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SANCTIONS—STRATEGIC MISCOMMUNICATIONS? THE CASE OF IRAN

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Abstract

This article explores why economic sanctions are increasingly being used despite their ineffectiveness. It attempts to contribute to the theoretical debate surrounding strategic communications (SC) by suggesting a novel holistic approach, based on a neo-Gramscian reading of international political economy, followed by examining the case of Iran under sanctions as an illustration of theory in action. The Iranian case is most suitable for the analysis of SC for its recency, durability, eccentricity and dramatic character. The paper expands the analysis of strategic communications by considering the following dimensions: the strategic and constitutive realms of social power relations, the ethical backgrounds of SC and the normative and emancipatory power of strategic narratives in Iran. It concludes that the tactical inefficiency of SC with Iran can be explained by a failure of Western strategic communicators to understand the country's socio-cultural constitutive, ethical and normative elements that reproduce the modalities of social behaviour.

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Introduction

The use of economic sanctions in strategic communications has intensified over recent years, leaving their effectiveness under-researched, which urges us to address two crucial issues: first, what is the interrelation between sanctions and strategic communications, and second, 'how can we reconcile the increasing use of sanctions with their perceived ineffectiveness?'[1] A long history of sanctions against Iran provides an excellent empirical case for assessing both questions. In *Societies under Siege,* Lee Jones maintains that the analysis of sanctions should go beyond mainstream theories,[2] as they ignore the mechanisms by which sanctions operate, and proposes a neo-Gramscian perspective[3] to shift the centre of attention from sanctions per se, to sanctioned societies.[4] Following Jones's suggestion, this article contributes to the theoretical debate surrounding strategic communications by refocusing the research on 'target' societies. This is done by introducing a novel holistic critical approach to analysing SC within the neo-Gramscian framework[5], followed by the case of Iran as an illustration of 'theory in action'.

The core component of the neo-Gramscian framework is the concept of hegemony that grasps the pervasive power of ideology in the formation of 'false consciousness' to reproduce existing class relations. Central to the concept of hegemony is the notion of 'passive revolution' that refers to the attempt at 'revolution' through the inclusion of a 'new category of mediators' who strongly position themselves within various dominated social groups, at the same time remaining loyal to the ruling class.[6] Hegemonic power is reproduced with the aid of this new class of mediators who reconstruct the ethical and normative

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1 Steve Chan, 'Strategic Anticipation and Adjustment: Ex Ante and Ex Post Information in Explaining Sanctions Outcomes', *International Political Science Review*, 30.3 (2009), 319–38.
2 *The 'mainstream' are 'problem-solving' theories grounded in foundational ontology and positivist epistemology.* Positivism suggests that humans are rational, an objective reality exists independently of our knowledge, and scientific knowledge is limited to what can be observed; Interpretivism, by contrast, rejects scientism on the ground of a contingent nature of the reality, multiple interpretations of unobservable features, norms, values and identities, and value-laden human behaviour.
3 The followers of the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, well known for his "Prison Notebooks". For Gramsci, hegemony is legitimised and reproduced through the cultural-ideological 'manufacture' of public consent through civil society institutions (the media, churches, universities.) The novelty of Gramsci's theory lies in the constitution of social power relations in the region of ideology and knowledge formation, secured through consent rather than military force.
4 Lee Jones, *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
5 Critical realism occupies the middle ground between positivism and interpretivism; it acknowledges the possibility of scientific knowledge, however, the analysis considers unobservable structures and causal explanations that have a strong normative component.
6 Claus Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985).

components of explicit strategic and contingent constitutive realities (not only in the observable but also in invisible, latent conflict zones) to secure the dominant ideological articulation between the ruling class and the population. As such, in the neo-Gramscian configuration strategic communications are conceptualised as activities that drive a long-term societal transformation by shaping people's knowledge, attitudes and identities, while strategic communicators are a class of mediators who set 'passive revolution' in motion, by securing the consent of the wider population to the dominant ideology.

To understand how strategic communicators operate, my analysis of SC will be illustrated by considering three essential components of the socio-economic processes in Iran since the revolution of 1979: strategic and constitutive realms of social power relations;[7] the ethical backgrounds of SC, defined as a synthesis between the individual and the community (i.e. the actualisation of the ideals of community through the actions of the individual); and the normative and emancipatory power of strategic narratives. By setting an ideological formulation of the notion of freedom within the structural and functional terrains, strategic narratives become emancipatory, 'tied to identity politics and questions of legitimacy'.[8] Strategic narratives are spoken or written accounts that are used domestically to legitimise the dominant social power relations, and internationally, to gain consent of the states affected by the global institutional arrangements.[9]

A critical approach will explain why the US decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)[10] and to resume extraterritorial sanctions on Iran,[11] is likely to fail to resolve the current geopolitical deadlock, while the recent assassination of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani by a targeted U.S. drone attack in Baghdad on the 3 January 2020[12] has raised the threat of a catastrophic regional war. It will also shed light on the paradox

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7 The neo-Gramscian critical realist epistemology synthesises the positivist 'strategic' and interpretivist 'constitutive' realms, introducing unobservable structural and functional power relations into analysis. In the strategic domain, rational actors pursue their interests (pre-given and exogenously determined); in the constitutive domain the interests are endogenous to agents and shaped by normative structures (institutionalised norms).
8 Neville Bolt and Leonie Haiden, 'Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology', 2019, p.8 [accessed 30 October 2019].
9 Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).
10 In 2015, Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States – plus Germany) reached an 'Iran nuclear deal', according to which Iran agreed to end its nuclear programme and allow international inspection in return for the lifting of sanctions.
11 The extraterritorial character of so called 'secondary' sanctions implies that the legislation of the 'sender' state of sanctions affects not only the 'target' state, but the activities of third parties (states, companies, and individuals).
12 Qassem Soleimani was a hero of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the chief of the IRGC's expeditionary Quds Force.

of why thirty years of anti-Iranian sanctions have not brought about regime change but instead have been largely counter-productive: Iran has adopted an increasingly Hobbesian posture and has become economically and politically more self-reliant. The clue to this puzzle lies in the title of this article: sanctions are not a means of strategic communications, as the mainstream theories assume, but rather a force that diverts normal processes and induces strategic 'miscommunications' with the 'target' states. This article will assess strategic communications in the domestic political struggle in Iran, suggesting that the consideration of sanctions as a means of SC is misleading and counter-productive. Coercive by nature, economic sanctions are a hard power mechanism (alongside military force), while strategic communications is an expression of soft power. As such, the success of Western SC in constructing information 'ecologies' and influencing minds and actions (or inactions) of Iranians is not predicated on the policy of sanctions, but rather on a deeper understanding of the domestic organisation of strategic communications.

Background

The history of sanctions against Iran goes back to the revolution of 1979, when Mohammad Reza Shah Palavi's pro-Western government (1941–79) was overthrown and, following the hostage crisis in Tehran, the US banned all imports from Iran and froze $12 billion worth of Iranian assets. Since then, Washington prolonged and tightened sanctions that remained unilateral until 2007, when the UN Security Council passed Resolution № 1747, which demanded the suspension of uranium enrichment by Iran. Until 2010, the EU's role in the anti-Iranian sanctions regime was limited to merely adding a few names of individuals and firms to the UN list of sanctioned entities, but then European leaders agreed to join targeted sanctions on Iran.

Interestingly, the EU agreement happened at almost the same time as the US Congress passed the 'Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act'—the mechanism of US 'secondary sanctions' that targeted firms and banks doing business related to Iran's energy sector.[13] The secondary sanctions were further expanded in 2013 by the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act—the IFCA. According to Tarja Cronberg, over time the

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13 Alan Cafruny and Ksenia Kirkham, 'EU "Sovereignty" in Global Governance: The Case of Sanctions', in *Global Governance in Transformation: Challenges and Opportunities for International Cooperation*, ed. by Adrian Pabst and Leonid Grigoriev (Cham: Springer, 2020), pp. 89–104.

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EU role with respect to anti-Iranian sanctions has transformed: from that of passive observer (1979–2003), to becoming a 'persuasive' mediator of US-Iran negotiations in 2003–05, then an active 'coordinator' of the P5+1 group (2006–10), then a 'sanctions enforcer' in 2010–13, and finally, to being a successful 'facilitator' of negotiations (2013–15) that led to the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[14] After Donald Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA in May 2018 and declared the re-imposition of sanctions, the EU tried to defend and uphold the deal, but its attempts were increasingly constrained by the 'extraterritoriality' of secondary sanctions.

This brief history of events shows that there has been no unanimity amongst Western states concerning anti-Iranian sanctions. The various Western 'grand strategies' for the Middle East are reflected in the opposing targets for SC with Iran. The role of Iran in the future of the Middle East is highly debated: some Western states see Iran as part of the international community and believe that the JCPOA should remain focused solely on nuclear non-proliferation, while others (predominantly the United States) want the isolation of Iran from the international community unless and until it reverses its military presence and missile testing. However, given the recent memory of bloodshed during the Iran-Iraq war, when outside powers extensively supplied Iraq with weapons, relaxing its military stance is unacceptable for the Iranian leadership. At the same time, the lack of unanimity amongst Western powers over the continuation of anti-Iranian sanctions leaves scope for more effective strategic communications with Iran to be put forward and for serious military conflict to be avoided. However, as previously mentioned, Western strategic communications are seemingly doomed to fail without a deeper comprehension of how SC are constructed domestically within Iranian society.

This article is divided into two parts. Part 1 is devoted to the theoretical debate over strategic communications: a brief literature review is followed by a theoretical categorisation of a critical neo-Gramscian approach to analysing strategic communications, with a focus on its central philosophical objective—knowledge formation. Hegemonic projects are advanced by the 'new class of mediators' through the ideological articulation of dominant 'grand strategies' that operate in everyday ethical life, in the strategic and constitutive realms. The consent of the population is secured by re-constituting their knowledge: this is

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14 Tarja Cronberg, 'No EU, No Iran Deal: The EU's Choice between Multilateralism and the Transatlantic Link', *The Nonproliferation Review*, 24.3–4 (2018), 243–59 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1432321>.

a gradual process, as it takes time for people to internalise ideological paradigms before they become common knowledge, and for strategic narratives to acquire normative and emancipatory definition. The ideas of 'grand strategies' and hegemonic powers are used to explore as yet under-researched links between strategic thinking, culture, institutional structures, and communication techniques. Part 2 applies the analytical framework to the case of Iran, with the aim of assessing why the effectiveness of SC is preconditioned by the ability of strategic communicators to reflect upon the historical and cultural peculiarities of a 'target' society. The article concludes that transformation of Iran could only be driven by grass-roots mobilisation of the Iranian people, once geopolitical tensions have eased. Meanwhile a deeper appreciation of Iranian identity and nature would be beneficial in putting forward a constructive SC framework with Iran.

1. The theoretical debate over strategic communications

Literature review

The ambiguity of the notion of strategic communications, its conceptualisation by authors at various levels of abstraction,[15] points to the need to apply a more 'holistic approach' based upon values and interests that 'encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment'.[16] As Christopher Paul observed, 'if you gathered 10 strategic-communication practitioners or experts around a table and asked each to define and describe strategic communication, you'd get 10 different answers'.[17] The absence of an agreed definition does not signal analytical deadlock, but points to a multitude of actors involved in strategic thinking; nevertheless, all definitions contain distinguishable common elements. Namely, SC a) belongs to the knowledge-building *information environment*, b) requires *institutionalised strategic thinking* and actions to shape public opinion, ideas, and values, both consensually and coercively (psychological manipulations); c) is *a forward-looking process* that targets future narratives, choices, decision-making, and actions; and d) *cannot be rationalised* in a positivist manner, as it affects peoples' cognitive and intuitive capabilities and, therefore, requires critical thinking (not a foundational ontology).

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15 There are three levels of abstraction: 1) empirical—the level of general theory, 2) actual—the level of specific agents or events, and 3) real—the level of specific mechanisms that generate actual events. (see B Jessop, *The Capitalist State - Marxist Theories and Methods* -, *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* (Martin Robertson & Company Ltd, 1982), xi <https://doi.org/10.2307/2069563>.).
16 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 5.Autumn (2018), 3–11., p.7
17 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates.* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2011), p. 18.

Considering strategic communications through the prism of economic sanctions, the current literature on sanctions is focused on the question of 'if' rather than 'how' sanctions work,[18] which is very problematic. Mainstream accounts—which can be categorised as liberal institutionalist, structural realist, public choice, and neo-Weberian—all follow 'Hayek and Popper's methodological individualism'[19] that results in a deterministic perception of societies as a world of rational atoms, of quasi-natural individuals,[20] which hinders a deeper understanding of grounds for strategic communication in states like Iran. For many authors the principal goal is to evaluate the extent of the negative impact of sanctions on the economy and welfare of a targeted state, and their contribution to policy compliance.[21] The problem is that methodological individualism is mired in actor-based definitions and conflict case studies. These subjectify strategic communications and downplay the role of institutions and other material structures. Collective individual actions and choices become primary explanatory variables in modelling aggregate social phenomena. Unquestionably rational individuals in sanctioned states are expected to mobilise and push their governments to comply with required policy changes for the sake of economic and military stability.[22] This approach visualises sanctions as a tool of SC, designed to send signals to sanctioned populations, provoking them into political action. Such visualisation, however, is misleading, as it aspires to estimate the effectiveness of sanctions without considering structural and functional constraints on individual actions, and without distinguishing the mechanisms through which sanctions work in a particular historical context. Some studies provide empirical evidence of smart, properly designed sanctions, which successfully affect 'internal political bargaining within the target state'.[23] While these are useful, but to answer the question of 'how', rather than 'if', sanctions work, a more general analysis is required. Moreover, the issue of US extraterritorial 'secondary sanctions' targeting firms and banks doing business related to Iran's energy sector remains considerably under-researched.

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18 Jones, Societies under Siege
19 Coined by Joseph Schumpeter to stress the centrality of the rational action theory to social-scientific inquiry: social phenomena are explained by the rational actions of "social collectivities, such as states, associations, business corporations, foundations, as if they were individual persons" (Weber 1922, 13).
20 Serguei Kara-Murza, 'The Metaphysical and Rational Foundations of Industrialism', 1994 [accessed 12 September 2019].
21 Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Barbara Oegg, 'Beyond the Nation-State: Privatization of Economic Sanctions', *Middle East Policy*, 10.2 (2003), 126–34 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-4967.00111>.
22 Steve Chan, 'In Search of Democratic Peace: Problems and Promise', *Mershon Inernational Studies Review*, 41.1 (1997), 59–91 <doi:10.2307/222803>.
23 T Clifton Morgan, Valerie L Schwebach, and T Clifton Morgan, 'Economic Sanctions as an Instrument of Foreign Policy: The Role of Domestic Politics Printed in Malaysia, 0629 (2008), p. 247 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629508434868>.

In fact, the negative impact of US 'extraterritorial' sanctions on some European companies (i.e. the case of the $9 billion fine on the French bank BNP Paribas for transacting with Iran) disrupts normal strategic communications and leads to the escalation of tensions in the International Political Economy (IPE). All this points to the limitations of such a 'scientific' approach. First, positivist accounts focus only on observable conflict zones and ignore multilevel layers of societal power relations that encompass the strategic and constitutive realms. Second, they tend to subjectify the role of SC in the construction of human knowledge in their attempt to model future responses to actions. Third, most theories consider interests as preordained and immutable, without paying much attention to the normative and emancipatory component of the formation of identities, interests, and values that guide human actions. The same critical remarks relate to existing positivist definitions of strategic communications. A holistic approach to SC grounded in a neo-Gramscian framework will help to overcome these limitations in two ways: first, by conceptualising the interrelation between sanctions and strategic communications through the prism of geopolitical and hegemonic rivalries; second, by looking more deeply into the political economy of target states, the strategic and constitutive realms of social power relations, and the ethical backgrounds and normative and emancipatory power of strategic narratives in Iran.

Yet, there are three important insights in the current literature on strategic communications that should be mentioned. First, as societies transform, the strategic narratives that shape human knowledge and perception of those changes transform as well. Lawrence Freedman offers an extensive historical background of the evolution of both integrals of SC— of strategy as a mode of thinking,[24] and of the evolution and advances of communication techniques deployed in the information environment, which he defines as a space of 'uncontrollable forms of global and instantaneous communication' that 'have exponentially increased the number of actors able to shape the narrative'.[25] This provides a major opportunity for pressure groups and political activists to shape perceptions by providing the media with images of their activities or those they wish to expose to influence the consciousness of various social groups, reconstructing networks and power hierarchies that 'enable these groups to move beyond the cellular form'.[26]

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24 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
25 Lawrence Freedman, 'Chapter Five, Strategic Communications', *Adelphi Papers*, 45.379 (2006), 73–93 (p. 75).
26 Ibid. (p. 89).

Second, the conceptualisation of SC presupposes reference to the genealogy of the concept of 'strategy'. The original Greek στρατηγική, or *strategike*, has passed its transformation from the military 'art of the general [the strategós] who practises strategy' in antiquity, to today's popular application of the term 'strategy' to 'many realms of life outside politics proper'.[27] *The Art of War* by Chinese general Sun Tzu (6th century BC) and *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by the Athenian historian Thucydides (5th century BC) were military treatises that pioneered the concept of warfare and its two major components—strategy and tactics. These ancient philosophies laid the foundation for Byzantine thought: Emperor Leo VI the Wise (r. 886–912) distinguished between 'strategy' as the means of defence and 'tactics' as organisation of defence.[28] This Byzantine hierarchical positioning of strategy over tactics, or warfare, predetermined the evolution of 'strategy' into a more political category, when Archduke Charles in the 18th century categorised strategy and tactics as 'the science of war' and 'the art of war' respectively.[29] The 19th century saw the next step in this evolution, when the Prussian philosopher-general Carl von Clausewitz argued against categorising warfare as either an art or a science, famously calling politics 'the womb in which war develops'. He suggested that '[r]ather than comparing [war] to art we could more accurately compare it to commerce, which is also a conflict of human interests and activities; and it is still closer to politics, which in turn may be considered a kind of commerce on a larger scale.'[30] The tradition of integrating military terminology into the social sciences reached its apogee in the 20th century, with the word 'warfare' being massively overused in various 'hybrid forms'[31] such as a fashionable characteristic of information environment as 'asymmetric warfare' in 'mass media ecology',[32] or as the US Department of Defense ideas of 'network-centric' and 'culture-centric' warfare.[33] The neo-Gramscian approach transcends this overuse of military terminology by conceptualising SC as a social phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a military dimension.

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27 Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 28.
28 George T Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985).
29 Heuser (p.5–7)
30 Clausewitz, cited in Heuser (p.6)
31 Ofer Friedman, *Russian 'hybrid Warfare' : Resurgence and Politicisation* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018).
32 Monroe Edwin Price, 'Information Asymmetries and Their Challenge', *International Media and Communication*, 4.2 (2016), 46–54.
33 Lawrence Freedman, 'Networks, Culture and Narratives', *Adelphi Papers*, 45.379 (2016), 11–26 (p. 11).

Third, the mainstream literature on SC explores the history of the dramatic transformation and expansion of communication techniques that were designed to meet strategic goals. Thus, for a long time 'the key forms of communication' that formed strategic narratives 'were pamphlets, and public meetings',[34] until they were superseded in the 19th century by the telegraph and a little later the telephone, moving the developed world into an electromechanical age of the long-distance transmission of messages. Then transitions came more frequently, brought about by developments in telecommunications and electrical engineering in the 1920s, later by the era of computer science or data network engineering in the 1960s, and most recently by the digital revolution that enabled mass access to wireless data transfer mechanisms in the 1990s (cellular phones, digital television, radio, and computer networks). It is no wonder that this dramatic transformation in communication technologies has had a controversial effect on strategic players, especially on states. On the one hand, information transmission mechanisms enhanced states' abilities to communicate information (in terms of speed, scope, and coverage), but on the other hand, the credibility of their information was undermined by social media that spreads instant digital images and messages around '5 billion mobile phone users accessing Twitter, Facebook, and the Internet instantaneously'.[35] Moreover, technologies that pose a threat to state security, enabling multiple cyberspace attacks and hacking programmes, are continually being developed. Given this, new research should consider security issues with regard to the credibility of various communication techniques and the information they reproduce.

The historical evolution of both parameters—'strategy' and 'communications'—suggests that SC is a contextual phenomenon, and therefore, ironically, any 'attempts to define strategic communications in the abstract, devoid of context, can be a labour of love',[36] at the same time any precise definition and specification of dependent variables will be misleading. A neo-Gramscian framework offers a genuine contextual background for analysing the interrelations between sanctions and strategic communications through the prism of hegemonic rivalry. We shall now turn to a holistic critical approach to SC that will consider the contentious issues of credibility of 'strategies' and communication techniques in IPE, with reference to knowledge formation.

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34 Freedman, Chapter Five (p. 88)
35 Neville Bolt, 'Strategic Communications in Crisis', *The RUSI Journal*, 156.4 (2011), 44–53 (p. 44)
 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2011.606649>.
36 Bolt, 'Foreword'.

A critical approach to strategic communications

The central objective of strategic communications is the formation of knowledge—a complex cognitive process. However, the information space amplifies a great deal of knowledge-forming noise that was never intended to be strategic. Strategic communications, or strategic narratives, are distinguishable from noise in so far as they, in Lawrence Freedman's words, 'do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current' in networks and cultures.[37] Who constructs and reinforces these ideas and thoughts? Who are the strategic communicators? I will present a holistic approach to understanding who strategic communicators are and how they operate by addressing the three critical arguments mentioned in the introduction. First, I will consider the three 'faces' of power that encompass the strategic and constitutive realms of social power relations in the field of SC[38], without confining it to one dimension of 'soft power', for instance public diplomacy.[39] Second, I will overcome the subjective/objective duality when assessing the role of SC in the construction of human knowledge dependent on the ethical choices of individuals (its main objective). This will be done by applying the Hegelian dialectics between the subjective and objective dimensions of ethical life to analysing SC within the constitutive realm.[40] Third, I will show how adding a normative and emancipatory component to SC can help strategic communicators understand the formation of identities, interests, and values that guide human actions, and so generate more effective strategic narratives. (*See Figure 1.*)

The strategic and constitutive realms in the International Political Economy

The first critical argument concerning the intersection of the strategic and constitutive realms presupposes the analysis of 'grand strategies' and hegemonic powers in the IPE, in which the power of strategic communications relates to knowledge formation within the social structure. A positivist epistemology distinguishes only observable social conflicts, in which SC rarely leaves the confines of public diplomacy and is seen as one of the tools 'utilised' by

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37 Freedman, 'Networks, Culture and Narratives', p. 22.
38 1. the power of observable political actions (actual decision-making); 2. the power to set agenda (potential decision-making), 3. the power to shape preferences (ideological power transformed into actual and potential decision-making)
39 Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).
40 Hegelian conceptualisation of ethical life as located at the intersection between the individual and the social whole (community) makes our understanding of SC in IPE essentially holistic.
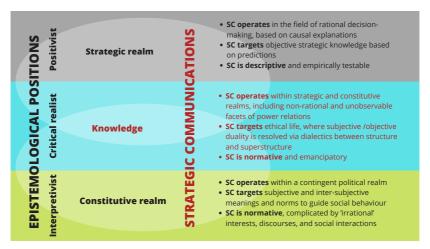
EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS			STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS
Positivist	Strategic realm		• **SC operates** in the field of rational decision-making, based on causal explanations • **SC targets** objective strategic knowledge based on predictions • **SC is descriptive** and empirically testable
Critical realist	Knowledge		• **SC operates** within strategic and constitutive realms, including non-rational and unobservable facets of power relations • **SC targets** ethical life, where subjective /objective duality is resolved via dialectics between structure and superstructure • **SC is normative** and emancipatory
Interpretivist	Constitutive realm		• **SC operates** within a contingent political realm • **SC targets** subjective and inter-subjective meanings and norms to guide social behaviour • **SC is normative**, complicated by 'irrational' interests, discourses, and social interactions

Figure 1. Strategic communications: a critical holistic approach

governments 'to wield soft power'. For instance, in positivist realist accounts the role of SC in promoting hegemony will be reduced to the political actions of territorial expansion and direct political-military and economic domination to secure the balance of power within an anarchic world system; in liberal theories – to the efforts to create an international regime of hegemonic stability to minimise uncertainty, transaction costs and market failures; in the interpretivist accounts SC will aid the construction of a 'grand strategy' within society via political discourses, providing an ideological basis for hegemony. A neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony as the consent of social agency to the main ideological structure introduces a new characterisation of SC as a dialectical reproductive force. This predetermines political and cultural practices of socio-economic relations through the internalisation of the ideas of the ruling class in the minds of the population.

A neo-Gramscian approach establishes the link between SC and 'the various levels of the relations of force' in the constitutive realm and distinguishes latent conflict zones in unobservable power relations with the notion of 'passive revolution'.[41] A passive revolution is the result of gradual societal changes that cannot be easily traced. They are hidden in the 'continuities and changes within

41 Antonio Gramsci, *'The Modern Prince' Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 175.

the order of capital',[42] in the institutional, material and ideological structures that are in the business of making human identities within a society. However, to understand how SC is involved in the 'making and unmaking of identities' in a constitutive realm of the IPE,[43] we need to relate SC to the notion of 'grand strategy'.

It is customary for mainstream theories of 'grand strategy' to distinguish between higher-level and lower-level politics. However, this division is not productive in the debates over the effectiveness of hard and soft power. Sanctions are not conceptualised as means of strategic communications, as their nature is not primarily normative and legal, but rather geostrategic. Extraterritorial legislation, or 'secondary sanctions', are then seen as one of the leading instruments of soft power.

Moreover, in some cases 'extraterritorial' sanctions serve as an international mechanism for national protectionism, evidenced in the recent shift in US trade policy. Recalling Ha-Joon Chang's allegory, President Trump's slogan 'America First', followed by the EU Commissioner's claim for Europe to be 'not last', suggests that it is the right moment now to construct a new 'ladder' of competitive advantage, kicking it away once the hegemony is reproduced.[44] That the nature of protectionism has changed and the role of sanctions in this transformation is massively overlooked. Overall, sanctions bear a potential risk of disrupting normal strategic communications not only between the Western powers and sanctioned states, like Iran, but also within the Transatlantic block itself.

At the level of 'grand strategy' states attempt to influence their position within the IPE; therefore 'the military instrument must be assessed in relation to all the other instruments available to states—economic, social, and political'.[45] Also, in the present historical conjuncture when military domination is not sufficient for long-term stability, the tactical effectiveness of SC in non-military spheres is vital for grand strategies to become hegemonic. Therefore, the best way to understand 'grand strategies' is through the prism of their hegemonic aspirations

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42 Adam David Morton, *Unravelling Gramsci. Hegemony and the Passive Revolution in the Global Political Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 68.
43 Morton, p. 74.
44 Ha Joon Chang, 'Kicking Away the Ladder: Infant Industry Promotion in Historical Perspective', *Oxford Development Studies*, 31.1 (2003), 21–32 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360081032000047168>.
45 Lawrence Freedman, 'Introduction', *Adelphi Papers*, 45.379 (2006), 5–10 (p. 5) <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679320600661624>.

to achieve what Gramsci called the 'moment of hegemony' that 'involves both the consensual diffusion of a particular cultural moral view throughout society and its interconnection with coercive functions of power'.[46] The inclusion of coercive elements in the formation of consent is essential for understanding strategic communicators as guarantors of public consent to grand strategies. Grand strategies encapsulate consensual, but also purely coercive power mechanisms (the state's monopoly of coercion, such as the police and armed forces).[47]

According to critical realists, current international political economy can be characterised as a US-led hegemony, secured by the country's role as the global liquidity provider, by efficient design of the Bretton Woods institutions,[48] and by the neoliberal paradigm. This last induced people's feeling of global interconnectedness through the shared ideals of democracy, individual freedoms, and equality of rights and opportunities. However, the neoliberal ideology, despite its strong capacity to bind people by diffusing a worldview 'through socialisation into every area of daily life that, when internalised, becomes "common sense"',[49] faces resistance in societies like Iran. There traditions, ethical norms, and moral values are distinct from those of the liberal West. Resistance creates the incentive for 'contender' states like Iran, Russia, or China to launch counter-hegemonic projects to preserve their sovereignty.[50] Hegemony presupposes that strategic narratives and ideologies gain the consent of the population. Consensus could be achieved by various tactics directed to shape human consciousness, reasoning, and ethical life. As mentioned previously, strategic communications are responsible for a consensual 'exercise' of grand strategy in its path towards hegemony. Why are strategic communications techniques effective in some cases and disruptive in others? The context of sanctions is useful in seeing how the imposition of sanctions shapes orienteers, narratives, directions, and goals for SC.

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46 Morton, p. 95.
47 Gramsci acknowledged that coercion was a constitutive base of consent. The coercive mechanisms, combined with cultural power, produce a 'force of social control and extraordinary resilience', as in a sociological sense, production is both material and mental (see Fulton 1987:198).
48 Originally, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), later the World Trade Organisation (WTO)
49 Gramsci, quoted in Elaine Hartwick and Richard Peet, *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives*, 2nd edn (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), p. 178.
50 Kees van der Pijl, *Global Rivalries From the Cold War to Iraq* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

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Ethical life in IPE

Strategic communications affects both the 'subjective' and 'objective' will of individuals. It is dependent on the ethical choices of individuals, where subjective and objective will is reconciled. The concept of ethical life as the interrelation between the individual and the social whole (community) makes our understanding of SC in IPE essentially holistic: as Hegel argued in the *Philosophy of Right* (§146), 'ethical reality in its actual self-consciousness knows itself, and is therefore an object of knowledge'.[51] Without understanding the 'ethical life' of society, SC cannot fulfil its main duty—the acquisition of moral justification, credibility, and legitimacy for its 'grand strategy'. Ethical life considers the individual as an integral part of the social and political whole, as the individual's actions would be actualisation of the ideals of community, once his self-identity and self-consciousness in the community is found.[52] Therefore, if Western strategic communicators intend to amend and reconstruct the ethical life of a foreign society, like Iran, they should first of all understand the synthesis between the individual and the community of that society, identify domestic strategic communicators, learn the organisational features and institutional peculiarities and adopt appropriate communicative practices.

How can we distinguish 'strategic communicators' from a multitude of actors, involved in SC? To answer this question we need to understand hegemony as an evolutionary process, which passes through the initial, transitional, and conclusive phases: 'at the initial stage an element achieves hegemony at the national level, then it enters the transitional phase by becoming a 'transmission belt', through which hegemony is 'materially grounded' in other states.[53] The role of SC varies depending on the phase of hegemony. Borrowing Poulantzean notions of 'internalisation' and 'internationalisation',[54] it could be argued that at the initial (domestic consolidation) and at the 'transitional' stages SC help to 'internalise' and 'internationalise' strategic narratives, while in the conclusive phase strategic communications assist in reproducing the core elements of the grand strategy domestically and within various nations. However, to answer the

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51 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right, 1886*, ed. by Translated by S.W Dyde (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), p. 133.
52 Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 235–36.
53 Ksenia. Kirkham, 'The Formation of the Eurasian Economic Union: How Successful Is the Russian Regional Hegemony?', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 7.2 (2016), 111–28 (p. 115) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.06.002>.
54 Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, London: New Left Books* (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 74.

question of 'who gets to call themselves Strategic Communicators' in full,[55] we shall recall the role of the Gramscian 'organic intellectuals' in the dialectics between structure (organisation of production) and superstructure (culture and ideology) conceptualised through the notion 'historical bloc'.[56]

Organic intellectuals are what neo-Machiavellians referred to as 'cadre stratum', or a 'separate class of mediating functionaries'[57]—they are strategic communicators that position themselves within various subaltern social groups, at the same time remaining loyal to the ruling class, reinforcing the 'acceptance' of the dominant ideological direction by the masses.[58] The structural power of strategic communicators resides in their 'high educational status, relative economic security, and employment in personal-service occupations'.[59] At the international level, when hegemony starts moving outwards, organic intellectuals 'perform a valuable supporting role for subaltern classes in promoting social change' in the 'ethical life' of other states;[60] this function of strategic communications is normative and emancipatory.

Normative and emancipatory function in IPE

The mainstream literature defines strategic communications as a 'descriptive, rather than normative, concept'.[61] In contrast, critical theories view SC as a normative and emancipatory phenomenon, based upon value judgements that shape human perceptions of the current state of affairs and their position and actions in social relations. The emancipatory power of strategic narratives can be explained by their ability to reproduce the dominant social power relations domestically and internationally, with the aid of 'discourse ethics', to gain consent of those who are affected by global institutional arrangements.[62] The emancipatory potential of SC lies in its 'cognitive interest' in 'freedom from unacknowledged constraints, relations of domination, and conditions of distorted communication and understanding that deny humans the capacity to make their future through full will and consciousness'; by using SC in this way, they could 'restore to men and women a true awareness of their place in

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55 Neville Bolt, 'Foreword', *Defence Strategic Communications*, Spring.6 (2019), 4–5 (p. 6).
56 Robert W. Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order. Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 284.
57 Gaetano Mosca 1895/, *The Ruling Class*, ed. by A. Livingston (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939).
58 Offe. *Contradictions of the Welfare State*
59 Ibid. (p. 833)
60 Morton, p. 92.
61 Nye, pp. 81, 103.
62 Habermas. *Justification and Application*

history and their capacities to make the future'.[63] From the critical standpoint, the normative and emancipatory function of strategic communications must overcome a narrow vision of society as a purely strategic domain, 'a place in which previously constituted actors pursue their goals', while their interests are 'exogenously determined', but look deeper into the constitutive domain (a domain where agents and social structures are mutually constituted) to see how normative structures (i.e. institutionalised norms) shape actors' identities, interests, and behaviour though the mechanisms of 'imagination, communication and constraint', and become 'rational' only 'because they have a force in a given social context'.[64]

Not all physical and virtual 'imaginations, communications and constraints' (e.g. talks, narratives, publications, images displayed on mass or social media, legal acts, meetings, conferences, educational plans, human resource programmes) that traditionally constitute the basis for public relations, diplomacy, business, academic and cultural cooperation—can be referred to as 'strategic'. To become 'strategic' these forms of communication need to be normative and emancipatory, and could be operationalised by delineating SC as: first, a politically and ideological oriented function, with a forward-looking target for hegemony; second, originating in institutionalised strategic public or private intellectual centres, supported or controlled by 'organic intellectuals'; third, serving to reproduce the material base for the 'grand strategy' (institutions, capital and human resources). These three components constitute the normative and emancipatory nature of domestic SC in Iran. The first point that relates to the ideological level of the 'grand strategy' will be used for analysing the strategic and constitutive realms in Iran. The second point of an institutionalised intellectual centre will be assessed through the lenses of ethical life in Iran. Finally, the normative and emancipatory function of SC will investigate how existing norms and institutions reproduce the material base for the grand strategy. We now turn to the praxis of SC in IPE and in Iran to demonstrate the applicability of the critical theoretical framework to an empirical case study.

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63 Richard K. Ashley, 'Political Realism and Human Interests', *International Studies Quarterly*, 25.2 (1981), 204–36 (pp. 226–27).
64 Christian Reus-Smit, 'Constructivism', in *Theories of International Relations*, ed. by J. Burchill, S. Linklater, A., Devetak, R., Don- nelly, J., Nardin, T., Paterson, M., True, 4th edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 212–36 (pp. 221–22).

2. The praxis of strategic communications in Iran

The following passages will apply the theoretical framework developed in Part 1 to the analysis of the strategic and constitutive realms of communications in Iran under sanctions. The focus switches from an abstract conceptualisation of strategic communications to the conflictual and contested terrains of the Iranian 'grand strategy', to Shia political philosophy as a foundation of Iranian ethics, and to strategic narratives that secure legal and institutional reproduction of the material base for the realisation of Iran's grand strategy. The aim of this section is to show how 'organic intellectuals' as strategic communicators realise the emancipatory potential of Iran's idiosyncratic institutional system of 'checks and balances'. It reveals how they maintain cultural control over the population and reproduce the material base for the Islamic revolution.

Strategic and constitutive realms of SC in Iran

The following will assess three crucial features of strategic and constitutive realms of SC in the use of sanctions against Iran that are considerably misunderstood in the West. First, strategic communicators operate in a highly dynamic and contested political environment where various rival factions compete over strategic narratives and ideologies. Second, institutionalisation of strategic communications in Iran is problematic due to overlapping cluster power networks, parallel institutions, informal power mechanisms, and new communication systems that form the constitutive realm. Third, domestically, SC between various factions is relatively successful, not only because its strategists share a common goal of encountering an authentic Iranian modernisation model, but also due to the weakness of the political party system and a strong coalition-building potential that proved effective at times when Iran was almost at the edge of social crisis.

In most Western accounts, especially in non-academic media, Iran's internal political struggle is portrayed as the division between 'reformists' and 'hardliners'.[65] However, the presentation of the 'reformists' as the Western-oriented intellectuals is misleading for three reasons. First, there is in fact no unified political entity that can be referred to as 'reformist'; several rival factions consider themselves reformist. The difficulty in distinguishing between various types of reformists makes communications tricky, as it might put strategic

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65 Golnar Mehran, 'Khatami, Political Reform and Education in Iran', *Comparative Education*, 39.3 (2003), 311–29.

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communicators on a wrong track in the process of making connections. Second, most 'reformists' do not oppose the Ayatollah's political dominance per se. Instead they are seeking a balance between preserving Islamic values and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the West; moreover, civil society institutions are highly politicised, but are not 'agents for potential regime change'.[66] Third, the reformists' vision of political reconstruction in Iran is distinct from the Western ideas of 'modernity' and 'democratisation'. Most Iranians (not only reformists) understand the process of democratisation through the prism of religious philosophy and believe that 'democratic reform in Iran should be shaped by Iranian indigenous struggle'.[67] Moreover, for them, the main strategic target is to restore Iran's sovereignty and the people's national self-determination, and to protect their society from the side effects of globalisation, such as 'drug abuse, family break-down, the collapse of traditional moral values, [and] the homogenization and stultification of international culture through consumerism'.[68]

To better understand the political struggle within post-revolutionary Iran, which has 'never been monopolised by a single political faction', strategic communicators in the West should expand the limited reformist/hardliner vision of organic intellectuals in Iran by considering Payam Mohseni's conceptually and theoretically rich classification.[69] Mohseni distinguishes four main factions: the first, the 'Theocratic Right', consists of the Bazaari merchants[70] and the traditional clergy who have been the driving force for the establishment of the Islamic state since the Revolution of 1979. The second faction, the 'Theocratic Left', unites the urban and provincial poor, the lower middle classes, veterans of the Iraq-Iran war, and members of the Basij and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC),[71] who hold strong anti-capitalistic views and see state intervention in the economy as an impetus for social welfare and justice. The

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66 Christian Salazar-Volkmann, 'The Everyday Environments of Children's Poverty', *Children, Youth and Environments*, 19.2 (2009), 250–71 (p. 251).
67 Reza Simbar, 'Iran, Democracy and International Community', *Journal of International and Area Studies*, 14.1 (2007), 55–66 (p. 57).
68 Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran : A History of the Islamic Republic* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 418.
69 Payam Mohseni, 'Factionalism, Privatization, and the Political Economy of Regime Transformation', in *Power and Change in Iran Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, ed. by Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2016), pp. 37–69 (pp. 42–47).
70 Bazaars are traditional marketplaces in Iran, the Bazaari – the merchants and workers of bazaars were among the main classes that drove the Iranian Revolution in 1979.
71 Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13) belongs to this faction; the IRGC (or Sepâh) is a branch of the Iranian Armed Forces, founded to maintain the country's internal political system; the Basij (the Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed) is a powerful paramilitary volunteer militia, subordinate to IRGC, originally formed by civilians to fight in the Iran–Iraq War.

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third group, the 'Republican Right', comprised of Western-educated technocrats and some Bazaari merchants who prioritise modernisation and economic growth in the manner of a 'China model' over egalitarian social justice.[72] The last faction is the 'Republican Left', formed of the urban middle classes, more secular-minded university students, and women's rights groups, who exchanged their anti-capitalistic vision over time for a more liberal-democratic ideology.[73] In this classification, the theocratic/republican division refers to the primary source of the legitimacy of the regime, which is the Supreme Leader for the theocrats, and the People of Iran for the republicans; the left/right division refers to the economic model of wealth distribution, which according to those on the 'left' should be controlled by the state, and to those on the 'right'—by market forces.[74]

In Iran the domestic political power shifts from one block to another while the boundaries between different institutions are permeable, and in some situations, cannot be precisely identified. The contradiction of such a diverse and fluid internal political constitutive reality is that it impedes, but at the same time aids, strategic communications in the country: on the one hand, the complicated design of overlapping power networks makes it difficult to attribute some political groups to a specific political block, which confounds institutionalisation; on the other, informal networks and various non-official interpersonal linkages became the foundation for a parallel institutional design.

Kevan Harris suggests three historical reasons for the occurrence of parallel institutions in Iran after 1979 that 'cannot be solely attributed to Khomeini's charismatic leadership', nor to 'Hobbesian state consolidation', but must also take into consideration the 'participation of millions in their country's history', the mass mobilisation of the Iranian people to overthrow the pro-Western authoritarian monarch who had lost the trust of the people: first, the distrust of the revolutionaries towards the institutions inherited from the previous Pahlavi monarchy regime; second, the need for the formation of effective revolutionary forces to resist centrifugal and separatist tendencies in times of war; third, the mass mobilisation of aspirational revolutionary groups who 'returned to their villages with intense emotional energy' and used 'personal, face-to face

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72 Former President Akbar Hashemi Rasfanjani (1989–96) and current president Hassan Rouhani (2013–present) belong to this faction.
73 Former President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), famous for his Reform program and for his popular views on Religious Democracy in Iran, belongs to this faction.
74 Mohseni, 'Factionalism, Privatization, and the Political Economy of Regime Transformation (p.42-43)

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horizontal networks to subdue existing local elites', or the 'old guard'.[75] As a result, power and authority in Iran is located at the intersections of the strategic domain and the constitutive realm, and is 'unevenly spread and concentrated among formal and informal' power mechanisms of 'factions, cliques, and network jockeys' that challenge formal political institutional design, creating a 'feckless pluralism'.[76] This institutional parallelism is not only workable for the successful plurality of political opinion, for the anti-monopolisation of political power, but has also been effective in social welfare formation and in economic stabilisation in times of sanctions. The persistent ability of Iranian society to endure almost forty years of economic hardship induced by sanctions can be attributed to the growing informal mechanisms that include, among many other factors, black-market payment arrangements to maintain traditional trade relationships,[77] the provision of jobs for the youth, and an educated labour force that cannot be formally absorbed due to structural economic problems ensuing from the sanctions.[78]

Iran's weak political party system has substantial democratic potential and can be leveraged effectively to help some progressive forces come to power. This was the case for president Hassan Rouhani, the head of the Moderation and Development Party, whose achievement in coalition building was based on the trusting relationships he enjoyed with both the Supreme Leader and another candidate for the presidency, Akbar Hashemi Rasfanjani.[79] The success of Rouhani's faction is dependent on support from the Western powers, and the 'legitimacy' of his presidency is 'staked on the international, particularly the US, reaction to his platform of moderation'.[80] These positive democratic tendencies, however, were considerably hampered by the persecution of popular coalitions, such as the Green movement, organised by rival radical political forces. At the same time, Rouhani, who according to some analysts is considered to be a

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75 Kevan Harris, 'Social Welfare Policies and the Dynamics of Elite and Popular Contention', in *Power and Change in Iran Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, ed. by Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2016), pp. 70–100 (pp. 78–79).
76 Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi, 'Introduction: Politics of Contention and Conciliation in Iran's Semiau-tocracy', in *Power and Change in Iran Politics of Contention and Conciliation*, ed. by Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2016), pp. 1–36 (p. 6).
77 Valentin Katasonov, *Stalinskiy Otvet Na Sankcii Zapada: Economiceskiy Blizkrig Protiv Rossii* (Moscow: Knijnyi Mir, 2015).
78 Mohammad Reza Farzanegan, 'Effects of International Financial and Energy Sanctions on Iran's Informal Economy', *SAIS Review*, 2013, p. 32 <https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2013.0008>
79 Ladan Boroumand, 'Iran's 2017 Election: Waning Democratic Hopes', *Journal of Democracy*, 28.4 (2017), 38–45 (pp. 40–41).
80 Mohseni, p. 84.

'centrist' rather than a 'reformist',[81] could for a while address what Brumberg and Farhi call the 'tricky dilemma' of channelling popular disaffection in ways that would engage support from elements within the regime—without provoking lethal retaliation from hard-liners'.[82] More importantly, Ayatollah Khamenei was unwilling to manipulate elections and supported Rouhani's intentions to bring an end to economic sanctions despite the fact that hardliners benefitted from the sanctions as the 'entire sanctions-based gap' in the economy was 'filled by companies affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps'.[83] These observations contradict the widespread view that sanctions will overturn or democratise the Iranian regime.

Strategic communications and Ethical life in Iran

Institutional dualism and parallelism, and the informality of SC in Iran, discussed in the previous sections, reflect a contradiction that lies deep in the philosophical, religious, and ideological terrains of social power relations. It concerns rival visions of the possibility of reconciling traditional norms and values with the idea of modernisation. Shia political philosophy is the bedrock for Iranian ethics: Shia Islam is not just a religion but a social system that exercises social right through legal institutions. Most political factions agree that the 'grand strategy' and people's present and future identities should be constructed in the Islamic tradition, based upon religious education—what former president Khatami called the 'key infrastructure' for the realisation of human resource potential, as it shaped the intellectual, spiritual, moral, cultural, and political values of the young.[84] There is disagreement, however, concerning the possibility of combining Islamic 'salvation' with Western 'liberation', which theocrats deny, but most 'reformists' see as possible via greater accountability of the government to the population. An Iranian 'third way', however, is encountered at the intersection of these two extremes.[85] Moreover, organic intellectuals on the right have, to some extent, acknowledged that the ability of humans to determine their fate was a positive achievement of Western civilisation. However, it is crucial to understand the 'extent' of the liberation, to which the Iranian 'reformists' are ready to open up their socio-political

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81 Hossein Bastani, 'How Powerful Is Rouhani in the Islamic Republic?', *Chatham House*, 2014, p. 6 [accessed 16 September 2019].
82 Brumberg and Farhi, p. 44.
83 Bastani, pp. 4–9.
84 Mehran, p. 312.
85 Mohammad Khatami, *Islam Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, 1998).

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organisation: in contrast to Western liberals, they condemn uncontrollable market competition, individualism, *laissez-fair*, and most importantly, unlimited capital accumulation, aimed at obtaining purely materialistic profit while neglecting spiritual development. Moreover, most Iranians are very passionate about their community and traditional family ties, sharing Hegel's vision, according to which, as Beiser puts it, 'the Christian ethic of personal salvation was only a cry of desperation, after a loss of community'.[86]

Organic intellectuals of various factions in Iran share the view concerning the leading role of the education system based upon the notion of self-esteem in shaping the modalities of social behaviour. According to the Quran, individuals should guard their self-worth: Muslims' 'high value is the main strategy of Islamic ethics and educational method to motivate them to act righteously'.[87] The root of Islamic ethics is self-esteem that it is 'believed to lead to a resistance against sin'—this worldview is promoted by the Iranian educational system as the 'only acceptable' one.[88] This does not mean, however, that education in Iran lacks flexibility and cannot balance between tradition and modernity. For instance, Mohammad Khatami, one of the most advanced developers of Islamic civil society, whose progressive thinking inspired many Iranians to promote religious democracy and the reformist agenda in formal schooling, 'will be remembered for opening the doors of tolerance, kindness, and culture for a new generation of Iranians'.[89] Khatami in his role as an organic intellectual attempted to bridge the gap between the traditionalists and 'intellectuals who have longed for democracy', by bringing the 'educated and learned to the forefront of society'.[90] These educated individuals were the frontrunners of the modernisation of civil society in Iran, which, however, remains highly politicised. It is guarded by the Iranian Constitution (Article 26), which, although it provides for freedom of association, prohibits contacts with and any financial assistance from foreign governmental and non-governmental agencies that 'threaten the freedom and interests of Iran'.[91]

It is important to point out a commonly mistaken view that civil society institutions in Iran are agents for potential regime change. For many in Iran, modernisation

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86 Beiser, p. 43.
87 Quran 39:15, in Mohsen Joshanloo and Fatemeh Daemi, 'Self-Esteem Mediates the Relationship between Spirituality and Subjective Well-Being in Iran', *International Journal of Psychology*, 50.2 (2015), 115–20 (p. 115).
88 Ibid.
89 Mehran, pp. 312–13.
90 Ibid.
91 Salazar-Volkmann, p. 239.

in the way it has been advanced in the West 'doesn't equate with democracy', and many remain very hostile to the history of 'utterly counterproductive attempts' by the West 'to impose its culture upon the population, with the Shah serving as a conduit'.[92] As 'Iranian people, with their national independence, want to solve their problems domestically'.[93] Therefore, for international strategic communications to be efficient, it is important to follow the advice of experts, who have spent years studying Iran from within: 'democratization in Iran can be aided by reduction in external threats, as it allows for internal dynamics of contention to force state elites to refashion the post-revolutionary social compact in a politically inclusive direction'.[94] Strategists would be advised not to misinterpret the historic role of the former Supreme Leader in the country's social and political advancement, basing their judgements upon his mostly anti-Western rhetoric. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini 'delivered unorthodox fatwas on a wide range of social issues, from women to the arts', encouraging 'a modernised form of "Muslimness"' that would go as far as to permit for 'sex reassignment surgery'.[95]

It is true that 'Iranian intellectuals, especially social scientists, view questions regarding the modernization of the country in light of today's realities and of new theories', and see modernity as an administration of complicated systems in response to the 'evolving needs of societies', divorced from its European origin. Modernity should be 'viewed only as a flexible model that adapts to diverse temporal and spatial conditions', and to the particular ethical and cultural life of a society.[96] At the same time the evolution of Iranian ethical life is not happening in a vacuum, and the character of strategic communications with other states and nations has an immense impact on the formation of national self-identity. Constance Duncombe analysed the growing 'intersubjective policy-identity' role of Twitter and other social media in Iran-US relations at times of 'difficulties of high-level diplomatic interactions', she maintains that 'our identity is formed through reflexive patterns of how others recognise us'. So when a state is 'recognized in a way that is different from how it represents itself, it may engage

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92 Daniel Khalili-Tari, 'The Independent: Four Decades on, This Is What People Still Don't Understand about the Iranian Revolution', 2019 [accessed 15 September 2019].
93 Simbar, p. 57.
94 Harris, 'Social Welfare Policies and the Dynamics of Elite and Popular Contention', p. 73.
95 Saeid Golkar, 'Cultural Heterogeneity in Post-Revolutionary Iran', *Policy Notes 50*, 2018 [accessed 16 September 2019].
96 Jamshid Behnam, 'Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization', in *Iran Between Tradition and Modernity.*, ed. by Ramin. Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 25–34 (p. 29).

in a "struggle for recognition'".[97] Moreover, social network strategies became a new form of governance, for instance, current president Rouhani 'incorporated social media into his new cabinet', so that key figures in the administration, such as Mahmoud Vaezi, Head of the Communications Ministry, and Mohammad Javad Zarif, Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are actively using Twitter and Facebook to communicate their plans and decisions. Nevertheless, given the importance of political discourse in the formation of nations' identities, the West must be careful not to load its communications with counterproductive assertions. The EU gives strong rhetorical support for greater European autonomy and for efforts to minimise the economic cost of sanctions but, despite the Union's desire to remain structurally independent and unconstrained by the United States, the determining role of the US in the 'formulation of the Iran policies of other Western governments'[98] remains mostly intact. It is vital to clear the official strategic narrative from such statements as John Bolton's 'to Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran',[99] as they just fuel fundamentalism.

Normative and emancipatory function of SC in Iran

The normative and emancipatory function of SC is a binding category between strategic narratives and legal and institutional reproduction of the material base for the realisation of grand strategy. In Iran, strategic communications deploy their emancipatory potential in three directions with the aim of maintaining: a) institutional design of the system of 'checks and balances'; b) the material base for the Islamic 'revolution', based upon state control over the strategic sectors of the economy (energy sector, oil and gas, banking); c) cultural and moral control over the population. The first emancipatory mechanism is the system of checks and balances that maintains relative socio-political stability and provides for the legitimacy of the regime. The factional architecture of the Iranian political system, analysed above, points to a 'quintessentially hybrid' nature of the state-society complex that includes features of competitive authoritarianism or illiberal democracy, semi-autocracy, or even the 'world's only electoral theocracy', and blurs the boundary between democracy and dictatorship.[100] Insufficient observation of civil rights and, in some extreme cases, the violation of human

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97 Constance Duncombe, 'Twitter and Transformative Diplomacy: Social Media and Iran–US Relations', *International Affairs*, 93.3 (2017), 545–62 (pp. 346–48).
98 Moritz Pieper, 'The Transatlantic Dialogue on Iran: The European Subaltern and Hegemonic Constraints in the Implementation of the 2015 Nuclear Agreement with Iran', *European Security*, 26.1 (2017), 99–119 (p. 107).
99 The Associated Press, 'Some World Hot Spots See Possible Openings in Bolton Firing', September 12, 2019 [accessed 15 September 2019].
100 Mohseni, pp. 39–40.

rights, hampers Iran's democratic development. At the same time, internal rivalries and transformations in domestic politics stem not from the country's 'institutional metamorphosis to dictatorship', but rather from elite conflict management and coalitional 'reworking'. Consequently, the responsibility for policy making is shared among multiple power centres and veto players (IRGC, the Supreme Leader, the President, the Expediency Council, the Council of Experts) and prevents the monopolisation of power.[101] Despite the Ayatollah's political weight in this system of checks and balances, his role as the 'ultimate arbitrator' and 'guardian jurist' (vali-ye faqih) does not enable him to 'single-handedly dictate all policy and actively undertake day-to-day governance', but rather to resolve elite conflict.[102] For instance, when President Rouhani came to power in 2013, Ayatollah Khamenei backed his intention to constructively engage and negotiate the reduction of tensions with the Western, regional and neighbouring powers, despite the hardliner's stark opposition to such 'heroic flexibility' in foreign policy.[103] On 27 September 2013, the Supreme Leader initiated Rouhani's 'historic telephone conversation' with US President Barack Obama to 'put a crack in the wall of mistrust between Iran and the United States', aiding the EU's mediatory efforts to conclude the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions.[104]

The second element of emancipatory strategic communications in Iran is related to a persistent dominant role of state-affiliated institutions in the economy. Despite 'private sector growth without privatisation',[105] the dominant role of the state in strategic sectors of the economy is supported by the Quran and had been formalised by the Iranian Constitution (Article 44) from 1979 until 2004, when the amendments to the Article enabled the programme of Privatisation.[106] In 2006, Ahmadinejad incorporated a plan to privatise 20% of large enterprises in the Fifth Five-Year National Development Plan (2010–15). Long years of harsh debates over the 'method' of privatisation led to a consensus to follow the Supreme Leader's suggestion to avoid a 'capitalist approach to privatisation' or the 'China model', but to follow the ideological and cultural peculiarities of

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101 Ibid.
102 Mohseni 2016:41
103 Amir Mohammad Haji-Yousefi, 'Political Culture and Iran's Foreign Policy: A Comparative Study of Iran's Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad and Rouhani', *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, 2.2 (2018), 225–45 (pp. 235–37).
104 Ibid.
105 Kevan Harris, 'The Rise of the Subcontractor State: Politics of Pseudo-Privatization in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Middle East Studies*, 45 (2013), 45–70 (p. 53).
106 In 2004 the amendments to the Article 44 were made concerning the large-scale strategic sectors. Earlier (1979-2002) the Constitution allowed privatisation of small and medium-sized businesses. Under President Hashemi Rafsanjani privatisation formed part of the First Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1989-1994).

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the regime. In practice, however, this caused elite rivalry over Ahmadinejad's scheme, with many complaining that instead of the primary goal of reducing state control over the economy, and despite the transferral of state assets to 'non-state' entities, the state, nevertheless, continued to choose and retain the managers and chairs of newly privatised enterprises.[107] While the official political statements claimed that privatisation helped public companies 'reduce their financial burden on the country's budget and also increase their productivity',[108] the contentious process caused lots of scepticism and critics called it 'quasi-privatisation'. The persistent control of state institutions over strategic sectors was a response to the increasing geopolitical pressures on Iran, such as economic sanctions, that led to further empowerment of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) as an economic actor (although not directly) and as a dominant instrument in maintaining internal security. Some analysts compare the IRGC to the Praetorian Guard in ancient Rome, whose task was to protect the emperor.[109] In 2009, in one of the biggest privatisations in Iran, 51% of the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) was sold for the equivalent of $7.8bn to Tose'e Etemad Mobin (TEM), an entity affiliated with the IRGC.[110] In 2012, 60% of state companies, valued at $122 billion, were 'privatised' by sales to 'non-governmental' bodies, such as retirement funds (the Social Security Organisation and the Retirement Fund), companies, and military organisations affiliated with the IRGC.[111]

The third direction taken by strategic communicators that belong to various political groups in Iran striving to secure government moral control over the population evolved alongside an intensifying struggle between opposing factions and quasigovernmental institutions, led by informal clientelist networks. The IRGC was increasingly trying to control public opinion and to perform its social mobilisation function; and economic hardships at times of the US 'extraterritorial' sanctions proved to be helpful in this respect. In fact, most people in Iran point to the defective 'ethics' of sanctions with their continuously 'detrimental impact on the livelihoods of ordinary Iranian citizens and violation of their basic human rights',[112] citing evidence that sanctions 'hamper the flow of vital medicines' even to

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107 Mohseni, pp. 57–58.
108 TehranTimes, 'Rouhani Declares Amended Law on Article 44 of Iran's Constitution', 2018 [accessed 16 September 2019].
109 Hesam Forozan and Afshin Shahi, 'The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards', *Middle East Journal*, 71.1 (2017), p. 69.
110 Ibid. (p. 81)
111 Najmeh Bozorgmehr, '"State" Bodies Stymie Iran Privatisations', *Financial Times*, 2012 [accessed 14 September 2019].
112 Sasan Fayazmanesh, 'The US Sanctions Are Affecting All Aspects of Human Life in Iran', 2019 [accessed 14 September 2019].

cancer patients.[113] These inhumane effects of 'secondary' sanctions make a wider population willing to accept as organic a transformation of the strategic narrative, giving it a more aggressive anti-American character. They secure wider popular consent to new intelligence-gathering and morality policing initiatives and actions, performed by powerful 'moral control' forces such as Nasehin teams—important groups of the Basij militia—controlled by the Council of Morality Policing.[114] The networks of 'moral control' are deeply embedded in Iranian society. Their emancipatory power is based upon popular mobilisation not only with the aid of religious organisations and mosques, the number of which has increased from 9,500 to 74,000 since the Iranian revolution, but also through intellectual communication in the multiple coffeehouses, 'teahouses', and shopping malls that 'proliferated' in Iranian rural and urban areas during the reformist era of President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005).[115]

Despite their penetrating attempts to monitor most civil society institutions, it would be erroneous to suggest that paramilitary organisations are controlling the activities of the multiple SC networks—in fact, their voice in strategic narratives of various political and social groups have been muted not only by various political activists, but also by the Supreme Leader, especially when the system of checks and balances was under threat (as it was in the case of privatisation, JCPOA negotiations, and modernisation reforms). Strongly contradicting Western stereotypes, the strategic narratives of women in Iran have been successful at times. Despite the notorious literature that accuses the regime of the detrimental effect of enforcing religious rules on educated women that led to their 'marginalisation',[116] empirical data show some positive developments. Since the Iranian revolution the number of educated women has dramatically increased, as has the overall level of education in Iran. Female employment in low-income populations has been on the rise and non-governmental women's organisations have contributed to the country's socio-economic development, especially in the welfare system, public health, and education.[117]

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113 Abbas Kebriaeezadeh, 'U.S. Sanctions Are Killing Cancer Patients in Iran', *Foreign Policy*, 2019 [accessed 5 September 2019].
114 Saeid Golkar, 'Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran's Basij Militia', *Armed Forces & Society*, 38.4 (2012), 625–48 (p. 459).
115 Golkar, 'Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran's Basij Militia', p. 6.
116 Goli M. Rezai-Rashti and Valentine M. Moghadam, 'Women and Higher Education in Iran: What Are the Implications for Employment and the "Marriage Market"?', *International Review of Education*, 57.3–4 (2011), 419–41.
117 Roksana Bahramitash, 'Islamic Fundamentalism and Women's Economic Role: The Case of Iran', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 16.4 (2003), 551–68 (p. 560).

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Concluding remarks

The process of strategic communications in the International Political Economy cannot be fully rationalised. It requires critical thinking to influence humans' cognitive and intuitive capabilities, future narratives, choices, decision-making, and actions in the knowledge-forming information environment. Emphasis on the tactical dimension of SC is not accidental: as mentioned earlier, the Byzantine hierarchy of strategy over tactics is the clue to conceptualising the field of SC in IPE as a functional strategic domain. Moreover, one of the mechanisms for the realisation of grand strategies is the neoliberal tactics of 'opening up the contender state–society complexes, dispossessing the state classes, replacing them by a governing class submitting to liberal global governance'.[118] However, in a holistic analysis of SC, the functional domain of grand strategies should be complemented by the constitutive realm of social power relations that shapes knowledge, morality, and ethical life through narratives, images, and actions. *To become 'strategic', communications need to be politically oriented, institutionalised, and contain normative and emancipatory mechanisms for the reproduction of the material-ideological base of 'grand strategy'.*

At present, the tactical inefficiency of SC messaging to Iran can be explained by the failure of Western strategic communicators to understand the country's socio-cultural constitutive, ethical, and normative elements that reproduce the modalities of social behaviour. Moreover, there is a dangerous and erroneous politically conceived opinion that geopolitical pressures, such as economic sanctions, lay the foundation for societal transformation towards democratisation. On the contrary, sanctions send the wrong signals to Iran and induce the country to evolve in the opposite direction—towards dictatorship— leaving little chance for liberal and democratic processes to unfold. As such, sanctions *are* disruptive for strategic communications, and should rather be seen as a trigger for strategic *mis*communications.

Iran has substantial potential for democratisation and modernisation. This could be realised in accordance with its traditions, ethical norms, and moral values that have been distinct from the liberal West for centuries. The praxis of SC in Iran is considerably misunderstood in the West. The Iranian domestic strategic domain is highly dynamic, containing an elaborate system of checks and

118 Kees van der Pijl, 'Is the East Still Red? The Contender State and Class Struggles in China', *Globalizations*, 9.4 (2012), 503–16 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2012.699921>.

balances over formally and informally competing power centres, thus preventing the monopolisation of power. The long history of Islamisation is reflected in Iranian ethical life and it remains resistant to any Western-type 'liberalisation' initiatives. Democratisation in Iran is only possible once the mechanism of extraterritorial sanctions is removed. Meanwhile, it is essential for the West to elaborate a constructive SC framework with Iran. Those who nevertheless aspire to 'modernise' Iran with the aid of external tactical interference via SC, should bear in mind that in order to successfully manipulate human consciousness, shape people's choices and actions, and transform the modalities of Iranians' social behaviour, they still need to gain a deeper appreciation of Iranian identity and nature.

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