

## **Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A Holistic Approach<sup>I</sup>**

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**Abstract:** In an approach of incorporation of existing models, this article seeks to explain the trends in the evolution of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past 30 years. To this end, it puts forward its perspectives with a view to the sustainability of principles and theoretical bases of Iranian foreign policy, and the variability of regional and international circumstances. It also tries to clarify how the past years experience of Iran's foreign policy can now help shape an independent course in international relations and develop an order without the domination of imperialist powers, which will promote national pride and independence among developing countries.

### **Introduction**

The Islamic Republic of Iran which enjoys a strategic status because of its location and values is recognized as an important regional power. By promulgating "Neither East nor West" as its slogan in the bipolar world order, the Islamic Revolution presented a new theoretical

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<sup>I</sup> Views expressed in this paper are of the authors, without any indication or implication for the current policy positions of the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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and operational pattern of foreign policy which was crystallized into the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its experience of 30 years can now help shape an independent course in international relations and develop an order without the domination of imperialist powers which will promote national pride and independence among developing countries.

By surveying the conceptual and theoretical aspects of the Iranian foreign policy, this article details the country's achievements in:

- Founding new principles and concepts in international politics;
- The creation of a discourse based on Islamic values and, confrontation with hegemonic tendencies of great powers;
- Efforts to realize a just international order and providing new opportunities for Iran's national interest and the lofty interests for the Islamic world; and
- Promoting the role and status of soft power in foreign policy.

To this end, the article seeks to explain the trends in the evolution of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past 30 years and put forward its perspectives with a view to the sustainability of its principles and theoretical bases, and the variability of regional and international circumstances.

### **A. Creating New Identity-Oriented Concepts and Approaches**

Iranian foreign policy discourses are grounded on ideological and non-ideological factors, such as religion, culture, national interests, geopolitics and economics. (Sadeghi, 2008: 3) In a state founded upon the governance of supreme religious jurisprudent, Iran's foreign policy is essentially based on Islamic precepts in which the religious principles have a norm-defining function. In other words, Islam forms the dominant ideological discourse of Iranian foreign policy. Regional and International equations, as well as identity factors also have great impacts on Iran's foreign policy. Meanwhile, identity—as viewed in constructivism—takes precedence over national interest and is socially constructed. The question of identity and culture is of prime importance as it underpins the political system of the state. Even in the case of a revolution, as in Iran, a new power system would stem from cultural principles.

In the case of Iran, a cradle of civilizations with a multiethnic and multicultural entity, this identity is the outcome of the integration of

ancient Persian civilization with Shiite Islam, making it both historical and religious. Iran enjoys a continuity of culture and identity in which religion and state have been linked since ancient times. This is akin to the perpetual fight between “good” and “evil” which first found expression in the duality of ancient myths. It was manifested in Iran’s post-revolution foreign policy with the designation of the USA as the “Great Satan”. And this policy is continuing in confrontation with arrogant world powers, as the expression of support for the oppressed and the quest for justice. (Sadeghi, 2008: 15)

It could be arisen from the anti-pathy of dominant discourse in the Islamic Revolution toward the now-defunct Pahlavi regime’s disconnection from the people because of its forced secularism and Westernization, its alignment with the West specially its close association with the USA. (Gasiorowski, 1991; Roosevelt, 1979; Shawcross, 1998; Zabih, 1982)

In contrast, the legitimacy of the new political system was defined as being based on Islamic doctrine. Iran rejected alignment with both the East and the West. Instead, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in Article 11, exhorts the government to achieve unity with other Islamic countries to establish an Islamic world order founded on solidarity, rather than the current world order based on the Westphalian system of nation-states (Lyons & Mastanduno, 1995).

Therefore, one can conclude that the level of identity and analysis has moved from the “micro” level—that of the nation-state—to the “macro” level, namely the Islamic Ummah, or, more generally, all freedom-seeking countries of the world, which clearly has implications for Iran’s foreign policy.

Iran is seen as having a central role in the empowerment of the Islamic world and oppressed peoples in general. Also striking is the fact that in rejecting Western modernization pursued by the Pahlavis, Iran turned toward the promotion of abstract and spiritual values such as justice, freedom and unity in opposition to the domination.

This was the consequence of an ideological approach based on the governance of supreme jurispudent—*Velayat-e Faqih*—in which all power is solely derived from God. Thus, the importance of the material and temporal has been downplayed and Western norms and values which have been held as defining the international system, are challenged.

## **B. Promoting New Principles and Objectives**

Foreign policy approaches fall into two general categories, namely idealist and realist (Dougherty & Pfaltzgraff, 2001). While the realist approach is based on state security and extending its national interest through pragmatic and rational means and can be security-oriented, the idealist approach is based on values and norms, and tends to be collaborative in nature. Thus, Iran's foreign policy can be characterized as "realist idealism", it can be further defined as reformist, as it expresses dissatisfaction with the existing international system. As it is interlinked with national development and domestic policy, Iran's foreign policy requires an international framework within which its national development must be achieved (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2005: 70).

Immediately after the revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war, Iran pursued an indigenous economic strategy marked by self-sufficiency. However, by the end of the war, the economy shifted to an exogenous model which pursued market economy and export expansion for rebuilding the country. Such a development model requires an active and engaged foreign policy, rather than an isolationist one.

Iran's geopolitical location on the crossroads of cultures and civilizations, its national identity as a multi-ethnic former great empire and, finally, its transnational religious ideology are all consistent with active engagement with the wider world. Thus, an interactive exogenous foreign policy is the most fitting for Iran, since it is compatible with the pursuit of exogenous economic development through multilateralism while avoids the risks posed by both isolationism and the unconditional acceptance of the existing international order (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2005: 83).

The principles of a progressive foreign policy are defined by peaceful coexistence, détente, confidence-building and multilateralism. These principles ensure that Iran can pursue its national interests and maintain its independence and identity while cooperating with other states and respecting the rights of all other nations, and thus preserving international peace and stability. Confidence-building dispels mistrust of another country's potentially hostile intentions, and is particularly valuable for countries such as Iran, which has been widely misperceived and portrayed as untrustworthy. It will bring a positive public image arisen from transparency as well as the development of relations with

other countries and organizations. This multilateralism involves dialogue, mutual understanding and consensus-building and is manifested in the elaboration of values and norms at the regional and global levels. Pursuit of such a foreign policy is increasingly necessary in the age of globalization.

Iran's adoption of multilateralism in turn allows it to actively participate in the global community and play a role in international standard-setting. Some other goals as to collectively facing such challenges as poverty, underdevelopment and insecurity are covered more properly through multilateralism.

The exercise of either economic or political/military power without moral or ethical responsibility has not led to sustainable success or security for those wielding it, but has brought about increasing insecurity at the global level. It is believed that responsibility is founded on the concept of justice, which is commonly recognized and understood by humanity as a whole, even if there may not be complete consensus regarding its precise definition (Mottaki, 2007: 5).

By shifting from the bipolar system of international relations to a new system based on overlapping cultural units engaging in dialogue and interaction, and involving non-state actors, the creation of "global ethical knowledge" would be in access. Consequently, this would give rise to an inclusive global order founded on justice which would provide a sound basis for collectively combating the problems confronting our increasingly globalized world.

### **C. Presenting New Opportunities & Perspectives**

Iran's foreign policy presents new opportunities by combining national interest with transnational objectives, such as the good of the Islamic Ummah, religious precepts and moral values, as the only Shiite theocratic, revolutionary and democratic state in the world. In fact, a revolutionary and democratic theory centered on the concept of emancipation, rather than one based on interest, can be suitable to address Iran's foreign policy. It would also take into consideration its national identity and Islamic and revolutionary aspects, which give its dominant discourse an ideological nature (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008).

The emancipation theory is derived from the Frankfurt school of post-positivist critical theory in which the basis for analysis is social rather than economic or purely rational. Therefore, Iran can be

recognized as a social actor enjoying a national identity and operating within a context whose foreign policy is largely defined by critical-transcendental rationality. Therefore the status quo is not accepted and values and norms-based aspirations shape policy. Thus, its actions and behavior are not driven solely by material interests in terms of their consequences and achievements. Instead, Iran is seen as a “mission-oriented” rather than an interest-oriented state, as it believes in having a responsibility to set goals compatible with Islamic precepts to attain ethical objectives such as social justice and emancipation from hegemony, and ultimately aim for the establishment of an Islamic order (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008).

In this context, emancipation is defined as having autonomy, freedom of action and security, as well as freedom from domination and repression. It calls for realizing political, social and ethical reforms by means of mutual understanding, ethical reflection and resistance to hegemony.

An emancipatory theory has a moral or ethical element that surpasses mere freedom of action and endeavors to build alliances in its opposition to the unjust forces of the international system. It gives support to other developing nations in their resistance against despotism and setting itself up as a model in this regard.

Therefore, this theory is more appropriate for the study of Iranian foreign policy than other theories such that freedom of action. It, *inter alia*, takes into account the developing, revolutionary and Islamic characteristics of Iran’s identity since it fits the cognitive, social, political, economic and cultural frameworks in an Iranian context and includes tangible and intangible social structures such as values. It addresses foreign policy motivations which link the national with the transnational; provides the possibility to study alliance with the developing and the Islamic world; and provides a framework for the analysis of both continuity and change in foreign policy, which surpasses instrumental rationality (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008: 12-13).

All foreign policies operate within a system of constraints and opportunities. Foreign policies are shaped by two principal factors, namely mindset—that is, the values and conceptions of the policymakers—and the objective environment, at the national and international levels (Haji-Yousefi, 2004).

While a mindset gives rise to what a foreign policy aspires to carry out, this is often constrained by systemic conditions relating to the

international environment which also creates pressures that steer states in a particular direction.

In Iran, the three aims of foreign policy are development, Islam—both in the sense of ensuring that policies are compatible with Islamic precepts, and striving for its greater good—and the struggle against hegemony and injustice. One must take into consideration objectives (ideals), instruments (tools and techniques used to achieve that which is possible) and systems (the domestic and international environment are subject to change) (Haji-Yousefi, 2004).

The system can thus exert influence over objectives and instruments for more adaptation and the changes can occur at the national, regional and global levels. Changes at the global level have been marked in the last three decades and can be expected to impact foreign policies. The structure of the international system during the second half of the 20th century, until 1991, can be classified as bipolar, as it was characterized by the Cold War between the two opposing superpowers of US and the Soviet Union. The effect of this bipolarity in the region was the alignment of countries with either of the two powers.

Under the Pahlavi regime, Iran sided with the USA, and consequently became part of a conservative regional bloc. However, following the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran undertook a radical change in its foreign policy, despite the unchanged nature of the bipolar system. Rather than allying itself with a superpower, Iran adopted a new foreign policy pattern based on the "Neither East nor West". It rapidly terminated its ties with the US and rejected the domination of superpowers within the bipolar system. It preferred to adopt a position of non-alignment and assert its independence by refusing to be influenced by the Cold War. (Alexander and Nanes, 1980; Bill, 1988)

With the disintegration of the bipolar system after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's foreign policy—as its development model—also underwent changes. The development of a unipolar system obliged small states to consolidate their security by either attracting the support of USA or through enhanced regional cooperation and formation of alliances.

As the international system is in transition and moving toward a multipolar model, Iran has become increasingly active not only in regional organizations but also in those sharing similar values, such as

the global struggle against hegemony. This can be seen in its active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77.

Iran's foreign policy has succeeded in balancing its religious ideals and pragmatism, as well as the national and transnational interests of the Islamic Ummah. It could fuse both ideological and national aspects by taking into account the constraints of the international and regional systems while preserving its identity and principles. Therefore, it must find a compromise between the ideals of the Islamic Ummah and the Westphalian international order in which the main actors are nation-states.

Iran's adherence to this system has been seen in its active non-alignment policy and its striving toward justice in the international system on the basis of moral and ethical values. Thus, the Islamic Republic of Iran becomes a model to be emulated on the world stage. This is a pragmatic approach that avoids the sensitivities of any form of political union while still being compatible with Islamic ideals and enhancing the international weight of Islamic countries in the international system by increasing their proximity.

#### **D. Constructing New Discourse: Stable Elements and Variable Forms**

The current world order is of a transitional model that shows characteristics of both the unipolar and multipolar systems. While the systemic factors (or external and international environment) are subject to change and the foreign policy will necessarily adapt to and reflect such changes, the actors nonetheless are directed by some guiding principles which we may call the fixed principles of foreign policy. Foreign policy contains three principle aspects as:

- The "idea" of foreign policy which is its general philosophical logic directing all policy;

- The behavior of foreign policy, meaning operational strategies for achieving goals set according to its principles; and

- The organization of foreign policy that consists of administrative and human system. (Eftekhari, 2007: 285)

Stability is evident in foreign policy, as it is founded on fixed principles. Yet, as it has to engage with reality, its strategic macro models are relatively stable while its policy aspects are subject to change. Therefore, stability and change must be integrated to ensure the success of Iran's foreign policy in the international arena (Eftekhari, 2007:285).

The fixed principles of Iran's foreign policy have been defined as following:

-First, the principle of invitation in which the Islamic government presents an attractive model rather than imposing its system by force on other nations. Therefore it employs soft rather than hard power in its goal to create an Islamic world order;

- The Second is the principle of opposing tyranny which also regards non-interference in other countries' internal affairs;

- The third is pacifism, as it comes in accordance with the principles of Islam in maintaining peace;

- Fourth, having autonomy in both securing and enhancing independence;

- Fifth, supremacy based on justice which refers to the supremacy of Islam and is based on the principle of human dignity; and

-Sixthly, quest Islamic unity in order to enhance the role of Islamic countries in the international system.

In practical terms, these fixed principles mean that the national interest is subject to modification through religious considerations so that the goals of foreign policy are not limited to the national sphere. (Eftekhari, 2007:285)

The behavioral principles and patterns of Iran's foreign policy have been enumerated as being, firstly, human responsibility or prophetic orientation, which stresses transnational responsibility toward all fellow Muslims and the oppressed in general. As seen in Article 152 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country is exhorted to "defend the rights of all Muslims of the world." (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008:15)

Secondly, is trans-nationalism or Islamic globalism which transcends the Westphalian system of nation-states in seeing the world in terms of Islamic and non-Islamic realms. It replaces loyalty to the nation with loyalty to the Ummah, and striving to bring about unity in the Islamic world.

Thirdly, is the interests of humanity or Islamic expedience which is pursued in tandem with the national interest; the two are seen as inextricably interlinked. In this regard, the article 154 of the Constitution states that "the Islamic Republic of Iran aspires for human felicity and considers the attainment of independence, freedom and the rule of justice and truth as the right of all people around the world." (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008: 16)

Fourthly, is the counter-hegemonism which forms the core of the concept of “emancipation” in relation to foreign policy in its opposition to all forms of tyranny, repression and imperialism. More specifically, in article 152 of the Constitution, “nonalignment towards the hegemonic superpowers” is stipulated, and the struggle against the unipolar system and global power monopoly continues to be a vital foreign policy objective.

Finally, the counter-hegemonic coalition or anti-domination alliance, in which Iran’s foreign policy has created or consolidated ties with the Islamic world, the surrounding region and the developing world in general. (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2008: 19)

The guiding principles of Iran’s foreign policy, as we have seen above, are based on values that challenge international domination. They seek to move towards a just and multicultural global order, particularly by forging Islamic solidarity and balancing power and responsibility. However, internal economic and technical development, regional cooperation and international interdependence, as well as social and cultural rapprochement constitute the variables of Iran’s foreign policy.

### **E. Promoting the Role of Soft Power in Foreign Policy**

The multipolar system is characterized by its transitory state and lack of clear guiding principles. Both states and international organizations may be seen as relatively weak, while threats are increasingly transnational in nature, whether that refers to terrorism or environmental degradation. In the face of such threats, hard – or classical military – power is rather limited, and has not achieved its objectives, as it is evident in the prolonged conflicts of the world today. (Nye Jr. 2004)

In the new international context defined by rapid globalization, this traditional approach to security – that is, hard security, conceived in military terms and operating primarily at the state level – is thus increasingly being replaced with new approaches focusing on soft security in which human security forms the basis of national and international security. This approach is centered on the individual, rather than the state.

We have previously noted the importance of the “idea” in foreign policy and great significance of the ideational factor in understanding security issues. Ideation, in moving away from the securitization of issues in foreign policy and “desecuritizing” them removes

misperceptions concerning the intentions of other actors. (Mottaki, 2007: 6)

In Iran, the source of soft power is primarily spiritual, as was manifested in the victory of the Islamic Revolution over the conventional military or hard power of the Pahlavi regime and its supporters. The sources of power in the Islamic Republic of Iran are categorized as follows: firstly, divine grace, as the supreme source of power, manifested in divine occult assistance in overcoming the enemy and spiritual edification; secondly, reliance on popular support which grants legitimacy to a government and enables it to confront its enemies; thirdly, authority and leadership; fourthly, fearlessness, as in facing death; fifthly, patience, persistence and endurance, as a culture of emancipation; sixthly, steadfastness and the imposition of the will on the enemy which is of more significance than a simple military victory; seventhly, the accomplishment of duties that from an Islamic viewpoint is not merely materialistic and takes a long-term perspective; eighthly, transforming threats into opportunities and ending dependence; ninthly, wisdom and prudence in which the means are as important as the ends; and, tenthly, the actualization of potential capabilities that are manifold in the case of Iran (Mohammadi, 2008: 1-21).

Soft power can be acquired and maintained through, *inter alia*, multi-faceted channels of communication; the construction of universal cultural and intellectual discourses; transparency in foreign policy and diplomacy; the promotion of public trust and awareness; providing information on the globalization of issues; harnessing public opinion; and establishing cultural interaction (Mohammadi, 2008: 6).

Iran does not consider imposition through hard power acceptable for spreading its principles; while the export of revolution figures as an objective of its constitution. It has instead espoused the use of attraction or persuasion, rather than imposition or coercion, rejecting force in favor of the soft power approach of awakening other countries and individuals in the world by capturing their "hearts and minds" and harnessing public opinion in its favor through the promotion of its values and beliefs. This exemplary approach was emphasized by Imam Khomeini, who said that, "...under the pattern of Islamic ethics ... [Iran] has to serve as an example for other observers" (Sadeghi, 2008: 23).

Iran's use of soft power is not limited to the achievement of Islamic solidarity, however. Its principle of social justice for all allows it to command a presence, not only in the region of West Asia, but in the

international arena as a whole, which is manifested through its active engagement with such organizations as the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77. It thus employs multilateralism in its efforts to attain sustainable peace within a just global system by means of dialogue and mutual understanding, which it believes to be a more potent force than military might in this era of rapid globalization.

### **Conclusion**

The last 30 years of experience by the Islamic Republic of Iran could be utilized to form a favorable context for the constitution of an independent course in international relations and the realization of a just order without the domination of imperialist powers. It can help attain national pride and independence through the policy of non-alignment.

Iran has succeeded in founding new principles and concepts in international politics; creating a discourse based on values; confronting hegemony; making efforts to realize a just order in international relations; creating new opportunities for upholding the national interest and the higher interests of the Islamic world; and promoting the role and status of soft power in its foreign policy.

It can be concluded that the level of identity and analysis has moved from the "micro" level—that of the nation-state—to the "macro" level, transcending territorial borders to encompass all freedom-seeking countries. Similarly, it has undergone a shift from the pursuit of the material national interest to a focus on the moral, ethical and spiritual values and norms that form the guiding principles of Iran's foreign policy.

The principles and theoretical bases of Iran's foreign policy have been sustainable in the face of the variability of regional and international circumstances, consolidating Iran's position as a major actor not only in the Islamic world, but also at the regional and global levels.

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