# EU normative power and the Iranian nuclear program

## Abstract (500 words)

Ian Manners has proposed the concept of European Union normative power: the ability of the EU to change what is ‘normal’ in international relations. The EU-led international negotiations with Iran aimed at preventing the Islamic Republic from acquiring nuclear weapons may provide an example of EU normative power in action. In his 2002 state of the union address, president George W Bush included Iran in an ‘axis of evil’, a move which appeared to raise the possibility of an American military intervention against Iran. In response to the alarm raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency report on the Iranian nuclear program in 2003, and in the context of deep divisions in Europe over the US intervention in Iraq, European leaders sought to reassert the EU as an actor in international relations, deliberately setting out to make the Iran nuclear issue a test case for the EU norms of negotiation, engagement, multilateralism and conformity with international law. In the place of military confrontation, the EU guided the international community along a path of patient negotiations and economic sanctions. Initially sceptical, the US eventually took on a leadership role in this normative approach, which ultimately contributed to a change in the political climate in Iran and the signing of an interim accord in November 2013. If, as appears likely, a final agreement eventuates, the Iran case could constitute an example of the EU influencing the practice of international relations, and hence an instance of EU normative actorness.

## Introduction

The EU is often derided for its lack of unanimity and its military weakness. These characteristics make it an unlikely actor in international politics. Its stated preference for international relations based on multilateral institutions, negotiations and international law have been disparaged as the choice of the weak, and a luxury only afforded by the American security umbrella (Kagan 2003). However there are others who argue that the very absence of the instruments of coercion grants the EU the ability to achieve a diplomatic solution in situations where a more threatening power would fail. Its preference for proceeding through multilateral institutions and within international law also grants the EU’s actions legitimacy, an important factor that can contribute towards the resolution of conflict, not the least by creating buy-in from other stakeholders.

In the case of the Iran nuclear negotiations, the EU deliberately set out in 2003, in the context of the US military intervention in Iraq and unprecedented division among its member states, to demonstrate that the EU, acting according to its stated norms of international relations, could indeed be an effective actor on the international stage, i.e. a normative actor. Despite many set-backs, and painfully slow progress, the EU eventually brought the US on board its two-pronged strategy of combining sanctions pressure with an always-open offer to negotiate, and together they clinched an important interim agreement at the end of 2013.

Ian Manners has described normative power as the ability to change what it considered normal in international relations (2002). If the EU was able to influence the conduct of the international community (in particular the US) towards Iran on the question of non-proliferation, then the Iran nuclear dossier can be considered an example of EU normative power in action.

## What is normative power?

In academic usage a normative statement is one which sets out how things should be, rather than how they actually are. Thus normative power can be considered to be the exercise of power according to certain norms, norms which are considered to be universally ‘good’ in and of themselves. Of course many powers would consider that they act according to norms that they consider universally good. To discover what normative power means in the European context, it is helpful to trace the historical evolution of the idea.

The idea that the EU might be an international actor in a different kind of mould from what is traditionally thought of as an actor dates back to the 1970s. In 1972 François Duchêne put forward the idea of what was then the EC as a ‘civilian actor’, whose influence derived both from its economic weight and the fact that it was not a superpower (Duchêne 1972, pp. 38-39). Duchêne argued that the EC’s very lack of military power endowed it with unique influence it would not otherwise have possessed if it were able to threaten with the use of force (Duchêne 1972, p. 43).

Later in the 1970s Gunnar Sjöstedt also argued that traditional understandings of what makes an actor were too state-centric, i.e. that the EC could not be discounted as an actor simply because it was not a state (Sjöstedt 1977, p. 13). Not everyone agreed with these ideas however, most notably Hedley Bull, who famously retorted that in the absence of military power ‘ “Europe” is not an actor in international affairs, and does not seem likely to become one’ (Bull 1982, p. 151).

Ian Manners reinvigorated this discussion in 2002 when he put forward the notion of the EU as a ‘normative power’ (Manners 2002). Manners argued that simply by being something large and different, i.e. by changing what is considered normal in international relations, the EU has ‘normative power’ (Manners 2002, p. 239). Manners was writing in a context in which the EU was setting about acquiring for itself certain limited military capabilities through what was eventually to become known as the Common Security and Defence Policy. Some writers, such as Karen Smith (2000) argued against such an acquisition because it would degrade the supposed advantage of EU power, its civilian nature. Manners also makes clear that normative power does not entail force of any kind (2002, p. 242).

While the EU may express a preference for non-military solutions, it apparently does not rule them out entirely. Many would also argue that sanctions, such as those used in the Iran nuclear case, are a form of force. It is time, therefore, to look at how the EU itself defines its normative power.

## The EU’s professions of normative actorness

The EU declaims the specific nature of its external action in important documents, as well is in the words of its leading officials. The EU’s external actorness can be described as normative in the sense that it has to do with the external application of internal norms, norms which have proved themselves in bringing about a situation of peace and prosperity in formally war-ravaged Europe.

For example, the current version of the Treaty on European Union states:

The Union’s action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law (Article 21.1 Treaty on European Union 2010).

The European Security Strategy (2003) stresses the importance of international law under the framework of the UN and calls for ‘effective multilateralism’, which it understands in the following context:

We want international organisations, regimes and treaties to be effective in confronting threats to international peace and security, and must therefore be ready to act when their rules are broken (p. 9).

In addition to identifying the need for the EU to be ‘more active, more coherent and more capable’ in the field of foreign policy and crisis management (p. 11), the strategy also makes reference to the EU’s normative mission:

Spreading good governance, supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order (p. 10).

The EU policy on weapons of mass destruction (Council of the European Union 2003) likewise takes up this concept of effective multilateralism, stressing the need for an approach based on treaties and multilateral institutions (p. 5), but also declaring the EU’s willingness to ‘enhance, as appropriate, its political, financial and technical support for agencies in charge of verification’ in order to ensure violations are detected and non-compliance is deterred (p. 6). Just as important however, is addressing the root cause of weapons of mass destruction proliferation:

At the same time, the EU will continue to address the root causes of instability including through pursuing and enhancing its efforts in the areas of political conflicts, development assistance, reduction of poverty and promotion of human rights (p. 5).

Importantly, these EU policies do not rule out the use of force, even the use of military force. Nevertheless EU actorness can still be understood as normative in the way put forward by Ian Manners (2002), as influencing what is considered normal in international relations, while at the same time having to do with uploading norms of good state behaviour from the internal to the external level.

The next sections look at the particular case of the Iran nuclear negotiations between 2003 and 2013, and argue that they represent a case of EU normative actorness.

## Iran and the nuclear non-proliferation negotiations

In his January 2002 state of the union address, US president George W. Bush used the now infamous ‘axis of evil’ phrase to describe Iran, Iraq and North Korea (Bush 2002). In the context of a war on terror, in which the first part, the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan had come to its initial conclusion, and in which the intention of the US to intervene militarily in Iraq would soon become clear, this expression came to be associated with a military threat towards Iran. Other administration comments backed up this association (Sagan 2006, pp. 55-56).

In mid-2002 allegations surfaced that Iran was secretly working on a nuclear weapons program. A visit to Iran by the International Atomic Energy Agency in February 2003 gave credence to these allegations (Sauer 2007, p. 7). The IAEA gave Iran until 31 October 2003 to demonstrate the peaceful nature of its nuclear program.

Although Iranian officials were initially indignant at having been set such a deadline, a turning point came with the visit to Teheran on 21 October by the foreign ministers of France, the UK and Germany (Dominique de Villepin, Jack Straw and Joschka Fischer). At this meeting Iran agreed to suspend its nuclear fuel production in exchange for further negotiations (Sauer 2007, p. 9). In December 2003 the EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana joined the negotiating team, consolidating the EU nature of the group (Dryburgh 2008, p. 265).

The EU-led approach suffered a set-back when it became clear in early in 2004 that Iran was not abiding by the 2003 agreement. Iran similarly disregarded a follow-up agreement signed in Paris in November 2004. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in June 2005 led to negotiations with the EU-3 breaking down completely in August 2005 (Squassoni 2006).

Iran’s behaviour finally led the Board of the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer the Iran dossier to the UN Security Council, as is its right to do when a breach has been established, in February 2006. A final offer was made to Iran in Vienna in June 2006, which it rejected (Santini 2010, p. 479).

On 31 July 2006 the UN Security Council passed its first resolution against Iran, threatening sanctions. The US, China and Russia now joined the EU-led negotiating team, as the locus of diplomatic activity had moved to the Security Council. This new formation came to be known as the EU3+3, or the P5+1 (permanent five + Germany) formation.

It was not until 23 December 2006 that the UN Security Council finally imposed the first sanctions on Iran (resolution 1737). Three further rounds of sanctions followed: 24 March 2007 (resolution 1747), 3 March 2008 (1803) and 9 June 2010 (1929). Though these sanctions were consistently watered down by Russia and China (Sauer 2007, p.15), they nevertheless were resolutions passed by the Security Council.

In the second half of 2009, a computer virus, Stuxnet, apparently developed jointly by Israel and the US, succeeded in destroying a number of centrifuges in Iranian enrichment plans, significantly setting back the Iranian enrichment program (Broad, Markoff & Sanger 2011). The damage was not permanent, however.

A few years earlier the Bush administration had used Israeli threats of a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities to increase the credibility of the military option (Sagan 2006, p. 54). Now however, despite Israel becoming increasingly vocal about the need for a military strike, and with UN Security Council permanent members Russia and China unlikely to support further sanctions, the US launched a new round of unilateral sanctions, on 1 July 2010 (van de Graaf 2013, p. 148). New EU sanctions quickly followed, on 26 July 2010, also over and above the UN sanctions of June 2010 (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2010).

These unilateral US and EU sanctions of 2010 were followed by even more rigorous further sanctions, put in place early in 2012. On 23 January 2012 the EU imposed sanctions which included an oil embargo, as well as a prohibition on the supply of insurance services to Iranian shipping (London-based brokers handle 95% of world oil tanker insurance (van de Graaf 2013, p.154)). Iranian banks were also locked out of the SWIFT banking system, based in Belgium (Patterson 2013, p. 136). The full EU oil embargo did not enter into force until July 2012, to allow Italy, Spain and Greece to seek alternative sources of oil. When the sanctions did enter into force, it quickly became clear that coupled with the comprehensive US financial sanctions, they were severely affecting the Iranian economy.

On 14 June 2013 the moderate Hassan Rouhani (the former chief nuclear negotiator for Iran, who had headed the first two years of negotiations with the EU-3) was elected president of Iran. One of the main arguments against sanctions, that they only strengthen the position of hardliners within a regime (van de Graaf 2013, p. 157), was thus shown to be unfounded.

On 24 November 2013 in Geneva, an interim accord was reached, whereby Iran agreed to freeze its nuclear program in return for limited sanctions relief, for a period of time during which a final comprehensive agreement was to be hammered out. At this time there was significant media coverage paying tribute to the role of EU representative Catherine Ashton, who had led the negotiations (e.g. Busse 2013). By this time it had emerged that the US and Iran had been holding secret talks since around March 2013 (Borger & Dehghan 2013), which no doubt contributed to the clinching of the interim agreement.

At the time of writing no final agreement has been reached, while the deadline for achieving one has already been extended twice. The Obama administration has indicated that it would like a final agreement to be reached by late March 2015, coming into force in June 2015 (Rogers 2015).

## Discussion

The Iran nuclear non-proliferation dossier is one of the few cases in which sanctions have had a decisive impact on a targeted state’s economy. One reason for that is that the EU and the US were able to exploit their structural positions within the world economy (as centres of international financial and insurance transactions) to disable Iranian oil exports (van de Graaf 2013, p. 146). But it is also important that the wider sanctions regime was broadly enforced. The reason for that is that for years sanctions were meticulously negotiated with and passed by the UN Security Council. They thus enjoyed a legitimacy which was absent from previous decades of unilateral US sanctions, which were not even enforced by the United States’ closest allies (Maloney 2010, p. 140). In the context of the UN sanctions regime, even the final rounds of unilateral EU and US sanctions retained this legitimacy. This legitimacy led to broad enforcement, and therefore success.

However, sanctions are only one side of the story. As expressed by a senior Obama administration figure: ‘Sanctions did not stop the advance of Iran’s nuclear program. Negotiations did …’ (Blinken 2015). From the start EU officials stressed the twin-track nature of its negotiations: even when sanctions were imposed, the door to further negotiations always remained open (Santini 2010, p. 472). By comparison, negotiations were not really part of the US approach. Even the initially optimistic Obama administration, after the unrest following the Iranian presidential elections had been put down, assumed that diplomacy would not work:

the U.S. policy debate has reverted to the familiar formula of carrot-and-stick, with a distinct emphasis on the latter. Although diplomacy remains the U.S. default position, at least through December 2009, the U.S. discourse has largely presumed its failure and leapfrogged to focus on prospects for new punitive measures … (Maloney 2010, p. 131)

In any case the US did not participate actively in negotiations until 2009 (Santini 2010, p. 483).

It is also an important point that negotiating with a non-threatening power such as the EU must have a completely different dynamic than the prospect of negotiations with a superpower that can credibly threaten military action. The Iranian regime certainly found it easier to justify to its domestic audience negotiations with the EU, which had far fewer negative connotations than the US (Roudsari 2007, p. 16). US power meant its approach to Iran was too easily dominated by punishment, isolation and threats (Leonard 2005, p. 3), whereas the EU had to negotiate on a much more even footing.

For the EU to succeed with its approach, it was vital to keep the other three members of the UN Security Council on board. This in itself was no small task in diplomacy. It was the EU that convinced Russia and China not to veto the September 2005 IEAE Board resolution that Iran was in non-compliance with the NPT. It was the EU that convinced the US to negotiate directly with Iran, and it was the EU that convinced the US, Russia and China to support the Vienna offer to Iran in 2006 (Sauer 2007, pp. 12-13).

By the same token, it is true that in the final stages of the sanctions regime, pressure was now coming from the US towards the EU to enact stricter sanctions (Patterson 2013, p. 139), though it is also true that the very efficacy of these sanctions was due to years of EU leadership. It is also a fact that the US opened secret negotiations with Iran in the final months before the interim agreement. There is no doubt that the US played a key role in the achievement of the interim agreement, and had taken on a leadership role by the time of the interim agreement. However this does not necessarily detract from the EU conceptualization of actorness, which stresses multilateralism and cooperation.

Other possible counter-arguments to the thesis of EU normative actorness are that the change in US behaviour from scepticism of the EU approach to embracing and leading the sanctions and negotiations regime had more to do with the change in the US presidential administration. However, while Obama ‘came into office determined to chart a new course on Iran’, he also quickly became bogged down in the same old policy options after the disputed re-election of Ahmadinejad (Maloney 2010, p. 131). And it is interesting to note that not even Obama ruled out a military intervention (Maloney 2010, p. 132). There is also some evidence that the change in the US attitude predated the election of Obama, for example George W Bush’s refusal to support an Israeli airstrike on Iranian nuclear targets, reportedly requested in May 2008 (Steele 2008). The Bush administration had also lobbied China to support UN Security Council sanctions – but had received the reply that diplomacy needed more time (Vakil 2006, p. 56).

It could also be argued that the success of the oil embargo had less to do with the EU’s multilateralist approach, and more to do with the willingness of Saudi Arabia to step up production to prevent price rises in the wake of the Iranian oil embargo (van de Graaf 2013, p. 155). Years of US pressure on its European partners may also have reduced the interests of European companies in Iran, thus making the cost of sanctions, when they finally came, bearable, and therefore politically achievable (Patterson 2013, pp. 142-143). Others point out that the Iranian economy was disintegrating anyway, after years of mismanagement, and the regime was ripe for being pushed aside (Maloney 2009, pp. 136-138). There is no doubt that a number of fortuitous factors assisted the success of sanctions. However these do not mean that the main reason for the achievement of the interim agreement at the end of 2013 was not the leadership of the EU of the negotiations and sanctions regime.

Finally, some have criticized the EU approach as not normative even by its own standards. It was coercive, did not treat Iran as a partner, and failed to take into account Iran’s legitimate security concerns (Santini 2006, pp. 477, 482), or desire for regional status (Roudsari 2007, p. 12). In other words it failed to address the root causes of Iran’s nuclear weapons program, something prescribed by both the European Security Strategy (2003) and the EU’s policy on weapons of mass destruction (Council of the European Union 2003). As was pointed out above, the EU definition of normativity does not rule out the use of coercion. If the important second strand of EU normativity, addressing the root cause of instability, was missing in this case, then the normativity of the EU approach can justifiably be criticized. However that does not mean that the EU was not a normative actor in the sense of acting according to and attempting to spread its norms of international relations (international law and effective multilateralism).

Keeping the offer of negotiations permanently on the table, and working meticulously through multilateral organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council were the key elements of the EU-led approach that contributed to its (provisional) success, and that are consistent with the normative international relations approach expounded by EU officials and documents. The argument being put forward here is that the EU exhibited normative actorness by bringing the US on board its unique approach, above all by dissuading it of the need for a military solution. If, as suggested by Manners (2002), normative power is about changing what is considered normal in international relations, then it can be argued that the Iran nuclear negotiations are an example of the EU exhibiting normative power.

## Conclusion

In 2003 the European Union was riven with discord over the American Iraq invasion, its vision for a multilateral and rules-based new world order in tatters. The military option for dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis was kept open by the Bush administration (Sagan 2006, p. 56). Three EU member state foreign ministers, later joined by the EU foreign policy representative, set out to demonstrate the validity of the EU’s stated norms of international relations: negotiation, engagement, multilateralism and conformity with international law. It took 10 years before an interim agreement was finally reached. In the process, an initially sceptical US was persuaded of the efficacy of the twin-track approach of ratcheting up sanctions but at the same time continuing negotiations. The EU and the US together escalated the sanctions regime to the point of sending the Iranian economy into free-fall. The Iranian people subsequently voted in a moderate president, with whom an interim deal could be negotiated. Though at the time of writing a permanent accord has still not been reached, one is still possible.

If a permanent agreement is reached with Iran on its nuclear program, then this case can be seen as an example of EU normative power. Firstly, it is likely that the EU, as a non-threatening power, was able to succeed where others with the ability to threaten militarily might have failed. This is an element of ‘civilian power’ that has been argued since the 1970s.

Secondly, the EU was able to succeed by sticking to its norms of negotiations, going through the offices of multilateral institutions and complying with international law. These are norms of international relations that the EU has set forth in key documents as the basis for its interactions with the outside world. The EU kept Russia and China on board by meticulously and patiently following the procedures of international law and the UN institutions, most importantly the International Atomic Energy Agency and the UN Security Council – even at the expense of suffering the watering down of UN sanctions. A sign of the legitimacy that the EU approach enjoyed is that even India voted for the IAEA resolution condemning Iran which moved the case upwards to the Security Council (Vakil 2006, p. 60). This meant that sanctions had broad support: a crucial precondition for any sanctions regime to be successful. Even the final rounds of sanctions imposed unilaterally by the EU and the US, which had the crippling effect on Iran, were foreshadowed in the previous Security Council resolution (Kozhanov 2011, p. 148).

Thirdly, the EU from the outset deliberately set up its approach to Iran as a model for international relations – in contrast to the US approach to Iraq and its perceived military threat to Iran – a model to be followed by other actors in the international system. It has been argued here that the EU was able to transmit these norms to the behaviour of the US on the Iran non-proliferation dossier, and that this was ultimately the reason for the success of the approach (assuming it does succeed).

The current Ukraine crisis provides an interesting test case. The EU and the US have applied sanctions on Russia over its destabilizing behaviour with respect to Ukraine, and the EU is once again advocating an approach which differs from the US one: just last month German chancellor Angela Merkel travelled to Washington and asked President Obama not to provide arms to the Ukrainian government, to allow more time for a diplomatic solution. The Russian economy has taken a significant blow, though this can only partly be attributed to the sanctions: the huge drop in oil prices is the main reason, though it is not known whether there was any coordination over this between the US and Saudi governments. Concerns with the political situation in Russia had already led to massive outflows of capital, which have been amplified by Russia’s intervention in Ukraine.

The main difference, of course, is that with Russia a permanent member of the UN Security Council there will be no UN sanctions. The legitimacy of the opposition to Russia’s actions in Ukraine, a key element in garnering the kind of universal support necessary for sanctions to be effective, may well be less established than in the case of the Iran nuclear dossier. Even within the EU, support for sanctions against Russia is less universal. EU energy dependence on Russia is also much higher than it was in the case of Iran. For these reasons it is less likely, though still conceivable, that an EU-US sanctions regime could be ratcheted up to a level which could inflict game-changing economic damage on the Russian economy, in the way it did in the Iran case. The main lesson, though, is that if they are to, they need to be widely perceived as legitimate.

## References