

Iranian Foreign Policy on the 35th Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution

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- Which approach has shaped Iran's understanding of foreign policy after the Revolution?
- What are the differences in the Iranian foreign policy in different periods after the Revolution?
 - What are the basic approaches to Iran's "interest-based" foreign policy?

The Iranian Islamic Revolution in February 1979 had regional and international repercussions. The Iranian revolution took place in a period predominated by the understanding of a bipolar world and the Cold War. The revolution pursued a foreign policy independent of these two polars and adopted a new discourse and approach not only inside but also outside. On the axis of this objective, Iran was eager to create a theoretical foreign policy framework with a "revolutionary" perspective. The country preferred to practice the said discourse during the Imam Khomeini period in particular. In the following periods, some changes were made in practice - though the initial discourse was not theoretically abandoned - and numerous initiatives have been taken to date.

A FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH CHANGING IN TIME

Iran stressing political independence by the slogan of "Neither the East nor the West" has set forth its foreign policy pillars as follows:

- To have close ties with peoples and movements rather than States,

- Not to adjust foreign policy relations according to economic interests,
- To fight against Israel while supporting the Palestinian popular movements,
- To keep aloof with strategic interests of big political powers.

While doing so, Iran has concentrated on objectives such as the full independence of the country, the protection of the rights of Muslims in the international arena, and the defense of the aggrieved against aggressors.

As in all revolutions, the Iranian revolution as well spoke through the discourse of providing a good alternative not only for themselves but also for the whole world and uniting masses around a common ideology in order to be successful. After the success of the revolution, the pillars and objectives given in a nutshell above were written into the Constitution, since it was necessary to put them in theory.

However, when it comes to put the theory in practice, again as in other revolutions, mostly the requirements of being a state; therefore, the future and the interests of the state have been prioritized in particular after a desired ground had been set-up for the

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system and presumed that the revolutionist staff had complete control of the State. While doing so, however, it was voiced that there was no deviation from theory, and arguments were developed accordingly.

After the revolutionary cadres have completely taken the state under control, the argument to justify the change they made in foreign policy was that the main country where *Amir al Mumineen* (Commander of the faithful/believers, Imam Ali, son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad) lived must be protected; if needed, again for the sake of the long-term interests of the aggrieved around the world, the protection of the main country must be the priority for the protection of the long-term interests of the aggrieved.

According to this argument again, a strong Iran is needed for the final liberation of the aggrieved around the world, so the priority not only for the state of Iran but also for everyone who wishes for a better world should be the protection of the Iranian interests. For a better understanding of which phases the Iranian foreign policy has gone through and reached its current phase, it would be illuminating to examine it by periods.

THE IMAM KHOMEINI PERIOD AND AN IDEALIST FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

Until the 1979 Revolution, Iran had completely positioned itself next to the United States and the Western block in the bi-polar world. The country, however, started to experience radical changes in foreign policy with the arrival of the revolution. In the early days of the revolution, Imam Khomeini revealed the Iranian foreign policy through the slogan of “Neither the East nor the West.” The slogan was an indicator of the Iranian objection to the current international system. With this, Iran, on the one hand, signified that they could not take side with either one of the two super powers and, on the other hand, tried to prove that a third way was possible. This attitude made Iran an assertive state in the international arena rather than a state aloof.

The natural consequence of this was to follow an active foreign policy within the framework of the de-

termined principles. The period of Imam Khomeini was, at the same time, a period of struggle for the Islamist cadres to gain absolute control within the state; therefore, Iran adopted an idealist and ideological approach in both national and foreign politics.

However, it would be wrong to say that the approach of an idealist foreign policy was actualized as soon as the revolution occurred. After the revolution, Mahdi Bazargan became the interim Prime Minister, and following his resignation, Abu'l-Hasan Benisadr took the presidential office. During the period of Benisadr, both figures seemed to follow a smoother foreign policy as a result of their conciliatory liberal approaches.

The interim government lacked a certain foreign policy strategy and did not internalize Khomeini's slogan “Neither the East nor the West”, but inclined to have good relations with the US. As a result, he stood against the occupation of the US Embassy by university students in Tehran and resigned when Imam Khomeini backed the students. Afterwards, Benisadr became the President of the country and dealt with three major foreign policy issues.

These were the issue of American diplomats held hostage by the students who occupied the US Embassy; the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviets Union, and the beginning of the eight-year war with Iraq. Since Benisadr was more willing to have good relations with the US than Bazargan, he was accused of betraying the regime and this left him no chance but to flee the country.

Established by the Islamist groups who followed the footsteps of Imam Khomeini, the Islamic Republican Party took the power after Benisadr. From there on, the Iranian foreign policy in the hands of Imam Khomeini adopted a revolutionary character. In this period, rulers of the Muslim countries in the region were openly accused of cooperating with the West as opposition movements in these countries were supported to the full extent. Iran was on good terms with organizations more than States. In this period, the main argument of the State was the final liberation of

the aggrieved around the world, and the country had problematic relations not only with Muslim countries in the region but also with the West.

On the one side, the West reacted against the Iranian discourse on Israel that “it is an illegitimate regime of occupation; therefore, Israel must be annihilated”; and Imam Khomeini, on the other hand, issued a death fatwa (order) against author Salman Rushdie for insulting Prophet Mohammad. This was the reason for many Western states to recall their ambassadors.

However, Iran did not give up its aggressive foreign policy in this period, and acted upon the premise that isolation is useful for full independence. Iran initially turned down the ceasefire calls by the United Nations (UN) for the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. In the end, in August 1988, however, Khomeini signed the ceasefire agreement which he described as “drinking a cup of poison.”

This agreement may also be seen as the first sign that Iran would regard international institutions and states as its addressees in the future. About a year after the ceasefire, Imam Khomeini died in June 1989. Ali Khamenei became the new Ayetollah and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani the President. Therefore, a new period in the Iranian foreign policy began.

THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY AFTER IMAM KHOMEINI: THE PERIOD OF SOFTENING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Islamic staff managed to take the state institutions under control during the Imam Khomeini period and they, themselves, were practically considered as the State. In addition, the Iran-Iraq war that lasted eight years had necessitated the overview of the internal situation and foreign policy priorities. Iran had been devastated in all areas and a significant development and economic recovery was important more than anything.

For the reconstruction of the country, an increase in oil income; therefore, cooperation with other states was needed. That, the aforementioned idea of the protection of the main country, was introduced in this pe-

riod and Iran started to act like a country prioritizing its foreign policy interests.

Since then Iran has maintained to generate politics on the axis of this basic approach. During the Rafsanjani period, the Iranian foreign policy adopted a more realistic approach in economy and security-related issues. Concentrating on generating viable policies, acknowledgement of a system having a grasp of international relations, respect for international rules, active membership in international and regional institutions, efforts to have no problems with neighboring countries and transition from the policy of exporting revolution to Islamic policy in a single country, were the main features of the approach.

Although Iran intended to have good relations with the European countries, this was prevented, however, when Iran did not step back from its stance about Israel and assassination attempts were made against some opposition elements in European countries.

THE IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE KHATAMI PERIOD: SOFTENING AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT MAINTAINED

Mohammad Khatami, the candidate of the reformist wing, won the presidential elections in 1997. Khatami maintained his predecessor Rafsanjani’s softening approach in foreign policy by the same token. Attempts of economic development by Rafsanjani were accompanied by political development during the Khatami period with the discourse based on “cohabitation and interciviliation dialogue.” The Iranian foreign policy during the Khatami period was as the following in brief:

Although the international system positively reacted to Khatami’s soft policy, it failed due to the US opposition, and the US regarded Iran on the axis of evil. In fact, given the dominant international perception of the period, the optimistic discourse of interciviliation dialogue lost strength against the dominating global perception after the September 11 attacks, in particular.

Still, Khatami followed a soft foreign policy distant from global powers. In the aftermath of the Sep-

tember 11 attacks and following the US occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran and the US made joint efforts about these two countries. A shift from the anti-imperialist foreign policy line in the early years of the revolution to joint efforts of cooperation with the US, which was termed as the *Great Satan*, is a good example for the aforementioned state-oriented evolution of the Iranian foreign policy.

Again, in the Khatami period the Iranian foreign policy makers inclined to have conciliation on the nuclear energy issue; therefore, acted in favor of negotiations. The West, however, did not make any compromise to Iran at all, and the Iranian nuclear works were suspended for two years.

THE AHMEDINAJAD PERIOD: REJUVENATION OF REVOLUTIONIST DISCOURSES

Mahmoud Ahmedinajad, the candidate of the conservatives, won the presidential elections in 2005 and took office. At that time, US President George W. Bush and his new neo-conservative staff were exhibiting tense and aggressive behaviors. In such a political climate, Iran could not protect its national interests through a soft discourse. Khatami tried this but turned unsuccessful, and Iran could not save itself from being placed on the axis of evil.

But instead, Iran took a new route and preferred to respond in an equally aggressive tone to the dominating global aggression in that period. To this end, Iran rejuvenated the old revolutionary discourses in foreign policy. First of all, it announced to resume its nuclear activities from where they left off despite all external pressures, and implemented an aggressive foreign policy.

Not satisfied with this, Iran took the tension to a further level when the President himself announced that Israel must be eradicated. The Iranian foreign policy in the Ahmedinajad period criticized the international system, claiming that: International institutions were gradually losing prestige, Israel was usurping the rights of the Palestinian people more every day and that international institutions remained reluctant to

this, big powers were acting despotic and making military and political interventions in other states as they wished to do so, nuclear weapons were in the hands of tyrant states, and the world was split into two polars as the rich and the poor.

Ahmedinajad stressing that a fight against all these was necessary, claimed that the Holocaust is a myth fabricated by Zionism in the Western world and that the reality of this should be investigated.

Besides, Ahmedinajad tried to have friendly ties with the Latin American countries; to begin with, the formation of an anti-imperialist front was necessary.

As it may be noticed, the Iranian foreign policy in this period returned to the foreign policy instruments of the Imam Khomeini period. Although this political approach was similar in style to that of the first period, the content was the continuation of the approaches of the later periods. That is to say, it was pragmatic not principal. For the confirmation of this, it would be sufficient to examine the Iranian foreign policy in Syria during the Ahmedinajad period.

In this period, idealistic foreign policy discourses in many areas were voiced as mentioned above. However, the interests of Iran became determinant when it came to the Syrian issue. In fact, Syria occupies a great deal of space on the “axis of resistance,” a key component of the defense doctrine. Nonetheless, Iran preferred to overlook some critical points, which were previously set as “principles”, with the start of the popular unrest against the regime in Syria. For instance, the principle of the protection of the interests of the main country was prioritized over the defense of the aggrieved against aggressors, and the principle of affiliation with popular movements rather than states, was ignored.

Iran overtly sided with Syrian President Bashar al Asad on the Syrian issue. Iran acting so decisively on this issue did not hesitate to pull Hezbollah of Jordan into the civil war in Syria at the expense of wiping off the prestige of this organization in the Islamic world. In fact, Hezbollah was established in Lebanon to fight against Israel and had won the approval of all Muslims.

Despite the big tragedies and slaughters of unarmed people in Syria, Iran has never considered a revision in its Syrian foreign policy, and a possible revision would be achieved only through some assurances. These are the evidence that the Iranian administrators now think like statesmen, not revolutionists. Therefore, it is possible to say that the Iranian foreign policy of anti-imperialist stance in the Ahmedinajad period served to the aggressive policy tactics.

In any case, Iran maintains this aggressive policy and takes nuclear energy works to a further level while facing trouble inside due to the international sanctions. In order to beat the economic dire strait and the crisis, finding a way out was imperative for Iran, and the international system has adopted a softer discourse resulting from the fatigue due to wars. These two points bear the signs about the Iranian foreign policy in the new period. It is possible to read the developments taking place after Hassan Rouhani's election as president, as an indicator of this new position.

First of all, the religious leader Khamenei stressed the concept of "heroic flexibility" about the foreign policy, and this was interpreted as a sign of possible tactical changes due to the economic situation. In any case, Iran was to maintain the interest-based foreign policy approach during the period of the current President Rouhani and apply tactical changes, if needed, as it was tried before. Rouhani's getting closer with Rafsanjani and Khatami is also an indication that he

would adopt a political line in foreign politics similar to those of Rafsanjani and Khatami.

CONCLUSION

As Iran took a new turn owing to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the foreign policy discourse of the time was redesigned by a revolutionary approach. The slogan of "Neither the East nor the West" may be seen as an insubordination against the bi-polar international system that paved the way for Iran to enter the international arena, as the country believed that a third way was possible.

Later on, however, Iran faced with the common fate of perhaps all revolutions; that is, the ideological revolutionary discourse was mellowed through various explanations and fitted into the interest and future of the State following the absolute control of the revolutionary cadres over the system.

Even in the Ahmedinajad period where the revolutionary discourses were revived and national interests were at issue, revolutionary principles could be explained, as can be observed easily by looking at the Iranian foreign policy on Syria.

This example shows that Iran acts like a modern nation state with the aim of maximizing its own interests rather than a State with revolutionary ideals.

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