

Evolution of Iran's Foreign Policy

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As per the Islamic Republic of Iran constitution, the Iranian foreign policy is made up of four fundamental principles like, rejection of all forms of external domination; second being preservation of Iran's independence and territorial integrity, the third being the defence of the rights of all Muslims without allying with hegemonic powers and fourth being the maintenance of peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states.

The foreign policy of Iran is guided by these principles since 1979 revolution. At times a pragmatic approach has been adopted by the decision makers keeping in view the regional and international developments. In view of this it becomes easy to understand the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and its support for Islamic resistance movements around the world. The decision makers during 1980s advocated concept of exporting the revolution. Iran in order to gain world wide Muslim support portrays itself as the heart of the Muslim world. It provides legitimacy to it in the face of regional and international challenges. The United States and some European countries consider Iran and its foreign policy to be the greatest threat to security and stability in the Middle East under these circumstances revolutionary turned towards the East. On the other this policy led to confrontation between Iran and western powers. Under these circumstances revolutionary Iran turned towards the East.

Iranian leaders generally feel that moving towards the East is less risky than building relations with the West with its hegemonic tendencies. Hence Iran tends towards China. It is said that Khamenei Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad have all believed in this theory.

Iran has also been trying to move towards Latin America and Africa in

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order to build up strong relations with a number of Latin American and African countries including Cuba and Venezuela. On account of this Iranian policy makers feel they can strengthen the economy on one hand and alleviate by the West and the United States. Establishment of Islamic Republic in Iran on 1st April, 1979 is supposed to be the beginning of a new era in the history of Iran's relations with the World.

Iranian government pledged to uphold the Islamic values and undertake the development with social justice. The regime decided to bring about a just World order which could bring about justice. They believed that "Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of its justice". In short the regime pledged to retrieve to bring end to any type of dominations, safeguarding the complete independence and integrity to defend the rights of Muslims, to practise non-alignment dealing with dominating powers and to maintain peaceful relations with non-belligerent powers. They adopted a policy of 'Neither East nor West' which implied to mean the rejection of the domination of two super powers of that time. They also decided not to align or take side of any of the two superpowers while dealing with them. Furthermore they decided to export the revolution and look after the interest of Muslims living in any part of the World.

The Hostage Crisis

After the revolution Iran's relation with America did not make progress rather they decelerated specially after November 4, 1979 when the US Embassy in Tehran was seized by Iranian youths. They could not be released from the custody of the youths for about 444 days.

It is observed that "Although the so called Twin Pillar policy of the United States was based on cooperation with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iran was unquestionably the more important of the two. In February 1979, when Iran renounced cooperation and dependence on both the United States and the Soviet Union, under the slogan of Neither East nor West" The United States was left with no strategic safety net and to reinvent its entire regional strategy."¹

United State still attempted to establish some kind of relations with the provisional government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan and Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yazdi. That experience proved to be a futile exercise suddenly when on November 4, 1979 a group of Iranian students

mainly followers of the line of Imam Khomeini invaded the US Embassy in Tehran and made 66 US diplomats and other Americans as hostage. They could not be released until January 20, 1981.

Bazargan and Yazdi both opposed the takeover viewing it as a serious breach of international law and submitted their resignation in protests which were accepted by Ayatollah Khomeini and Revolutionary Command Council. This was clear indication of a prolonged and bitter confrontation between Iran and the United States. Thereafter US imposed trade sanctions and formal rupture of diplomatic relations. On the contrary hostage taking in Iran was perceived as a manifestation of independence from Western influences. This action was taken to be an act of extremism and dangerous and Iran was considered to be an unpredictable state having no regard for its undertakings in international law. It was on September 22, 1980, Iraq launched attack on Iranian airfields and its armies advanced along a 450 mile into Iran's Khuzestan Province. The US sided with Arab position. The Security Council considered it a situation rather than war and called for a cease-fire which implied that they permitted Iraqi forces to remain on Iranian territory.

Iran thought it to be that United States was behind Saddam Hussein in order to punish Iran for the hostage taking. Iraqi invasion was taken by Americans a blessing which in their view would force an end of hostage crisis.

The Realist Paradigm in Iranian Foreign Policy

The prolongation of the Iran-Iraq war led to "the renewal of a realist foreign policy in 1984. This policy, focused mainly on a rapprochement between Iran and the United States, began to be implemented with Iran's efforts to solve the 1984 Lebanese hostage crisis. The swing to realism was intensified by the secret deal between the United States and Iran that culminated in the visit to Iran by the US National Security Advisor, Robert McFarlane in 1985 and became known as the 'Iran-Contra Affair'. Ayatollah Khomeini's emphasis on the necessity of having political relations with all countries, and the invitation to the German Foreign Minister to Iran signified the beginning of a new era of realist foreign policy."² It is said that "Iran has emerged from the 20th century having experienced two massive revolutions, two world wars, a movement for independence and democracy which began with the nationalization of Iranian oil and ended

with the coup d'état of August 1953, and a long war with Iraq".³ Thereafter "In mid-July 1989 the US unexpectedly offered to pay compensation directly to the families of the 290 passengers and crew of the Iran Airbus. A 300 B mistakenly shot down by the USS Vincennes in July 1988. However, the Iranian Government insisted that the compensation should be distributed through its agencies rather than privately, and took the dispute to the ICJ."⁴ In connection with release of two hostages it is said "In April 1990, following the release of two US citizens who had been held hostages by pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon, the USA thanked both the Syrian and the Iranian Governments for the part that they had played in securing the hostages' release".⁵

Iran pays particular attention in pursuing its foreign policy to peaceful coexistence, promotion of bilateral relations and extensive regional and international cooperation. Achievements in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy include adoption of strategic decisions for the purpose of defusing regional crises resulting from military attack by the United States of America on Afghanistan and Iraq, which led to occupation of those countries under the pretext of campaign against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Iran has established constructive and interactive relations with most countries of the world in different continents. Iran is active member of various international and regional institutions. Iran is member of United Nations, Islamic Conference Organization, Non Alignment Movement, ADC, Shanghai Group D8, and Eco etc. America has been engaged in isolating Iran from the comity of nations but "To counter US efforts to isolate Iran, President Ahmadinejad engaged in an energetic diplomatic counter-offensive during 2005. Iranian officials pursued increased political and economic co-operation with their counterparts from various countries including Venezuela, and held high-level meetings with Russia, China and numerous Arab and Muslim states. Iran also attended the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which brought together the leaders of 10 nations in and around Central Asia."⁶ Dealing with the topic under consideration it is observed that "The policies of the regime from the 1990s during Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency focussed on strengthening the state through an increase in economic activity and production."⁷ It was thought necessary to provide opportunities for both domestic and international private capital on the one hand, and on the other to eliminate the pressure and burden of military conflict through a

policy of improving relations with regional states. After the election of the seemingly moderate and reformist Mohammad Khatami, in 1977, it was believed to be the dawn of a new era of greater openness and freedom in Iran. The transition from the Rafsanjani to the Khatami presidency was marked more by continuity of policies than change. It was because of the institutional make-up of the state meant that the power structure, particularly the relative power of the spiritual leader and Guardian Council vis-à-vis president and government. Moreover, despite some differences in outlook, the fundamental economic and foreign policies of the two eras were based on shared contradiction. There was the need to stabilize the country and improve the state of the economy through reforms and reconciliation with the outside world. The other reason was the principle of never explicitly renouncing the ultimately revolutionary objectives of the Islamic Republic or attempting to change its fundamental structures. The ‘tactical alliance’ between so-called radicals and moderates, symbolized in the leadership axis formed following Khomeini’s death between Khamenei as supreme leader of the Revolution and the respective presidents. The economic prosperity was needed first to build a strong state before the message of the Revolution could be propagated further. The concept of the Sazandegi (economic reconstruction) and the policy of the 1990s lay in the need to build a state able to resist domestic and international challenges and act as the political fulcrum for the advancement of the Revolution’s ultimate objectives. Sayyed Mohammad Sadr, director in the 1990s of foreign policy and international relations at the Strategic Studies Centre, affiliated to the Iranian president’s office, observed: “The most important strategic aim of the Islamic Revolution is the globalization of Islam and the Islamic Revolution. It follows that all moves and policies in the economic, security, cultural, political and other fields should be in the way of realising this aim... Since the Islamic Revolution and the regime is based on Islam, the ultimate aim is export of revolution and the spread of true Islamic thought. Since export of revolution and globalization of the Islamic movement is not possible without central backing and permanent support, we should exert all efforts to protect this centre, the Islamic Republic of Iran”.⁸

The effort toward economic development from the 1990s stood for a revision of a number of principles of the Islamic Republic relating to economic structure and international political and economic relations. It is claimed that concrete measures were formulated and implemented under

the auspices of the first-five year development plan (FFYDP) for 1989/90-1993/4, centring on economic liberalisation aimed at achieving a high growth rate for the economy spurred by increases in production. It aimed at reducing the state ownership, privatisation and deregulation of large sectors of the economy, encouragement of capital investments, reform of the exchange rate system, and reduction of subsidies on basic consumer goods. Under This plan the government abandoned earlier 'alternative strategies' and opted for a policy of capitalist economic growth consistent with that of the majority of semi-industrialised peripheral states.⁹

When Revolution took place in Iran a large number of people fled Iran. Among them included engineers, doctors, technicians and capitalists. However, "The information regarding Iranians in exile is scarce and fragmented. President Khatami in his earlier days in office made a few brief efforts to encourage exiles to return to Iran some statistics appeared, and it was casually mentioned by government officials that close to three million Iranians had left since the 1979 revolution. Many have moved to India, Turkey, Japan, the Persian Gulf states, Europe, and North America, among other places"¹⁰ Earlier Shah wanted to bring about Iran into the line of Industrialised nations of the world. It is observed "The Pahlavi vision of a Modern, Westernized, secular Iran with military superiority, economic growth, and a homogenous cultural identity was shattered in 1979 when massive protests throughout the country on an unprecedented scale forced the royal family to leave Iran. A number of reasons have been offered for this failure. Unequal development resulting in a gap between the rich and the poor, the absence of civil and political institutions violation of the constitution, inability of the leadership to understand, and evaluate the dynamics of change in a traditional Muslim Society."¹¹ In the face of massive demonstrations, and the failure of the government the shah left the country on January 19, 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini was back in Iran by February 1. On April 1, 1979, Iran was declared an Islamic Republic, and on January 25, 1980, the first Iranian president was elected.¹²

Iran- Russia Ties

Iran's ties with Russia have been growing ever since Vladimir Putin visited Tehran in October 2007. He was the first Russian leader to visit Tehran ever since Joseph Stalin set his foot on Iranian soil. Mr. Putin promised Iranian Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei that Russia was willing to

“expand ties without limitations with Iran. It was an offer to form a strategic alliance against common enemies that the Ayatollah made to the then Russian Security Council Secretary, Igo Ivanov when he visited Tehran in February 2007. They took eight months to respond because of the fact that they insisted on synchronizing the all round expansion and deepening of Russian and Iranian ties before the question of nuclear programme. Mr. Putin did not visit Iran before Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreed in August on “Work plan” to clarify Tehran’s past centrifuge development work weeks after Mr. Putin’s visit Iran handed over the details on its P-2 centrifuge work Mohamed El Baradei (IAEA) Director said that Iran was making “good progress” towards resolving the outstanding issues. It was on December 3, that the U.S. released a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). This report cleared Iran of the charge of pursuing a nuclear weapons programme. As a result Washington abstained from the military option. President Mohammad Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian leader to attend the Gulf cooperation Council summit in Doha. The very next day Mr. Saeed Jalili the Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council paid a visit to Moscow to meet Mr. Putin. He was reported to have told the Russian President that the Iranian leadership was committed to building “long-term, strategic and future-oriented relations with Russia. In response to this Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lovrov met the Iranian envoy and revealed that the Iranian envoy had pledged to answer all outstanding questions.

Russia and Iran have reached an agreement on a time table for the completion of the Bushehr nuclear plant, which was held up on account of row over payment. Russia shipped the first consignment of uranium fuel to Bushehr and the second batch of fuel rods was delivered to the Iranian plant in the last days of 2007. The said plant was supposed to be fully stocked with fuel required to start before the end of 2008.

The Nuclear Issue

“In mid-1997 official US attitudes towards Iran continued to be dominated by concern about the country’s weapons programmes. In July the announcement that Russia was to assist Iran to complete the nuclear power plant at Bushehr prompted the USA to reiterate its concern that Iran might attempt to exploit civilian nuclear technology for the development of nuclear weapons”¹³

“Throughout 2004 the Wrangling over Iran’s nuclear programme continued. On 18 September an IAEA resolution gave Iran until the organization’s next board meeting on 25 November to suspend its enrichment programme and prove its peaceful intent or face the possibility of being referred to the UN Security Council”.¹⁴

Foreign Policy of Reza Shah

In developments that paralleled those in Turkey, Iran worked to improve relations with its neighbors like it signed the Saadabad Non-Aggression Pact. Reza concluded treaties with the Soviet Union to promote trade and guarantee national security, but at the same line suppressed suspected communists; most of them intellectuals and labour leaders. With Germany and Russia as major trading partners on the eve of World War-II Iran could not easily maintain its neutrality.

Iran’s Wartime Dilemma

Two main problems faced Reza Shah Iran had ordered manufactured goods from Germany. The British announced that even neutral countries should not receive shipments from there. Iran regarded the supplies as vital to continued development and turned to the Soviet Union, which was still on stable terms with Germany, as a possible route. But as German-Soviet relations worsened, Iran’s government faced heightened pressures to curtail ties with Germany. This was not easy because German citizens were employed in government ministries and in business in Iran. Reza’s first problem, then, was that his relations with Germany were both endangered and threatening to his own nation’s security.

After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the British looked to Iran as a route for sending supplies to their Soviet allies. Moreover, the British wanted to assure that strategic British controlled oil field would not be sabotaged by German agents. Both Britain and the Soviet Union, then had good reasons for wanting the Germans out of Iran. The Turks who could not fulfill the role intended for Iran, were allowed to remain neutral in the war.

Not long after the Shah refused to expel the Germans and allow for the resupply of Russian forces through Iran, the two countries embarked on joint occupation not unlike that of World War-I. With Soviet troops in the North and the British in the South, Reza Shah abdicated rather than

acquiesce to foreign occupation. British forced him into exile, first in Mauritius and later in South Africa where he died in 1944.

Accession of Muhammad Reza Shah the new Shah was his twenty year old son Shahpur Muhammad who came to power as Muhammad Reza Shah. Educated in Switzerland and Iran, Muhammad Reza had acquired both military training and practical experience through travels with his father. During the war, he could hardly rule Iran freely, especially after he signed a formal treaty of alliance with its occupiers in January 1942. These latter promised Iran political freedom, independence and sovereignty and they claimed to be utilizing the country temporarily. They would evacuate their troops within six months after hostilities ended. Iran agreed to provide facilities for the allied war effort. From that time on, the country became the key route for supplying the Soviet Union American troops entered Iran to help coordinate transport. Iran broke relation with Italy, Germany and Japan and in September 1943 made an official declaration of war on Germany.

Socio-economic policy, centralization and self-sufficiency like Ataturk, Reza Shah believed that the best way to modernize Iran was to avoid dependence on foreigners, to discourage foreign intervention, to industrialize, to modernize education and to build a new society in which women would play a more prominent role. Only a strong central government could bring about profound change within a short time, and Reza was willing to work to achieve his goals. He hoped other Iranians would emulate his work ethic.

Although Reza employed an American financial adviser from 1922 to 1927, his economic program focused on making Iran less dependent on outsiders. As within the Turkish efforts, he looked to local industry and commerce as a means of creating national self-sufficiency. The Shah invested in textile factories (Silk, wool, cotton), sugar refineries and cement plants. To help promote internal commerce, the Trans-Iranian railway connecting Bandar Shahpur on the Gulf to Bandar Shah on the Caspian sea was built between 1927 and 1938.

Iran during Shah's time was considered an element of stability in the Gulf which at that time was a crisis area. Shah focused his attention towards Iran's nuclear policy vis-à-vis its military strategy. For all practical purposes Iran began its nuclear programme in March 1957 when Iran and the USA

entered into an agreement for cooperation in the civilian use of nuclear energy¹⁴. This nuclear programme to utilize nuclear energy as a source of commercial and industrial power began at massive rate after the oil price hike in October 1973. In this respect Iran contacted France, Germany and USA to supply nuclear power plants. In June 1974, the Shah paid a visit to France and ordered for five plants but the French firm gave a firm commitment on only two of them. Thereafter in July 1976 the Germans agreed to construct two plants at Bushehr and to supply nuclear fuel for ten years.

The USA and the West have strong apprehension that Iran is engaged in making nuclear weapons. There seems to be no precise information that how close Iran is in building an Atom Bomb. It is alleged by the British SIS and the American CIA that Iran is achieving nuclear weapon's capability and if Iran continues with its nuclear program with the same pace Iran will soon make nuclear bomb. Iran during Shahs time was signatory to the non-proliferation treaty. It was also the prime mover of the General Assembly resolution in 1974 to declare the Middle East as the nuclear-weapon free Zone. During the last two decades Iran has been going ahead with its nuclear program.

The IAEA even after inspection has not come out with precise information about Iran's past and present nuclear program. They have not revealed correct information about Iran's stage of nuclear enrichment program. Iran on the contrary claims its program is for peaceful purposes and it is their perfectly legitimate right to enrich Uranium and they feel that no country should be prevented from enriching Uranium as long as it is done under safeguards.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there spread a wave of terror in the entire region of West Asia. There was fear that Iran would spread its revolution and will try that Iran's type of governments should be established in the region of West Asia. This led to renewed hostility of United States of America against Iran and labeled Iran as a major threat to the entire region of West Asia.

There took place certain developments in Iran which had far reaching influences on Iran's foreign policy "At the end of 1980s some development like the passing away of the late Imam, the end of the cold War, the Iraqi

invasion of Kuwait, and the ensuing Gulf War and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union are some of the changes due to which Iran's foreign policy changed to the extent that relations between Iran and its neighbours turned from confrontation and ideological war into peaceful relations"¹⁵

Later on the collapse of the Soviet Union brought about great effects on the policy of America towards the Middle East "The collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of an atmosphere of non-confidence changed the Structure of the international order, and balance of power in the region. Under these circumstances, the new US strategy was based on limiting the spread and influence of revolutionary Iran and Iraq, or the Dual Containment strategy' that constituted a critical part of US strategy in the region"¹⁶

There was ideological debate in the field of foreign policy "Imperial Iran was a strategic ally of the United States in the global Struggle against the Soviet Union, provided a buffer between the USSR and the Persian Gulf, acted as a US surrogate in the region and made available valuable air bases and listening posts"¹⁷

Given the historical experience of Iran, the call for the "prevention of foreign influence" and the "rejection of all forms of foreign dominance" was easily incorporated as a guiding foreign policy principle of Revolutionary Iran. "Neither East, Nor West" became the rallying point, so did Khomeini's oft-quoted remark "We must settle our accounts with great and super powers, and show them that we can take the whole World ideologically, despite all the painful problems that face us"¹⁸

The United States and some European countries consider Iran and its foreign policy to be the greatest threat to security and stability in the Middle East. On the contrary Iranians have been trying to shift their partnerships towards the East as there has been much propaganda against Islamic revolution and attack on Iranian culture. Iranian politicians believe that moving towards the East is less risky than developing their relations with the West. Khamenei, Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad all believed in this view.

Iran has moved ahead towards Latin America and Africa and has been successful in building strong relations with countries of Latin America, and Africa including Cuba and Venezuela. Iranian policy makers are trying

to strengthen the economy. Besides this on account of following this policy they are able to alleviate the pressures exerted on them by the West and America.

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