

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY EVOLUTION: IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS

(1979–2021)

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Annotation. *The article analyzes the transformation of Iran's foreign policy strategy from the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to the early decades of the twenty-first century. Particular focus is placed on how domestic reforms, constitutional changes, and shifting geopolitical conditions shaped Tehran's external orientation. The study highlights the central role of the Supreme Leader, whose broad constitutional powers allow him to define national priorities, supervise their implementation, and intervene directly in political institutions. It further examines the contributions of the President, the Parliament (Majles), the Foreign Ministry, and constitutional councils to policy formulation. The paper traces key stages of Iranian diplomacy under Rafsanjani's pragmatic reconstruction, Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations," Ahmadinejad's confrontational justice-centered approach, and Rouhani's moderate, economically oriented strategy culminating in the JCPOA. Overall, the research demonstrates how Iran's foreign policy continuously balances ideology and pragmatism to strengthen national interests and ensure regional leadership.*

Keywords: Iran; Foreign Policy; Supreme Leader; Majles; Pragmatism; Dialogue Among Civilizations; JCPOA; Regional Leadership; Decision-making.

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Iran's foreign policy underwent profound transformation, shaped by internal reforms, constitutional changes, and global political developments. The 1979 Islamic Revolution not only replaced the country's ruling elite but also redefined the conceptual framework guiding its external relations. The adoption of the 1979 Constitution and its 1989 amendments established a unique governance model in which decision-making in foreign policy became a complex process involving both elected institutions and unelected bodies, with the Supreme Leader holding the highest authority [1].

Iran's external strategy during this period evolved from revolutionary activism and ideological confrontation toward pragmatism, multilateral diplomacy, and economic engagement. Each presidential administration—from Rafsanjani's reconstruction era to Khatami's reformist initiatives, Ahmadinejad's confrontational policies, and Rouhani's moderate, economy-focused approach—sought to recalibrate foreign relations in response to changing domestic priorities and international pressures. Understanding these dynamics is essential to grasping the continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy and its pursuit of national interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

At the close of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first, Iran's foreign policy strategy evolved repeatedly under the influence of sweeping domestic reforms.

Throughout this historical period, Tehran's political elite consistently adjusted the country's external orientation to reflect shifting internal and international circumstances. The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a turning point: the new ruling elite not only transformed the mechanisms of implementing foreign policy but also articulated an entirely new conceptual framework for Iran's engagement with the world [2, 35].

This conceptualization was rooted in the religious and political worldview of Iran's leadership and took into account emerging socio-political trends within the country. While Iran's foreign policy is formally based on the Constitution adopted in 1979, the governance system in its present form has existed since the 1989 constitutional amendments. Within this framework, decision-making represents a delicate balance between institutions reinforcing the central role of the clergy and those whose members are chosen through popular elections.

Foreign-policy decision-making in Iran is a multi-layered and often complex process involving both formal and informal power centers. The official apparatus responsible for foreign affairs consists of the Supreme Leader, the President of the Islamic Republic, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Parliament (Majles), and several constitutional councils.

Article 110 of the Constitution grants the Supreme Leader far-reaching authority in foreign policy. These powers include, among others, setting general state policies in consultation with the Expediency Council, supervising their implementation, declaring war, peace, and mobilization, resolving extraordinary political issues, endorsing the inauguration of the president elected by the public, and dismissing the president under Article 89 in cases of legal violations or incapacity.

Such prerogatives enable the Supreme Leader to intervene without restriction in the activities of various political institutions, effectively positioning him as the ultimate arbiter of Iran's domestic and foreign policy direction. In this sense, the Supreme Leader represents the primary institution articulating the nation's core interests, objectives, and the means by which they are pursued internationally [3, 421].

From the 1980s onward, Iran's diplomacy was heavily shaped by the authority and political vision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Under his leadership, the Supreme Leader's office emerged as the highest body defining foreign policy priorities. The foreign policy doctrine formulated during his tenure was anchored in two guiding principles: the "export of the Islamic Revolution" and the slogan "Neither East, nor West – only Islam." These ideas reinforced Tehran's resolve to construct a foreign policy inspired by the realist paradigm of international relations while staying ideologically grounded.

Khomeini's foreign policy doctrine embraced several core tenets: an uncompromising stance against oppression targeting the global Muslim community; the application of Islamic values in governance and their promotion abroad; the expansion of Iran's relations with other states; a focus on mutual cultural, economic, and social influence among nations; the use of foreign policy to combat Iran's international isolation and counter propaganda against the revolution; and the identification of friend and foe through diplomatic engagement.

Institutionalizing these principles in the Constitution provided a legal foundation for the Supreme Leader's pivotal role in international affairs. This framework was reaffirmed publicly, including during Khomeini's January 1981 meeting with officials of the Foreign Ministry.

Within Iran's political hierarchy, the office of the President is considered the second most important institution after the Supreme Leader. The President is elected by popular vote for a four-year term, but his appointment must be formally confirmed by the Supreme Leader before he takes the oath of office in the Majles. The Leader retains the constitutional authority to dismiss the President at any time.

In the realm of foreign policy, the President's powers include signing and executing laws after parliamentary approval, ratifying treaties and agreements passed by the Majles, receiving foreign ambassadors, and managing governance through the cabinet of ministers he appoints.

According to Article 176 of the Constitution, the President also presides over the Supreme National Security Council, which formulates the state's security and foreign policy strategy and determines its implementation methods. Historically, however, the President's influence on foreign policy has remained limited compared with that of the Supreme Leader.

The 1989 constitutional reforms, the transition to a new Supreme Leader, and the election of a new president ushered in a new era for Iran's foreign policy. Under President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), the concept shaped during Khomeini's era was reworked, and Iran's diplomacy assumed a more pragmatic tone. Constructive relations were re-established with several countries, and Tehran focused on safeguarding national interests, positioning Iran as a regional leader in politics, economics, and technology, and expanding its reach in global markets [4, 125].

During this period, efforts were made to ease sanctions, broaden cooperation with many countries (excluding Israel and the United States), and strengthen Iran's standing in the international arena through active participation in regional and global organizations. Tehran also sought to use influential platforms such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to advance its national agenda, attempting to transform the OIC from an economic body into a political—and potentially even a security-oriented—organization.

Under President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), widely regarded as the reformist era, Iran's foreign policy gained renewed content and direction. His signature initiative, the "Dialogue Among Civilizations," sought to end Iran's international isolation and promote multi-vector cooperation within a multipolar world order. In response to military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Tehran also proposed the "Coalition for Peace Based on Justice," a framework for collective action under UN auspices to counter emerging threats.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure marked a shift toward more confrontational rhetoric. The principle of "justice" became central to Iranian foreign policy discourse, and the government prioritized creating a favorable external environment to make Iran the leading regional power in economy, science, and technology by 2025. However, internal divisions among Iran's political elite over the country's international posture limited the effectiveness of these policies. Between 2005 and 2009, Tehran relied heavily on "aggression" and "escalation" strategies as tools to deter the United States and Israel [5]. The dominance of radical conservatives in Parliament, the executive branch, and the judiciary provided Ahmadinejad with a supportive domestic context for this approach. His Middle East policy even improved ties with several leading Arab states, including Egypt and the Gulf monarchies.

During President Hassan Rouhani's administration (2013–2021), Iran increasingly gained recognition as a leading regional power. Rouhani's pragmatic foreign policy approach, aimed at strengthening the country's global standing, won popular support and was characterized as a reformist movement. His concept emphasized revitalizing the national economy, implementing Iran's nuclear program, achieving the lifting of sanctions, and deepening regional cooperation.

He also recruited like-minded pragmatist politicians into government. Initially, his efforts enjoyed strong backing from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Following Rouhani's election, the Foreign Ministry assumed a more prominent role in shaping foreign policy, notably after the administration of the nuclear program was transferred from the Supreme National Security Council to the ministry. The Foreign Ministry led negotiations with the United States and the UN Security Council's permanent members, culminating in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which ended Iran's international isolation and eased economic sanctions.

Rouhani's tenure brought relative moderation to Iran's foreign relations, fostered mutual trust with neighboring states, and prioritized diplomacy over confrontation. Nonetheless, U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under President Donald Trump created new challenges for Tehran.

Rouhani's "moderate" foreign policy rested on four main pillars: (1) crafting foreign policy based on a realistic assessment of circumstances, ensuring alignment with principles and national interests; (2) avoiding extreme rhetoric and slogans to improve Iran's international image; (3) building mutual trust through constructive cooperation with other countries; and (4) prioritizing economic development within foreign policy.

Analysts note that Iran's use of "soft power," particularly through charitable foundations abroad, contributed significantly to these efforts [6]. Yet Rouhani faced mounting internal resistance as relations with the Supreme Leader became more strained in later years.

The Iranian Parliament (Majles) also plays an important role in shaping foreign policy from a legislative perspective, as reflected in Articles 76, 77, and 78 of the Constitution. The Majles ratifies treaties, agreements, and other international documents and has historically made decisions with significant international consequences—such as the one related to writer Salman Rushdie, which temporarily severed Iran–UK relations.

One distinctive feature of Iran's political system is its network of councils, which is also enshrined in the Constitution. Five constitutional councils are mentioned, three of which have direct influence on foreign policy decisions. The Expediency Council is tasked with advising the Supreme Leader on general policy formation, addressing systemic challenges, and even forming a leadership council if the Supreme Leader dies or becomes incapacitated.

The Guardian Council, composed of 12 members, also plays a pivotal role in foreign policy by reviewing legislation for compliance with Islamic principles, vetoing parliamentary decisions when necessary, and approving candidates for key state positions—including the presidency, parliamentary seats, and members of the Assembly of Experts—thus influencing decision-making within both the legislative and executive branches.

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