Nuclear About-Face

Examining the Role of Collective Face Concerns in Iran’s Nuclear Decision-Making

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*The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. government.
Abstract

Although security concerns and military-technical capabilities remain highly influential components of the often-complex, multi-faceted nuclear decision-making processes undertaken by governments, the interaction of these variables with select normative and social-psychological dimensions found within a country’s domestic political and foreign policy making landscape can, in some contexts, alter the trajectory of a state’s nuclear program. One case of long-standing and critical importance to U.S. policymakers whereby such normative and social-psychological dimensions have historically appeared to play an important role in a state’s nuclear decision-making remains that of Iran. This paper will seek to explore the role of one such dimension: that of “face.” More specifically, this paper will discuss the underexamined roles of “face” and “collective face” —concepts encompassing such elements as national pride, prestige, and the avoidance of national humiliation—in Iran’s nuclear decision-making. More specifically, this paper will examine the role of Iran’s collective face concerns and the role of face-saving measures in reaching the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also referred to as the “Iran nuclear deal,” negotiated between the P5+1 (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, plus Germany), the European Union (EU) and Iran in 2015. By utilizing strategic empathy and deploying these measures as part of its coercive counterproliferation strategy, the P5+1, while satisfying its own collective non-proliferation aims, effectively provided Iran with a means by which it could reserve a level of nuclear prestige, secure adequate institutional buy-in from key domestic power-centers, pay lower reputational costs for its concessions and ultimately maintain sufficient collective face. By looking beyond solely Iran’s security motivations, this paper seeks to inform more holistic negotiation strategies that can potentially influence Iran’s nuclear decision-making in a manner more favorable to U.S. interests.
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Overview of a last plenary session of the talks on the Iranian nuclear program that is being held at the United Nations building in Vienna, Austria, Tuesday, July 14, 2015. After 18 days of intense and often fractious negotiation, diplomats Tuesday declared that world powers and Iran had struck a landmark deal to curb Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for billions of dollars in relief from international sanctions, an agreement designed to avert the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran and another U.S. military intervention in the Muslim world. (Joe Klamar/Pool Photo via AP)
Introduction

While security concerns and military-technical capabilities continue to play a significant role in the complex nuclear decision-making processes undertaken by governments, the interplay between these factors and select normative components found within a country’s domestic political and foreign policy environment can, in certain situations, modify the direction of a state’s nuclear program. As such, while a state’s final nuclear-related decisions may or may not diverge from security predictions in the end, it nevertheless remains useful for scholars and policymakers to consider how other factors might impact how states arrive at their decisions.3

Iran is a long-standing case of critical importance to U.S. policymakers whereby select normative and social-psychological dimensions that are intertwined within a country’s domestic politics and foreign policy making have historically appeared to play an important role in a state’s nuclear decision-making. While Iran’s nuclear decision-making remains opaque to outside observers, some scholars have sought to analyze it primarily through the prism of classic security interests while other scholars and experts have sought to examine the potential roles played by social-psychological and interrelated normative components woven into Iran’s political landscape such as national pride and prestige. There nevertheless remains a great deal of space for additional exploration and policy debate as it relates to how these fluid and fluctuating normative concepts have impacted prior episodes of nuclear negotiations with Iran and how they might impact them in the future.

This paper will seek to explore the concepts of “face” and “collective face” in the Iranian context, which, for the purposes of this paper, will encompass to some extent such concepts as national pride and prestige as well as the avoidance of national humiliation. More specifically, this paper will examine the role of Iran’s collective face concerns and the role of face-saving measures in reaching the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), often referred to as the “Iran nuclear deal,” negotiated between the P5+1 (the United States, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, plus Germany), the European Union (EU) and Iran in 2015. It should be noted that specific concerns regarding potential audience or reputational costs related to its general population, domestic political elites, regional neighbors, international adversaries or like-minded governments, are not treated as mutually exclusive but rather as interrelated factors that influenced Iran’s broader collective
face concerns and calculations. Further, while Iran’s collective face concerns influenced the outcome of select JCPOA provisions, Iran’s negotiating positions were based on an array of factors and motivations beyond just, and often in combination with, such face-concerns. Such factors included its desire to obtain sanctions relief, maintain nuclear self-reliance and preserve a nuclear hedge.5 Identifying with certainty the dominant motivation(s) for Iran’s agreement to select provisions that were to some extent influenced by Iran’s collective face concerns is difficult to discern. This paper does not intend to suggest that face-related concerns were the only or even primary motivation for Iran’s agreement to the face-saving provisions discussed in this analysis, although some, like those that did not result in Iran’s preservation of nuclear capabilities that might support a nuclear hedging strategy, might fall into such a category. Indeed, while face-concerns have been a significant factor in Iran’s nuclear decision-making at times, they have also been utilized by negotiating parties in various contexts as part of a broader bargaining strategy, often meant to create audience costs and/or pressure a counterpart to make concessions.6 In the case of Iran, some analysts have contended, for example, that while elite divisions and related face concerns regarding the nuclear issue are genuine, they can at times also serve as a convenient justification for inflexibility.7 Nevertheless, as part of an effort to account for motives beyond security interests, this paper seeks to discuss the broad role of Iran’s collective face concerns during the JCPOA negotiations and effectively analyze the cumulative effect of implementing measures that, to some extent, took them into account. By doing so, this paper hopes to shed light on the role of face in Iran’s nuclear decision-making and inform future analysis of when it might be in the strategic interests of the United States to employ some level of strategic empathy and incur the costs associated with deploying face-saving measures in order to achieve its non-proliferation objectives. Based primarily on the U.S. perspective regarding the impact of these measures on negotiation outcomes, this paper also seeks to shed light on lessons from prior nuclear negotiations with Iran and demonstrate the value of looking beyond solely Iran’s security motivations to formulate more holistic negotiating positions that can potentially shape Iran’s nuclear decision-making in a manner more favorable to U.S. interests.8
Face in the Iranian Context and the Face-Sensitive Nature of Iran’s Nuclear Program

A universal concept often cited as having deep roots and origins in Asian cultures, the concept of face has been studied across disciplines and internationally over many years. The renowned sociologist Erving Goffman, who is often credited with introducing the study of the concept to the Western world, defined face as “an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes-albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.” While the concept of face can be translated into Persian in several ways and the appropriate translation may depend on specific nuances and context, scholars who have focused on the conceptualization of face within Iran have often noted that the Persian metaphor of “aberu,” translated literally as “water of the face,” often serves as an equivalent concept. “Aberu” is often thought to incorporate aspects of pride, prestige and honor and embodies how one individual or collective is viewed by others.

For the purposes of this paper, references to face and collective face in the Iranian context will to some extent encompass these components associated with “aberu.”

A range of scholars have built upon the understanding of face over the years and theoretical models have even emerged to assist in evaluating the role of face in international relations and cross-cultural conflict resolution. In the context of international politics, renowned scholar Thomas Schelling described different categories of face as impacting bargaining positions among states, distinguishing between those aspects related to a state’s status or honor and its reputation for action or the “expectations other countries have about its behavior.” Stella Ting-Toomey’s Face-negotiation Theory has also assisted scholars in evaluating the important role of cross-cultural factors, such as a culture’s tendency toward either individualism or collectivism, as it relates to how the concept of face influences conflict behavior. Yet the study of face has nevertheless largely been focused on the individual and the study of “collective face,” or a preoccupation with the image of one’s “ingroup” in the eyes of “outgroups,” both in the context of a country’s domestic politics and international relations, is in need of additional examination. In the context of Iran, this is especially important as scholars have argued that Iranian society, in general, is governed much less by a Western understanding of individual autonomy but rather by a sense of collective
identity. As put by one scholar, who has extensively researched the concept of face in Persian:

“Persian face is collectivist. Since face considerations underpin all communication among speakers who have a social relationship, Persian face...also includes group face wants, enhanced through adherence to social conventions. Such a concept of collective face is in line with the closely-knit ties that exist among members of nuclear and extended family, and the circles of friends and acquaintances.”...Iranians are in charge of their destiny and bear the responsibility of maintaining and enhancing their own face and, by extension, the face of the family or the group they belong to. Consequently, the stakes of losing face are much higher, because an individual’s loss of face reflects adversely on his family’s or group’s collective face.”

It is against this normative and social-psychological backdrop related to face and collective face in the Iranian context that the nuclear issue has become an inherently and highly face-sensitive matter. Such collective face considerations have become evident in various statements from senior Iranian officials. For example, in a speech made by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during the JCPOA negotiations in July 2014, he stated: “Of course, we believe in our negotiating team. We are sure that they will not be satisfied with transgression against the rights and dignity of the country and the people.” Iran’s nuclear decision-makers are likely to be influenced to some extent by their collective face concerns and the possibility that their decisions regarding the country’s nuclear program will reflect back not just on them as individuals but potentially on their political faction, the entire Iranian governing system or even Iranian society as a whole.

This sense of collective identity or collective face has also played a significant role in shaping broader official and public discourse regarding the nuclear program. Official discourse has often effectively linked the nuclear program to Iran’s national identity, with an emphasis on national pride, independence or self-reliance, as well as justice and fairness -- concepts often considered to be engrained within Iranian political culture and often linked to “abern.” The language used by senior Iranian officials across the political spectrum to discuss the nuclear program, even if they maintain divergent views as it relates to how the program should be limited or expanded to best serve Iran’s security interests, has consistently been centered on such concepts. Officials of the Islamic Republic have long sought to make
the case domestically that Iran’s nuclear program has always been for peaceful purposes and that international sanctions and pressure were disguised efforts of foreign powers to meddle in Iran’s internal affairs and stymie its technological progress. Iranian officials have also often reiterated a baseline notion of what they insist is Iran’s right to peaceful nuclear technology – a so called “inalienable/indisputable right” or “hagh-e-mosalam” in Persian – including what Iran perceives as a right to domestic enrichment for peaceful purposes. Moreover, to navigate face sensitivities related to the nuclear program, Iranian negotiators from across the political spectrum have also often utilized historical references to prior treaties, negotiations and events ranging from the Hudaybiyya Peace Treaty, the Peace Treaty of Imam Hassan and the Treaty of Turkmenchai to the Nationalization of Oil and UNSCR Resolution 598. Such references have been used in a variety of contexts both to advocate for and resist compromise on the nuclear program. Iranian officials have also consistently emphasized the concept of “fairness” as it relates to their view of the inequities in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Indeed, despite the Islamic Republic’s history of deception, including its prior organized and covert nuclear weapon design program and consistent failure to adequately cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on several outstanding inquiries, as required by Iran’s comprehensive safeguards agreement (CSA), Iranian officials have also continued to emphasize a refusal to be treated differently than any other NPT party. Such discourse has been utilized
consistently by political elites across Iran’s political spectrum. For example, despite their factional differences and contrasting approaches to the nuclear issue, both former Presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani utilized the term “nuclear apartheid” to criticize international scrutiny of Iran’s nuclear program.\(^{29}\)

Yet, this approach in Iranian rhetoric also predates the Islamic Republic. “You [the United States] are asking us for [nuclear] safeguards that are incompatible with our sovereignty... Such safeguards are absolutely unnecessary because Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” declared the U.S. allied former ruling monarch of Iran, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.\(^{30}\) “No country or group of countries ‘has the right to dictate nuclear policy to another,’” declared the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) under Pahlavi, Akbar Etemad.\(^{31}\) As put by one historian of Iran, “the way the Shah sometimes boasted of Iran’s nuclear program demonstrates its nationalist pride and international prestige roots.”\(^{32}\) Such framings and sentiments have continued to make the nuclear program susceptible to collective face sensitivities up until the present day.

Such discourse, when taken together with broader public opinion trends concerning the nuclear program, can make solutions to the nuclear issue particularly face-sensitive and subject to the influence of face concerns in the Iranian context. A fully reliable or comprehensive understanding of Iranian public opinion concerning the nuclear program has become increasingly difficult to obtain. There has been increased systematic repression of public discourse about the nuclear program in recent decades under the auspices of national security as well as attempts by the system to restrict the free flow of information and polling, while employing its own rhetorical instruments to shape public views. Even Iran’s Central Bank has taken part in attempting to shape the narrative by, for example, in 2007 re-designing a common currency note with an atomic symbol over a map of Iran to, according to press reports at the time, “showcase Iran›s technological ambitions and boost national pride.”\(^{33}\) (See figure 1) Nevertheless, select polling, surveys and a range of other sources that circumvent the system of information suppression within Iran continue to give a glimpse of a nuanced picture subject to continued debate when it comes to the Iranian public’s opinion regarding the nuclear program.\(^{34}\) While the majority view concerning Iran’s development of nuclear weapons has been less clear based on this body of data, it continues to appear that a large majority of the Iranian public continues to be in favor of a peaceful, civil nuclear program and Iran’s full enrichment capabilities.\(^{35}\) Part of this trend can be attributed to Iran’s history and a strong sense of national pride and prestige related to scientific advancement and independence, which is also
ultimately tied to Iran’s collective face within the international community.\textsuperscript{36} As one scholar has noted, “Iran’s motivations for having a robust nuclear fuel cycle are linked significantly, but not solely, with a notion of ‘Persian grandeur.’”\textsuperscript{37} Yet another scholar has maintained that the “[Iranian] regime’s commitment to its nuclear program is influenced by Iran’s long-standing sense of vulnerability to both regional and international adversaries, and an enduring sense of national humiliation at the hands of foreign powers, in parallel with a powerful belief in the superiority of Persian civilisation.”\textsuperscript{38} One example of such vulnerability and humiliation was the Iraqi use of chemical weapons against Iran during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War and what Iran viewed as its limited condemnation by the international community. This and the broader experiences of the lengthy war significantly shaped subsequent official and public views of Iran’s nuclear pursuits and discussion of a need for not just some form of military deterrence but also self-reliance.\textsuperscript{39} Against such a backdrop, Iran’s negotiators are likely to be influenced by face concerns as well as audience and reputational costs not just in the international context but domestically as well in the so called “court of public opinion” where they wish to avoid being seen as “surrendering” Iran’s sovereign rights or technological advancement.

Figure 1. An image of the 50,000 rial note unveiled in 2007

An image of the 50,000 rial note unveiled in 2007, described above. The Persian script contains the following saying from the Prophet Mohammad: “If the science exists in this constellation, men from Persia will reach it”.\textsuperscript{40}
The role of face is often a critical component of international diplomacy and arguably any negotiation among competing parties. As one scholar has put it, "Within diplomatic interaction orders (perhaps more so than in other types of interaction orders), a central issue is to avoid losing face, i.e., to avoid embarrassment. From this perspective, diplomacy can be interpreted as national ‘face-work.’" Yet it is important to understand the complexity of the concepts of face and collective face in the Iranian context and in the context of the Iran nuclear issue in particular. Indeed, alongside other critical motivations such as a drive for credible deterrence, power projection and energy considerations, matters linked to the concept of face, including national pride and prestige, are now woven into the multifaceted and continuously evolving quilt of Iran’s underlying nuclear motivations. One long-time scholar of Iran’s nuclear motivations has even argued that prestige and other matters related to collective face concerns have influenced Iran’s nuclear-decision making on a level on par with security concerns. Such complex motivations are among the reasons why formulating effective U.S. policies related to Iran’s nuclear program have proven particularly challenging in recent decades.

Iran’s Collective Face Concerns and the Role of Face-Saving Measures in Reaching the JCPOA

Given Iran’s collective face concerns and the importance often attributed to the role of strategic empathy and the deployment of face-saving measures in securing a range of nuclear concessions from the Islamic Republic to reach consensus among all JCPOA negotiating parties, the following section will discuss these measures and seek to analyze, primarily from the U.S. perspective, their impact on negotiation outcomes.
Those provisions related to civil nuclear cooperation contained in Annex III of the JCPOA were among the critical components of the P5+1’s decision-making aimed in part at allaying Iran’s collective face concerns related to the broader concessions it would make as part of the deal. This annex contained a wide array of provisions for civil nuclear cooperation between Iran and the P5+1 in a range of areas. These provisions range from assisting Iran with the acquisition of power reactors and the fabrication of nuclear fuel to cooperation on permitted research and development (R&D) activities, nuclear waste management and the establishment of a Nuclear Safety Center in Iran.

While there would be some additional risk in establishing and expanding such nuclear cooperation with Iran, such as the possibility for initiatives going beyond the permitted scope of Annex III, the P5+1 determined that the benefits outweighed the risks. Civil nuclear cooperation would ultimately enable the P5+1 to influence Iran’s civilian nuclear work going forward and would be consistent with prior efforts of pushing towards a more globalized nuclear ecosystem. Such activities and increased international cooperation with Iranian nuclear personnel would also translate into increased visibility and insight into Iran’s program over time. Moreover, such provisions could not only build institutional habits and secure institutional buy-in for the JCPOA by providing Iranian engineers with alternative and expanded opportunities for advanced civilian nuclear science, but also incentivize Iran, in part due to the nuclear prestige it might gain through such international cooperation, to continue its long-term compliance with the JCPOA to maintain access to such initiatives. Indeed, some scholars would likely argue that the face-saving and symbolic social benefits of such provisions, by enabling Iran to potentially gain prestige through increased global integration and nuclear cooperation with major powers, would contribute to incentivizing Iran to maintain its nuclear roll-back. Such incentives, contained in their own designated annex of the accord, provided Iran a great deal of face-saving benefit as Iran’s decision-makers could claim that they were being treated as a serious international nuclear partner and would continue to advance Iran’s technological progress. Moreover, such face-saving and prestige enhancing provisions more generally provided Iran’s negotiators additional space to make concessions in other areas of critical importance to the P5+1.

As the taboo of direct and continuous high-level negotiations with the United States continued to be broken within Iran, the involvement of international bodies,
third party facilitators and mediators in the lead up to and during the JCPOA talks also served as an important face-saving means by which diplomatic solutions could be discussed constructively. Indeed, in order to reach consensus as part of such a complex negotiation as the JCPOA, it is often necessary to utilize mediators or relatively neutral third-party facilitators, particularly for the purposes of implementing face-saving measures. As some scholars have argued, “A mediator’s suggestions should have the greatest impact when the negotiator to whom they are presented is most in conflict between a need to make concessions and a need to appear strong.” Iran’s negotiators undoubtedly encountered such collective face and reputational concerns, particularly as it related to potentially being seen as bowing to the demands of the United States in particular. As a relatively neutral party and trusted interlocutor who enjoyed healthy diplomatic relations with both sides, the Omani government’s role in facilitating the secret 2013 talks between the United States and Iran that paved the way for the JCPOA negotiations served as a face-saving means by which parties could explore possibilities for diplomatically resolving the nuclear issue. At various points in time, other JCPOA negotiating parties, like Russia, took on central mediating roles that helped facilitate progress in the talks. The facilitation of the talks by the EU itself also provided Iran’s negotiators some additional face-saving diplomatic space against domestic criticism that they were cozying up too closely to the United States during the negotiations. Moreover, the IAEA, as an international body, also helped facilitate face-saving measures and secure Iran’s concessions related to the intrusive monitoring and verification called for in the JCPOA.

A recognition by U.S. negotiators during the JCPOA talks that their rhetoric, tone and framings could impact the ability of Iran’s negotiators to preserve sufficient face and ultimately “sell a deal” at home appears to have played a role in reaching the accord as well. According to a senior administration official in 2015, during the secret 2013 talks between the United States and Iran in Oman, U.S. negotiators were advised by the Omani government regarding the importance of the rhetoric they utilized: “tone, not just substance, mattered: the Iranians had to be treated with respect and understanding—that was a continual piece of advice.” Nevertheless, there were multiple episodes during which Iran protested, for example, the use of select terminology by U.S. officials, particularly select phrases contained within U.S. government published factsheets at various points during the negotiations. U.S. officials’ use of the word “dismantle” to describe some of the fundamental adjustments to Iran’s nuclear infrastructure or even use of the term “suspension”
as opposed to the term “lifting” in relation to the status of various sanctions provisions was protested publicly by senior Iranian officials.\textsuperscript{51} As described by one analyst at the time regarding a public dispute over the U.S. use of the term “dismantle” to describe a mutually agreed upon nuclear measure: “The net effect was to raise tensions over an issue that did not, in fact, involve much disagreement between the negotiating teams.”\textsuperscript{52} Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in his 2018 memoir recalled the attention he paid to select Iranian face concerns and the careful process he undertook when drafting a public statement regarding the status of the talks:

“I didn’t want hard-liners on both sides to be able to use my words in defending their assertion that we were wasting our time with diplomacy. I also knew the Iranians well enough by that point to understand that if they felt humiliated or condescended to, they were more likely to dig in than capitulate. I still believed strongly that success was possible, but we’d have to tread carefully. Every move we made—every word we said—mattered enormously.”\textsuperscript{53}

While U.S. negotiators themselves had their own face and collective face concerns to consider against the backdrop of heightened domestic debate concerning a potential diplomatic solution to the Iran nuclear issue within the United States, they nevertheless, at times, were cognizant of and sought to, when possible, avoid heightening the face concerns of Iran’s negotiators as it related to U.S. rhetoric and specific terminology that may have involved face-compromising connotations, particularly when translated into Persian. Such practice made no real substantive difference as it related to the U.S.’ non-proliferation objectives but would assist Iran’s negotiators in preserving additional face domestically and avoid further complicating the negotiations.

Collective face-concerns also played a significant role in determining the final status of Iran’s 40-megawatt Arak heavy water reactor, which, once completed, could have produced approximately one to two weapon’s worth of plutonium every year. One diplomat familiar with the negotiations anonymously stated at the time that negotiators would need to utilize “linguistic engineering to hide modifications” to the Arak reactor that would ultimately achieve the P5+1’s non-proliferation objectives while still allowing Iran to save sufficient collective
face, avoid, as described in one 2015 press report, “an intolerable national humiliation” and preserve its “sense of strength and scientific achievement.”

In the end, as opposed to completely dismantling the Arak reactor, it was instead agreed that Iran would remove its calandria, its critical core component, fill it with concrete to render it inoperable and open the site up to continuous IAEA access and monitoring, to include placing cameras and seals on the new reactor core and monitoring of the reactor’s power levels. For a duration of 15 years, Iran would also not be permitted to engage in any spent fuel reprocessing, R&D for spent fuel reprocessing, construction of any additional heavy water reactors or development or acquisition of a reprocessing facility. In exchange, the reactor would be fully redesigned in cooperation with participants of an international consortium for peaceful nuclear research for the production of medical or industrial isotopes, ensuring it would not be suitable for the production of plutonium for nuclear weapons. Iran would also be required to ship all its spent fuel from the reactor abroad for its lifetime. Under this construct, Iran could preserve collective face by claiming the reactor would remain and would even be modernized in coordination with world powers, and with Iran’s capability to potentially produce plutonium.
for a nuclear weapon greatly reduced, the P5+1 achieved their non-proliferation objective of cutting off Iran’s potential plutonium pathway to a nuclear weapon.\textsuperscript{55}

Those portions of the deal related to the IAEA’s investigation into Iran’s past nuclear weapons-related work, and the portions related to providing the IAEA access to Iran’s military sites, if needed, were additional critical components of the JCPOA impacted by Iran’s collective face concerns. A “Roadmap for Clarification of Past and Present Outstanding Issues,” was negotiated between the IAEA and Iran in parallel with the JCPOA talks, outlining those steps Iran would have to take in cooperation with the agency concerning the IAEA’s longstanding investigation into the possible military dimensions (PMD) of Iran’s prior nuclear activities. The IAEA had long suspected, based on strong indicators and evidence, that Iran, prior to 2003, carried out testing and research relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device as part of its “Amad plan” or “Project Amad.”\textsuperscript{56} Prior to the JCPOA, the United States had taken the position that Iran must “come clean” about the full extent of all its past nuclear weapons related activities for the sake of transparency.\textsuperscript{57} Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic continued to espouse the narrative that its program had always been for peaceful purposes and that international sanctions and pressure, as a result of which ordinary Iranians had also suffered greatly, were merely disguised efforts by the West to undermine Iran’s stability and scientific progress. Indeed, just weeks before the JCPOA was reached, Khamenei claimed: “America is after destroying our nuclear industry altogether...Our negotiators’ aim is to safeguard Iran’s integrity ... and our nuclear achievements during the talks.”\textsuperscript{58} There was also an emphasis placed by Iranian officials on Khamenei’s (unwritten but officially acknowledged) Fatwa or religious decree “that the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons are forbidden under Islam and that the Islamic Republic of Iran shall never acquire these weapons.”\textsuperscript{59} As put by former U.S. National Security Advisor to then Vice President Joe Biden and current U.S. National Security Advisor to President Biden, Jake Sullivan, in a 2018 interview: “The Iranians asserted from start to finish that all of this [accusations of prior nuclear weaponization efforts] was a bunch of bunk, that they had never attempted to weaponize. But we knew, and they knew that we knew, and we knew that they knew we knew.”\textsuperscript{60}

In the lead up to and over the course of the JCPOA negotiations, it became clear to U.S. negotiators and a range of longtime analysts and observers of Iran’s nuclear program that extracting a confession from Iran’s leaders regarding their
past nuclear weaponization efforts might prove too powerful of a blow to the Islamic Republic’s legitimacy, causing it to lose all too much collective face domestically and internationally. The Islamic Republic’s longstanding narrative that the nuclear program had always been for peaceful purposes and that the country had been suffering under sanctions due to foreign plots as opposed to its own covert nuclear weapons-related efforts in contravention of its international obligations would collapse. It eventually became clear to U.S. negotiators that to break the impasse that eventually transpired over PMD and to effectively compel Iran to make its broader concessions, Iran would need to be afforded a face-saving way forward. There also appeared to be an assessment by U.S. policymakers that they had obtained sufficient knowledge of Iran’s activities prior to 2003 and that ensuring the agency’s access to verify the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program going forward would outweigh any non-proliferation benefits that might be gained through an Iranian confession. Instead, the P5+1 sought to leverage the JCPOA negotiations to assist the IAEA with its PMD-related efforts. “The United States is not looking for a confession...We’ve made our own national judgment. But sanctions lifting will only occur as Iran takes the steps agreed on, including addressing PMD,” a senior U.S. official told the press just weeks before the deal was reached. By forgoing a confession in this context, some scholars have argued that the handling of PMD represented a sort of tradeoff between face-saving and future verification. The provision of a face-saving way forward—in this case, Iran’s ability to forgo an explicit confession – likely increased the odds of securing the broader coercive counterproliferation bargain as the “caught proliferator” (Iran) could avoid what would otherwise be tremendous domestic and international audience costs. While such deniability can be useful to leverage as part of a negotiation like that which led to the JCPOA, it is not a cost-free approach as it could set far from ideal precedents as well as complicate and hinder the IAEA’s safeguards and verification efforts related to the past, as future programs often draw from past efforts.
The roadmap also included provisions that would require Iran to provide access to its Parchin Military Complex, where the IAEA had collected evidence that, prior to 2003, Iran had engaged in “high explosive testing, possibly in association with nuclear materials,” as well as the “construction of a large explosives containment vessel in which to conduct hydrodynamic experiments.” 64 Iran, albeit while denying the allegations and attributing some of these activities to nanodiamond production, had previously granted the IAEA limited access to the sprawling Parchin military complex in 2005. However, Iran denied the IAEA access to some of the locations it wanted to inspect and its subsequent requests for further access to the site, including a location suspected of housing a large explosives containment chamber. 65

Moreover, in the intervening years, Iran appeared to engage in significant efforts to sanitize and reconstruct the Parchin site, further complicating the agency’s verification efforts. 66 As part of the IAEA’s efforts related to the JCPOA-linked roadmap, Iran would once again need to provide access to Parchin.

Despite numerous instances of Iran providing the IAEA some level of access to its military facilities, including Parchin in 2005 as well as its Kolahdouz and Lavisan-Shian military complexes in 2003 and 2004 respectively, given the broader domestic political sensitivities within Iran in the lead up to the JCPOA, the topic of Iran opening up its military sites to inspection was particularly contentious and increasingly face-sensitive for Iran’s negotiators. 67 Such dynamics were amplified by the public “redlines” issued by Khamenei during the negotiations, including those insisting that Iran would not accept inspections at its military facilities or interviews with Iranian nuclear scientists. “As it has already been said, no permission will be given to them for inspecting any of the military sites as well as for interviewing nuclear scientists and [scientists in] other sensitive disciplines and encroaching upon their privacy,” Khamenei stated in May 2015 during an address to graduates of a military academy. 68 Meanwhile, while many Iranian officials reiterated Khamenei’s blanket proclamations, President Rouhani, who had campaigned with a central focus of resolving the nuclear issue, along with key members of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team, at times appeared to be carefully wording their statements on the topic of visits to and inspections of military sites. 69 Following...
Khamenei’s May 2015 remarks, Rouhani publicly noted that Iran would “never sign a deal that would allow anybody to have access to the country’s scientific and military secrets” but did not entirely rule out the IAEA conducting its verification efforts at military locations.70 Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister at the time, Abbas Araghchi, also appeared to try to manage the internal criticism within Iran regarding the issue by not classifying the IAEA’s access to military sites as an “inspection” and instead emphasized the concept of granting “managed access” to the IAEA under the Additional Protocol (AP). “What the IAEA does is not an inspection, but a managed access for environmental sampling to check whether there are any radioactive substances there,” stated Araghchi in May 2015, following Khamenei’s remarks on the issue.71 Such managed access was also reportedly in line with prior arrangements under which Iran allowed access to military facilities, such as under the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention.72 Moreover, Iran sought to include face-saving language in the JCPOA text itself, framing IAEA access as nothing extraordinary and specifying that access requests would be “made in good faith, with due observance of the sovereign rights of Iran, and kept to the minimum necessary to effectively implement the verification responsibilities” of the JCPOA, consistent with “normal international safeguards.”73

Ultimately, implementation of the roadmap took place and then Director General Yukiya Amano along with his Deputy visited the Parchin military complex, including “the main building of interest to the Agency” that could only previously be observed through satellite imagery.74 Against the backdrop of collective face sensitivities inside of Iran, the IAEA and Iran also agreed on, as the agency put it, “an arrangement” for the inspection of Parchin, which involved “visual observation and environmental sampling at the location of interest to the Agency.”75 Under this face-saving arrangement, Iranian representatives were permitted to swipe the environmental samples. According to a Western diplomat familiar with the details of the arrangement at the time: “There was a compromise so the Iranians could save face and the IAEA could ensure it carried out its inspections according to their strict requirements.”76 The IAEA publicly emphasized that it had permitted Iran’s participation in the sample taking process as it had previously done for other states in certain circumstances and that it had “ensured that the samples were taken at the location of interest and maintained the chain of custody for the samples in line with the Agency’s established safeguards practices.”77 This arrangement broke the impasse regarding access to the Parchin military complex based in part on Iran’s collective face concerns and desire to
avoid both domestic audience and international reputational costs related not just to its past weaponization efforts but also for allowing a “foreign” organization to access its military sites.

Such collective-face concerns regarding access to military sites were not just related to the IAEA’s ability to access Parchin as part of its roadmap related efforts, but the IAEA having the ability to gain access to any suspicious location, declared or undeclared, including potentially on Iranian military sites, in the future. As part of the deal, Iran would implement the Additional Protocol (AP), a voluntary agreement that 140 states have in place with the IAEA to supplement existing safeguards agreements and expand the agency’s ability to investigate undeclared nuclear activities. Importantly, the AP provides for complementary access to undeclared sites, including potentially military sites, if it is necessary to “assure the absence of undeclared nuclear material or to resolve questions or inconsistencies in the information a State has provided about its nuclear activities.” While a dispute over such access could potentially drag on indefinitely under just the AP, the JCPOA effectively provided an addendum for this AP process that limited any dispute resolution process to 24 days, after which Iran would face the possibility of the snapback of UN sanctions suspended under the JCPOA. It was described in press reports at the time as a formula that would provide the IAEA with “strong inspection powers while allowing Tehran to save face” on potential future access to military locations as it did not “explicitly force Iran to admit that its military sites could be open to foreign inspections.”

Iran’s effort to retain some level of uranium enrichment on its own soil was undoubtedly driven by a range of its underlying nuclear motivations, including heavily by security considerations, but appears to have also been heavily influenced by matters of face. For years, the United States and its international partners had insisted, including through the passage of multiple UN Security Council Resolutions between 2006-2010, that Iran suspend its nuclear enrichment activities given the range of outstanding concerns regarding its program, including related to its pre-2003 covert and coordinated nuclear design and weaponization work. Yet Iran continued to deny its past weaponization efforts and insist that it had a “right to enrich” uranium for peaceful purposes. Despite its diplomatic isolation, a host of international sanctions and other coercive measures meant to deter and undermine such advancements, the Islamic Republic ultimately charged ahead with its mastery and expansion of the full nuclear fuel cycle.
Inheriting the stalemate over Iran’s nuclear program that had ensued since 2002, when it was first publicly revealed that Iran had been operating covert nuclear facilities, in 2009 the administration of President Barack H. Obama entered office. The Obama administration made clear that the United States was determined to pursue all available options, including potential military action, to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran but strongly preferred and would first seek to exhaust diplomacy, without pre-conditions. Following fits and starts of nuclear diplomacy with Iran that were complicated by an array of domestic and international events, the administration eventually assessed that, despite a range of unilateral and international measures aimed at preventing the further advancement of Iran’s nuclear program, an insistence on zero enrichment in Iran would be unlikely to yield a diplomatically negotiated settlement. According to William “Bill” Burns, who served as the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State at the time, President Obama was convinced that a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue would require “some limited form of domestic enrichment,” given the domestic support for Iran’s civilian program and the scope of the program at the time. Just prior to the implementation of the JCPOA, Iran was operating nearly 19,000 centrifuges (See Figure 2 below) and had accumulated a stockpile of over 10,000 kg of low-enriched uranium (LEU) -- enough fissile material (once enriched to higher levels) to potentially produce an estimated at least six and potentially up to 10 nuclear weapons, if it were to choose to do so.

Figure 2. Number of Installed Centrifuges in Iran
The issue of domestic enrichment had become increasingly face sensitive within Iran over time, particularly given the official and politicized narrative surrounding the matter crafted by Iran’s government. “Our people feel great pride because our young Iranian scientists can produce nuclear fuel, the most important part of the fuel cycle, despite all of the sanctions and pressure from the West,” Rouhani explained in 2005 while serving as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator. Khamenei has also repeatedly attempted to tie Iran’s national dignity to its nuclear achievements such as its ability to indigenously enrich uranium. “20 years ago, if someone bothered speaking about centrifuge manufacturing and uranium enrichment in Iran, no one would believe him. However, the talented Iranian youth has now scored such an innovative performance that all nations are appreciating it for its lively interest in science and its efforts to restore its related rights,” Khamenei stated in 2008. Such framings when coupled with the cumulative costs the Islamic Republic had incurred over time for its nuclear advancements in defiance of the international community ranging from international sanctions and resource expenditures to diplomatic isolation, sabotage and the assassination of nuclear
scientists, allowed for such collective face concerns to take deep root. Such deeply rooted face concerns had likely contributed to the prior repeated failed attempts at nuclear diplomacy with Iran whereby Iran insisted on retaining enrichment. Given these past failures, as former President Obama revealed in an interview just after the JCPOA was finalized, his administration had sought to employ some level of strategic empathy to consider not just Iran’s security but also face-related concerns in order to find more effective approaches that could break the impasse over issues like enrichment and achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

“...even with your enemies, even with your adversaries, I do think that you have to have the capacity to put yourself occasionally in their shoes, and if you look at Iranian history, the fact is that we had some involvement with overthrowing a democratically elected regime in Iran. We have had in the past supported Saddam Hussein when we know he used chemical weapons in the war between Iran and Iraq, and so, as a consequence, they have their own security concerns, their own narrative. It may not be one we agree with. It in no way rationalizes the kinds of sponsorship from terrorism or destabilizing activities that they engage in, but I think that when we are able to see their country and their culture in specific terms, historical terms, as opposed to just applying a broad brush, that’s when you have the possibility at least of some movement.”

With this mindset, it appears that the Obama administration sought to combine its own strategic calculations with some level of understanding of Iran’s perspective in order to come up with new face-saving approaches and solutions to past policy failures and anticipate what might yield constructive progress on the nuclear file. In this context, U.S. officials involved in the negotiations at the time appear to have understood that concerns about collective face among Iran’s nuclear decision-makers would likely impact the course of negotiations and to some extent the level of concessions Iran would agree to regarding its domestic enrichment capabilities. In line with this view, the United States began secret talks, a format that lent itself to face-saving dialogue, with Iran in 2013. The talks were facilitated by...
Oman and laid the foundation for the JCPOA negotiations. It was during these discussions that a message was conveyed for the first time that the United States might be prepared to accept a limited and constrained enrichment program in Iran as part of a larger understanding that included the necessary rollbacks as well as intrusive monitoring and verification.\textsuperscript{90} “Offering enrichment—that was the breakthrough moment,” a senior U.S. administration official who was involved in the talks reportedly stated in 2015.\textsuperscript{91} Shortly after the 2013 secret talks in Oman, and accelerated by the 2013 election of Rouhani, who had campaigned on a promise of “constructive engagement” with the world, a period of nearly two years of arduous negotiations commenced, culminating in the JCPOA. Under the accord, Iran was permitted to operate 5,060 of its most basic first-generation IR-1 centrifuges for the purposes of enriching uranium only at its above-ground Natanz facility for 10 years and permitted to retain a 300kg stockpile of 3.67% LEU for 15 years. This meant Iran would remove roughly 13,000 of its 19,000 operating centrifuges and reduce its LEU stockpile by nearly 98%. Relatedly, Iran agreed to implement what the IAEA would term the “world's most robust nuclear verification regime,” providing the agency the ability to continuously access and monitor Iran's declared nuclear activities and facilities and effectively have eyes on its entire nuclear supply chain -- from increased access to Iran's uranium mines and mills to its production, assembly and storage facilities.\textsuperscript{92} At just Iran's Natanz facility, such transparency measures would range from continuous camera surveillance of centrifuge halls and regular access to and inspection of the facility to the placement of tamper-resistant seals on nuclear equipment and material to prevent unauthorized activities.

When taken together with other provisions of the JCPOA, this construct allowed the P5+1 to achieve, for at least a decade, their objective of at least a one-year “breakout timeline,” or the time it would take Iran to produce enough fissile material for a single nuclear weapon. As Wendy Sherman, the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and chief nuclear negotiator at the time, noted in her 2018 memoir: “The new proposal... would give us a handle on Iran’s enrichment activities, while allowing the Iranian regime to claim that they had faced down the world to retain their civil nuclear program.”\textsuperscript{93} Indeed, while also undoubtedly satisfying its desire to maintain...
select nuclear capabilities for security reasons, Iran would also preserve sufficient collective face. Iran’s collective face concerns as it related to the export of its existing LEU stockpile under the JCPOA were addressed by Russia facilitating a solution whereby Iran would ship out approximately 98% of its existing stockpile well as future accumulations of LEU to Russia in exchange for natural uranium. By doing so, Iran’s could claim that the arrangement was a “fuel swap.” Moreover, Iran would preserve collective face by claiming it had not dismantled (but rather placed into IAEA sealed and surveilled storage) its excess centrifuges, defended its perceived “right” to a domestic enrichment program and secured what it argued were its civilian nuclear needs. A closer look at the provisions of the JCPOA related to enrichment and Iran’s stockpiles of enriched uranium further reveals the significant influence of face concerns. As observed by one scholar and nuclear expert during discussion of this paper:

“Even on enrichment limits, the specifics suggest that saving face played a role. Centrifuges were highly visible, often shown on Iranian TV with the [Iranian] President examining them, and they were easily counted and understood. Iran insisted on keeping thousands of IR-1s, even though they probably had no intention of using those low-quality first-generation machines if they ever broke out to nuclear weapons. Similarly, they insisted on storing the centrifuges they took out, so they could argue nothing had been dismantled, even though they likely never planned to reinstall huge numbers of poorly performing [IR-1] centrifuges. But stocks of enriched uranium were not something the Iranian government had broadly advertised to the public, and they agreed to get rid of almost all of those – even though starting from enriched uranium was at least as important as centrifuge numbers to the pace at which Iran could make bomb material if it chose.”

Although Iran’s ability to retain some level of domestic enrichment was viewed as far from an ideal outcome by both critics and supporters of the accord, U.S. officials viewed it as a necessary compromise and perhaps among the most significant aspects of the deal influenced by not just Iran’s security calculations but also Iran’s collective face concerns. As Burns discussed in his 2019 memoir:
“There would have been no agreement without sharp constraints and strong monitoring—but there would also have been no agreement if we had insisted on zero enrichment. As Araghchi [Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister at the time] once put it to us, a civilian nuclear program, including enrichment, was “our source of national pride, our moon shot.”\textsuperscript{96}

The JCPOA's outcomes related to Iran's R&D on advanced centrifuges, while also undoubtedly influenced by security considerations, also provided Iran alternative pathways to maintain prestige and maintain its claims that it would not cease its continued civilian nuclear progress. Iran had insisted throughout the negotiations that it would not refrain from nuclear R&D and this was reiterated in “redlines” publicly espoused by Khamenei. Indeed, according to the EU’s lead technical negotiator, Stephan Klement, R&D on advanced centrifuges was a central concern
and the “most time-intensive effort” of the negotiations. It was a contentious topic that was only successfully resolved in part through the late-stage involvement of Moniz, a nuclear physicist by training and former Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor, and then head of the AEOI, Ali Akbar Salehi, an MIT trained nuclear engineer. The highly technical backgrounds of the two officials along with their shared MIT connection, also assisted in addressing some face-concerns among Iran’s negotiators as the solutions the two hammered out on contentious matters like R&D would have strong technical justifications and scientific merit that transcended much of the political discourse at the time. As Salehi recalled in an interview just a few months after the negotiations concluded:

“The Americans said, ‘If there’s no research on centrifuges, we will be very happy.’ We said, ‘We would not be happy. We understand you have some concerns. Let’s see how we can mitigate them.’ Neither side got the ideal it was looking for. We met in the middle...”

Ultimately, Iran would not be permitted to utilize its more advanced centrifuge models to accumulate enriched uranium for at least 10 years but it was permitted to continue limited enrichment R&D and testing on a limited number of its more advanced machines. Such efforts would take place under the continuous monitoring of the IAEA and would ensure that Iran’s breakout timeline would remain at least one year for at least ten years. However, Iran would be permitted to incrementally advance its R&D after 8.5 years of JCPOA implementation at a “reasonable pace” and for “exclusively peaceful purposes,” consistent with its “Long Term Enrichment and Enrichment R&D plan,” details of which were confidentially submitted to the IAEA as part of its initial declaration for the AP to Iran’s CSA. Iran’s ability to specify the limits contained within its R&D plan discreetly to the IAEA would not substantively impact the restraints contained within it but would allow Iran to save face by shielding the details from public scrutiny. While the topic of R&D remained a face-sensitive one as the deal’s provisions were debated inside of Iran, Iran’s ability to claim the continuation of these efforts, however limited, would indeed provide some level of collective face preservation and a critical selling point in the face of domestic criticism of Iran’s broader concessions.

Yet another critical component of the JCPOA impacted significantly by security considerations but also Iran’s collective face concerns was related to the status of Iran’s Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Fordow was a previously covert enrichment
facility designed to house 3,000 centrifuges that was revealed to publicly in 2009 at a joint press conference held by President Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Situated on a site that was previously an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) tunnel facility, Fordow was fortified under a mountain near the city of Qom. Iranian officials consistently maintained that the facility would not be closed as part of the JCPOA and collective face concerns regarding Fordow’s final status were complicated by its origins. Since its public revelation, Iranian officials had insisted Fordow was established as a “contingency enrichment plant” as the result of increased military threats against Iran and to ensure Iran’s ability to enrich in the event of a military attack. “Another issue is preserving the organizations and sites that the enemy cannot destroy. They place emphasis on Fordow because it is not accessible to them. They say, ‘You should not have a site that we cannot destroy and harm. Is this not ridiculous?’” Khamenei publicly noted in a speech in July 2014. By
effectively tying the hardened potential military target to its sovereignty and resistance against foreign invasion, Iran’s leaders made reaching a compromise on Fordow highly face-sensitive. Achieving a solution that would address Iran’s collective face concerns also meant U.S. policymakers were faced with particularly difficult choices. Such choices involved evaluating not just the potential security and proliferation risks of implementing a face-saving compromise but also the political and precedent-setting costs of doing so. When reflecting on the final status of Fordow, Ben Rhodes, President Obama’s former Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting, highlighted that senior U.S. officials often faced decision-points during the JCPOA negotiations whereby once proliferation objectives were sufficiently met, political costs of select face-saving solutions also needed to be considered:

“Obama had to balance security, science, and politics. For example, we had consistently opposed Iran having any centrifuges at Fordow, a site buried deep underground, and therefore a harder military target. The Iranians wanted to keep some centrifuges there, but disconnected, with electronic seals in place to make sure they were off. In exchange, they’d make additional concessions on other issues. ‘Ernie [Moniz, then U.S. Secretary of Energy], what do you think?’ Obama asked. ‘Substantively, it makes no difference,’ he replied, adding that he’d rather have other Iranian commitments on their stockpile and ability to build new reactors. Satisfied, Obama would ask me if we could make that shift. As long as we can say there’s no enrichment at Fordow, I said…. We were holding out in Washington for things that often made little substantive difference but could help us defend the deal against the barrage of criticism that was coming.”

Ultimately, under the JCPOA Iran would not be permitted to enrich uranium at the Fordow facility for 15 years and would have to allow daily access to and continuous monitoring of the facility by the IAEA. It was also required to have the facility converted into a civil nuclear, physics and technology research center. As part of this construct, it was permitted to retain 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges inside the facility, of which roughly 350 (or two cascades) would be operational but transitioned, with Russian assistance, for the production of stable molybdenum (Mo) and iridium (Ir) isotopes for medical and other civilian uses. This process would effectively make these transitioned centrifuges useless for the purposes of...

...
According to press reports at the time, U.S. “administration officials were struck by the fact that Iran was willing to waste 1,000 centrifuges, essentially spinning uselessly, to preserve national pride.”

Nevertheless, the final compromise on Fordow complicated the already heightened and complex political discourse and debate surrounding the JCPOA and also involved costs related to Iran ultimately retaining a hardened facility that it could potentially re activate for uranium enrichment at some point in the future (indeed, following the unilateral U.S. decision to cease participation in the accord in 2018, before Fordow’s conversion was completed, Iran has already done so). As part of their own domestic messaging, in part to save face against internal opponents of nuclear compromise within Iran, senior Iranian nuclear officials also sought to de-emphasize the importance of the facility for enrichment purposes, which also partially contradicted its pre-JCPOA official narrative, described above. Instead, they sought to emphasize Fordow’s hardened nature. “All of the uranium enriched at Fordow can only supply 1.5% of [the nuclear energy reactor at] Bushehr’s fuel and the importance of Fordow lies only in its invulnerability,” Behrouz Kamalvandi, Iran’s AEOI spokesman told the semi-official, IRGC-linked Tasnim News Agency just prior to the JCPOA’s finalization. While P5+1 negotiators viewed the final status of Fordow as a necessary compromise in order to achieve their non-proliferation objectives and Iran could claim that it was not required to completely dismantle the facility and its infrastructure (consistent with public “red lines” drawn by Khamenei), it nevertheless was not, as with most face-saving measures in such contexts, risk or cost-free.
Conclusion

In order to manage conflict, prevent its escalation, or at best, prevent it all-together, the United States has deployed strategic empathy and face-saving measures during a range of pivotal moments in history. Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy is known to have deployed a number of delicate face-saving measures that allowed for the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Among the seven paraphrased lessons his brother and key advisor, Robert F. Kennedy, offered from the crisis: “Don’t humiliate your opponent; leave him a way out.” Face concerns also played a major role in determining the U.S. approach to the Korean War and prevention of its escalation. The United States’ experience with the JCPOA underscores the continued utility of face-saving measures and of employing strategic empathy in select contexts as part of conflict and crisis management. Indeed, while simultaneously satisfying the consensus non-proliferation objectives of the P5+1, as one scholar has noted, “the face-saving parts of the deal are precisely what make it possible for Iran to accept it.” Although Iran’s concessions were nevertheless heavily criticized inside Iran by political and ideological opponents of nuclear compromise, the deployment of these measures provided an alternative means by which Iran could reserve a level of nuclear prestige, increase the prospects of securing institutional buy-in from key domestic power-centers, pay lower reputational costs for its concessions and ultimately maintain sufficient collective face.

By implementing these measures as part of their coercive counterproliferation strategy, it was clear that U.S. diplomats and their partners within the P5+1 understood that negotiating with Iran regarding its nuclear program was not a clear-cut matter of just economic or security calculations but rather one deeply rooted in matters of face. It was that understanding that appears to have increased the prospects of securing the necessary nuclear concessions from Iran in the end.

At this time, it remains unclear what specific face-saving measures might be effective at again
assisting the United States in rolling back Iran's increasingly advanced program in the near-term and in the aftermath of the JCPOA's slow unraveling following the U.S.' 2018 unilateral withdrawal. Iran's nuclear program has advanced, in some respects irreversibly, and so has the baseline for renewed negotiations. There is also a broader question of what Iran's collective loss of face as a result of its experience with the JCPOA – a diplomatic settlement to a nearly 13-year crisis -- will mean for its broader nuclear decision-making going forward. With, as the U.S. intelligence community has long put it, no “insurmountable technical barriers” to developing a nuclear weapon in its way, if it were to choose to do so, whether Iran ultimately develops a nuclear weapon is ultimately a matter of political will and decision-making.114 This makes it all the more important for policy-makers and analysts to decipher possible shifts in the cost-benefit analysis, to include collective face considerations, within Iran regarding the future of its nuclear program as it continues to undergo a great deal of continued scrutiny and evolve following its JCPOA experience. In recent years, Iran appears to have adopted a more assertive approach in its nuclear policies, signaling that its political calculations are shifting towards increased risk tolerance and hardened bargaining positions.115 Further, major public decisions on Iran's nuclear program previously tended to undergo some level of, albeit highly limited, debate and require some level of consensus among political elites, some of whom held divergent views regarding the contours of Iran's nuclear program. Yet the space for such debate inside of Iran continues to shrink, particularly given the increased marginalization of those voices who had previously argued in favor of the JCPOA and nuclear compromise to secure Iran's security interests.116 Meanwhile analysts and observers of Iran continue to closely monitor what the near future might hold in store for the Islamic Republic more broadly. Iran's leaders continue to face an increasingly stark legitimacy crisis as they fail to address the longstanding and deeply rooted legitimate grievances of their own people, who continue to bravely fight for their ever so basic freedoms in the face of egregious and violent state crackdowns.

Regardless of its ultimate fate, the JCPOA will remain a useful model to consider in order to craft more holistic and ultimately effective approaches to shaping Iran's nuclear decision-making in a manner more favorable to U.S. interests and also potentially more broadly in other contexts. U.S. policymakers and negotiators should routinely assess the face related implications of their proposals and, while cognizant of Iran's broader bargaining strategies, seek to craft creative face-saving solutions that can achieve core U.S. objectives when prudent. As former
Secretary of State John Kerry noted in the context of the JCPOA negotiations and understanding both what drives and constrains Iran's decision-makers: “Trying to understand adversaries is not a favor that we do for them; it’s in our interests.”117 Indeed, employing strategic empathy towards Iran and understanding the impact of matters of face on its decision-making should not be viewed as a weakness that translates into forgoing U.S. interests. In contrast, it should be viewed as a means by which the United States can more effectively achieve its strategic interests and non-proliferation objectives. As such, it will remain important for U.S. policymakers to employ strategic empathy and consider Iran’s collective face concerns as part of their coercive bargaining strategy as they continue to manage potential future nuclear crises with Iran and de-escalate tensions in the near-term.
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