Breaking Bad: Decolonial Strategists in World-Making: An Ontological Security Analysis of the Iran-Venezuela Alliance

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An Ontological Security Analysis of the Iran-Venezuela Alliance

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List of Abbreviations

ALBA*:* Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America
APOC: Anglo-Persian Oil Company
CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis
CIA: Central Intelligence Agency
CSIS: Centre for Strategic International Studies
DGCIM: Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence
ELN: *Ejército de Liberación Nacional*
EU: European Union
FARC: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*
G77: Group of 77
IEA: International Energy Agency
IMF: International Monetary Fund
MI6: Secret Intelligence Service/ SIS
IR: International Relations
IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
MENA: Middle East and North Africa
NAM: Non-Aligned Movement
NIEO: New International Economic Order
NIOC: National Iranian Oil Company
NYT: New York Times
SWIFT: Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
OPEC: Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OST: Ontological Security Theory
PDVSA: *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A*
PM: Prime Minister
R&D: Research and Development
SWIFT: Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UK: United Kingdom
UN: United Nations
UNSC: United Nations Security Council
US: United States
USSR: Soviet Union
WMD: Weapons of Mass Destruction
WWI: World War I
WWII: World War II

Introduction

The American-led paradigm of "rogue states" (Koerner 2003) has turned political outliers into global villains. Since Anthony Lake introduced this narrative in American foreign policy in 1994, it has become a cornerstone of Security Studies (SS), legitimising America's self-ascribed position as a global hegemon (Lake 1994). By framing non-compliance with the so-called "rules of the game" (Cohen 1980) as the abject of malignant states, this discourse obscures systemic inequalities that underpin the international order (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). The grandstanding use of rogue lexicon— '21st-century predators' (BBC News 1998), 'axis of evil' (Bush 2002), 'wolf pack of evil' (Wadhams 2019), and 'troika of tyranny' (The Economist 2023) projects non-Western states and its leadership as adversarial.

This projected narrative goes beyond stigmatising state behaviour and serves as a tool for America to position itself as the arbitrator of global order (Buzan and Little 2000). Stemming from American interests (Lake 1994), the "rogue nation" paradigm has reflected Washington's strategic goals and selective application. Underscoring an important duality of this study: Western domination not only dictates norms and principles of engagement but asymmetrically affects the power of discourse within knowledge creation (Seth 2013). This is evidenced in the United States' (US) response to the concurrent conflicts in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip. At one end, the US has led the charge against the imperial aggression of Russia against Ukraine. On the other, it has become one of the last remaining supporters of Israel's actions against Hamas—which has primarily hurt the Palestinian people (Mason 2023).

Today, even as Israel faces growing recognition as a pariah state (Al Jazeera 2024), the US continues to approve weapons sales to Tel Aviv (Copp 2024). In juxtaposition, "rogue states" such as Iran and Venezuela have been heavily sanctioned for their role in supplying weapons to the Russian offensive in Ukraine (Miller 2024). Does this mean that the West serves moralistically superior cause, or is it a demonstration of its dominance in shaping global narratives and structures of power? Moreover, if the US continues to defy international calls (Human Rights Watch 2024) to reconsider its support of its partner Israel, should defiance always be labelled as rogue and malignant, or can it be strategic? Such contradictions expose America's ontology within International Relations as a paradox, where doctrines like the Monroe Doctrine and the "rogue state" paradigm clash with the very political practices they are meant to uphold.

This paper offers the same conditions of contradiction at the intersection of US strategy and ideology to states labelled as "rogues" and decolonises their defiance, as an intentional political response driven from their desire to protect their status, identity and perspective within the global order. Therefore, the central puzzle for this thesis is, can the alliance between two so-called "rogue states," Iran and Venezuela, utilise defiance be a deliberate strategy to navigate marginalisation, preserve ontological security and assert agency within an asymmetric global order?

Through an ontological security theory lens, this paper traces the causal pathways Iran and Venezuela take to overcome their obscurity under the "rogue" label. Ultimately, this paper concludes that Iran and Venezuela strategically employ their alliance to assert agency as part of a decolonial, non-Western worldmaking project. Allowing them to preserve their ontology amidst global anarchy (Waltz 2000).

1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework here uses an Ontological Security Theory (OST) through a postcolonial perspective. Given that 'knowledge does not exist in a vacuum but reinforces the power dynamics it emerges from' (Laffey and Weldes 2008, 558), the absence of non-Western experiences, voice, and worldmaking is an epistemic violence against the non-West (Seth 2013, Spivak and Young 1991). In adopting a decolonial agenda, this study reframes the narrative of so-called "rogue states" to argue that in contrast to their portrayal as disengaged or marginalised actors, these "outliers" and "outcasts" of the global order actively participate in international relations (IR) and adopt deliberate strategies to protect their epistemological and ontological identity (Laffey and Weldes 2008, 558; Spivak and Young 1991; Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

To highlight the key concepts that will be engaged with throughout this paper, the theoretical framework is divided between five key modals of inquiry: a) Who is the rogue? b) What are they defying? c) Why are they adopting defiant measures? d) How are they defying? and e) What do they gain from their defiance?

1.1. Epistemic Disobedience: Reframing the 'Rogue'

The term Pariah originates from the Tamil word *Paraiyar*[1], a derogatory caste designation in Southern India. And although the word 'rogue' originates in Latin, its current use can be traced to 16th-century England, where it describes vagrants or criminals[2]. Far from being neutral designations their use today continues to reflect the socio-cultural notions their foundations. As illustrated through the introduction, it evokes a certain perspective, a behavioural trait or a 'negative' connotation. As such, this thesis will decolonise the label of 'rogue/pariah' and instead use the word defiant when speaking about Iran and Venezuela. In this new light, defiant states will not be non-compliant actors driven by "malign" (Lake 1994) or "evil" interests (Bush 2002), instead they will be understood as political actors, acting out of tangible agendas, goals, ambitions or context (Geldenhuys 2004; Wunderlich 2020).

In reframing this label, this author is not employing a revisionist approach. To that end, the underlying aim is to step out of binaries of 'good/bad', 'civilised/barbaric' and to understand their defiance in context (Blokker and Brighenti 2011). As such, this thesis will also interchangeably use the word resistance when speaking to the objective of defiance (Wolf 2022). With this transition of terminology in place, the subsequent section will outline who these defiant states are resistant against.

1.2. Challenging the Empire: Defiance Objectives

This section focuses on three key areas that is pertinent to this thesis, at the "core" of what states like Iran and Venezuela are vocally defiant against. First the global economy as an American empire, second its hegemonic control over natural resources and trade along with weapons and technology. Lastly, recourse dependency and weaponised interdependence.

1.2.1. Economic Empire: Structures of Influence

Postcolonial scholars posit that, while there is a growing cognisance of the power (im)balance within the global economic order (Go 2007; Wunderlich 2020), its structural inescapability remains unchanged. Drawing on Julian Go's (2007) theory of 'waves' of American imperialism, this paper borrows his lens to explore how imperial dynamics underpin today's global economy. In his analysis, he reframes the traditional "physical" empire, to an

[1] See, Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia., "Pariah | Meaning, Etymology, & History | Britannica," www.britannica.com, September 17, 2020.
[2] See, Oxford English Dictionary, "Rogue, N. & Adj." (Oxford University Press,), Oxford English Dictionary.

economical one, maintained through institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the dollar (as the global trading currency), pre-World War I (WWI) territorial expansions and post-World War II (WWII) interventions (Go 2007, 7-9, 15-16, 23-24). In Go's analysis he underlines the different ways in which the US positions itself as the global 'middleman' (Go 2007, 23-24) to deepen its position within an interdependent economic order. Through his concept of 'informal empire', Go interlinks modern imperialism or neo-colonial as the natural consequence of a system that has been structurally built on the intersection of power and control inescapable even amid hegemonic decline (Go 2007, 27-29)

To that end, Noel Parker's (2010) argument on 'empire as a geopolitical entity' is emblematic of the defiant state's dilemma of instability of engaging in great power politics. As such, Parker connects 'disorder' as weapon that the West uses as a threat to elicit compliance (Parker 2010, 123-124). This compliance is primarily enforced, he argues through 'specific zones of influence, control, and exclusion' (Parker 2010, 125-126). These zones, divide the world in three distinct groupings: rule makers (US), then the rule followers, and lastly, the rule breakers (rogues). Positing America as the 'modern metropole' (Mignolo 2005; Seth 2013), through which the peripheries derive legitimacy (Parker 2010, 125-126).

1.2.2. Oil, Arms, and Influence: Foundations of a Global Order

To further employ Parker's concept of 'zones of influence,' this subsection builds on Robert Paarlberg's (2004) idea of 'knowledge as power.' In his analysis, Paarlberg argues that the US's position as an economic hegemon is reinforced through its military bulwark not only through its weapon-producing capacity but also through its control over technological knowledge (Paarlberg 2024 123-125). Even with a globalised form of military Research and Development (R&D), the US sustains its monopoly over science and technology by maintaining 'tight geographical clusters'—by carefully overseeing who gains access to their 'technological innovations,' even in a 'demise of distance' (see, Analysis II, Paarlberg 2024, 129).

Phil Johnstone and Caitriona McLeish (2020) argue that oil was foundational to the organisation of the modern world order. In their concept of 'deep transitions' framework, they claim it was in the industries that supported WWI and WWII war efforts, that today's demand for oil and military infrastructure is reinforced through (Johnstone and McLeish 2020, 6-8). Juxtaposing oil as a 'proxy for geopolitical control [that] serves as the linchpin of a global

struggle for hegemony' (Johnstone and McLeish 2020, 10, 11). Reinforcing a 'feedback loop dependency' Johnstone and McLeish highlight how control(production)—not merely possession—has shaped the dynamics of resource control in IR. A central framework for the subsequent Analysis and Contexts.

1.2.3. Weaponised Interdependence

Structural Dependency within the global order, as outlined by Theotonio dos Santos, is 'economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others,' (Dos Santos 1970). This systemic asymmetry is coercively weaponised, as Andrew Farrell and Paul Newman (2019) argue, to reinforce entrenched dependencies. According to them one weapon is the use of sanctions that targets foundations of state's apparatus such as banking systems, trade routes, and resources (Ferrell and Newman 2019, 45, 76).

Exasperated structural dependencies posits that great powers within the global order, continue to subjugate peripheral states economies to their own profits (Dos Santos 1970). Moreover, Lee Jones (2015) and Nicholas Mulder (2022) categorise sanctions as the most sought-after weapon of interdependence as it exploits the non-Western's dependence on the West to its own benefit. In simplest terms, while resources remain (in this context) present in the non-Western's dominion, the weaponisation here speaks to how West controls the utility of the resource through a system of economic order that emerged from colonialism. Which Lee and Mulder state makes the use of sanctions far more destructive than conventional warfare, as it abuses a system that is inescapable to enforce compliance.

Together this Western and primarily, American centric hold over the key industries, movements and intuitions within IR—frames the object of the defiance spoken to within this paper.

1.3. Radical Resistance: The Logic of Defiance

Resistance even in its "violent" or uncomfortable forms are fundamentally important, argues Adom Getachew (2019), Paul Blokker and Andrea Brighenti (2011), justifying the intersection of resistance and colonialism (within a decolonial context). In Getachew's worldmaking perspective, she critiques the dominant narrative that frames colonialism as a seamless "transition" from empires to nations/states, (Getachew 2019, 17) arguing that such

binary portrayal erases the experiences, consequences and the enduring impact of colonialism itself.

By disguising the transition into modernity as a natural or seamless progression to the Westphalian modern system of states, the West beguiles the global community into viewing decolonisation as a *fait accompli*—a benevolent act rather than the outcome of deliberate, hard-fought resistance by the colonised (Getachew 2019, 17-18). In this context, Getachew's decolonial worldmaking echoes Fiona Adamson's (2020) critique of Western 'political assumptions masquerading' as "epistemic truths."

To that end, Blokker and Brighenti's politics of justification and defiance outline a key insight into how narrative shapes our perception of behaviour as highlighted in the Introduction.

For example, in their justification of defiance they explicate on how 'liberal democracies' like the one in the US (Blokker and Brighenti 2011, 6-7) employ institutional defiance—or elections. Where people can periodically reject an authority that no longer serves broader, collective or specific interests of the people it oversees. However, the 'justification' is not awarded within the international arena (Blokker and Brighenti 2011, 10-12) since the lack of "central authority" (not UN's membership) allows for conflicting "rules" of engagement to conflate resistance as something that is aggressive or offensive (to either sides) (Blokker and Brighenti 2011). In this context, the 'defiant' states become *legitimate* in their resistance as they expose the failures of a profoundly Eurocentric method of modern worldmaking.

1.4. Mechanisms of Resistance: Ontological Security Theory

Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen (2018) define ontological (in)security as "security concern" emerge from threats to one's identity, agency, and self-determination. Thus, OST itself—is defined as 'idea that states seek to perceive themselves as coherent and continuous over time, enabling them to act with agency'(Mitzen, 2006, 341–343). For example, the US's hegemonic identity is integral to its ontological security (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2018, 2–4). Or its identity as a 'first independent nation' after it gained independence in 1700s as integral to its identity continuity. There are four key aspects that frame the OST framework applied herein, these are:

1.4.1. Relational Security

Based on Simon Pratt's (2017) analysis, states derive identity not only through their identity as an individual but also through collective identity that is constructed through alliances or partnerships. Which are reinforced through "patterns of behaviour," which in the case of Iran and Venezuela is their collective opposition to American hegemony (Pratt 2017, 12–14). What threatens this? To that end, their relational (in)security (Ejdus 2018) stems from being labelled as 'arbitrary' alliances or being relational only because of their isolation. The reclamation of this narrative is as Filip Ejdus (2018) argues an important end to their alliances. Thus, here defiance is a negotiating medium for status to asserting self-determination in a global order that remains structurally skewed against non-Western actors (Onea 2014) to protect its relationships and invariably their identify.

1.4.2. Routines: Predictability as Stability

Building onto the Pratt's outline of relationality, Mitzen (2016) outlines, 'that routines often manifest as oppositional practices and can consists of actions like 'resisting sanctions, forming ideologically charged alliances, or rejecting imposed norms' (Mitzen 2006, 345). Thus within their relationality, their routinised or consecutive junctures of partnership, helps Tehran and Venezuela to actively preserve its OST and reinforce its friendship so as to mitigate its own insecurities over their overarching status of being 'outcasts.'

At the same time, these routines, while central to their survival can sometimes also deepen systemic divides, as Bahar Rumelili (2015) notes. Which can lead to 'peace anxieties' wherein, continuous adversarial dynamics can make the resolution or the "end" of tensions a unwanted outcome of agency (Rumelili 2015, 78–80). I.e. Perhaps the Iran and Venezuela continue to routinise their defiance to not have a weaning presence or relevancy in IR. This is perhaps the biggest caveat of analysing strategic defiance here, are they being "oppositional" to assert with a definite end or is it because their opposition provides them with security of 'relevancy?' Definitive ends can never be "objectively" definite as there are no historical end to either Iran and Venezuela's defiant status, nor America changing perspective on these states—in the near future.

1.4.3. Narrative Construction: Symbols and Icon

To that end, as highlighted in the Introduction, narratives and perspectives play a critical role in stabilising a state's self-perception, particularly during crises and conflict. By invoking historical figures and events, leaders construct continuity and legitimacy. For instance, Hugo

Chávez's use of Simon Bolivar underscores how such symbolism anchors sovereignty and identity amidst systemic threats (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018, 3). Symbolic acts and icons are powerful instruments of resistance argues Jelena Subotic and Steele Brent (2016) who highlights how action—such as rejecting global norms or asserting ideological independence—carry a significant meaning for a state's self-conception but so does the icon who does it. And while these acts can be dismissed as performative, serve as crucial 'emotional anchors' that reinforce autonomy while resisting material and ideological exclusion (Steele and Subotic 2024, 92).

1.4.4. Status Anxiety

And finally, defiance is once again understood through, Reinhard Wolf (2022) and Tudor Onea's (2014) discourse of status anxiety, which is a response a states' perception of threat to its position within the global order. Wolf states that status is not only material (economic standing) but is also tied to state's sense of self-worth and legitimacy (Wolf 2022, 45). Thus, for states like Iran and Venezuela, defiance reflects a broader effort to reclaim lost or contested status, even if their material gains (economic standing) remains unchanged. Onea, on the other hand, speaks to how great powers, engaging in "performative aspect of status competition," like the Cold War era, have turned defiance into a symbolic act that signals prestige, determination and loyalty to their respective ontologies (Onea 2014, 134).

Together, these five key aspects frame the lens through which the last theoretical lens will outline what strategic motives are being perused here?

1.5. Strategic Defiance: Political and Symbolic Gains in Alliances

At last, alliances—central to this thesis, are understood as a mechanism of 'epistemic resistance' as well as a 'force multiplier' that enhances material and symbolic capacities of resistance through relational narratives and routinised resistance. Thus, as Gabriel Elefteriu (2023) states that 'alliances create a framework for collective action that transcends individual state limitations,' helping to stabilise security landscapes through shared deterrence (Elefteriu 2023). To that end, Emily Goldman considers alliances as 'adaptive frameworks' that allow states to create strategic depth in uncertainty. Lastly, Mika Aaltola and Juha Käpylä (2016) 'geo-economic strategic' lens helps negate banalities and understand that material realities are

not the only strategic plane, but that strategy can exist even in 'symbolic landscapes of power' (Aaltola and Juha Käpylä 2016, 17). Even though defiant states incur an economic, political, and material loss, they continue to deepen their relationships because power and self-preservation are also important avenues of political engagement.

This paper borrows from Hew Strachan's (2005), 'method of thought' and considers 'strategy as inseparable from politics [and] not merely a military concept but a tool for achieving political ends' (Strachan 2005, 7) The objective method of constructing strategic defiance is outlined in the Methodology section. This strategic framework, thus, outlines what this author means in her conceptual utilisation of terms such as defiant, defiance, resistance, rapture, symbols, et.al. in order to bring out how states within a asymmetric world order, speak from positions of margins, and why their resistance is an important aspect of Security Studies, as it helps to decolonise the narrative for both the non-West and the West—with an objective of applying the same strategic rigour towards non-Western action, as one does to the West. Thus, this theoretical framework has outlined a rich intersectional discourse that underpins the two broad frameworks applied in this paper. The following section moves the focus towards more objective discussions of Iran-Venezuela alliance.

2. Historiography

The literature underpinning this thesis draws from key policy reports, academic research, and select investigative journalism that explore the Iran-Venezuela alliance. These sources examine the alliance either directly or through critical junctures such as sanctions, military cooperation, and regional geopolitics in both the Middle East and Latin America. Collectively, they converge on three central themes essential to this analysis: military partnerships, oil and sanctions.

2.1. Pariah Narratives in Context

The vast yet American-centric literature on pariah states examines how their labels shift and influence their behaviour within global politics. Thomas Henriksen outlines how "rogue" states have been a perpetual condition of global politics, discussing the "rise and fall" of such states while underscoring that it is not always the rogue itself that changes, but rather the system outside it (Henriksen 2001, 4–5). To that end, Anthony Lake, as highlighted in the Introduction, focuses on "rogue" states as actors who lay 'siege' of the international arena, by acquiring Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) (Lake 1994, 46). While Henriksen approach to rogues is situated in a historical examination of possible 'rogue' states, he underlines some of Lake's underlying concerns, highlighting how the domestic apparatus of the state along with aggressive international engagement constitutes what it means to be a *Blackfish state* (Lake 1994). However, Bruno Reynaud (2021) identifies contradictions in Iran's labelling as a "rogue" state, which he sees as more a product of its foreign policy than its domestic order (Reynaud 2021).

Echoing similar concerns, scholars such as Hussein Banai (2016) outline the limitations of "pariah diplomacy." They argue that these concepts hold little epistemic value, as their existence depends inherently on being labelled pariahs, not self-identification. They critique the "pariah" label as a Western construct used to justify intervention and reinforce global hierarchies, often overlooking the structural roots of such narratives (Banai 2016, 32; Reynaud 2021, 25). In a more practical context, Andrew Thomas (2013) argues that sanctions on such states often exacerbate political or economic instability or—in the case of Syria—become

"reasons" used to galvanise further resistance and resilience. Ultimately, sanctions fail to achieve strategic objectives (Thomas 2013, 29–30).

Finally, DJ Bederman (2002) critiques efforts to demilitarise pariah states, arguing that international institutions enforcing such transitions are often too weak to ensure compliance or punish violations. He also highlights the political reality that 'pariah' states are seldom isolated indefinitely, as they frequently seek alliances and military partnerships, complicating American-led demilitarisation efforts (Bederman 2002, 95–96). Bederman, along with Henriksen, provides valuable insights into the complexities of enforcing international security measures against states in the peripheries of global order. However, much of this literature remains centred on America's foreign policy agendas. And while they do critique the application of sanctions as well as the fragmented nature of responses to the so-called "rogue" behaviour, they often overlook the inherently political nature of the label itself—and continue to treat it as a descriptive tool. What gives America the authority to define and categorise other states in this way? Such critiques are either marginally addressed or left underdeveloped, leaving a critical gap in the discussion.

2.2. Geopolitics in Oil

Crude oil has been one of the 20th century's most valuable finds which has been, crucial for both Iran and Venezuela in their assertion of identity, the creation of their economic and political orders.

Luis Giusti's *La Apertura* (1999) explores Venezuela's late-1990s oil liberalisation under Hugo Chávez. Analysing the shift of oil as a resource towards ideological oil use. While Giusti's outline of Venezuelan oil diplomacy is important to the current political posture of Caracas, his critique of Chávez's focus on "anti-Americanism and distributionism," is what he considers to be the ultimate downfall to Venezuela's economic collapse. Ahmadali Gholam, Kamaruzaman Yusoff and Mansoureh Ebrahimi (2017), speak to how Iran has strategically used oil and other energy resources to counter American sanctions. Yet have not been able to develop "sustainable" uses for this resource and are ostensibly tied to the volatility that pins this industry. Yet they acknowledge that Iran has leveraging oil and gas for its economic survival which has elevated its position within the global geopolitics (Gholam, Yusoff, and Ebrahimi 2017).

Then speaking to both countries nationalising their oil, John M Guy (1979) analyses Venezuela under in the pre- Chávez years to show how oil wealth was channelled into regional projects, strengthening Venezuela's status as a 'middle power' (Guy 1979). Initiatives like the Venezuelan Investment Fund (FIV) enhanced regional cooperation, but these policies laid the groundwork for later economic overdependence (Guy 1979) led to Venezuela becoming an importing economy with no diversification in its economic portfolio.

For Iran, Jane Perry's (1974) parallels Venezuela's experience, detailing Iran's oil nationalisation after WWI, led to its swift geopolitical isolation. She describes how British and the Americans interference undermined Iran's independence, leaving the country economically dependent on foreign interests (see, Context I, II).

Similarly, David Painter (2014) adopts a postcolonial lens to trace Iran's anti-colonial resistance, linking the then PM-Mohmmed Mossadegh's 1951 UN speech to the broader New International Economic Order (NIEO) movement. In his analysis, Painter critiques 'oil diplomacy' as volatile tool that is unsustainable and often leads to further geopolitical insecurity, by drawing parallels to Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries' (OPEC) attempts to shift global power dynamics during the 1973 oil embargo.

Annegret Mähler (2009) examines Chávez's efforts to project Venezuela as a regional power through PetroCaribe and OPEC, emphasising Caracas's leveraging South-South cooperation rhetoric. However, she notes that domestic mismanagement and fluctuating oil prices eroded Venezuela's capacity for a sustained influence. And finally, Matteo Capasso (2021) extends a more critical discussion of Chávez's oil diplomacy and calls it a "structural trap." Because even with initiatives like PetroCaribe, Matteo believed, Venezuela achieved merely symbolic resistance and failed to overcome systemic inequalities in the global economy.

2.3. Sanctions and Resistance

Mohammad Soltaninejad (2023) applies 'prospect theory' to outline how Iran responded to sanctions and contradicts and underlines how Iran framed nuclear weapons goals and employed a defiant stance against the US. His framework of 'sanctions-driven diplomacy' highlights how states such as Iran adapt to their growing sanctions by maintaining strategic autonomy, often through regional and geopolitical partners, such as Venezuela. His perspective although important, undertheorizes over why Iran pivoted towards agreeing to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Richard Hanania's (2020) report on sanctions underscores how intent versus results should lead the US to rethink its immoral and ineffective approach to sanctions. However, he argues that American sanctions continue to strengthen internal cohesion in target states (Syria) and build resilience. Magdalena Defort and McLaughlin W Preston (2020) along with Evan Ellis (2020) analyse how the Iran-Venezuela is born out of their mutual isolation. But argue that while Iran strategically benefits, Venezuela bears disproportionate costs specifically of its further marginalisation akin to its partnership with Iran. To that end, Defort also warns that America's overuse of sanctions risks escalating these dynamics into asymmetric warfare and must be rethought more strategically.

2.4. Specific Iran-Venezuela Military Reports

Matthew Levitt's (2016) report on "Iran's strategic pivot" to Latin America, Hezbollah proxy networks and its growing dominion is "emblematic" to the great power rivalries during the Cold War, which ultimately turned both Latin America and the Middle East as proxy wars hot bed. In his report, he frames this vie for "shaping" Latin America against Western dominance, as a direct result of America's overarching presence in the region as well as the benefits Iran would receive by directly challenging it for hemispheric domination. Similarly, Michael Singh's (2020) focuses on economic strategies like barter trade often used by Iran and Venezuela to circumvent sanctions underscores a "strategic impasse" where, Iran continues to challenge global economic hierarchies, through its use of states such as Venezuela that resides in "America's backyard."

Simon Romero's (2007) *New York Times* exploration of the symbolic ties between Iran and Venezuela, such as direct flights, cultural exchanges, and joint production initiatives, which reinforce their partnership ideologically and diplomatically also adds "symbolic acts" Douglas Farah and Caitlyn Tavarez (2021) and Jeferson Guarin, (2020) further highlight Iran's use of soft power through platforms buying into regional television and broadcasting networks such as *HispanTV* to project anti-US narratives across Latin America, influencing a constant state of rebellion and shared goals within Venezuela, all while underscoring how Hezbollah's entrenchment in Venezuela has intensified their non-state illicit financial networks.

Despite the abundance of literature on proxy collaborations involving Iran and Venezuela, there is a noticeable absence of detailed analysis of their state-centric military partnerships. This thesis addresses that gap by drawing on secondary sources, sanctions reports, and journalistic

investigations to construct a cohesive understanding of their military cooperation. Thus, the literature review has provided considerable analytical insight into connecting sovereignty projects to oil and reframing defiance as a strategic concept.

To that end, while the existing scholarship touches on various insights, what remains missing is a cohesive, decolonial approach to defiance itself. Often understood as resistance, defiance is always examined through a lens of material outcomes. This project shifts the focus from material outcomes to more "symbolic strategic ends," where strategic depth does not overlook economic or relative gains but positions relevance, status, and autonomy as equally critical axioms of "gains."

3. Methodology

The methodology for this thesis adopts a dual mechanism of Interpretive Process Tracing (IPT) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The aim of adopting this combination is ultimately to outline how Iran-Venezuela's alliance leads to strategic defiance.

3.1. Interpretive Process Tracing

The IPT method is adopted by David Collier (2011), who outlines that PT is used to map causal mechanisms and causal expiations to trace a causal chain of how a trigger can cause an effect. Collier argues that These cause-effect mechanisms can be tested through specific tests that determine whether causal pathways, i.e., intermediary steps after the Trigger, indeed lead to the effect that is initially hypothesised (Collier 2011). James Mahoney (2015), on the other hand, outlines how PT can be shaped or influenced through contextual, historical analysis and chronological sequences. By incorporating these perspectives, this thesis draws causal inferences between triggers, sequences, and narratives of defiance, using five key elements to examine the Iran-Venezuela alliance: strategy, outcomes, agency, isolation, defiance, and legitimacy.

For example (Trigger III): The 2005 US arms embargo on Venezuela restricted access to Western arms markets, disrupting Venezuela's 'sovereignty' (OST) and self-determination (postcolonialism). It also prevented other suppliers, like Spain and Israel, from engaging with Venezuela. The intermediary steps (Collier 2011) that defiant states take thereafter form their response to this disruption. This response then frames the 'effect,' such as the pursuit of alternative partners or networks. Ultimately, this demonstrates how Venezuela defies US hegemony and integrates itself into an alternative 'axis' or network. This example illustrates how PT uses mechanisms that connect systemic pressures to strategic outcomes, ensuring that causal pathways are empirically validated.

Grounded in the theory outlined earlier this paper uses both OST and postcolonial concepts as 'causal mechanisms' that ultimately lead to the defiant states' strategic defiance. Through a combined lens of OST and postcolonial theory, situating defiance within a historical and epistemic contexts, emphasising its role as a response to systemic exclusion and a reclamation

of agency. The integration of OST and postcolonial theory here provides the conceptual foundation for analysing how systemic exclusion triggers material actions and discursive strategies of defiance, as mapped through IPT and validated via CDA.

3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The term discourse, as Anna Holzscheiter (2013) states, is a 'space where intersubjective meaning is created, sustained, and transformed,' this constructs "social truths." She argues that then, discourse analysis, is conducted to assess how 'discursive labels, language and terminology are used to construct this social reality.' To that end, this paper uses, Teun van Dijk's (1997) 'power in discourse', to understand who has the power to create 'social truths' by centring on individuals who hold power in discourse, i.e. social elites, like Prime Ministers, Presidents et. al.

Furthermore, van Dijk's critical lens into who legitimises discourse, is borrowed to speak to the power the US holds in its discursive label of 'rogue' nations (T. Dijk 1997, xii, 324–xii, 324). To that end, 'rhetoric of resistance' is outlined through Iryna Synytsia's (2021) critical analysis of discourse in Ukraine under the Russian invasion, where she outlines how discursive opposition to dominant narratives is constructed and reproduced within mass media. Specifically, to highlight the interplay of discourse and power in shaping public perceptions (Synytsia 2021). Finally, this paper also employs Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak* to ensure that defiant states are speaking to their agency, delf-deamination and pollical agendas by including sources, historical context and 'self-proclaimed' rhetoric towards their actions (Spivak and Young 1991).

3.3. Research Design:

Thus, this research is designed on three key hypothesis:

H1: American-led sanctions act as triggers that lead to alliance formation between Iran and Venezuela, overcoming 'weaponised interdependence' in the global economy.

H2: Anti-imperial narratives challenge US hegemony while addressing threats to ontological security and status anxiety.

H3: The Iran-Venezuela alliance reflects strategic depth rooted in systemic exclusion rather than being a temporary framework.

3.3.1. Testing Hypothesis in PT:

Hoop Tests: Does the absence of sanctions reduce the likelihood of the alliance? The chronological sequences, along with the escalating levels of sanctions and their alliances, stem from the sanctions themselves. This phenomenon is apparent between Outcome I and Outcome IV (Collier 2011).

Furthermore, *Smoking-Gun* Test: Is there explicit evidence linking sanctions to alliance formation? The response to each *trigger* shows that there is a straightforward causal mechanism between sanctions and Iran-Venezuela's alliance (Collier 2011).

Testing CDA:

Since discourse is a construct of 'social truths' (Holzscheiter 2013). Here, the paper operates on the parameters of: who is speaking? Who is participating in discourse? How are narratives put forth? And to what extent are non-Western speakers—those directly affected by sanctions and triggers—represented within the discourse? (Holzscheiter 2013) Thus ensuring a legitimate interpretation of causality within discourse and action to outline how sanctions lead to alliance and defiance leads to agency.

3.4. Limits and Challenges

The use of both interpretation and discourse within IPT and CDA means that the analysis within this paper is vulnerable to bias, complex causality and subject to interpretation. CDA also risks in over-emphasising narrative. And most importantly, this thesis limits itself to asymmetry between the West and non-West but does not venture explicitly into outlining the consequences of Iran-Venezuela's internal power asymmetry.

Sources:

The sources here are a mix of Western and non-Western newspapers, magazine articles and reports. Particularly for the West, this thesis uses the *New York Times, Washington Post, The Economist, The Guardian, BBC News and The War Zone*. And for non-Western sources, the primary sources are *Al Jazeera, Tehran Times, IRNA English*, and *Venezuelanalysis*.

Official sanctions reports, from both the EU and US are also included to inculcate verbiage and rationale towards sanctions imposed on Iran and Venezuela. Finally, this paper uses reports from organisations such as Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and other policy papers to outline the larger 'narrative' of rogue nations to trace the perspective and oppositional viewpoints to fulfil CDA requirements.

In conclusion through the comprehensive framework explicated in this Introduction chapter, This paper, answers its research question through the application of OST and postcolonialism across Iran-Venezuela alliance in two critical fronts: military cooperation and oil diplomacy. Through a process of dual methodology; interpretative process tracing and CDA. To reiterate, defiance here is considered active and not reactive.

Chapter 1: Backgrounder on the Iran-Venezuela Alliance

1. Historical Foundations of the Iran-Venezuela Alliance

At the turn of the 20th century, both Iran and Venezuela were so-called modern states. Although Iran was never formally colonised, Venezuela had achieved independence from Spain and Gran Colombia's federal dominion by the late 1800s (Restuccia 2021). While a domestic monarchy ruled it, Venezuela's governance was based on loose 'democratic' institutions with successive military rule (Restuccia 2021). However, their formal entry within geopolitics was primarily through their main economic output, crude and petroleum oil. The rising global demand for energy resources during WWI (Johnstone and McLeish 2020) heightened their international engagement through oil trade.

The first radical rapture Venezuela experienced was its oil discoveries in 1920, which shifted away from its agrarian-based economy (Giusti 1999; Getachew 2019). And by the culmination of WWII, it emerged as a key oil supplier for the US and the European Union (EU). On the other hand, 'oil was a double-edged sword' for Iran (Perry 1974), as its abundant reserves and 'uncolonised' tag tempted both the Dutch and the British Empire. Ultimately, the British could retain control of the key oil ports through the Tobacco Concession of 1890 and the 'discovery' of oil fields led to the establishment of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) by 1909 (Balaghi 2013). Thus, as Getachew aptly states, resource-rich countries were the 'finest fruit' of Western domination—as Indigenous (non-Western) resources were still vied for foreign control, even if they were never formally colonised (Getachew 2019, 16) or were in their post-colonial state.

This chapter outlines three key contexts that shape Iran-Venezuela's anti-colonial/imperial worldmaking.

Context I: Colonial Legacies and Resource Exploitation

In Iran, by 1951, Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh signalled the intention of nationalising oil and thus effectively removing the British control of its oil and APOC. By stating that

> 'the oil resources of Iran, like its soil…are the property of the people of Iran…ownership and authority are inalienable…they are part of the foundations on which stand our national sovereignty and our admitted equality' (Mossadegh 1951).

This directly challenged British control, was a watershed moment for Iran, and framed its political ontology as anti-imperial. In the undercurrents of this declaration, the UK had ensued its challenge to Iran's nationalisation by declaring APOC a publicly held company and, thus, directly operated through the British government (Yergin 1991, 456). As such, Winston Churchill, the then PM of the UK, was able to levy a direct embargo against Iran's oil trade, specifically in the Abadan region (Declassified Report 2024).

This act of blatant hypocrisy—by a state 'transitioning' to Westphalian statehood—reflected Britain's earlier playbook in India, where the initial introduction of the English East India Company (EEIC) at the inception of its colonial rule, a 'private trading company' which was later repurposed as the colonial corridor for formal British rule in India. Fearing the same fate, Mossadegh warned that the UK's embargo and clandestine moves in Iran mirrored colonial exploitation under the guise of 'free markets'(Mossadegh 1951). This tension between Western capitalist legitimisation and the non-West's rejection of such a system underscored the underlying ideological tensions that later materialised into the Cold War (Schenk 2021, 22).

On the Venezuelan front, it continued oil exports throughout WWI and WWII, cementing its economic order primarily based on oil. Capitalising on its oil wealth, by 1979, Venezuela decided to formulate its own national oil company called the *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PdVSA) (Guy 1979). This nationalisation of oil allowed Caracas to have greater control over its oil wealth, with the agenda of diversifying its economic portfolio by reinvesting oil revenue (Giusti 1999).

Context II: Unrealised Nationalisation and Imperial Pushback

The UK's pushback extended far beyond sanctions and assumed a covert operation in Iran and tapped America's growing presence in the Persian Gulf region. Together, the two Western states engaged in continuous campaigns of subversion to overturn Mossadegh's nationalisation decision. Even though his rightful push towards nationalisation was put together through his own democratically elected leadership (De Luce 2003), ultimately, this sowed the US as an interfering body within Iran. Reports from declassified files also highlight how the US systematically used its newspapers, like the *NYT* to instil doubt in the international arena over Mossadegh's leadership, along with the British doing the same domestically in Iran through its ownership or investment in Iranian media apparatus (Romero 2015).

When these projects failed to resurrect a domestic-born coup, the UK and the US escalated their intervention and orchestrated *Operation Ajax* in 1953 (Risen 2000). This covert CIA-MI6 operation tried to oust Mossadegh from power, although it was unsuccessful—it intensified the rift in Iran between its democratic leadership and its people. It installed the Pahlavi ruler, the Shah, as the oil intermediary. This resulted in a quasi-nationalised oil apparatus, and the birth of National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), under the preview of the Shah, was directly dealing with the APOC and other Western oil companies (Risen 2000; Romero 2015).

In Venezuela, *PdVSA* remained a quasi-nationalist apparatus, specifically as the country continued to rely economically on American imports of its oil. This reliance shaped Venezuela's resource dependency and the subsequent 'weaponisation' of this interdependence through sanctions (Ferrell and Newman 2019). This dynamic highlights the larger ideological narratives and context of how colonial legacies and post-colonial state-building entanglements shaped both Tehran and Caracas's anti-imperial ideologies. The next section outlines their responses and the ensuing radical 'rupture' (Getachew 2019; Barkawi and Laffey 2006).

1. The Revolutionary Rupture: Iran-Venezuela defiance in perspective

This subsection outlines how both defiant states shape their economic and military agendas within the context established in the previous section.

Context A: Counter-Hegemonic Narratives, the New "Economy of Resistance"

Various factors shaped Iran's 1979 revolution, but the Shah's refusal to join the 1973 OPEC oil embargo served as a critical spark in oil politics (Gross 2019). In the buildup to the 1970s, with heightened Cold War tensions, Israel's territorial expansions into the Golan Heights (Syria), Sinai Peninsula (Egypt), and parts of the West Bank (then under Jordanian control) intensified the region and resulted in the *Yom Kippur War*. In the foreground, the OPEC, consisting primarily of non-Western, Arab states and Venezuela, finally decided to sanction the West by agreeing to hike oil prices by almost 70% (Smith 1973). This move by the OPEC countries—sans Iran, under the Shah—led to the West dubbing OPEC's sanctions as the 'Arab Oil Weapon,' this disrupted 40% of the West's oil import (Smith, 1973; H. Farnsworth 1973).

For Venezuela, the aftermath of the 1980 Oil Crisis highlighted its economic instability and dependence on oil exports. While it experienced tremendous growth during the 1970s, by the 1980s, economic vulnerabilities stemming from decades of trade dependency on the West finally set in (Romero 2007). This led to Caracas's second Bolivarian Revolution under Chávez in 1999.

In juxtaposition, when the US applied the same oil sanction against Japanese imperialism in China in 1941, their move was considered to be a 'weapon of war and strategy,' (Yergin 1991) yet when OPEC applied the same pressures on the West, this move by the so-called 'cartel' (BBC News 2010) was questioned, 'if the oil weapon can be sustained, what can be gained by its use?'(Smith 1973). The gains here were to prevent the West from aiding Israel's moves in the Middle East, as was America's in 1941, to stop Japan's imperial pivot inside China (Yergin 1991). Consequently, due to OPEC's embargo, in 1974, the West organised its own bloc to coordinate how oil will be imported, called the International Energy Agency (IEA) and established petroleum reserves to combat any further interruptions to their 'free flow' of oil agenda (Lake 1994). A move that can also be seen as resilience amidst sanctions, (see Analysis I, II).

As outlined in Context I, *PdVSA*'s nationalisation remained limited and while Chávez sought to sever this dependency, the entrenched economic reliance on the US with Venezuela's historic lack of alternative exports was central to his expulsion of Exxon Mobil in 2007 (see, Analysis I). This transferred proprietary control of oil exports to the *PdVSA* (Reuters Staff 2007) and its desired partners. His government framed these policies as essential to restoring Venezuela's sovereignty (Chávez Frías 2015).

This context outlines how both Iran and Venezuela ordered their 'economy of resistance' (Vahdat 2022). Furthermore, this context also highlights the asymmetry of the power in knowledge production underscores the critique of this paper; Eurocentric bias epistemically alienates perspectives of the non-West and represents bias and perspectives that continue to shape how actors and acts of the non-West are perceived (Adamson 2020; Weinraub 1973).

Context B: Axis of Unity

Emboldened by their 'resistance' through oil, much of the oil wealth investment for Venezuela and Tehran has been done to bolster its military threshold. Geopolitically, both countries within their respective hemispheres have been subjected to years of Cold War tensions, growing American and Russian proxies (Amirah-Fernández 2011), as well as internal reordering through their domestic revolutions. In Latin America, Chávez's close relationship with Fidel Castro, Cuba's leader, played a significant role in shaping Venezuela's military agendas, specifically through their partnership in Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America *or ALBA* and the establishment of the Directorate General of Military Counterintelligence or DGCIM in Caracas, where personal were trained under Cuban military counterparts (D. Hirst 2005).

Iran's discontent with the Shah's overreliance on foreign powers and failure to craft an independent geopolitical identity before the revolution shaped its military agendas after 1979. This was particularly evident in the ensuing conflict between Iran-Iraq in the 1980s, started through Iraq's invasion of Iran and growing regional hegemony, supported covertly by the US (Amirah-Fernández 2011). Despite Western support during the war, Tehran turned towards unconventional alliances, including partnerships with North Korea (Bederman 2002). It prompted Iran's shift towards an asymmetric military order by establishing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its foreign wing called the Quds Force, solidifying its military and ideological independence (Farah and Tavarez 2021).

Iran and Venezuela's rejection of military 'alliances were not merely ideological; it was a strategic pivot to self-reliance in the face of systemic exclusion' (Balaghi 2013, Amirah-Fernández 2011). This early recognition underscored the ideological alignment and mutual defiance of hegemonic powers that would define their enduring partnership and gave foundation to its own 'axis of unity' (The Economist 2008, Reuters Staff 2007).

The context here frames the postcolonial critique of SS and shapes the defiance of both Iran and Venezuela within this 'context' (Blokker and Brighenti 2011). To that end, it explicates both defiant states' ontological frameworks, specifically their identity, political ideology, economic structures, and counter-hegemonic perspectives within a historical lens. This

contextualisation underscores how both Iran and Venezuela experience their identity within a ‘continuity,’ as highlighted by the OST framework (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018).

Analysis I- Oil as an Economy of Resistance:

The first analysis chapter, henceforth Analysis I, builds on the foundation of Iran and Venezuela's relationship, as outlined in Contexts A and B, and shifts its chronological focus to the period after 2010. This shift is emphasised to recognise how new political climates influence their partnership while maintaining a continuity of identity and ideas rooted in their historical contexts. The post-2010 period saw the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, and 2013 witnessed the demise of Chávez and a new government under Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. Moreover, in 2015, Maduro began his tenure under the rule of decree, which was a central tenant to the US-led sanctions. Together, these events underscore the chronological background of this analysis, which is instrumental in understanding, first, the sanctions levied against both states, and second, their subsequent resistance as defiant states (AFP 2022).

Therefore, this chapter examines two key triggers:

A: The 2012 removal of Iranian banks from the *SWIFT* international financial system limited Iran's ability to conduct oil sales. It forced it to adopt barter trade mechanisms, including oil-for-gold agreements and followed oil-tanker shipments to China and Venezuela.

B: In 2019, the US sanctions on *PdVSA* cut Venezuela off from international oil markets and intensified its dependence on Iranian partnerships, specifically through oil shipments.

These events are used here to map causal pathways and intermediary steps that defiant states took in response to specific sanctions—which will further explain how Iran and Venezuela's partnership under these sanctions was accelerated and materialised into alternative economic frameworks. Using the Context outlined in the previous chapter, Analysis I will deliver on two important Outcomes that will finally shape how defiant states create/utilise their defiance as a strategy.

Alternative Oil Networks: Resilience Amidst Sanctions

Trigger I:

In 2012, the EU issued a press release outlining its decision to expand its collective sanctions on Iran, citing Iran's nuclear agenda and reports of human rights issues after the 2009 election in Tehran (Council of The European Union 2012). As stated, these were targeted towards 'investment[s] in Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical industries…prohibiting credits, loans, new investment in and joint ventures with such companies in Iran' (Council of The European Union 2012).

The EU's decision was heavily influenced by US pressures that had intensified in the background of the Arab Spring and its regional alignments with Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Israel (Congressional Research Service, 2023). To intensify a 'joint' Western approach, the US successfully 'coerced' or persuaded Belgium to disconnect Iran from SWIFT services, thus 'stagnating' Iran's economic systems (SWIFT 2012). Jointly, these sanctions also stated that 'any third-party institution facilitating Iranian oil transactions faced punitive measures,' This extraterritorial reach of the US, the EU compliance and the isolation from SWIFT were, according to EU representatives, applied in hopes to 'isolat[e] Iran, with no quarrel to the Iranian people' (Traynor and Hopkins 2012).

In reaction to these sanctions, Iran warned, "if any disruption happens regarding the sale of Iranian oil, the Strait of Hormuz[3] will...be closed" (Traynor and Hopkins 2012), yet they persisted. This led to Iran quickly establishing alternative mechanisms, including barter trade agreements and oil-for-gold exchanges, to sustain its oil exports (BBC Business 2012). Turning towards India (amongst others) and adopting a Rupee-based payment system 'that allowed Iran to import Indian metals and machinery equivalent to the value of its oil exports' (BBC and Bagchi 2012). Even before 2012, Iran and Venezuela had already began escalating their partnership over oil, and in response to the immediate sanctions, Iran began using Caracas as a financial and logistical ally (IRNA English 2014) by running oil through *PdVSA* for cash-for-oil payments (BBC News 2010; Romero 2009). This circumvented direct Iranian bank exchanges and in return, Iran invested in projects such as *HispanTV* (Kucera 2011) and other joint energy industries.

[3] Important passage between the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, borders with Iran, UAE and Oman.

Outcome I: The *SWIFT* ban and the EU and US sanctions completely disrupted Iran's oil trade. The creation of alternative barter channels allowed Iran and Venezuela to formalise their nexus as an "alternative financial network" (Rodríguez 2020). Although Venezuela was not undergoing similar severity of sanctions yet, their symbolic "disapproval" of 'American imperialism' (Parraga and Ore 2012) was important to Tehran.

Venezuela ensued a public campaign against this move; by citing Chávez's speech at G77[4] and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) it intensified its approach towards Tehran, by emphasising historic and symbolic rhetoric to show how its partnership with Iran showed 'non-Western' resistance and endurance even under economic stagnation (Tejas 2015). Farrell and Newman too used their *NYT* op-ed, to call out US's decision to involve private enterprises like *SWIFT* calling it a 'coercive agenda that would alienate the EU.' Furthermore, warned that the EU and the UK might start looking to establish alternative financial systems and ultimately decouple their institutions from the US (Farrell and Newman 2018).

Post-2014 Oil Crisis Years

In 2014, the world underwent another oil crisis, triggered by trifecta of oversupply, increased US domestic production and the weakening of global demand from over $110 per barrel in mid-2014 to below $50 by early 2015 (Nardelli et al. 2014). For both Iran and Venezuela, this crisis was deeply destabilising. In Venezuela, Maduro leadership was fraught with political instability and allegations of election corruption (Kelly 2013). The economic destabilisation caused by the 2014 oil crisis added urgency to The Joint Cooperation Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations, as both the EU and the US recognised the broader need for stability in oil markets and regional geopolitics (JCPOA 2015).

The JCPOA agreement began under President Obama and President Hassan Rouhani, (JCPOA, 2015), between US, EU, China, Russia, the UK and Iran. The tenants of the JCPOA agreement were essentially aimed to reaffirm that Iran's nuclear programme will be 'exclusively peaceful.' In return, the EU and the US would ease oil, nuclear material and economic sanctions on the condition that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will be allowed to have regular bilateral monitoring capacities (JCPOA 2015). This would

[4] Group of 77 is a United Nations 'developing countries coalition.'

ultimately lead to a naturalisation of relations between all members present, specifically on Iran's economic woes under its comprehensive sanctions.

In juxtaposing, the involvement of Russia and even China at this juncture speaks to the larger nuance that Iran's nuclear program holds to these stakeholders-as Nardelli et al. note,

> 'even though Russia has been instrumentalising Iran's nuclear programme to weaken US foreign policy, it would not favour having a nuclear Iran on its borders. China does not want a nuclear Iran either, or it could lose an opportunity for a US-China relationship, particularly over Taiwan,' (Nardelli et al. 2014)

This underlines that ultimately, even non-Western worldmaking is guided through its own strategic interests and agendas. Often the narrative underscoring the partnership between countries such as China, Russia and Iran and to that end Venezuela, frames their partnership as a maligned or erratic, but they have intentionality as well as larger self-determining goals.

Trigger II

Under the Trump administration and the new Maximum Pressure (Trump 2018) initiative, and the reinstating of the Iran sanctions, the US also began an extensive sanctions regime on Venezuela after Maduro's re-election in 2019 (DeYoung, Mufson and Faiola 2019) and its official support for Maduro's opposition Juan Guaidó (UN Mission Brazil 2019). This sanction eliminated the petroleum trade between these two countries. Further, it pushed Iran and Venezuela together (Rezaian 2020), expressly, as they had already set up an alternative network of oil trade through *Trigger I*.

By 2020, Venezuela's oil-producing and exporting capabilities had 'hit its all-time low, with internal shortages and growing economic insecurity' (IRNA English, 2019; Taylor 2020). Iran provided "expansive aid towards Venezuela, through oil tankers (Reuters 2020) shipment to Caracas (BBC 2020). This signalled an open defiance of the US, where Venezuela called US sanctions a threat to the world (Al Jazeera 2019). Both Iran and Venezuela replicated their 2012 response and started using a gold-for-oil arrangement, which "kept Venezuela alive" (Tehran Times 2024b), according to Maduro. Severing the *PdVSA* link for Iran and Venezuela, both countries turned towards independent refineries in China via resellers in Malaysia (The Economist 2024a; Parraga 2024; Rezaian 2020). In the newest phase of sanctions resistance, Tehran and Caracas used ship-to-ship (STF) transfers (Newdick 2021) by switching off their tracking or even using clandestine bases and names to avoid detection (Reuters 2020). This oil

is sold on the black market at a slashed price and reportedly through China's oil and gas company, PetroChina (The Economist 2024a).

Outcome II: As the *Washington Post* 'Money War' reports stated,

> 'sanctions on Venezuela… contributed to an economic contraction roughly three times as large as that caused by the Great Depression in the US,' (Stein 2024).

Ultimately, Trigger I and Outcome I, paved way for both Iran and Venezuela alternative networks of circumventing US's centrality within the oil trade. The onslaught of economic repercussions through their defiance only intensifies further sanctions which makes this triad eternally engulfed in a complex nexus of narrative, perspective and adversarial world view. To that end, the benefit to other non-Western countries such as India (Trigger I) and China (Trigger II) also speaks to how other states utilise defiant countries for their own non-Western engagement but are protected through their position within the world order. Their defiance was symbolically presented through a televised arrival of oil shipments, 'escorted by the Venezuelan navy and air force,' as way to signal their coordinated resistance (BBC News 2020; Newdick 2021) towards the US. Specifically, as not all oil tankers from Iran reached Venezuela and were often intercepted by the US.

In conclusion, the Iran-Venezuela alliance's 'economy of resistance' and might have never intensified if not for the US-led sanctions. Their symbolic and material gains through this resistance, particularly for Venezuela, underscore that this alliance is moving towards more strategic foresight and amplifying their rhetoric of counter-hegemony and anti-imperialism. This is further explicated through the next analysis chapter.

Analysis II- Military Partnerships

The Iran-Venezuela alliance has been fundamentally anchored by its shared oil resources. In the undercurrents, another key theme of their partnership emerges—the military. This chapter shifts its focus towards how sanctions on weapons, military technology, arms, and other items are influenced by how these two defiant states perceive their regional geopolitics. As outlined in Context II and Context B, both states were confronted by the presence of US-aligned strategic partners in the Middle East and Latin America.

In the MENA region, Iran's tensions reverberated through its participation in OPEC, its disengagement with Israel, the spillover from congruent and concurrent crises in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian issue. Meanwhile, for Venezuela, in the Latin American region—another proxy battlefield for the Cold War tensions—insecurity stems from Colombia's enduring closeness with the US—especially its collaboration on counter-narcotics operations involving the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and CIA—and its own border and resource control issues with Guyana (Cooper 2006).

The challenge underscoring their military collaboration, as seen in Context B, lies in the asymmetric nature of both states' military strategies and state order and the veil of suspicion that clouds even routine military modernisation requirements (The Guardian 2006). Given that their own defence and security apparatus includes offshoots of non-state actors and so-called 'fringe militia,' sanctions here become quite complex, convoluted and constantly overlapping with 'counterterrorism' charges (Guarin P 2020). Nevertheless, their unconventional collaboration here, has been central their bolstering of military capacity allowing Iran and Venezuela to circumvent traditional power structures and assert their autonomy in the face of systemic exclusion, especially through their use of alternative financing and networks (Outcome I, II).

This chapter will focus on two key events:

A: the 2005-2006 US embargo on arms to Venezuela

B: the 2023 US sanctions on both Iran and Venezuela based on military technology sharing

These events will be used to map causal pathways to specific sanctions—which will further explicate on how Iran and Venezuela's partnership under these sanctions were accelerated and materialised into alternative weapons trade, technology sharing as well as, the development of indigenous capabilities. The narrative surrounding these actions will be further analysed through the context already mapped in the previous chapters.

Anti-Imperial Solidarity: Military Modernisation Amidst Embargos

In 2002, President Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech framed states like Iran and Iraq as direct threats to US security in the context of the events of 9/11 (Bush 2002). Chávez UN speech in the following years also marked a decidedly frail relationship between the US and Venezuela, once he called Bush the 'devil' (Chávez Frías 2006). Iran, on the other hand, was directly threatened through the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam Hussein which signalled to Tehran that similar actions could be taken against its sovereignty (Amirah-Fernández 2011). At the same time, in 2002, much like Context II's Operation Ajax, Venezuela was once again threatened through a brief coup that removed Chávez from power (briefly)—intensifying his miff with America (Chávez Frías 2006). Simultaneously, Venezuela, becoming a closer ally for Cuba, began investing its oil wealth towards 'soft power' political gains by setting up initiatives such as ALBA and Petrocaribe to project alternate frameworks to mitigate the growing tensions with the US (Kucera 2011).

Trigger III:

Therefore, when in 2006, the Bush administration imposed an arms embargo on Venezuela, accusing Chávez of failing to comply with its US counter-terrorism measures and enacted the Arms Export Control Act (Congressional Research Service 2024); this ultimately blocked Caracas' prevailing military upgrades and weapons purchases. The unprecedented evocation of this sanction, for Caracas, singled to Venezuela that it was now part of this 'nexus of evil' and thus strengthened his pivot towards Iran and even Russia. This sanction also outlined that reports of Hezbollah's presence in Latin America were through Venezuela's oil corridor, yet as the Guardian reported, 'there was no mention of oil…as [America was] …a big importer of Venezuelan oil and cannot afford to cut off that supply" (The Guardian 2006). Another tenant of the sanctions touched on possible links between Colombia's growing guerrilla militia like Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and ELN (Guarin P 2020; Forero

2005; Maza 2019) and Hezbollah and Venezuela. Brazil, Israel, Spain and the Netherlands cancelled their sale to Venezuela, citing fear of US backlash (Holland 2006).

In response, Venezuela re-approached Russia (Hendren 2005), replaced its 1980s American F-18s with Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30MK2, and purchased Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and long-range radar systems through China (台北時報 2005) and Iran (The Economist 2006).

Outcome III: The already fraught relationship between the US and Venezuela was intensified in the aftermath of the US embargo; the problematic use of 'loose' grounds of sanctions is not only underscored in the sanctions themselves (Congressional Research Service 2024) but also framed the tensions preceding it. Chavez's response of using so-called 'mockery and jokes' as the counter-American narrative was a new behaviour of defiance introduced through this Trigger (Parraga and Ore 2012; Fassihi and Kirkpatrick 2019). The resurrection of the Cold War style of 'us vs them' rhetoric underscored in Bush's axis of evil problematises the power of discourse and narrative within this paper and contextualises why defiant countries continue to push for alternatives and counter-hegemonic avenues of trade, arms, weapons etc.

Trump's Maximum Pressure and COVID-19 context

Under the Maduro government in Venezuela and Iran's reinstallation of sanctions in 2018 (see Trigger II) under the "Maximum Pressure" (The Economist 2024) campaign, this troika continued to experience fraught relationships. Trump's push to further alienate the Iranian government heightened concerns about the growing closeness between Venezuela and Iran, particularly as reports of oil-based tanker sharing and military modernisation intensified in the background.

The COVID-19 period was catastrophic for Iran and Venezuela, as comprehensive US sanctions continued to stiffen their economic and global participation, restricting the movement of goods essential to supporting their economic orders (Taylor 2020; Stein, Nakashima, and Schmidt 2024). Venezuela's fears of another American-linked coup d'état finally materialised in 2020 with *Operation Gideon* (Luis Granados Ceja 2021). Although this operation was primarily undertaken by the US-based private security company Silvercorp (Ward 2020), it involved ousted Venezuelan military personnel and two to three former US Army Green Berets (Luis Granados Ceja 2021). While direct links to the US government were never confirmed, Maduro's warnings of potential "Colombia or American-linked" coups came to fruition (Al

Jazeera 2019b). This again echoed Operation Ajax (see Context I), where external interference similarly disrupted a sovereign state's political and military stability. Although with President Biden in office in 2020, US's comprehensive sanctions on Venezuela under 'Maximum Pressure' were eased. However, the JCPOA commitments with Iran were never able to be renegotiated.

In 2023, two new geopolitical conflicts with relevance arose, first the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 and then the conflict in the Gaza Strip in 2023. The US, Iran and Venezuela are all directly engulfed in this context either directly or indirectly (Venezuela). Moreover, a new report emerged in the US Congress in December 2023-2024 titled *Restricting Rogue-State Revenue: Strengthening Energy Sanctions On Russia, Iran, and Venezuela*. This comprehensive report outlined measures the US must take to quell the so-called 'wolf pack of evil' (Gramer 2023). Specifically, this report states,

> 'multiple rounds of sanctions targeting those involved in the illicit finance networks that fund Hamas: Iran, its primary state sponsor…and that [impacts] US security …and our allies, notably Israel…Iran continues to fill up its war chest, and Venezuela is escalating military activities…' (House Financial Services 2024).

Trigger IV:

In 2023, the US sanctioned Iran on its UAV or 'drone technology' by stating that Hezbollah and Hamas were using Iranian drones in the Gaza Strip and Russia against Ukraine. Stating that

> 'These sanctions will exert pressure on Iran's missile and UAV program in addition to constraining Iran's conventional arms transfers and ongoing military relationships with countries like Venezuela and Russia' (Lewis and Mohammed 2023).

In response, these sanctions remained largely unproductive. Through Trigger III, in 2006, Venezuela had already begun seeking Iranian expertise for UAVs to achieve their 'goal of building an independent defence industry' (The Economist 2008). The drone-technology sharing issue is critical to the US as it uses its own radar, navigation and weapons delivery system's technical superiority as a strategic commodity within the global arms trade. This 'power in knowledge' (Paarlberg 2004) is significant for its strategic partnership with Israel as they both remain the foremost countries with a sophisticated system of drone technology (Copp 2024).

Outcome IV: By October 2024, Maduro won the elections in Venezuela and Iran again, and Russia was the first to recognise him as the rightful leader (Faulconbridge 2024). This again intensified the collective response to US-backed sanctions, as the US continues to disengage and unrecognised Maduro's rule in Venezuela. The growing drone technology sharing that began in 2007 has continued to exist even under the sanctions (Egozi, 2023). After the new bilateral friendship treaty was signed in 2022 (AFP 2022), Iran and Venezuela had already begun setting up their joint energy and, reportedly to an extent, 'indigenous military industries' (Miller 2024; Armstrong 2024).

In conclusion, Analysis I and II, grounded in the contexts outlined in the historical background, show that firstly, both defiant states used their oil diplomacy to evade sanctions and set up anti-American networks by asserting control over the networks they employed for circumventing sanctions. Their collaboration on military strategies here constructs a subaltern approach to security (Barkawi and Laffey 2006) that challenges notions of their exclusion as defiant states. Together, their alliance opposes Western norms and is emblematic of postcolonial resistance and worldmaking that reframes their own roles within the international system as active agents within the global order. Their agreement over their shared ideological counter-narrative also signifies that they resist US sanctions through coordinated approaches and strategies (Vahdat 2022). While it may be narrativised as an axis of evil, these defiant states actively decolonise their labels to self-identify their political engagement as counter hegemonic. The final section of this paper applies some of the outcomes discussed. It identifies key methods and models of objective strategies these defiant states apply to gain agency, self-determination and 'a voice.'

Outcomes and Tactics of Defiance

This final chapter juxtaposes key outcomes, contexts, and triggers to analyse the strategic tactics, agendas, and goals that defiant states project through their resistance and retaliation to sanctions. These strategic outcomes are underpinned by Emily Goldman's (1994) 'strategy without an enemy' and Hew Strachan's theoretical foregrounding, as outlined in the Theory section of this thesis.

A. Strategic Intentionality: Defiance as Ontological Continuity

Iran-Venezuela's ontology, as outlined in Context I, II, A and B, demonstrates that their ontological framework is rooted in their anti-imperial identity. Through the Outcomes in Analysis I and II, this author has drawn on OST's 'identity continuity' (Mitzen 2006) to explain how the Iran-Venezuela alliance applies their context to action. With each trigger and context, the political intentionality of their collective defiance is clear, apparent and constantly reapplied.

As outlined in Analysis II, the problem of 'rogue nation' rhetoric is that every action is perceived through an offensive outlook. The establishment of barter trade agreements in Outcomes I and II show that these networks are not only activated under sanction pressures but have been actively approached and are constantly growing through each sanction examined here. While they are posed to have been drawn from their isolation or economic pressures, the defiance-agency paradigm here is contrastingly a response to their systemic and long-drawn subalternation that is not always contextualised within their 'defiant behaviour.' As asked in the Introduction—are these states defying to misbehave? No, these states defy with intentionality (Terman 2019). The first tactic of their defiance is thus rooted in their resistance and intention to be defiant. Resistance, therefore, is neither optional nor symbolic—it is an imperative for asserting sovereignty and crafting an identity untethered from colonial legacies.

B. Postcolonial Resilience: Alternative Economic and Military Frameworks

The second and the most explicated defiant strategy is rooted in its resistance through alternative frameworks and networks of counter-American institutions.

I. Tangible Outcomes and Symbolic Gains

The first outcome of their resistance lies in Iran and Venezuela's ability to establish lucrative trade and weapons networks beyond American control. Outcomes III and IV demonstrate that,

despite the West's dominance and 'technological superiority,' it cannot maintain a monopolistic grip on the natural trajectory of modernisation and globalisation. Put simply, these defiant states prove that "no one is irreplaceable."

II. Epistemic Resistance in Economic Strategies

The second outcome of their resistance shown through Outcome I and II is that while the entrenched economic interdependency is hard to escape, there are methods and models of economic systems that pre-dated American-centric economic plans—the dollar or other financial intermediaries—which can be used as viable trading mechanisms. America's centrality in the global order depends not only on its so-called power but equally on the willingness of other states to subscribe to and participate in its world order.

Thus, the second defiance tactic identified here lies in Iran and Venezuela's establishment of alternatives, such as 'gold-for-oil' schemes, bolstering indigenous capabilities for weapons development, and collaborating with other 'defiant' states to create networks of military partnerships that operate outside—and in opposition to—American influence.

C. Worldmaking through Agency: Beyond Survival

Third, as highlighted through A and Outcomes II and IV, the agenda of defiant states' resistance is not only to survive but also to operate in a way that reclaims their exclusion and allows them to overcome their status anxiety while retaining relevance within the international system—even if this is through their adversarial capacities. Thus, through their defiance, the third strategic prong that emerges is agency and relevance. It allows them to perform their sovereignty, maintain their routines, and reinforce their shared identities as actors refusing to comply with Western norms. This is not a desperate tactic—it is a deliberate assertion of agency. To that end, their alliance also moves beyond being tied to 'peace anxieties' and reflects counter-hegemonic world making beyond just adversarial politics.

D. Counter-Narratives: Resisting Systemic Exclusion

To the extent that the narrative of "rogue" nations goes, this paper has posited an inherent power vacuum that limits the non-West's response to this label and continuously frames their actions as defiance. Contexts I and II have shown the duality of such narratives: while modern states like the UK framed their post-WWII worldmaking as "post-colonial," their

resource exploitation reflected a pursuit of neo-colonisation. Even through the sanctions outlined in Context II, the non-Western application of the same models of "corrective" behaviour is labelled as "weaponisation" or inherently offensive.

To that end, even the pursuit of so-called WMDs in Iraq, a campaign that was ultimately a failure, remains unreconciled and unredacted. Even as the larger field of Security Studies recognises the failure and lies of the campaign, the application of the "axis of evil," the very lexicon that gave America the impetus to invade Iraq, is still not recalled (Kessler 2019). On the issue of nuclear weapons in Iran, the constant pursuit of its WMD program remains asymmetric to how the US has approached other countries like India or Pakistan regarding their nuclear arsenals—entirely ignoring how the US still does not probe Israel to publicly declare its military capabilities.

Thus, counter-narratives become an important strategy for defiant states to question asymmetry and challenge the selective application of the "rogue" state label. As such, the final tactic of defiance discussed here is counter-hegemonic narratives, sowing the seeds of power politics within global structures.

Conclusion

What does it take to defy the rules of a game designed for you to lose? Through this analysis, Iran and Venezuela have shown that their defiance is not inherently a losing strategy, but rather a strategic manoeuvre that gives them agency, even from the peripheries. Caracas and Tehran defiant behaviour frames them as challenging agents within the global order, with deliberate mechanisms that collectively reinforce their anti-imperial identity and counter-hegemonic rhetoric.

To that end, it becomes evident that their defiance is not a reactive posture, but rather a deliberate strategy that is rooted in their ontological security needs and self-preservation agendas. Which moves their strategic gains beyond the absolutes of material or relativity but foregrounds symbolic and sovereignty as the outcome of their partnership.

Are Venezuela and Iran embroiled in illicit activities? Perhaps. The objective aim is not to categorise their self-determination as "right or wrong," the aim, rather, is to afford the same level of objectivity to Iran and Venezuela that is extended to most other states—and specifically the US the architect of this contradictory paradigm of "rogue states."

Finally, by holding Iran and Venezuela to the same standards of strategic intent afforded to Western actors, this study puts forth a decolonial Security Studies perspective. And reframes their alliance as a deliberate strategy and that is aimed towards challenging their systemic exclusion. Thus, by speaking from the 'wrong side of history,' (UN Mission Brazil 2019) the defiant actor here, challenges the epistemic erasure of their non-Western worldmaking.

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