events through established narratives of interference, betrayal, resistance, and hostility. Constructivist analysis is therefore necessary alongside neorealism: identity and memory shape what states consider threatening.

Power Asymmetry and Deterrence

The United States possesses much greater global military, economic, intelligence, and alliance capability. Iran cannot balance symmetrically. It has pursued asymmetric tools, including missiles, drones, maritime capabilities, cyber operations, and relationships with armed groups and political movements in the region. These tools can raise the cost of pressure and provide strategic depth.

From Tehran's perspective, vulnerability to regime change, attack, and economic coercion creates incentives for deterrence. From Washington's perspective, Iranian regional networks and weapons threaten U.S. personnel, shipping, Israel, and Arab partners. Each side's effort to improve security can produce countermeasures by the other.

The Nuclear Program and the Security Dilemma

Nuclear technology has civilian and military-relevant dimensions. Uranium enrichment can support peaceful fuel production but can also shorten the technical path to weapons-grade material if a state chooses to violate commitments. Verification is therefore central. The International Atomic Energy Agency monitors declared material and seeks assurance that no undeclared activities exist. ("International Atomic Energy Agency", n.d.)

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action limited Iran's nuclear activities and expanded monitoring in exchange for nuclear-related sanctions relief. The United States withdrew in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. Iran later exceeded several JCPOA limits and reduced aspects of monitoring. The IAEA's Iran documentation continued to identify verification and safeguards concerns through 2025. By July 2026, U.S. policy still relied heavily on sanctions, with repeated Iran-related and nonproliferation designations issued by the Treasury Department. (U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, n.d.)

A neorealist interprets the bargain as temporary cooperation made possible when verification and reciprocal incentives altered expectations. Its breakdown demonstrates the problem of credible commitment: Iran doubted durable sanctions relief, while the United States and partners doubted long-term restraint and regional behavior.

Does Neorealism Support Iranian Nuclear Weapons?

Waltz controversially argued that an Iranian bomb might restore regional balance and produce deterrence. This is a theoretical claim, not an established consequence of neorealism. Nuclear acquisition could also encourage regional proliferation, increase crisis instability, intensify preventive-war incentives, create command-and-control risks, and weaken the nonproliferation regime.

Structural realism explains why leaders may seek a nuclear option under threat; it does not prove that proliferation is wise, lawful, or stabilizing. States can pursue security through conventional deterrence, alliances, arms control, verified limits, crisis communication, and regional arrangements. A critical essay must separate explanation from endorsement.

Israel, Gulf States, and Regional Balancing

The relationship is not bilateral in isolation. Israel views a nuclear-capable Iran and Iran-aligned armed groups as major threats. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have competed with Iran while also exploring diplomacy to reduce escalation. Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Gulf are arenas in which local conflicts intersect with regional competition.

External balancing occurs through alliances and security partnerships; internal balancing occurs through military investment. U.S. arms sales, bases, missile defense, and naval presence reassure partners but can reinforce Iranian encirclement fears. Iranian regional activity then strengthens demands for more U.S. involvement.

Sanctions as Economic Statecraft

Sanctions seek to reduce resources, change behavior, punish violations, or create bargaining leverage. They demonstrate U.S. financial power because access to dollars, banking, insurance, shipping, and global markets matters. Iran has responded through evasion, alternative trade, domestic substitution, and closer relationships with other powers.

Sanctions can impose high economic costs without producing the desired political concession. Leaders may protect strategic programs while ordinary people bear inflation, unemployment, medicine shortages, and reduced opportunity. Humanitarian goods may be formally exempt while financial institutions avoid transactions because of compliance risk. Neorealism predicts that states resist dependence that can be weaponized.

Domestic Politics and Leadership Change

The original essay contrasts conservative and liberal U.S. administrations as though ideology determines cooperation automatically. Domestic orientation matters, but all administrations operate within institutions, alliances, congressional politics, public opinion, and regional events. Iranian politics also include elected bodies, the supreme leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, clerical institutions, and factional competition.

Leaders may use external conflict to manage domestic legitimacy or may pursue diplomacy when economic and security costs rise. A purely structural account cannot explain why governments facing similar pressures choose different tactics or rhetoric.

The Hawkish Approach

A hawkish policy emphasizes coercion, sanctions, military readiness, and strict limits. Its strongest argument is that concessions without enforcement can fund or legitimize threatening behavior. Its weakness is that coercion may increase the adversary's incentive to accelerate deterrent capabilities, reduce inspections, or retaliate indirectly.

A diplomatic approach emphasizes verified limits, reciprocal steps, and communication. Its weakness is the risk of temporary agreements that leave unresolved issues. Durable policy likely requires both credible deterrence and credible off-ramps. Threats without a feasible settlement can produce endless escalation; incentives without verification can produce exploitation.

Neorealism's Explanatory Strengths

Neorealism explains persistent rivalry despite changes in personalities. It highlights power asymmetry, alliance structures, geographic vulnerability, relative gains, deterrence, and the security dilemma. It also explains why agreements require monitoring and why states hedge against uncertainty.

The theory is especially useful for understanding why Iran's intentions alone cannot reassure rivals and why American declarations of defensive purpose do not reassure Iran. Capabilities and the possibility of future misuse matter more than statements.

Limits of the Theory

Neorealism underestimates ideology, religion, nationalism, legal obligation, economic interdependence, bureaucratic politics, and individual leadership. It can flatten Iran into a unitary

security seeker and the United States into a single rational actor. It also has difficulty explaining the content of hostility: why certain states become central enemies while others with significant capabilities do not.

Liberal institutionalism adds the role of inspections, agreements, and repeated interaction. Constructivism explains identities and narratives. Domestic-politics approaches examine coalitions and institutions. A complete analysis combines these perspectives.

Pathways to Risk Reduction

Risk reduction does not require friendship. Limited agreements can address nuclear monitoring, maritime incidents, prisoner issues, humanitarian trade, and communication during crises. Verification should be technically credible and insulated where possible from political change. Reciprocal steps should be sequenced so that neither side must rely entirely on trust.

Regional dialogue can address missiles, armed groups, conventional deployments, and noninterference, but expecting one comprehensive bargain immediately may be unrealistic. Narrow arrangements can create information and reduce accidental escalation.

Escalation, Crisis Stability, and Miscalculation

A security dilemma becomes most dangerous when each side assumes that restraint will be read as weakness. Military deployments, sanctions, proxy attacks, cyber operations, and nuclear advances can create pressure for rapid retaliation. Crisis stability depends on whether leaders believe they can wait for more information without losing critical capability. Ambiguous attribution and compressed decision time increase the risk of miscalculation.

Communication channels, notification procedures, and clear distinctions between limited signaling and preparation for major war can reduce accidental escalation. These measures do not solve the underlying rivalry, but neorealism itself suggests that prudent states should avoid unnecessary uncertainty when the costs of error are extreme.

Conclusion

Neorealism provides a powerful explanation of Iran-U.S. rivalry as a product of anarchy, unequal capabilities, alliances, deterrence, and the security dilemma. It helps explain why Iran seeks asymmetric leverage and why the United States resists capabilities that could alter the regional balance. It does not establish that [Iranian nuclear](#) weapons would produce peace, nor does it explain every aspect of the relationship. Historical memory, ideology, domestic politics, law, and institutions also matter. A stable policy must combine deterrence with verifiable limits and credible diplomatic

exits. Security cannot be built sustainably if each side's only response to vulnerability is to increase the other's fear.

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