

Critical rereading of the nuclear policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran; An explanation from the perspective of the strategic thinking model

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Article Info	Abstract
Original Article	Without a doubt, the Iranian nuclear file has been the most important area of foreign policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran's history; the extension of more than two decades and the hostage-taking of other policy areas, including defense-security, economic, and social, are the reasons for this importance. This study, to explain the damages of the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear policy, critically rereads its four key periods. The central question of the article is what implications a critical reading of Iran's nuclear policy from the perspective of strategic thinking provides? To this end, the research was conducted using qualitative historical-critical analysis and data, including speeches, interviews with officials, and previous research literature. Therefore, this article, relying on the two main elements of strategic thinking in the form of a theoretical discussion that is a combination of "strategic rationality" and "dynamic adaptation", claims that the main problem in Iran's nuclear policy is not the complete lack of strategic rationality or dynamic adaptation, but the simultaneous deficiency of these two components and the inability to create sustainable interaction between them. The findings show that this inability to create sustainable interaction has manifested itself at two levels: at the cognitive level, policies have been overly reliant on intuition and ideology, and at the operational level, they have lacked institutional learning mechanisms, which has led to the repetition of errors and the instability of achievements. The research ultimately provides solutions for breaking the cycle of crisis reproduction.
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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The Iranian nuclear program has been the most sensitive and contentious domain of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy over the past two decades. What initially emerged as a technical and legal issue under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) gradually evolved into one of the principal axes of confrontation between Iran and the global powers. The nuclear file has deeply shaped Iran's relations with the West, constrained its economic development, influenced its regional standing, and even transformed the security architecture of the Middle East.

This trajectory has revealed a structural gap: a persistent mismatch between short-term decision-making, often justified as "rational management of threats", and the inability to sustain a coherent long-term strategy. The outcome has been the reproduction of crises, cycles of sanctions, and, ultimately, the escalation to military confrontation, exemplified by the July 2025 "Midnight Hammer" strikes on Iran's enrichment facilities. The significance of this study therefore, goes beyond technical or legal debates. It constitutes a strategic inquiry into how the Iranian state has perceived threats and opportunities, made decisions under uncertainty, and struggled to transform its nuclear policies into a durable and sustainable grand strategy.

2. Aims

This research pursues two interrelated aims:

- a) Analytical aim: to provide a critical review of Iran's nuclear policymaking across four key historical phases (2003–2005, 2005–2013, 2013–2018, and 2018–2025), using the lens of strategic thinking.
- b) Explanatory aim: to demonstrate that Iran's nuclear vulnerability stems not from the total absence of rationality or adaptability, but from the simultaneous weakness of both and—most importantly—from the failure to create a stable interaction between strategic rationality and dynamic adaptability.

The central research question is: What insights does a critical reading of Iran's nuclear policy through the model of strategic thinking yield about its persistent vulnerability and eventual confrontation with great powers?

3. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative historical–critical approach with elements of interpretivist case-study research. Four historical periods of Iran's nuclear policy were chosen as analytical units, based on turning points in strategy and diplomacy. Data sources include official speeches, interviews, and previous scholarly works in both Persian and English.

As levels of analysis:

- a) The cognitive level examines assumptions, perceptions, and theoretical frameworks of decision-makers, focusing on the degree of reliance on tested theories, collective deliberation, and structured strategic reasoning.
- b) The operational level investigates institutional organization, inter-agency coordination, and the system's capacity for institutional learning and adaptation to changing geopolitical contexts.

By combining these two levels, the research identifies both cognitive deficiencies and organizational weaknesses. The dual-level analysis highlights the interaction—or lack thereof—between rationality and adaptability in shaping nuclear policy outcomes.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal a recurring pattern across the four phases:

Phase I (2003–2005: Conditional Suspension and Diplomatic Hope).

Iran adopted a strategy of voluntary suspension of enrichment to avert UN referral and buy time. This reflected partial strategic rationality—a cost–benefit calculus based on international regimes and trust-building. Yet weak adaptability, limited institutional consensus, and fragile coordination prevented this policy from evolving into a sustainable framework.

Phase II (2005–2013: Confrontation and Nuclear Advancement).

Under President Ahmadinejad, nuclear policy shifted to an identity-driven, resistance-centered discourse. The program became a symbol of independence and defiance, not just a security project. This cognitive rigidity trapped policymakers in “single-loop learning”, where external pressure was interpreted as proof of righteousness rather than a signal to recalibrate strategy. Operationally, informal and personalized decision-making weakened institutional learning. Sanctions multiplied, and international isolation deepened.

Phase III (2013–2018: The JCPOA and Diplomatic Opening).

The Rouhani administration pursued engagement, leading to the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). This demonstrated a relative revival of strategic rationality, as assumptions about the international order were revised and collective bargaining processes re-emerged. Operationally, new coordinating bodies and expert-led negotiations reflected partial institutional learning. Yet, the absence of mechanisms to safeguard achievements, combined with domestic factionalism and overdependence on U.S. compliance, meant that once the Trump administration withdrew, the achievements quickly unraveled.

Phase IV (2018–2025: Breakdown of Deterrence and Multi-layered Crisis).

After the U.S. exit, Iran's strategy reverted to fragmented, reactive, and defensive measures. The failure to reassess assumptions (e.g., reliance on Europe as a counterbalance, linking

nuclear policy to regional resistance) illustrated cognitive stagnation. Operationally, a lack of institutional adaptation, poor coordination among executive and security organs, and the absence of organizational learning left Iran unprepared for escalating threats. The 2025 Israeli–U.S. strikes exposed the erosion of deterrence and underscored the strategic vacuum.

Cross-cutting finding: In all four phases, the root vulnerability lay not in the sheer absence of rationality or adaptability but in their disconnection. Whenever short-term rational decisions were made, they were undermined by poor adaptability; whenever tactical flexibility emerged, it lacked grounding in coherent strategic reasoning. This misalignment explains the reproduction of crises and the eventual military confrontation.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Iran's nuclear policy over the past two decades has suffered from a persistent failure to integrate strategic rationality (theoretical consistency, deliberative decision-making, and long-term calculation) with dynamic adaptability (institutional learning, inter-agency coordination, and responsiveness to change). At the cognitive level, reliance on ideology and intuition often overshadowed structured strategic analysis, leading to misperceptions of adversaries and unrealistic expectations. At the operational level, fragmented institutions and a lack of organizational learning hindered the stabilization of policies. Together, these weaknesses created a cycle of repeated mistakes and unstable outcomes. The implications are threefold:

- a) No diplomatic or deterrent strategy will be sustainable without institutionalized mechanisms for both rational analysis and adaptive learning.
- b) Breaking the vicious cycle of “rationality without flexibility” and “flexibility without rationality” requires independent strategic institutions, transparent decision-making, and systematic feedback loops.
- c) The Iranian case provides a cautionary lesson for other states: without continuous integration of rationality and adaptability, even regional powers remain vulnerable to crisis reproduction and external coercion.

In sum, the Iranian nuclear experience illustrates the centrality of strategic thinking—as a synergy of rationality and adaptability—for navigating complex international environments. Its absence explains both the fragility of Iran's nuclear diplomacy and the escalation to direct military confrontation in 2025.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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