

Iran and "*Look to the East*" Policy

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In the early days of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (August 2004), his government demonstrated an inclination toward a new direction in foreign policy, which was dubbed as the "Look to the East" policy.

Although the "Look to the East policy" as a specific approach to Iran's foreign policy dates back several decades, its applied content can take on an original meaning based on the way in which it is defined.

The Changing International Environment

Substantial international developments after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system led various countries to redefine their foreign policies. This was more important for great and middle powers

that had global and regional interests. Therefore, it was not accidental that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first Bush Administration spoke of a new world order and formulated its new strategy accordingly. A similar development occurred in the foreign policies of European powers, especially in the framework of the European Union.

Under such circumstances and given the major developments occurring around its borders, the Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional power was inclined to redefine some of its approaches to foreign policy. The policy of "détente" under former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the "Dialogue among Civilizations" under former president Mohammad Khatami partially met those expectations. With the coming to power of President Ahmadinejad, which coincided with a deadlock in negotiations between Iran and the EU-3 (Great Britain, France and Germany) over Iran's nuclear program, a tendency evolved in the new government to review the country's foreign policy orientations and to establish closer links with countries

in the "East" under the rubric of a “Look to the East” policy.

Although some experts consider this new approach to Iran’s foreign policy as tactical and as a sign of protest to the arrogant behaviors of some Western powers, especially with regard to Iran's nuclear dossier, others argue that this could represent a strategic change in Iran’s foreign policy and that therefore, it should be studied carefully.

With this background, the Department of Foreign Policy of the Center for Strategic Research (CSR) began a study on Iran’s “Look to the East” policy in early 2006.

Because CSR’s study was examining a subject that was not yet defined theoretically and which was in its formative stages, the research was open to many questions. As a first step, it was necessary to review the different stages of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy in the past. The “Neither East nor West” policy; seeking closer relations with the West, particularly European countries; and finally the “Look

to the East" policy were the major approaches to Iran's foreign policy during the past 27 years.

The "Look to the East" policy as a basis for a new strategy in Iran's foreign policy obviously needed to be examined from different angles. Because the priorities of foreign policy in every country are formed and articulated in the framework of long-term strategies, these priorities usually depend on the prevailing conditions, the trend of events, the probability of success and the inferred effects of those policies. Given this assumption, sweeping changes in the international scene made the revision of Iran's approaches toward foreign policy and its priorities inevitable.

The developments in the international arena after the end of the Cold War, especially after the events of September 11, 2001, and the emphasis upon unilateralism by the United States, which has become the last remaining superpower and has had military-oriented preventive and preemptive policies, all made an impact on other great and middle powers, including

Iran. Those developments were significant in causing certain Iranian policymakers, including some in President Ahmadinejad's Administration, to believe the country's foreign policy needed a new direction. It was quite clear from the start that what intensified their efforts for exploring new horizons in Iran's foreign policy was the impasse in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program with the EU-3 and in general Iran's disappointment in reaching any viable agreement with the West on substantial issues.

However, although the "Look to the East" policy resulted from these conditions, a tendency for the Islamic Republic to "Look to the East" dates back to earlier times. For instance, during the second term of Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency, there were some efforts to strengthen existing links with important Asian countries such as China, India and Russia in the framework of a strategic alliance. It is therefore necessary to examine different aspects of the new approach compared with similar policies in the past.

The Prominence of Asia

Nowadays there is a vivid understanding about Asia's importance in the world. Since several years ago, many analysts have believed that if the 20th century could be dubbed as the European Century, the 21st century would belong to Asia.¹ Even some American strategists have concluded in their studies that the United States should pay special attention to Asia in its future strategies. They argued that while the United States had focused on Europe and the Atlantic alliance during the 20th century, Washington needed to shift its attention to Asia in the 21st century.² It is said that in the Asian-Pacific age, while Europe has reached its peak in economic development, Asia still has a lot of potential to be explored and that can flourish in the future. Two Asian giants -- China and India -- have rapidly growing economies. It is estimated that India's "middle class" of over 300 million people has a potential purchasing power of \$3000 per month. The World Bank says India will become the third largest economy after China and the US by 2025.³ Given

trends like these, the future of Asia is very promising, and most of the great powers have shifted their attention to this continent.

Thus, the major considerations in Iran's "Look to the East" policy can be defined in the following terms:

The International Dimension: Major Powers in Asia have shaped the world's geopolitical environment since the end of the Cold War. Those powers have experienced increasing growth. Some, like Japan, have already achieved great power status, at least in economic terms. Others are on their way toward that position. Presently, China and India are considered the main rising powers in Asia.

The Regional Dimension: Regional developments, especially after the September 11th events, are considered to have had the greatest effects on certain countries. For instance, major changes have occurred in Iran's neighborhoods that have had broad security implications. As for other regional great powers,

especially China and Russia, although compared to the United States, they have different approaches toward the campaign against terrorism, and they are not officially working with the United States on this problem, their firm conviction is clearly to avoid any confrontation with the United States. It is also noticeable that despite fundamental differences between the social systems of China and the United States, it seems that Beijing has used the existing opportunities in the “War on Terrorism” to gradually weaken opposition in the United States for closer cooperation with that country.

The Internal Dimension: The coming to power of President Ahmadinejad’s government coincided with the deadlock in Iran’s nuclear negotiations with the EU-3. Problems arose after the EU-3 introduced its proposals on Iran’s nuclear issues, which were considered by Iranian officials as imperfect and inconsistent with previous negotiations between the two sides. The events leading to the deadlock in the

nuclear negotiations caused outrage among many Iranians. In an apparent move to stave off public criticism, some officials in President Ahmadinejad's new government suggested imposing an embargo on imported goods from certain countries that voted in favor of a resolution against the Islamic Republic of Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). South Korea and Britain were among those countries.⁴ Of course, that proposal was never approved or implemented, but it was interpreted by some as a new tendency in Iran's foreign policy. Some believe that President Ahmadinejad's government sought a new approach in Iran's foreign policy because the country found itself in a sensitive situation: It was facing challenges by the West, particularly the United States, while two regional great powers, China and India, were seeking accommodation and resolving their past disparities with Washington. However, in order to turn that new policy into practice, some questions must first be addressed:

Essentially, what are Iran’s opportunities in pursuing a “Look to the East” policy? To what extent does the “Look to the East” policy enjoy national support? Which tactics were to be applied to implement this policy? Should the policy be performed through the expansion of bilateral relations or by alliances? Or by making alliances with some selected countries such as India, China and Russia? To implement this policy, what leverage or instruments could Iran use? By resorting to this policy, what would be the reactions of other powers and how would Iran meet potential opposition? What would be the economic opportunities and challenges resulting from this policy? Assuming that the export of energy is one of the main advantages of Iran's "Look to the East" policy, to what extent could Iran rely upon this factor? What are the volumes of proven energy resources available for export?

The “Look to the East” policy generally prioritizes the strengthening and deepening of bilateral relations with the Eastern countries. During the first

months of coming to power, high ranking officials in Ahmadinejad's government made several official visits to Asian countries. These visits were for the most part reciprocated by their counterparts. However a review of the content of those visits reveals that Iran pursued an economic approach rather than a strategic one. In fact, despite showing an interest in forming alliances with Eastern countries, there was no sign of strategic planning.

From another perspective, the expansion of Iran's bilateral and regional relations with Asian and Eastern countries is very important because, Iran may attempt to make strategic regional alliances with countries such as China, India, Russia and Iran. Thus, the question is how is it possible to implement an "Look to the East" policy in the framework of regional cooperation? Enhancing Iran's status in regional organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the D-8 group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) can provide

appropriate opportunities for Iran to pursue a "Look to the East" policy. On the other hand, economic cooperation with Asian countries especially in the energy and transit sectors is considered an important area for Iran's regional cooperation in Asia. The expansion of transit routes for the promotion of trade has been targeted as one of the main areas in regional cooperation. The North-South Corridor agreement linking the Indian sub-continent to Russia and northern Europe was signed by Iran, Russia and India and later expanded to include other countries in the region. The impending question is to what extent could these opportunities be exploited in the framework of a new regional cooperation? For example, to what extent did Iran's major investment in the Bandar Abbas-Serakhs railroad brought the expected outcome in the promotion of regional trade during the past several years? Or how possible is it to benefit from the East-to-West railroads, including transit routes from Afghanistan and Pakistan to those in Iraq and Turkey, in order to forge new regional co operation?

Another important element in the implementation of the "Look to the East" policy is the role that rival powers can play in opposing that policy. For some time now, the United States has been expanding its influence in Asia. The United States has shifted its attention to the Asian-Pacific zone and attempts to repeat its successful experience of Trans-Atlantic cooperation in Asia. Therefore, in studying Iran's foreign policy towards Asia, the impact of U.S. policies and reactions of that country in the form of its policy to contain Iran cannot be ignored.

At the present time, it is likely that Iran would face a confrontational U.S. policy its "Look to the East" policy because America's declared policy is to deter other powers from expanding their relationships with Iran. It is also important to take note of U.S. strategic plans for Asia, including forging a strategic alliance with India.

New Horizons

The Ahmadinejad Administration has advanced the "Look to the East" policy at a time of great changes when great changes have occurred in the internationally, regionally, and regional scene as well as within Iran. At the international level, the collapse of the bipolar system and U.S. efforts to consolidate its status as the only remaining superpower in the world; at the regional level, the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the ousting of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq; and at the domestic level, the determination by Iran's young, resourceful and dynamic population to take a great leap forward in scientific and economic developments have all been noticeable.

As a result, Iran has gained a pivotal position in this arena. During past decades, the western part of the Middle East hosted this central position because of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which was shadowed by the confrontation between two superpowers. The collapse of the Soviet Union and opening of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia to the outside world

substantially increased the geopolitical weight of this region. In that process, the geopolitical gravitation has gradually moved from the western part of the Middle East to its eastern edge; consequently, Iran has become the center of this new gravitation of regional geopolitics. Thus, the continuation of the present policies of Western powers toward Iran risks not only the isolation of Iran but also more importantly a shift in Iran's strategic orientation towards the East. Although in its early stages, Iran's present policy of "Look to the East" suggests that the continued exertion of political pressure and sanctions against Iran -- even in a covert form -- could drive it further from the West. This makes it essential for the West to adopt a pragmatic policy toward Iran because not only have geopolitics changed in Iran's favor but also investment and advanced technology as the main bargaining chips they hold could be compensated by China and other countries, although not at the same quality and quantity at this stage. With this image in mind, some proponents of the "Look to the East" policy have

argued that it will force the West to back off some of its policies toward Iran. Obviously, such flexibility on the part of the United States depends on many factors, including Iran’s diplomatic dexterity to strike an appropriate balance in its relations with the East and the West and avoiding extremist anti-Western policies. Simply put, tilting toward the East and West for a country like Iran, which has significant geopolitical stature and the potential for becoming a prominent regional power, fails to meet the national objectives and aspirations of this country. There are no good reasons to neglect strategic advantages that can result from a positive relationship with the West. With this in mind, the “Look to the East” policy can only serve Iran’s national interests if it can remove any kind of dependence on the West and enforce a balanced foreign policy that could also widen Iran's foreign policy options.

Notes:

¹ Today, many scholars have prophesied that the 21st century belongs to Asia. For instance at the first World Economic Forum on East Asia in Tokyo it was emphasized that: “The new century belongs to Asia,” and “The center of gravity of the global economy is moving East,” and “India and China are the new economic powerhouses.

See, <http://www.forumblog.org/blog/2006/06/exclusive-east.html>

² See, Stephen J. Blank, TOWARD A NEW U.S. STRATEGY IN ASIA, The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College , February 01, 2004.

³ See, <http://ezinearticles.com/?India-Marches-Ahead-to-Emerge-as-the-Largest-Economic-Power-of-the-World&id=356990> Yet there are other estimates that, if things go according to prediction, by the year 2040, India will be the largest economy in the world with a reasonably high per capita income. <http://www.hindu.com/biz/2003/12/29/stories/2003122900341600.htm>

⁴ Reuters, Tehran, 18 Oct 2005.