

“Smart Power” in the American Think Tanks’ Approach to the Nuclear Activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Reza Soleimani¹

Received: 2015/12/01

Accepted: 2016/01/10

Abstract

In the last decade, the concept of “smart power” was invented to guide the US diplomacy system so that the US could have a more assuring achievement process to its goals by using its national and international power capabilities. The concept of “Smart Power” was introduced after the formation of the concept of soft power by Joseph Nye, which refers to the simultaneous application of managed soft power and hard power. The concept of smart power for operationalization requires a variety of strategies designed by the US strategists and decision-making institutions. The question of this article is about the position of smart power in the US foreign policy toward Iran. It seems that with the coming of the Obama administration in the United States, the project of the smart power was operationalized by the diplomatic apparatus of the country, whose obvious example can be seen in the context of the kind of US confrontation with Iran’s nuclear program. With the use of pressure and negotiation strategy, the project pursues the gradual reduction of the nuclear capabilities and the rollback of Iran’s nuclear program. The authors believe that in case of success, this process can be generalized and spread to other areas of conflict and put America at an aggressive stand.

Keywords

Smart Power, Think Tanks, Aggressive Foreign Policy, Pressure and Negotiation Diplomacy, Iran’s Nuclear Capacity

1. Assistant Professor of Political Sciences Faculty at Hamadan Payame Noor University
r.soleimani1980@gmail.com

Introduction

In the era of the international community and the complexity of international relations, the governments and administrations face many difficulties with finding information and knowledge in various fields, especially in the field of international relations. The think tanks (thinking rooms, decision-making institutions) have been formed to solve this problem and to help the diplomacy system. The think tanks can be considered as the link between knowledge and politics, which enable the politicians' to predict the outcomes and effects of their decisions by using scientific-research studies (Traub-Merz, 2011: 4). These think tanks have grown vastly in the United States, which claims the leadership of the international system in the present era. Given that the United States needs diverse and numerous strategies in various global issues, particularly in the field of foreign policy, the vital and influential role of active thinkers in this field appears to be so prominent. For example, one of the main concerns and complexities of US foreign policy over the past decade is its strategy in confronting with Iran's nuclear case file and the results generated accordingly. This process has highlighted the need for the active and powerful presence of think tanks and strategists working in this field.

In this regard, a concept called the "smart power" was introduced in the last decade, which played its role as the main driver of the US foreign policy device with the presidency of Barack Obama. With Obama administration coming to power in the US, the main goal was focused on the simultaneous use of power and influence. The new US foreign policy doctrine is based on the concept of smart power. This concept is a combination of hard power

and soft power providing the United States with an appropriate framework to deal with unconventional threats. Using this concept, the US decision-making institutions have provided diverse strategies to cleverly manage Iran’s nuclear case. Different strategies of the think tanks influential in the field of Iran’s nuclear case pursue a process, which is focused on two basic principles. By focusing on Iran’s nuclear case, on the one hand, they are trying to encourage the executive authorities to reciprocate the nuclear activities voluntarily and accept extensive restrictions by increasing the pressure and providing incentives to Iran. On the other hand, they struggle to achieve the goal of expanding Iran’s rollback in the nuclear issue to other conflicting areas and transform Iran’s decision making and foreign policy structures.

Therefore, the main question of this article is as follows:

What process do the strategies of the US decision-making institutions follow in Iran’s nuclear case based on a software called the Smart Power?

In this study, focusing on the web sites of some of the American think tanks, we described and explained the following hypothesis:

The strategies of the US decision-making institutions pursue the process of gradual reduction of Iran’s strategic capabilities aimed at the self-imposed nuclear retreat under the pressures of the United States and its allies. Finally, they will look for changing the structure of the government of Iran using the process of creating double pressures and backward steps.

Smart Power of the United States

In his book, “Soft Power: a Tool for Success in Global Politics”, Joseph Nye defines the term “smart power”. He believes that smart power means that we learn better how to use the combination of hard and soft powers (Nye, 2004: 32). He believes that the smart power is not the third type of power, but is something close to a method. In fact, the smart power is the ability to employ various forms of power. Therefore, Nye considers the smart power as an approach to the exercise of power (Pallaver, 2011: 105). He made a challenge against serious threats against US interests and proposed a new concept. He spoke of smart power in the sense of, the intelligent combination of hard and soft powers in confronting threats to the national security. He believes that the America’s military, economic, cultural and ideological capabilities and superiorities must be aligned in the same direction so that their resultant will ensure the continuity of America’s supremacy. In fact, the smart power is a combination of hard and soft powers, which is seen as the modern management of exercising power rather than to be a news source of power. Indeed, the smart power is a particular type of soft power tending to hard power or a developed type of soft power, which is capable of combining with hard power. It leaves open the way for applying violence to achieve the goal – making the opponent to obey. Meanwhile, such a tyranny can be called a coverage of grace through the “demonstration of legitimacy”, whose output would be the carrot and stick policy or strategy. This strategy is based on a combined behavior, including propaganda deception and propaganda fear (Ghasemi, 2008: 135-134). In other words, the smart power aims to create a balance among the three

areas of defense, diplomacy and development. Such a change in the US foreign policy could be seen as one of the most significant changes in the US national security strategy over the last few decades (Pallaver, 2011: 101).

Politically, the smart power was specifically introduced as the core of the US foreign policy with the coming of the Barack Obama administration. Obama, after winning the presidential election in the United States with the slogan of “Change”, introduced the term “smart power” as the new White House policy, first stated by Hillary Clinton, his foreign minister at the congress, which is considered today as the most important tool against Iran (Ghasemi, 2008: 123). Referring to the issue in the Senate in January 2009, Clinton stated that:

“America cannot solve the pressure of problems only by relying on its own abilities and the world cannot withstand these pressures without the United States. We need to use what is known as the “Smart Power” to fit any situation, which is a wide range of diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural tools” (Guerlain, 2014: 482-483).

According to this strategy, the slogan of Obama’s change does not mean a change in the US doctrine of hegemony, rather, it means a relative shift in the US strategies to achieve the global hegemony position. Obama had been chosen to use optimism, pluralism, multilateralism, pragmatism, value-orientation and emphasis on the United Nations to represent the acceptance of the hegemony of the United States more pleasant and legitimate to the world. This change meant a change in the negative attitudes of the world to the United States and shifting this negative attitude to the White

House's enemies and critics. Such an approach was adopted to confront Iran, especially in the context of the opposition to its nuclear ambitions. Within the framework of this process, the American think tanks have put diverse strategies for addressing Iran's nuclear issue at the disposal of the US diplomacy apparatus. Different strategies presented to the American diplomacy system emphasize the need for inducing a nature contradiction between the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the United States of America and prescribe strategies to solve Iran's nuclear riddle in this process.

The Nature of the Contradiction

Many experts and strategists working in the security and strategic areas link Iran's nuclear case to the contradiction between Iranian and American views and believe that although the current crisis between the United States and Iran seems to be about the nuclear program, but the real problem is the conflict between their interests and views in the Middle East. To understand this analysis, we have to look at the most fundamental interests of the United States in the Middle East. An issue emerged in the US National Security Strategy in 2006 and the main interests of the United States in this strategic region are as follows:

1. Providing security for the supply of oil and gas
2. Eliminating the threats of terrorist organizations [based on the concept of terrorism from the American perspective]
3. Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction
4. Ensuring the survival of Israel and the qualitative use of military bases

Despite the fact that the US governments have claimed that the America’s main goal in the region involves the promotion of democracy and the free economic market, even if we assume such a claim is true, one can say the mentioned four security objectives are among the foundations of US foreign policy in the Middle East and are so intertwined that losing one of them can impose heavy costs to the US. For example, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction makes the terrorist threats more prominent. Accordingly, terrorism is a threat to the security of energy and Israel. Hence, all these interests must be considered altogether (Özcan & Özdamar, 2009: 125).

This issue becomes more strategic and sensitive when the United States is concerned about the emergence of a powerful actor critic of its policies in this sensitive area. This emerging power from the perspective of many experts, especially those present in the US foreign and security policy only adapts to Iran. Indeed, one of the major issues raised by the United States major approach in the Middle East after entering this region, specifically, after the Second World War so far has been to determine a coherent and uncontroversial strategy in support of one of two important and defining issues of “freedom” or “stability” and “democracy” or “security” among the countries of the region. This issue has much mattered to the White House that has always put Washington against a difficult paradox in the past six decades. The first side of this paradox is the practical and real commitment of the United States to the principles of freedom and democracy such as the granting of the right to determine their own fate and the right to vote for the citizens of the Middle East and the tolerance of

independent and even anti-American governments and groups in these countries. The second side of the mentioned paradox is the establishment of authoritarian, non-democratic and unaccountable governments under the influence of the US government and ignoring the basic rights of the citizens in the Middle East (Soleimani, 2012: 93).

The remarkable thing about Iran-US relations is that those four interests of the United States are totally in conflict with the goals of Iran. The first and the most important point is that Iran is not under the US influence. In fact, Iran is able to cut off the transportation of oil from the Strait of Hormuz and can export its energy to Russia, China and Turkey (and possibly the European Union in the future). The second issue is that Iran is the biggest supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah in the region. The third issue is that the United States claims that Iran is using the Shiites to interfere in Iraq and prevent the stability of this country, and is the biggest obstacle to radical Islamic groups in the region. The fourth issue implies that Iran has strict positions against Israel while protecting Israel's security is highly important for the United States. Ultimately, the possibility that Iran can produce nuclear weapons seems to be a nightmare for the United States. This issue is considered a huge strategic tool for Iran for the survival of the Islamic state and the threat of Israel. It could also turn into a rivalry for achievement of nuclear weapons in the region. All of these factors increase the power and influence of Iran in the region and disrupt the balance of the regional power. The Iranian government struggles to protect the territorial integrity and the Islamic state and to become the leading power in the region (Özcan & Özdamar, 2009: 125). Therefore, the conflict of interests

of Iran with the United States is not confined to the nuclear issue. Even without nuclear weapons, Iran has a strong presence in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf region (Ottaway, 2009: 1). Thus, the fact that the emerging and powerful actor, Iran, has a critical and revisionist view of the relations governing the international system and is one of the main critics of the White House policies makes the competition conditions more complicated and widespread. This competition can occur and influence all the matters between the United States and Iran, while Iran’s nuclear case is only one of these controversial issues.

Therefore, the contradiction between the US and Iran is rooted in the worldviews of the two political units and it cannot be confined to a dispute over a specific issue called the nuclear issue. Basically, the contradiction between the views of the United States and Iran is such that can be manifested in various subjects. For example, Aaron T. Walter [US Foreign Policy Researcher] has studied Iran’s Nuclear Subject from the perspective of the US and Israel security and interprets it under the title of “Power and Influence.” According to him, the Americans believe that if Iran gains enough uranium to develop a nuclear weapons program, a nuclear arms race may begin in the region, which will lead to the reduction of US power in the region. By uniting with Iran, Syria feels bold against US-led international pressure. Hezbollah also raises its attacks on Israel (Walter, 2012: 10). Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons will make Iran’s position stronger, and thus, it will seek to change the power equation. Therefore, Iran’s nuclear issue is being pursued under the subject of power and influence by the United States and Israel. Due to their multiple conflicts and

interests in the Middle East, the Americans cannot even imagine Iran with a peaceful nuclear knowledge (Walter, 2012: 11-12). As a result, the main objective of the United States and its regional and international allies over Iran's nuclear case is based on lack of access. As, after the 2008 presidential election, Obama stressed on the threat of a nuclear Iran as a revisionist player against the interests of Israel by providing the ground for the arming of terrorist groups (Bianco, 2014: 94-95).

In explaining the issue that how the US government and according to what strategies can pursue their own specific policies in the pursuit of success in Iran's nuclear stalemate and rollback policy and how a concept known as smart power can play a role in this regard, we should track the factors in the diversity and goals of the strategies presented to the US diplomacy system. The attention to this issue will highlight the role of decision-making institutions (think tanks) in the context of providing strategies related to Iran's nuclear case to the United States diplomacy apparatus. Each American think tank focusing on Iran's nuclear program have tried to provide the platforms to operationalize the smart power by presenting various and numerous strategies. Hence, in the following, we discussed and explained the nature and the objectives of the most important strategies proposed by the most active American think tanks in connection with Iran's nuclear program.

1. Rand Corporation

In providing its different strategies and suggestions regarding the Islamic Revolution of Iran, especially in the context of the nuclear case, the Rand Corporation has a combined attitude (a combina-

tion of hard and soft powers) with a tendency toward soft power to change the nature of the Islamic Revolution and change the approach of the diplomatic apparatus of this country. The Rand Corporation analysts first ask this question whether the United States and its allies will be able to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. In response to the above question, they propose the strategy of pressure and negotiation to manage the change in Iran and believe accordingly:

“The United States should provide the necessary grounds for political positive change in Iran. Economic sanctions for influencing Iran’s decision-making in the short term are unlikely to provide the required results; but they can stop Iran’s nuclear progress. The bargaining strategy of the United States with Iran is not expected to succeed; however, the continuation of the talks, even in the absence of an agreement, could support Iran’s political change in the long term” (<http://www.rand.org>, 2012, 8 October).

In the context of this process, Dalia Dassa Kaye, one of the authors of the Rand Corporation, in a recommendation to the US government officials to put pressure on Iran with the aim of rewarding something in the nuclear talks, links Iran’s nuclear issue to its efforts to build nuclear weapons and change the power balance in the Middle East in its favor and recommends the US authorities that:

“The US leaders should continue to strengthen their joint security and intelligence cooperation with Israel and work against Iran’s efforts to reduce Iran’s capabilities. Dalia Dassa Kaye believes that the United States should create a barrier against Iran’s expansion of regional power and influence and isolate this coun-

try. The United States must also put the policy of engagement and sanctions on the agenda through diplomatic routes and, accordingly, prevent the development of nuclear weapons in Iran” (<http://www.rand.org>, 2012, 5 January).

James Dobbins et al., as authors affiliated to the Rand Corporation, in an article analyzing the US and the West strategies regarding the nuclear issue of Iran, introduce the most important strategy of the United States and its allies the pursuit of radical changes based on considering the issues like human rights abuses in Iran and believe that paying attention to this strategy and maintaining pressures on Iran can coordinate Iran’s political atmosphere with the interests and desires of the United States and its allies. He emphasizes in this regard that:

The United States must not only focus on Iran’s nuclear program but should also address issues such as human rights abuses in Iran and promote the idea that the United States does not look at Iran as a problem but pays attention to it as a country as well... The United States and the international community must be responsible for dealing with Iran. In addition, the United States should consider the members of Iran’s security services, in particular, the senior and middle-rank officials from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij militia responsible for suppressing and violating the human rights and sanction them. These sanctions prevent the foreign governments and companies from communicating with or doing business with them, and thus, can change the domestic politics of this country (<http://www.rand.org>, spring, 2012).

2. The Brookings Institute

The Brookings Research Institute is also one of the active US institutions in relation to Iran issues, and particularly about the nuclear case of Iran. This institute has proposed its most fundamental strategies based on establishing communication at different levels aimed at infiltration in the decision-making layers of the Iranian government. In a part of the proposed Brookings Institute report, entitled as “Roadmap for Coexistence”, we can see a new US policy towards Iran. In this proposal, the institute has called for the US government to consider the fourth option from the options of regime change, military strike, isolation and the establishment of relationship with Iran. In doing so, the US should consider the following seven major issues:

1. Negotiating over sensitive issues such as the resumption of diplomatic relations, the issue of the nuclear case, the security of Persian Gulf and Iraq, and wider international issues, without making any of these negotiations dependent on another

2. Appointing a specific person at the US State Department to coordinate diplomatic efforts towards Iran

3. Eliminating the prohibition of direct link between American and Iranian authorities and the normalization of diplomatic relations at low levels (so that the US government will get acquainted with Iranian officials and obtain a better understanding of how political changes occur among Iranians)

4. Dealing with Iran as a “single agent” instead of trying to create conflicts between different groups in Iran and considering that without the approval of the Iranian leadership, no change will

occur in the main issues with the United States

5. Finding an effective mediator that can bridge the relationship between the US government and the central circle around the Iranian leadership and the Iranian president

6. Focusing on programs that encourage the contacts and communication between people in both countries and attempting to curtail the US interventionist image

7. Understanding that the process of establishing relations with Iran will be long-lasting and affected by the internal relations of Iran and the regional contexts.

The upcoming US government should use the opportunities and situations to build an ascending trend and maintain it, manage the crisis and subtilize in determining the direction of the domestic debates in the United States and the issues related to “the interests and concerns of the United States Allies” (Ghassemi, 2008: 137-138).

Robert Einhorn, a person active in the field of arms control and a member of the Center for 21st Century Security as well as one of the authors of the Brookings Institute, regarding the impact of reaching an agreement in the nuclear talks of the United States and his allies with Iran, argues that the senior Obama administration officials believe that the pressures cannot have much effect on the result of the negotiations; however, what matters is that, although an agreement cannot stop Iran’s enrichment power but can prevent the rapid growth of Iran’s nuclear capacities. The agreement could undermine the threat of plutonium production in the Arak reactor and provide access to widespread and systematic oversights (Ein-

horn, 2014: 20). Therefore, penetrating the decision-making layers of Iran and influencing the influential individuals in different positions simultaneously as well as maintaining pressures on Iran with the goal of nuclear retreat and ultimately changing the nature of the system (political-cultural transformation) are among the most fundamental strategies of the Brookings Institute against Iran.

3. The Hudson Institute

The Hudson Institute has a security attitude toward Iran’s nuclear issue and addresses the US foreign policy behavior in facing Iran’s nuclear case from this angle. In this framework, this institute suggests some strategies to achieve the goal of changing Iran’s foreign policy in accompanying and co-operating with the United States. Michael Doran, one of the main elements of the Hudson Institute and a theorist on the context of Middle East security examined the Barack Obama’s policy on Iran’s nuclear case in terms of the diplomacy of pressure and tension aimed at changing Iran’s behavior. Pointing out the Obama’s instrumental use of sanctions and preservation of pressure on Iran, Michael Doran believes that “Obama has kept the restrictions on Iran to coordinate the policy of this country with the Middle East policy of the United States. For peace of mind, he is still emphasizing the theory that Iran seeks to maintain and expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East. In this framework, in particular, Obama has seriously opposed Iran’s policies in Syria and Iraq” (<http://www.hudson.org>, April 22, 2015).

The authors affiliated with this institute, to explain the need for the American government to continue to use the strategy of ten-

sions against Iran aimed at weakening Iran's strategic capabilities and self-reliant rollback of nuclear policies, link the risk of stabilization of Iranian nuclear industry with high enrichment power to the insecurity of the region and the expansion of the nuclear weapons rivalry by the United States allies in the Middle East. Accordingly, they believe that, despite the announcement of US support for Saudi Arabia against Iran's possible attacks, the Saudis doubtfully look at the promise of the United States and assume the purchase of the nuclear weapons some sort of guarantee for themselves. Based on this type of futurism and inducing the danger of the occurrence of a widespread and uncontrollable war in the Middle East, which the Hudson Institute believes will occur after Iran access to a high level of enrichment, the need to prevent Iran from gaining access to an independent and leading nuclear power industry is explained and theorized for the US authorities.

4. Center for a New American Security

In analysis of the nuclear issue of Iran, the Center for a New American Security has addressed the consequences of a nuclear Iran and relates this issue to the production of nuclear weapons. In this regard, the researchers of the Institute provide some recommendations to the US authorities. In a report with the title of "Risk and Competition" as a part of a one-year project, they have examined the nuclear issue of Iran and emphasize that a nuclear-armed Iran will have a significant power to challenge the interests of the United States and Israel as well as to increase the regional conflicts. Therefore, preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons should remain a priority for the United States and Israel. Continuing the

current mix of pressure and diplomacy, all the options, including the prevention by using military action, should remain on the table. The United States and Israel must take steps to prevent the loss of time in the course of diplomatic options. The best diplomatic consequence would be Iran’s action in the rollback of its nuclear developments. However, the policymakers must increase their preventive measures to draw red diplomatic lines for Iran to end all of its domestic uranium enrichment activities in the negotiations. In addition, the United States and its partners should seek diplomatic solutions to pressurize Iran to comply with international obligations. These researchers believe that the four following conditions can legitimize the maintenance of pressures on Iran:

1. All non-military options are going to be over;
2. Iran moves to build nuclear weapons;
3. It is reasonable to expect Iran’s nuclear program to pursue a rollback direction;
4. Adequate big international coalition is available to curb Iran and create a barrier for Iran to rebuild its nuclear program (H. Kahl et al., 2012: 7).

The authors of the Center for a New American Security, including Elizabeth Rosenberg and Ilan Goldberg, believe that an agreement can create new opportunities for the United States in the region as it succeeded to provide a direct link between the US Secretary of State and the Iranian Foreign Minister after 35 years of a very low relationship between Iran and the United States. Expanding this communication path can provide potential opportunities for cooperation in Afghanistan, Iraq, Central Asia, and in the

maritime domain. On the other hand, the United States and Iran will continue to work together to find a way to end the crisis in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and, to some extent, in Iraq. In addition, the agreement may increase the concerns of our regional partners, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel since they are likely to feel more insecure from Iran after the agreement. For the United States, this method is right and proper to provide a right balance in three areas:

1. In the area of Iran's supports for instability and violence in the region
2. Creating new unions to reassure the regional allies
3. Seeking ways to further engage and cooperate with Iran (<http://www.cnas.org>, July 14, 2015)

Conclusion

The American policy structure has been designed and adapted to enable this country achieve the highest global power. In this process, one of the concepts raised over the last decade is a concept known as "Smart Power". This concept enables the US to exploit two hard and soft powers in conjunction with a specific topic under a simultaneous, functional, and targeted management. However, what matters in this regard is the fact that operationalizing the smart power in the US diplomacy system requires diverse and numerous strategies in various fields. This issue provides the contexts for the powerful presence of decision-making institutions and think tanks in the design of targeted strategies for the US diplomacy apparatus. During this process and in the context of designing the type of the US dealing with the Iran's nuclear case, the think

tanks and strategists of the United States have proposed several and various strategies to be used by the US diplomacy system in dealing with Iran’s nuclear case. Reviewing the strategies of the most important US decision-making institutions regarding Iran’s nuclear case reveals their emphasis on the managed and purposeful use of both hard and soft powers. Meanwhile suggesting the maintaining of a military option against Iran and the promotional use of this strategy to put pressure on government officials and the diplomatic apparatus of Iran, these think tanks believe that the main strategy of the United States regarding Iran’s nuclear program is the use of soft power capacities.

The US foreign policy strategists believe that the strategy of combining pressure and diplomacy and its intelligent use regarding Iran’s nuclear case can not only reduce Iran’s strategic capacities and lead to severe restrictions on its nuclear activities, but also can change the behavior of its foreign policy in the long run and encourage its political currents to further engage and cooperate with the United States. This process can ultimately lead to the transformation of Iran’s political-ideological system. Therefore, one can see that the strategies presented to the US diplomacy system by the think tanks active in the field of Iran’s issues consider Iran’s self-rollback of the nuclear industry an introduction to the change in Iran’s political system, which can lead to an expansion of US influence in Iran.

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