



Tracing the Structures and Factors Influencing Iranian Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

As the region of West Asia is passing through an era of geopolitical flux, Iran has emerged as a key player in extended regional politics. In this regard, Iranian foreign policy has played a critical role in spreading its influence in West Asia and beyond. Whether it's the Iranian relations with the West or ties with its major neighbors, there is a certain amount of continuity in its foreign policy. This article seeks to assess the role of various structures in the shaping of Iranian foreign policy. Further, it seeks to analyze the various factors that form the background against which the Iranian Foreign policy is framed. The article concludes with the argument that the West needs to understand the structures and factors of Iranian foreign policy to understand its policy compulsions and to build better ties.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, Structures, Geopolitics, Religious Ideology

1. Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was born in the year 1979, post-Iranian revolution. Geographically Iran is situated at a crucial geopolitical juncture at the crossroads of West, South, and Central -Asia and East and North Africa. Thus, since its birth, it has faced a continuous power struggle like the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, which was challenging for Iran. The newly-born Iranian State has defended its sovereignty and territorial integrity despite finding itself in geopolitical turmoil (Nordberg, 1979; Keddie, 1969; Farrokh, 2011; Leverett & Leverett, 2013). The West has criticized the Iranian foreign policy as maximum resistance and opposition to The US and its allies, and its institutions as being a mouthpiece of the clergy. However, the continued survival of the Iranian State despite continuous Western opposition, placement in a geopolitically tumultuous region, and a plethora of sanctions point toward solid fundamentals in its foreign policy-making structures.

2. The Various Structures of Iranian Foreign Policy Making

After the revolution, Iran established strong institutions and has various levels of organizational hierarchy, which plays a vital role in formulating its foreign policy. It's visible that the Iranian foreign ministry plays a significant role in its policy formulation. However, looking at the internal players in Iran, various other agents play a very important role in policy-making related to foreign relations.

The first and foremost is the leadership or the Valley-e-Faqih (Ruler-Jurisconsult), who, according to the constitution, has the right to direct all the country's policies, whether domestic or external (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 110) (Rizvi, 2011). Ruler-Jurisconsult intervenes in Iranian foreign policy both directly and indirectly. Speeches and commandments exercise direct

influence in various parts of the country. But if looked closely, it indirectly influences foreign policy through various offices under his supreme control, that is:

- Representatives in Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).
- Members of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).
- Leaders posted in western European countries or various organizations.
- Organizations tasked with spreading ideological, cultural, and Islamic values since the revolution. Like the Islamic Propagation Organization, The Organization of Islamic Culture and Communications, and The Centre for Promoting Proximity between the Islamic Religions (Majmae Taghreebe Beyn al-Mazahabe Islami).

The second most important organization is the SNSC which was inducted into the Iranian Constitution after its amendment in 1989. President chairs the council's meeting. All the other key military, security, and intelligence have their representatives in SNSC. The apex leader (Valiye-e-Faqih) has two representatives in SNSC. Some scholars regard SNSC as Iran's most powerful and influential foreign policy-making body (Barzegar, 2010).

The next in the line is the Islamic Consultative Assembly, i.e., The National Parliament of Iran which is involved in foreign policymaking in many different ways. Firstly, it keeps track of all the national and international trade and such agreements directly impacting Iranian foreign policy. Secondly, its specialized foreign policy commission closely watches the foreign policymaking process. Further, it also passes a law that is related to the conduct of foreign policymaking. Last but not least, it directly intervenes in the foreign policymaking process through its parliamentary deputies in a critical or advisory way (Abedin, 2011).

IRGC is one of the most elite forces in Iran. It influences the decision-making of the SNSC or national parliament through lobbying or pressure techniques. It has an intelligence of its own. It also supports non-state actors that Iran uses to avoid confrontation with the states while carrying on with its hegemonic policy in the region of non-state actors. It also helps non-state actors in conflict situations (Abedin, 2011).

The above-mentioned different bodies are involved in Iranian foreign policymaking. IRI's organizational and constitutional mechanism provides an elaborate system for the same. This intricate system may offer checks and balances but creates much confusion in foreign policymaking. This variety of structures and influences is also reflected in the various factors contributing to the formulation of Iranian foreign policy.

3. Factors influencing Iranian Foreign Policy

3.1 Geopolitics of Iran influencing its Foreign Policy

In the case of Iran, geography played a single force with two opposing tendencies. To start with, it has helped Persian influence grow throughout Asia. Still, on the other hand, it has exposed Iran to great power rivalry and the diplomatic maneuvers of powers outside the region. Under the Pahlavi dynasty in the twentieth century, the Iranian state—once the plaything of conflicting foreign forces—became a significant regional power, albeit one that frequently served as a proxy for Western interests (Ehteshami, 2002). Even though Iran never succeeded in economically separating itself from the international capitalist order or was able to create a fully independent economic base, Iran's power resources have been employed since the Islamic revolution to defend regional autonomy from the West. Looking at the history of Iran, its nationalism seems to be formed based on fear of foreign interference in the region (Abdi, 2001). Given the ties between geography and Iran's foreign policy, it will become clear that the country's geographical structure is a critical component in establishing Iran's foreign policy. The most significant distinguishing characteristic of Iran's foreign policy is its increased regional efficacy coupled with the expansion of its spheres of influence. Iran views itself as an actor with a substantial impact in various parts of the world, particularly the Middle East, due to its historical

past and geostrategic significance (Kilic, 2018). Geographical factors, the need to protect the nation's territorial integrity, adverse historical events, competition with other empires (like the Ottoman Empire), interference in the internal affairs of the nation by western and eastern powers like Russia, Britain, and the United States, and the country's resource endowment have all combined over time to give geopolitics and a keen understanding of the significance of history a special place in determining the course of Iranian foreign policy (Ahouie, 2021).

The IRI leadership faced the issue of combining their idealism, based on Islamic ideology, and pragmatism, based on current geopolitics approaches in post-revolutionary foreign policy as they sought to export the revolution and safeguard its regime from the outside world. The execution of foreign policy by the Iranian government gradually concentrates on the geopolitical element (Aliyev & Ashifa, 2021). On the other hand, religious ideology, which is one of many factors that contribute to Iran's power, is regarded as a factor that works to safeguard Iran's interests and national security (Barzegar, 2010)

3.2 Religious Shia-Islam factor in Iranian Foreign policy

Shia Islam has dominated the Islamic State of Iran, influencing choices about foreign policy. The vast majority of Shi'a Muslims in Iran frequently view themselves as a party of the oppressed fighting against wealthy and powerful forces by the social justice standard established by the prophet Muhammad (Kruse, 1994). During the revolution, the clergy and Khomeini argued that Shah's rule was un-Islamic because the poor had been neglected. There were also claims that the Shah was the puppet of the United States and that the government was selling oil to Israel even though both states were viewed as oppressors (Salehzadeh, 2013). Religious leaders actively sought Islamic goals in foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution gave them a front-row seat at the negotiating table. In doing so, the clerical dictatorship supported and inspired violent Shi'a organizations like Hezbollah, a militant political party, and Shi'a Islamic organization in Lebanon (Katzman, 2016). Given its presence in Lebanon, Hezbollah is Iran's main leverage against Israel. If Israel decides to launch a nuclear assault, it acts as the first line of defense. Iran became a pariah in the eyes of the world as a result of its continuous support for extreme Shi'a organizations. Despite its isolation from the rest of the world, Tehran maintains connections with regional Islamist movements and, on occasion, even fabricates them from scratch. Tehran has also questioned the legitimacy of pro-Western administrations in the region by labeling them as Un-Islamic and little puppets (Ramazani, 2004).

The Islamic Revolution's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, once remarked that "the revolution is not about the price of watermelons" (Molavi, 2010). This meant that the Islamic Republic stood for higher ideals than the need for materially calculable economic growth. Within this context, Khomeini is viewed as a ruler who shaped Iran into a staunch fundamentalist branch of Islamic thought. Shi'as believe their leaders' power is absolute because it comes from God. Therefore, his contribution to the revolution, especially the idea of exporting the process to free oppressed people, continues to strengthen itself among religious and political leaders (Kruse, 1994).

Khomeini worked tirelessly to make Iran a fully-fledged Islamic Republic after ascending to the position of Supreme Leader. Khomeini ensured that courts tasked with interpreting Sharia law would be used in the IRI to preserve and uphold religious regulations. The Constitution also serves as a foundation for the institutions of Iranian society, which are based on the central teachings of Islam, specifically the Quran and the Hadith, to continue to create and uphold the country's cultural, social, political, and economic institutions. This implies that all governmental actions conflicting with the Quran are void and without legal force (Salehzadeh, 2013).

But in recent years, the leadership has struggled to strike a balance between dogma and a rising tide of pragmatism. The link between ideology and pragmatism has been a quandary for Iranian politicians since the Safavid kingdom was founded in 1501, according to (Ramazani, 2004). According to

structural realists, nations would follow actions that outweigh their ideological prisms when faced with destruction, despite a paradigm shift in regime ideology. This argument is based on the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran abandoned isolationist principles when challenged by the Iraqi invasion and sought out weapons from its most fundamental ideological rivals, especially the United States and Israel. Before the attack, Iranian Islamic clerics referred to the United States as the Great Satan and Israel as the Small Satan (Kruse, 1994).

Moreover, the severe financial sanctions against Iran forced foreign officials to interpret their religious beliefs pragmatically to further the state's interests. At this time, ideologies clash with efforts to sever ties with the outside world to reestablish a robust economy (Ramazani, 2004). Iran desires a stable economy to establish itself as a significant region, rebuild its aging military receives less than \$2,5 billion in funding annually, and control unrest and demonstrations that could endanger the regime (Cordesman, 2018). Therefore, it is possible to contend that even if ideology guides Iranian policymakers, pragmatism prevails when the state's interests and the regime's legitimacy are in jeopardy.

3.3 Natural Resources influencing Iranian Foreign Policy

Natural resources, particularly oil, have significantly influenced Iran's influence in international relations since the 19th century. A state's geopolitical objectives have always demanded access to energy resources. Iran has been a focal point of regional and international geopolitics in the framework of global energy geopolitics since the early 1900s due to its enormous energy potential. Iran remained under the influence of Britain and Russia until the Second World War, after that it came under the influence of the United States. Shah Mohammed Reza maintained his monarchy under American support until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Iran is a significant player in terms of global energy politics for several reasons. The first is that Iran possesses one of the world's largest reserves of oil and gas. Second, due to its geographic location and geopolitical situation, Iran has the potential to inflict damage or provide for the Eurasian energy market as well as the global energy market. Geographically adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, through which 30% of oil carried by water travels (Zohourian, 2020). Iran is adjacent a shore to the Caspian Sea situated in the Basra Gulf. It is possible to view Iran's potential to create turmoil in these critical centers of the global oil market which can become a threat to other nations. The chance for Iran, on the other hand, is the potential for an alliance with Turkey, the countries of the European Union, China, India, and the state energy axis in the East, including Pakistan. The political stance of the Iranian regime will determine whether Iran will support this threat or this opportunity (Coşkun, 2009).

Iran possesses 10% of the global oil reserves which accounts for 13% of the OPEC nations' total oil reserves. Iran is the fourth-largest oil exporter in the world after Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Norway. It is the second-largest OPEC oil exporter after Saudi Arabia. Iran sends a sizable proportion of its energy to nations including China, India, South Korea, and Turkey (Iran Facts and Figures, 2022). While on the other hand, Iran's natural gas reserves and export potential are crucial for supplying the rising energy demands of industrializing Asian nations like China and India; they are also seen as a significant chance to counterbalance the EU and Russia's hegemony in the European energy markets. Turkey also plays a crucial role in connecting Iran with its European markets, which gives it relevance and significance for Iran beyond simply being the largest consumer of Iranian natural gas (Coşkun, 2009).

From the above discussion, this article found that Iran's short-term objectives in the oil, natural gas, and other energy fields are as follows: to relieve the economy, which has been contracting as a result of embargoes; to produce enough natural gas and energy to meet both the export market and the domestic market; to keep domestic demand under control by investing in thermal power plants (Özbey, 2019). The regime's long-term goals in the oil, natural gas, and other energy fields are to bring in foreign

businesses, promote interdependence and ensure that Western bloc nations suffer more from potential future sanctions, to diversify natural gas and oil exports (processed oil instead of crude oil), and to establish the country as a pivotal energy supplier for Turkey, China, India, Pakistan, Central Asian nations, and the South Caucasus (Aliyev & Ashifa, 2021).

3.4 External factors influencing Iranian Foreign Policy

The end of the Cold War followed by the fall of the Soviet Union changed the nature of world politics and how it was conducted internationally. Moreover, the demise of bipolarity brought regional and international competition and threats while creating new opportunities for developing powers. Iran is strategically vital due to its capacity to control the Basra Gulf, the region around the Caspian Sea, Afghanistan, and possibly Pakistan. Iran is situated between the Caucasus and the Indian Ocean. However, the link between American bases in the Middle East has reached its breaking point (Mesbahi, 2011). It plays a significant role in one of the most crucial military-strategic regions of the world as a state bordering the Caspian Sea and surrounded by the waterways of West Asia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Gulf of Basra, and Oman in the Indian Ocean (Aliyev & Ashifa, 2021). Iran is involved in many regional issues, either directly or indirectly, and the degree to which Iran is involved in regional matters is one of the crucial factors determining whether the issue is resolved. Even though Iran's regional nuclear operations and anti-US foreign policy led to economic and political sanctions, it was unable to deter Iran from its goals to become a dominant force; instead, it increased its economic and military might (Gaffar, 2015).

Following the Islamic Revolution, the theocratic dictatorship quickly recovered from the Iraq-Iran War and developed into a potent regional player by pursuing a policy of enlarging its sphere of influence in the Shiite-populated areas of the Middle East. With the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran has gained new spheres of power, and its impact on the Middle East has grown more visible. The Islamic Regime continued its active military and political participation in the conflict zones of the middle east after the Arab Spring of 2011. It became one of the main actors in major conflict areas like Yemen and Syria, although economic problems and an oppressive attitude at home largely hampered it. On the one hand, Iran plays a significant role in regional conflicts while on the other it keeps up its multifaceted diplomatic engagements with the P5 + 1 nations, the UNSC, and the IAEA regarding its nuclear program. Iran wants to escape the isolation and embargo placed on it (Gaffar, 2015).

Other nations in the region view Iran's actions as threatening their internal security. This fear is especially pronounced for Gulf nations with Shiite majorities. On the other hand, Iran's geopolitical position and nuclear program influence its relations with the Gulf states (Kidwai, 2020). As a nation that is a member of 50 international organizations and more, Iran has a multifaceted and dynamic culture when it comes to diplomacy. To preserve the stability of the system founded on velayat-i faqih understanding, safeguard national security interests, and advance regional objectives, Iran employs diplomatic, political, and military tools within its borders and in the areas under its sphere of influence (Adel, 2021).

The above research finds that Iran has significant potential and a strong ideological desire to solidify its place as a regional actor further. The Iranian leadership seeks to take advantage of all possibilities, opportunities, and goals in the nations under its purview, particularly in the Middle East. However, the most significant barriers to the actual realization of Iran's claims and ambitions in the areas under its sphere of influence are thought to be things like economic embargoes and isolation, political and ideological issues and conflicts with Arab countries, and regional interest conflicts with the USA (Kinch, 2016).

4. Conclusion

The Iranian foreign policy is a product of its geography and the compulsions of the various structures fighting for relevance in fast-changing demography. Iranian Foreign Policymaking is an exercise in

complexion; labeling it under the influence of one office or ideology amounts to reductionism. Many misadventures between Iran and the West result from this misinterpretation of intentions and policies. Towards this, the West must abandon its policy of maximum pressure on Iran and make some compromises from its rigid stance on JCPOA. On the other hand, the Iranian State too needs to separate the theocratic-ideological influences from realpolitik and stop support to proxy actors inimical to the interests of its neighbors. This would go a long way in forging a more peaceful West Asia.

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