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Understanding Iranian Foreign Policy Behaviour

LSE Ideas

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Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has cut across a wide range of Western security concerns. From supporting terrorism, seeking weapons of mass destruction and more recently, supporting armed non-state actors in Afghanistan and Iraq, its recalcitrant theocracy has been viewed as a threat to regional stability. However, despite the plethora of literature written about Western policies vis-à-vis Iran, Iranian foreign policy remains poorly understood. Instead of clear analysis, there are considerable amounts of sensationalistic coverage about Iran's nuclear ambitions and about "mad mullahs" driven by apocalyptic delusions and a martyr complex. Arguably, understanding Iran's foreign policy is central to crafting sensible and effective policies and requires a closer examination of the historic, domestic, and regional contexts of Iranian foreign policy behaviour transcending Western perspectives and concerns.

Relevance of history

For Iran, the past is always present. On the one hand, ordinary Iranians have a strong connection even with their remote past, repeating ancient poetry, folktales and ceremony, and reaffirming their cultural heritage. Additionally, they take pride in the continuity of their cultural identity over millennia, and in having influenced the Greek, Arab, Mongol, and Turkish civilizations and Western culture through Iranian contributions to Islamic civilization.

At the same time, however, Iranians have a deep-seated scar in their collective psyche emanating from oppression by foreign powers throughout their history. Greeks, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and most recently Saddam Hussein's forces all invaded Iranian homeland. Likewise, Iranians also remember the British and Russian empires' economic exploitation, political subjugation, invasion and occupation in both World Wars. Moreover, the impact of the coup d'état against democratically elected Mossadegh in 1953 and the return of the autocratic Shah to the throne, and subsequent perceived American domination of Iran for a quarter century is seared into Iran's collective memory.

This paradoxical combination of historical awareness, cultural pride, and a sense of victimization at the hand of foreign powers, has created a passionate sense of independence and a culture of resistance to domination by any foreign power, as well as a deep desire to re-establish a 'natural' Iranian regional hegemony among the Iranian people. The four fundamental principles of Iranian foreign policy – rejection of all forms of external domination, preservation of Iran's independence and territorial integrity, defence of the rights of all Muslims without allying with hegemonic power, and the maintenance of peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states – are rooted in these widely held sentiments.

Iranian statecraft

Contrary to some Western depictions of Iranian foreign policy as irrational and contradictory, Tehran's foreign policy has its own strategic logic steeped in its particular idiosyncrasies. Formulated not by "mad mullahs" but by calculating Ayatollahs, Iran's contemporary behaviour is a far cry from its revolutionary zenith in the 1980's when its main objective was to export the revolution through provocation, agitation, subversion, and terrorism.

In the post-Khomeini era, Tehran's top priority has been the survival of the Islamic Republic. It views the United States as an existential threat and to counter this threat Iran devised a strategy that rests on both deterrence and competition in the Middle East, and increasingly looks to non-western states for political and economic cooperation. In this context, China, India and Russia emerged as strategically important partners. According to its strategy, Tehran balances between deterring any possible military actions by the United States and its allies – largely by improving its retaliatory capabilities both inside and outside the country – and neutralizing Western attempts to contain it, as well as undermining U.S. interests and increasing its own power in the wider Middle East.

Yet, to many external observers Iran's behaviour remains fundamentally enigmatic. On the one hand, this can be partly attributed to the ambiguities in the Iranian political system. Far from being a unitary actor, Iran seems like a country of a

thousand power centres, with its political networks and affiliations resting upon personal connections rather than an institutional framework, with layers of complexity and contradictions beneath the surface of its political system. Indeed, political factionalism and friction in Iran's political system emanating from the competition for power between its Islamic and republican institutions, at times, causes oscillation between ideological and pragmatic concerns in its foreign policy.

On the other hand, the imprudence in Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, especially regarding Israel and the Holocaust, hardly reinforces the image of pragmatic Iran. On the contrary, it invites comparison between Ahmadinejad's foreign policy and revolutionary Khomeinism of the 1980's. However, such analogies overestimate the role and influence of the President in Iranian foreign policy. Indeed, while there have been considerable differences in the foreign policies of Rafsanjani, Khatami and Ahmadinejad, Iran's foreign policy has had considerable continuity through Supreme Leader Khamene'i whose authority supersedes that of the President's Office. More importantly, however, such analogies grossly underestimate the impact of regional geopolitics.

Geopolitics

A close analysis of Iran's actions in the region shows that in the post-Khomeini era, Iran has shifted its policies to securing the revolution within its borders rather than exporting it. Where its immediate security is concerned, Tehran has come to focus on geopolitical factors over ideological concerns. However, ideology remains an important part of its foreign policy where it has little security implications.

Adjacent to its borders, Iran's foreign policy has been mainly influenced by strategic concerns. Facing sectarian conflict and fragile states outside its borders, Iran's domestic characteristics, its ethnic politics and cultural-religious identity, and its national security have become inextricably tied to that of the region. The Global War on Terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the post-invasion landscape have only served to intensify this complex security interdependence.

In Afghanistan, Iran's strategic goal has remained unchanged for the last nine years. Most importantly it has aimed to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a platform for attacks, concurrently maximizing its own influence. It has included isolating Iran from threats that undermine the Islamic Republic and its domestic stability, and negating potential threats to Iran's standing as a regional power. Subsequently, Tehran has formed and cultivated relationships with Shi'a Hazara and other Dari/Persian-speaking communities who could keep Iran's Afghan enemies and their external supporters in check and use them as a counterweight to anti-Iranian, pro-Saudi, and pro-Pakistani elements among Afghan Pashtuns.

Iran's strategic priorities in post-invasion Iraq have been equally continuous. Establishing a friendly, preferably Shiite government with the capacity to impose and maintain order – albeit too weak to challenge Iran's hegemonic aspirations – has been Tehran's main objective. It has opposed the Balkanization of Iraq, fearing that such fragmentation would incite secessionism and fragmentation. Additionally, Tehran has actively sought to eliminate, or at least balance pro-Saudi and pro-Pakistani elements operating in Iraq. Similar to Afghanistan, Tehran has sought to achieve its goals through cultivating relations with several factions in Iraq's Shi'a majority.

However, in the Levant, where there have been less direct security consequences, Iranian behaviour has been more heavily influenced by ideological factors, seeing a partnership forming between local armed non-state actors and Tehran. The strategic rationale behind Tehran's regional policy vis-à-vis the Levant has been to increase its Islamic credentials, to compete with Saudi Arabia over Lebanon, and to maintain an irregular capacity to challenge Israel and America through supporting Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent, Hamas. Indeed, in the Levant, supporting the armed non-state actors presented Iran with an opportunity to cultivate cooperation with actors who share its foreign policy principles, approach to American influence over the region, and disdain toward the policies of Arab regimes, especially vis-a-vis the Middle East Peace Process. Somewhat ironically, the conflicts that occurred in the region have largely facilitated Iranian regional influence and increased its prestige. Supporting armed non-state actors in the Levant provided invaluable strategic partnerships in a region where Iran and its behaviour are largely met with suspicion and containment, and with little risk of Israeli or American retaliation, Iranian support for these groups has been more robust than in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The Revolutionary Myth

Although the many stereotypes of Iranian foreign policy persist, and are likely to do so for the near future, they should not continue to go unchallenged. There is hardly a 'one-size-fits-all approach' when it comes to Iranian foreign policy, which the 'mad mullah' paradigm relies upon, nor is Iran a unitary actor run by a cohesive foreign policy elite. Indeed, Tehran's foreign policy has an undeniable logic that cannot be divorced from Iran's cultural, political and historical idiosyncrasies, or the impact of regional geopolitical dynamics.

During the Global War on Terror, Tehran has shown itself to be acutely aware of the geopolitical dynamics of the wider Middle East, which has allowed it to increase its stature mainly by reacting to regional events and American misunderstanding of regional dynamics, Iran's intentions and behaviour largely facilitated Iranian presence. While there has been considerable variation in Iranian foreign policy between ideological and pragmatic elements, it has been the geopolitical context that has mainly determined Iranian behaviour. In Afghanistan and Iraq on the one hand, and the Levant on the other, Iran's policies have been considerably different simply because they present very different challenges and opportunities to Tehran. Its

objectives, strategies and concerns have been somewhat different in each case, leading to different approaches which fit into the fundamental principles in Iran's foreign policy.

Fundamentally, there is a significant need for Western policy-makers and analysts alike to better understand Iran, especially when facing potential clash over Tehran's speculated nuclear weapons program. Indeed, Iran's many idiosyncrasies need to be considered and embedded in the analysis of Tehran's foreign policy behaviour, or the underlying rationale guiding its behaviour will likely go unseen, severely crippling the ability to develop an effective long-term strategy toward Iran.

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Shifting Sands is the blog of the Middle East International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS, analysing current events in the Middle East and contributing to the ongoing deliberations over policy prescriptions.

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