

Conceptualizing “Rebel State” and “Rogue State”: the Iran case

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Abstract

The article in question focuses on the concept of rogue states, which was advanced by the USA in the 1990-s and a similar, yet representing a different point of view, concept of rebel states coined by Carlos Escude at the same time. The authors examine the origins and background of these theoretical constructs, highlight the differences in these two approaches and the fact that the former one is used as a form of stigmatization, meant to promote a unilateral approach to this group. The article exemplifies Iran as a rebel state that has been developing under tough sanctions for years.

Key words: rogue, rebel, sanctions, peripheral realism, states, Iran, the USA

Introduction

For many years now the Islamic Republic of Iran has been causing concerns of the major part of the world community, and some states even consider it as a potential threat to their security. The first sanctions were imposed on Iran back in 1979, after the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty. As the result of the Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, came to power and became the first Supreme Leader of Iran, creating, in essence, an authoritarian theocratic regime that still functions. Once secular, Iran turned into an Islamic republic. The established political system with its' specific mechanisms and the new government's orders caused widespread condemnation from world politicians which resulted in numerous sanctions and a newly acquired status of a “rogue state”. That being said and Tehran's unwillingness to yield to the demands, made mostly by the Western countries, led to severe international isolation, which has worsened in recent years

due to the policy of maximum pressure from the United States. In this case, Iran, as a worldwide acknowledged rogue, is a particularly interesting example of a country which successfully finds ways to overcome these restrictions and has built a state system that can be characterized as highly resilient.

What is a “rogue state” and how does it differ from a “rebel state”?

The term “rogue states” entered the U.S. foreign policy lexicon after the Cold War and it is used to refer to countries that are deemed to be violating acceptable norms of international behavior, or are considered a threat to international peace and security in some way. It is also applied to countries that are either sponsors of terrorism and employ it as an instrument of state policy, that are developing nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction, or that are repressive of their own citizens and violate human rights. A rogue state does not react predictably to deterrence or other tools of diplomacy and statecraft¹. In short, such a state requires special treatment and high levels of international pressure in order to prevent it from wrecking public order, setting off wars, and subverting whole areas of the world. The core group of rogue states initially included Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Libya and even Cuba and all of them have since experienced U.S.-directed or U.S.-assisted regime change.

Interestingly, the US refers to rogue states as those countries that pose a threat to America's vital regional interests and “show hatred” towards the States. Thus, it becomes obvious that deliberate “pushing” outside the system of international relations, where all states allegedly play by the same rules based on the principles of liberalism and democracy, is exclusively a Western, or rather, American practice. Therefore, “rogue states” can be considered as a unilateral Western or American political concept, with no standing in international law, which seeks to demonize a diverse group of states and promote a one-size-fits-all approach to this group.

¹ Rubin, Barry. 1999. US foreign policy and rogue states. Middle East Review of International Affairs 3 (3): 72-7.

However, we believe that in order to get a comprehensive understanding of politics of the states, whose behaviour is somehow different from the majority, it's only logical to turn to non-western theories.

Therefore, it's worth mentioning the theory of peripheral realism, that was advanced by Argentinian political scientist Carlos Escudé in the 1990-s. Peripheral realism sets out to develop a theoretical construct that stresses the differences in functions engendered by power differentials between states². It formulated a concept of the structure of the interstate system that includes three functionally-differentiated types of states: a) Rule-makers; b) Rule-takers, and c) Rebel states³. The latter per se do not have the power to forge rules, but defy them forcibly and pursue their own view of politics, sometimes at a great cost. Interestingly, this definition lacks strongly pronounced negative connotation and the connection with the US state interests. According to this concept, rebels still operate within a system, but they try to readjust and tailor it to their own needs and goals.

The Case of Iran

To this end we argue that Iran is the most vivid example of a rebel state. It should be noted that as of 2023 Tehran has been a subject to more than 4,000 sanctions, which makes it the second country in the world in terms of the number of restrictions. However, it doesn't stop Iran from pursuing its' own policy. It actively enhances cooperation with non-Western states namely Russia, the Arab and Asian countries. Nowadays we may observe Iran's attempts to open a new route of the International North–South Transport Corridor (also called “Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor”). It is the western route of the corridor that is planned to be laid through Armenia. It is probable that the goods delivered from Iran to Armenia will eventually reach European countries via the Batumi port and the Black Sea. In the future, the

² Schenoni, Luis and Escudé, Carlos, Peripheral Realism Revisited (February 17, 2016). *Brazilian Review of International Politics*, 59(1), 2016, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2888603>

³ Escudé, Carlos. "Who Commands, Who Obeys and Who Rebels: Latin American Security under a Peripheral Realist Perspective". In Mares, David R and Arie Kakowicz (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Latin American Security*. New York: Routledge, 2015

ITC can connect India and Europe through Iran, Armenia and Georgia. It should be noted that the proposals regarding the opening of a transport corridor through Armenia are not new, but the parties managed to reach a full agreement only recently⁴. Thus, Armenia and Iran signed an agreement on the construction of a road to implement this project. Generally, the Iranian authorities are increasing cooperation with Asian states, but not with Western ones, demonstrating disagreement with the expansionist policy of the latter. Iran has the potential to enhance its position and become a so-called bridge between Europe and Asia, which will make it a mightier regional power in the future.

Conclusion

On this basis, one can conclude, that the concept of rogue states has long been a key aspect in the American foreign policy. By labelling a state “rogue” the USA justifies its own interference in the internal affairs of other states as it is done to reshape the flawed system within so-called dangerous countries. On the other hand, the concept of rebel states represents a non-Western point of view on international relations and world order. It can be described as relatively neutral, more objective and comprehensive when used to characterise a state, that somehow differs from the others majority. Finally, Iran as one of the most illustrative examples of rebel states manages to operate under significant pressure of the world community. It has developed methods of coping with numerous sanctions and succeeded in strengthening its position in the Middle Eastern Region, which, on the whole, proves to the viability the rebel state concept.

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