

Iran's Regional Power and Prominence in the Context of International System*

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Abstract: To reach a higher status and a prominent role in the region is among priorities of Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. This has always been the case in the country's foreign policy. However, it has been underscored as a top priority in Iran's Twenty Year Prospect Plan (2024).§ Given the country's existing national capability and potentials such an aiming is sensible and logical. However, despite the real potentials, there still remains a range of domestic and foreign restrictions and obstacles which make the realization of such goal rather complicated. One of the main

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§ This plan refers to a mid-term development strategy, approved by the supreme leader of the I.R. Iran, and pursues higher status of economic, scientific, and technological development for Iran, upon which Iran takes the first place among Middle Eastern countries in 2024. (Editor)

obstacles is the structure of international system which the country needs to overcome besides removing its own internal factors. The following paper examines Iran's foreign policy in the context of present international system and how the international and its regional sub-systems could withhold Iran's regional power status.

Introduction

Little attention had been paid to the notion of regionalism during the Pahlavi's regime in Iran regardless of its effectual geo-strategic, geopolitical and geo-cultural position in both regional and international levels. In the early 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War and after British withdrawal from the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean waters, the announcement of Nixon (two-tier) doctrine signified the concept of regionalism. Under the Nixon doctrine, Iran and Saudi Arabia were the military and economic pillars of the region's security. However, because of its geopolitical position, greater military prowess plus common borders with the former Soviet Union, Iran was far more important to the United States than Saudi Arabia. For that reason, as the region's gendarme, Iran continued to play a significant role in regional equations.

After the victory of Islamic Revolution in 1979, the revolutionary qualifications, the imposed war on Iran by Iraq, the Cold War and certain mindsets in the country's foreign policy never gave the chance for the country to try and see whether or not it could ever become a dominant power in the region. On the other hand, high on the agenda of new decision makers was to shield the country's sovereignty and the newly-established Islamic system. However, Iran's revisionist approaches towards international system caused hostilities towards Iran by those who had shaped that system.

After the Cold War and disintegration of the former Soviet Union, fundamental changes in the world system and the scope of great powers' influence let some regional powers to emerge. Iran is one of these powers which is expected to become the region's dominant power within the framework of Twenty Year Prospect Plan (2024). However, as mentioned earlier, despite the country's existing national capability and potentials, there still remains a range of

restrictions and obstacles which make the realization of such goal rather complicated, inter alia the international system is among the most important factors. Some scholars of international relations assume the international system as the most effective and decisive factor in shaping the behavior of nations. The distribution and balance of power are the main consisting elements of international system. States and statesmen take actions on the basis of their perception on international system. Based on this assumption, international system determines what the governments could and what they could not do. In Iran's case, the international system has always had a major impact on its foreign policy and conduct – although there have also been non-systematic factors. Given the country's unique political structure and its foreign policy approach toward international system, most of restrictions on Iran have been for its non-materialistic traits. The following article seeks to analyze these traits and establish how and to what extent the international system could create restrictions for Iran.

1. Existing Scenarios on International System

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union and turbulence in international relations order, prediction of the new order is a difficult task. Some scholars are of the opinion that in the international system a new economic-oriented multi-polar system would emerge and there will be little room for military discourse. Some take into consideration the events of 1990s and talk about the emergence of a unipolar arrangement under the American leadership. There are also others who have to come to believe that a new world order has not been shaped yet and that the world is flexible in which various systems could be formed. The paper aims to discuss and review these diverse opinions.

1-1 Unipolarism

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1990, scientific circles in the United States and Europe laid emphasis on a unipolar world order. These circles came to believe that after the fall of Soviet

Union the bipolar system which had shaped the security policies of great powers for almost half-a-century had been removed and the US had come out as the sole superpower. Advocate of such claims refers to the widespread US military prowess, its leadership of liberalism, the military defeats of Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, and in general the wide distance of US might and capabilities from all other powers. From such a point of view, the American dominance puts Washington in the middle of universal politics to pursue the policy of creating a single hegemony as the leader of liberal democracy. In such a scenario and in the words of "Fraser Cameron", the world will have a sheriff who will be in charge of implementing the law and creating order using its unrivalled strength and power. In this scenario, international security is under direct influence of the unrivalled US hegemony, the executive guarantees of which could come from its economic, technological and cultural power, and which could be used effectively in the political arena. (Karami, 2004: 97)

John Ikenberry believes that US power and dominance today is unprecedented in modern history and that no other great power had ever possessed such military, economic, technological and political capabilities. We have a superpower in the world that has no other rival. Other nations are somehow trying to compete with the US in some areas. However, the multi-facet characteristics of the United States have made it domineering, influential and provoking. (Ikenberry, 2003: 15)

1-2 Multi-Polarity

The proponents of multilateral international system lay emphasis on the limitations of American power and believe that it cannot rule the modern world. Samuel P. Huntington sees the present international system as "single -multipolar" that demonstrates the existence of a superpower i.e., the US, along with a number of other great powers. Huntington argues that under the single-multipolar international system, the presence of an influential power alone is not sufficient when it comes to resolving international disputes. A

superpower as such could be a player with veto power but it will need all other great powers to meet its goals.

He further states that the structure of world power has four layers, on the top layer of which stands the US which is dominant in all sources of power. The second layer concerns major regional powers. Most of these players are high-ranking in certain parts of the world such as the European Union, Russia, China, Brazil and Iran. The third layer concerns average regional powers with less influence in their areas than the major regional powers. Finally, the fourth layer concerns all other nations, some of which are still pivotal for some reasons - although they play no role in the world order compared to those in the third layer.

A structure as such could create different patterns of disputes based on which the US is the sole superpower with global interests, trying hard to extend it across the world. This creates rift between the regional powers and the US - seen as an uninvited guest in their territories. They believe that they are the ones that should play major roles in regional developments, thus paving the way for regional competition and rivalry. The average-rate regional powers also do not want to be dominated by the major regional powers and for that reason they try to edge their influence in regional developments. This competitive pattern paves the way for their collaboration with the United States. (www.foreignaffairs.org)

1-3 Transitional Period

A good number of experts of international relations are of the opinion that the world system has not been established yet and that the world is still in a flexible state. Some developments take place between the periods of transition from the former system to the new one known as the transitional period. International transition offers opportunity for a change in the foreign policies of each and every country as well as performance of international system. During the transitional period, countries try to understand and define the new international milieu. This helps them develop foreign policy objectives as well as means to achieve these goals. During this particular period,

global powers try to promote and stabilize their desired systems. The US government as the only superpower coming out of the Cold War devises unipolar policies in order to establish a unipolar world order. On the other hand, other major players like the European Union pursue a multipolar world order to counter the American unilateralism. (Esfid Vajani, 2006:125)

2. The Impact of September 11th on International System

Indeed, what happened during the 1991-2000 was depicting a transitional international system, fluctuating amid the unilateralism and multilateralism and bound to the international rules and norms, particularly within the United Nations. The situation had been directly affected by the internal affairs in the US i.e., the ruling of Liberals - that was greatly changed when a new US president took office - followed by new international developments in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. After the 9/11 attacks, there has been a combination of continuity and change in international system. In general, the September 11 attacks rendered three consequences. The first outcome concerns international relations players. While in the 1990s, there were serious talks on decline of nation-states and the rise of non-governmental organizations, the 9/11 attacks further strengthened the status of nation-states across the world, especially with regards to providing security. This consolidation of nation-states' power was a fact while the role of other players weakened.

The second group of outcomes concerns the effects on the rules of the game which in turn these factors also demonstrate both the elements of continuity and change. The rules of the game in international relations have always been divided into friendly and hostile rules, each encompassing a range of actions and reactions. Before the 9/11 attacks, especially after the successful efforts by the UN in establishing the international conventions and norms, the rules of the game were mostly friendly and multilateral. Nevertheless, after the September 11th attacks, the peaceful/multilateral cooperation did not end but became more focused on military - given the US attitude- which changed the international discourse and paved the way for the

emergence of more antagonistic rhetoric such as "enemy", "terrorism", "coalition", "war" and "occupation". Another end result was unilateralism versus multilateralism.

The third set of outcomes concerns the changes in the environment of international relations which in spite of its transitional characteristics, has shown a more highlighted US factor. In this sense and others, the US has intensified efforts to trail its hegemony. From this perspective, in the new environment the psychological atmosphere entails a mixture of cultural and military power. These three sets of outcomes have revived the geopolitics in international relations, turning Eurasia into the main and the most strategic region in the world. Second, it has brought up the subject matter of identity in international security discourses. Finally, it has made the US challenge a hot topic of discussions in international relations.

3. Possibilities and Limitations

Given to Iran's vast land, quality and quantity of human and natural resources, as well as its unique geographical position within the framework of the Islamic system and based on a dynamic ideology, achievement of a prominent status and playing the major role in the region has been and still is the top priority for Iranian decision-makers. There have always been opportunities to this end in conjunction with international and external restrictions. The most important external challenges concern the lack of compromise and alignment with the dominant ideology in international system.

3-1 National Abilities

Thanks to its geographical features, natural resources, population quality and density, economic and technological development and military dexterity, Iran has become an influential regional power. Iran has a perfect geographical position and is one the most important countries in the Middle East. Throughout history, Iran has always been viewed as a barricade against great powers. The geopolitical position and place offered a special role for the country,

especially during the Cold War era, affecting regional and international equations. Among its other advantages, Iran is linked to the Eurasian region; it is close to the free waters and has long shores in the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman; it controls the Strait of Hormuz and can control its sea traffic; and finally its land can be used to attack the neighboring states. More important than the necessary hardware, the country has a talented population that is so much interested in long-term goals and advancement. (Seifzadeh, 2005: 220)

Moreover, the country's location in the vicinity of the energy-rich regions of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, similarly offers to Iran a unique geo-economic position. The Caspian Sea has well over 200 billion barrels of proven crude oil and 279 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves. Oil majors have invested well over 4 billion dollars thus far to develop these oil and gas fields. (Rahimpour, 2002:57) With well over 700 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves, the Persian Gulf is the largest energy hub in the world. It also has the second biggest reserves of natural gas after Russia. In this respect, Iran enjoys a unique geo-economic position because it has 137 billion barrels of proven crude oil and 992 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves. (www.bp.com)

Iran also is rich in mineral resources. This has made Iran a regional power. On the other hand, its geographical position has made it like a bridge between the Central Asian and Caucasus states and the Persian Gulf. This has also made the country as transit route generating a significant amount of income from transiting goods from the Central Asian states to the world and vice versa. (Jafari Valedani, 2005: 44)

After the imposed war, Iran began to rebuild its military with some major results in missile defense technology. The development of Iran's missile defense industries alongside its peaceful nuclear power program has created a pretext among some extra-regional powers to raise suspicion on the matter. Although Iran has spent far less than other regional states to military spending, it is still a regional military power. As the existing capabilities and resources give confidence to the country to play a dominant role in the region, they force the

regional and international system's players to play a partial balancing act against Iran.

3-2 The Nature of Iran's Political System

Islamic Republic of Iran has been established on religious democracy. Although its political system has some similarities in form to the liberal democracy which is a conventional political configuration in the international system, there are still fundamental differences in substance to this political formation. Religious democracy is based on monotheism in which God is the creator of mankind and the world, and the origin of all worldly affairs. In this respect, law and sovereignty originate from God's directives and belongs to Him. No one deserves to take His place and position either. On the same token, human beings, even prophets and the infallible Imams, consider themselves under His absolute command and follow His specific orders. No one is allowed to rule or devise laws that defy the divine rules.

Western liberal democracy is the opposite of religious democracy and is based on the humanism. In other words, in this system, human being is a creature that can use his mind and wisdom to set goals without seeking assistance from the outside and metaphysical forces. Western liberal democracy is based on humanism, liberalism and secularism schools of thought. Therefore, they largely depend on materialistic and worldly aspects of human being. In liberal democratic philosophy, there is no place for God and religious issues such as Judgment Day and Revelations when it comes to determining human being's political life. The ultimate goal is also non-other than materialism. (Mortazavi, 2003: 204-206)

Quite the opposite, Islam gives legitimacy to Iranian political system. Islam's prevalent influence was not only evident in the revolutionary movement, but also the main feature after the revolution. The Iranian leaders and people managed to make optimum use of Islam as an ideology during the revolution. It was also used as a factor after the revolution to stabilize and secure the new Islamic system. (Valipour-Zoroumi, 2004: 101) Therefore, the

Islamic Revolution was an ideological revolution derived from the Islamic ideology. Nationwide, it managed to revive Islamic programs and theories in governance. Worldwide, given the global nature of Islam, it has ushered progressive thoughts and theories. Imam Khomeini did pursue global justice and believed that only a global Islamic system could establish justice. Therefore, the goal for the Islamic Revolution was the revival of a unified Islamic identity, fight against nationalism, and unity of the Islamic world against the West. Under the circumstances, for some reasons, Shiite ideological teachings create more sensitivity in the West. Based on Shiism, any governance other than the one by the Infallible Household of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) is usurper and non-Muslims should never rule Muslims. Such a belief is a challenge per se for exploitative forces of colonial powers. The Iranian revolution did in fact happen to be against the international system and brought certain values and norms that challenged the interests of status quo powers. (Fazelinia, 2004: 116)

3-3 Iran's Foreign Policy towards International System

The Islamic Revolution in Iran ushered widespread political and social developments. At the same time, it created fundamental changes in foreign policy. The paradigms of interaction with the West also changed from that of coalition and alliance to distancing from both the Eastern and Western powers, especially the United States. It even went further by opposing the international norms, organizations and the dominant ruling structures. After the revolution, Tehran pursued the policy of "non-alignment" or "Neither East, Nor West, But Islamic Republic." The non-alignment strategy in foreign policy was all about rejecting the idea of being dominated in international relations. However, there have been different views and definitions for "non-alignment" which have practically guided foreign policy. Therefore, there are also non-alignment strategies in Iran's foreign policy. One of these strategies which was mostly the case during the provisional government in the early days of the revolution was traditionally based on accepting the present order and not depending

on foreign powers. (Firouzabadi, 2002: 131) The ruling nationalists in that transitional period were in no way trying to oppose the structure of national system at the time. They were seeking independence and national sovereignty within country's framework. The provisional government tried to follow international rules and refrain from interfering in other countries' internal affairs. It was also trying to improve relations with other nations which had been in critical conditions because of the revolution. So the government was trying to analyze and justify the policy of "non-alignment" within the framework of "Neither East, Nor West" slogan in alignment with a "negative balance". (Norouzi, 2004: 203)

Another strategy was the "revisionist non-alignment" that was the case during 1981-89. The strategy meant rejecting the present order and status quo, making strides towards establishing a favorable system. Contrary to the provisional government's commitment to nationalism, making compromises and accepting the historical balance of power - the goal of which was to protect independence within the heart of world order - the new policy was idealistic and challenged the very foundation of the so-called world order, its established norms of diplomacy and international law system, referred to by some researchers as "Islamic world order." (Ramazani, 2001: 62) Such an approach which had its roots in the ideology of Islamic culture and the political conduct and behavior of the Iranian people after the revolution, resulted in profound developments in the structure of world order as well as national/regional environment. The main players of international system pictured Islamic Republic of Iran a counterbalance to the world order and devised policies and took covert and overt measures against the country to counter, weaken and contain the Iranian revolutionary system on internal, regional and international levels. (Tajik, 2004: 69-75)

The third strategy was the moderate "reformist-non-alignment" tactic which covers the middle ground of two former versions and overwhelmed the Iranian politics in post-war era. Although it maintains the necessity of change in the current international system and world order, it still believes such development has to be pursued within the framework of established

cooperation with other discontented players. In fact, the non-alignment in the vision of reformists was a facade for the current order to implement gradual and compromised changes in its infrastructure and principles. The acceptance of 598 UNSC Resolution, the end of imposed Iraqi war on Iran, and the revision of constitution from one hand, and the collapse of the former Soviet Union and its impact on international relations on the other, had huge effects on the process of decision making and policies implementation in both national and international levels. Destructions caused by the war and the consequent financial and humanitarian problems that came after, war-stricken migrants and prisoners of war, the destruction of production centers, reduction of national assets, economic embargo and in general, economic and political malaises threatened the very existence of the Islamic Republic. Under the weight of these factors, the government started to gradually and reluctantly acknowledge the realities of international system and the internal conditions and crisis. Consequently, Tehran pursued the five-year economic development plans in order to improve the domestic affairs and rebuild the country. (Azghandi, 2002: 15) The new shift in policy indicated that the country's officials have acknowledged the new necessities of the international system and are striving to put the country in its regional position for a much more suitable role. (Ehteshami, 1999: 92-101)

The September 11 attacks on the US soil and the consequent incidents such as including Iran in the so-called axis of evil, the military invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the physical presence of US forces along the eastern and western borders was the new realities facing Iranian foreign policy with regard to the international system. The ninth (current) administration rejected the idea of having a passive foreign policy but believes that the Islamic Republic must pursue a dynamic and self-respected diplomacy in foreign relations based on the three principles of "self-esteem, wisdom and expedience". From President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's point of view, a sustainable order which creates tranquility and peace can only materialize once established upon the two pillars of justice and spirituality. Discrimination in international community could generate grudge, war and terrorism. Iran lays emphasis on the notion

of justice in international system because justice and spirituality are the only pillars that help create sustainable order and peace. On the other hand, the ninth administration rejects the hegemonic system; lays emphasis on a world order free from the domination of hegemonic powers; rejects aggression, crimes and oppression by the world powers; and its foreign policy is justice-oriented. The ninth administration also lays emphasis on the importance of interaction among the justice-seeking nations of the world. To this end, its diplomacy is people-oriented as a basis for confidence building in the world while preserving national principles, values and power in the international arena. The ninth administration has invested in the global and regional public opinion. This is because the nations are against the hegemonic policies of the United States and the expansionist methods applied by the Zionist regime. Then again, the government's people-oriented diplomacy is in no way a populist tactic; rather it is about paying attention to the growing role of civil institutions which make decisions in foreign policy arenas. (Dehshiri, 2006: 30-31)

A quick look at the history and the performance of Iran's foreign policy reveals that the three non-alignment strategies which have their roots in various foreign policy discourses of Iranian foreign policy have concurrently been competing and even countering each other. None of them also has an absolute dominant position. As a result, Iran's foreign policy has been facing the dilemma of determining a single strategy. This has made it difficult to pursue and secure national goals and interests. More to the point, the isolationist inclinations, impartiality, alliance and coalition are among strategies that have at times directed the country's foreign policy. The problem is how much the above-mentioned strategies are in alignment and harmony with the national geopolitical necessities. Some have assumed that the non-alignment strategy does not fit Iran's geographical conditions and that the best strategy for foreign policy has to be alliance and coalition. From this position, Iran is an international country with geopolitical and geo-strategic importance, and has no other option but to be part of the international equation. This is because national policies and measures have consequences that

are related to the interests of the great powers. Hence, isolationist strategies and passive neutrality don't necessarily suit Iran's foreign policy. (Sariolqalam, 2000: 152-154)

Everything considered, it is safe to conclude that first of all, the country's direction and its strategy of non-alignment have to be revised according to internal, regional and international developments. Second, such non-alignment should no longer be passive and reactionary; rather it must have an active course to play a dynamic role in the international system. Third, non-alignment does in no way mean absence of interaction and relations with the outside world or the centers of global power. Fourth, the substance of non-alignment is independence and security. However, dependency and independence will have to be defined under inter-dependence conditions and the way power has been distributed. Fifth, strategies that force the country to distance itself from international affairs are in no way suitable for the policy of Islamic Republic of Iran as they don't serve national goals and interests.

4. International Restrictions on Iran's Regional Prominence

4-1 World System Dynamism

The collapse of the former Soviet Union led to the fall of the bipolar world system after which the transitional period began. After two decades or so the world is still in its transitional period and no new system has managed to replace the old one. However, it is still too early to talk about the structure of a future system. Then again, it comes as rational to identify effective factors in forming the future world and the impacts they could have on Iran. The main factors which depict the dynamism of the world order are:

4-1-1 Modern Militarism

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union a number of researchers in security studies called for a new discourse in which traditional militarism had no place. But the scientific experience suggests a different reality - tendency toward global security

equations and studies on modern militarism. In other words, militarism has not been forced into a corner in the world order; rather its position has been upgraded. No event other than the 9/11 attacks has ever managed to have such huge impacts on the development of global security equations and deals. The positions of great powers indicate that international affairs despite previous expectations can no longer be resolved through collective consensus and peaceful means; rather they can only be resolved through force. A further proof to the so-called mentality could be the two failed experiences at the beginning of the 21st century i.e. the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies. (Eftekhari, 2004: 258-261)

After the September 11th attacks, Iran defined a possible direct US or Israeli attack on its soil to destroy its peaceful nuclear program as a threat. Iran used to believe and still believes that a military strike is likely, especially after the 9/11 events when President George W. Bush announced that all options are on the table against Iran. The subject matter of pre-emptive strike was seriously considered and kept the minds of Iranian military and defense planners busy for some time. The Iranian leaders seriously believe that an American or Israeli strike (although analysts believe that Israel does not possess such capability) is on the cards. For that reason, after the 9/11 attacks, a US strike on Iran has been considered as a military threat – forcing the country that beyond any deterrence capabilities, to think about finding ways to retaliate. (Sadouqi, 2004: 715-716)

4-1-2 Economic Dominance

Since the fall of the former Soviet Union, the three economic powers i.e., the US, the EU and Japan, have been trying to preserve and extend their economic superiority into the 21st century. To this end, the American politicians have come up with a new agenda in form of trying to secure a new world order that could take into account their economic interests through the expansion of territories and economic deals. In this respect, the US military war machine can provide the opportunity in the absence of a rival power to define and attain new interests in other parts of the world. Second, it can boost its

economic position in the global network, so that all players acknowledge the significance and the importance of respecting the US economic supremacy.

In this sense, economy brings about competition in two levels and this issue, to a great extent, determines the fate of the world order. The first level leads to the modern economic imperialism which includes the under-developed and developing nations. The second level concerns hidden economic competition between the US, the EU and Japan which could result in the formation of a single global hegemony if the US wins - or an amalgamated global hegemony if the US fails. (Eftekhari, 2004: 261-262)

4-1-3 Information Penetration

Manuel Castles once named the formation of network society as the main index of the future world in which information is not just one aspect of power; rather it indicates the formation of a modern identity in which information is power. This has become a tangible reality in the contemporary international affairs affecting all great and middle powers and even weaker nations. (Eftekhari, 2004: 263) In such structure, "imbalance" is naturally endorsed as a principle where we are witnessing a new definition for "North" and "South" in international system. This clearly indicates that the national system can be challenged by the principles of communications technology, creating crisis for a good number of political domains. (Pourakhondi, 2003: 70) Therefore, the future international system will be affected to a great extent by macro policies of different powers in the face of the growing development of production, application of tools and communications technology which help establish the network society. Under the circumstances, the players will be trying to find a suitable position in the global network. Hence, by reducing their vulnerabilities and pursuing interests, the powers can adjust their global network identity in an efficient manner. (Eftekhari, 2003: 263-264)

4-1-4 Ideological Homogenization

The main index of the contemporary world is its ideological characteristic - just when everyone thought that the end of ideologies was nigh. The great powers are striving to come up with a proper description for the world order and that explains why they have become so "ideological" and why they seek an ideological order for the future. Theories such as the "The End of History" by Fukuyama and the "Clash of Civilizations" by Samuel P. Huntington as well as their analytical assessments and results demonstrate that all these thoughts and opinions are after a unified concept and a single goal i.e., an unparalleled domination of liberal democracy in the world. It goes without saying that an international order based on "homogeneous values" could be the most sustainable and a genuine one for group behavior and action and relative thriving of democratic values across the globe can generate such values. But the means for creating such order is weakening or crushing the political systems which are somehow keen on preserving their national independence and local identity. Therefore, ideological factors are the most effective ones when it comes to form a future order. The ignorance of world system comes as a consequence of ideological aggressions which are currently the case by the major players. In this sense and others, President George W. Bush's ideological drive could be a unique phenomenon of the century that it is behind the current aggressions. (Eftekhari, 2003: 20-26)

Based on a recent report by a US strategic studies center known as "RAND", Islam will be the most powerful force against the United States in the Middle East until 2025. RAND is an American institute and its report indicates the value and the importance of the present research work. In the report US rivals have been divided into two categories: identical and lower-hand rivals. As for the identical rivals, experts in RAND argue that no country in the world could match the US militarily. However, the "revolutionary Islamic school" has the potential to somehow challenge the liberal democratic values. In addition, Iran can, in collaboration with China, become a lower-hand rival for the United States. A report by Atlantic Council

assessing the security of Islamic Republic of Iran has laid emphasis on the clash of “values”, the negative impacts of which could be more devastating to the United States than its economic or political advantages and opportunities. (Eftekhari, 2003: 10-11) Justifications as such, which are accompanied by unrealistic analyses on Islam, could pave the way for a new form of threat against Iran, the high destructive power of which justifies the imperialistic policy of the United States. The US has come to believe that Islam today is an invading force and that Iran is trying to overwhelm political Islam throughout the region. (Kazempour, 1995: 311)

In brief, an ideological world increases the possibility of a clash with Iran in key issues such as the Middle East crisis. It could also undermine the country’s regional influence.

4-2 Impact of Unilateralism on Iran

As far as history is concerned, anti-hegemonic movements started from Iran after the victory of Islamic Revolution in 1979. Before the revolution, the dominant feature of macro conflicts in the international arena concerned the great powers differences (before the Second World War) and-or the hegemonic conflicts (during the bipolar conditions). The Islamic Revolution, which raised new discourses against the two great powers, for the first time came up with new values which did not fit in the dominant values of the East or the West. The two powers demonstrated their objections to the new values during the eight-year imposed Iraqi war on Iran. During this particular period, they endorsed the Iraqi war on Iran. The United States and the former Soviet Union employed the strategy of regional balance against Iran and in the process offered their all-out assistance to Iraq. This showed that despite their strategic rivalry they had consensus over certain regional and international issues. Their program was to contain Iran and took effective measures to thwart the spread of Islamic Revolution. (Shouri, 2003: 165)

The unipolar world order of the 1990s boosted the US role as the only superpower. The new conditions created fresh limitations

which rose in the face of the prerequisites of unipolarism. This is because in unipolar circumstances:

A) Countries have no other option but to get closer to the superior power (unipolar) when facing security issues. In international disputes a regional government can barely object to a country that is an ally of the unipolar power. All it could do, will be refraining from alliance with the superior power and keep its distance. The only country which can provide security for other nations would also be the single superpower;

B) The regional states have one option in a unipolar system. They will have less maneuvering power against the unipolar power because there is no rival so that they could join it;

C) In a unipolar system, countries must try harder. Since they rely on the sole superpower, they must also try hard to preserve their positions. In the absence of a bipolar structure, superpowers no longer need the alliance of small regional governments against their rivals. A unipolar power will not get engaged in regional disputes unless absolutely necessary.

D) The sole superpower interferes more vigorously in international agenda. Naturally, the sole superpower will impinge on international agenda to serve its interests. It also has much more freedom in determining its goals and interests than in a multi-polar world system. (Haji-Yousefi, 2001: 331-332)

After the September 11th attacks and the subsequent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US got the best opportunity to institutionalize its hegemony. Perhaps, this historic incident was the beginning of a new chapter in the world order which led to huge structural changes. There is no doubt whatsoever that the incident played the role of a strong catalyzer in defining and explaining the structure and the phenomenon of the international system the day after the fall of Communism in Russia. The neocons in Washington have come to believe that the international system has had a unipolar nature after the end of the bipolar system and that the US must move in the direction of stabilizing its hegemony. The US views the international system and order as a hegemonic and hierarchical structure which itself stands on top. The hegemonic

system has its own features and exigencies which do not give Iran any chance for regional prominence (hegemony) as an independent player outside the circle of global hegemony. First of all, the hegemonic system requires a hierarchical system of domination in which there is no chance for forces to escape from its central gravity. Second, in such system there are no obvious military alliances against the hegemon. Third, challenges from non-symmetrical powers or players are not tolerated. Fourth, there is no room for the so-called "playoff" policy. Fifth, the global interaction model is competition and cooperation and not skirmish and reciprocity. Sixth, the international bodies work to give legitimacy and power to the hegemonic power - and not to limit it. Finally, it is of high importance and vital for the hegemonic power to preserve its international credibility. (Dehqani Firouzabadi, 2005: 55-56)

The hegemonic power tries in three ways to force countries to follow its hegemonic rule. First, it tries to warn and encourage players through incentives (carrots and sticks) in the international and regional arenas. This is a behavioral pattern of US even towards Russia and the European Union. Second, they force other nations through diplomatic and political channels or even political and economic pressures to accept the present conditions. Third, they take aggressive measures against nations that are unwilling to accept the hegemonic system. The behavioral pattern of US against Iran underlines the policy of force. The US as a hegemon is trying to use forceful diplomacy through international bodies and structures to force Tehran to accept the hegemonic norms and give up its drive to become a regional power. This is because in the hegemonic system there is no room for a regional hegemony to challenge the global hegemonic power. Washington has always tried to stop Iran from becoming a regional power. Since the failure of its dual containment policy in the 1990s, especially after the 9/11 attacks, the United States has been dealing with new security conditions in the region, mainly in the Persian Gulf. The US views itself as the only superpower in the world and tries to control and contain Iran. This is because Iran is applying different means to counter the US regional hegemony. (Abbasi Ashlaqi, 2005: 280)

4-3 International Players

Iran possesses independent power sources in different aspects such as geopolitical energy resources, rich/dynamic culture and ideology, independent political-security strategies, as well as economic potentials. Hence, it can use them to develop its international relations. However, objections and pressures exerted by key global players headed by the US have created a lot of restrictions in the way of creating opportunities for Iran. The US claims that Iran is a menacing player and an anti-order whose influence and role must be contained in cultural and economic fields. On the other hand, pressures and threats should be exerted through international bodies, including the UN, to change Iran's behavior and align it with the current order. That explains why any effort taken by Iran to increase its natural role and influence and create opportunities throughout the region has been opposed by some global players and powers.

4-3-1 United States

The United States is referred to as the so-called superpower in international politics. Being a superpower in a realist term is equal to having a hegemonic power in the neo-Marxist denomination of international political economics. The chief characteristic of a superpower is having hegemony which can be obtained through force and suppression. The means for this domination is also the world order which is created by the very same superpower. (Assadian, 2002:10) The past and the present behavior of the United States demonstrate that any regional domination or authority is assumed as a security threat by Washington. Therefore, any country which is on the verge of becoming a strategic regional power through military means will face wide-spread restrictions from the US. (www.whitehouse.gov) Washington's motivation for containing regional powers lies in its strategic literature, an obvious example of which could be the document of "National Security Strategy". It states that: "It is vital for the US that it would be no anti-American hegemonic power and rival in any part of the world and that no rival

coalition is formed anywhere in the world that consists of different nations. The security of the US and its allies is vital for Washington and it should not allow enemy countries to gain access to weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear bombs." (The Commission for Devising US National Security Strategy for the 21st Century, 2001: 73)

During the Cold War, general US policy for regional powers was based on two principles. First, using the regional hegemony to protect and preserve its international interests (engagement) – an obvious example could be the Shah of Iran in the 1970s. Second, striking and preserving a regional balance against a power that has challenged the American interests – an obvious example could be helping Iraq against Iran throughout the 1980s. (Fuller, 1996: 60-61)

After the September 11th attacks, the Americans boosted their intelligence gathering to a great extent to counter regional powers. "Libyiki", a prominent strategic intelligence theorist, believes that the US has applied the pattern of activating the global data network in order to control nations that are trying to become a regional power. To this end, Washington paves the way for creating the "system of data conformity" in order to counter regional powers. This would require data gathering. In general, data gathering means that the US make optimum use of its technical, political, legal, and international capabilities in the field of data production. It should also create coordination among its allies for taking joint actions. In this context, regionalism means having conditions in which there are no security threats or restrictions. If certain countries enhance their power to create a confrontational pattern, the Americans will certainly react. Calling a nation radical does in fact reflect the regional policies of the United States with regards to countries that are trying to stabilize their regional position and challenge its hegemony. Therefore, the US and its allies will use the following patterns to confront challenging regional powers: Using force or seeking help from the international bodies to endorse such actions; and using force without paying attention to the position of international bodies. What took place in Afghanistan was based on the first model i.e., the Americans built an international and regional coalition before launching an all-out war against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The second

pattern was used against Iraq through which the US ignored the position of international bodies (UN) and launched an all-out war against Saddam and his army. (Mottaghi, 2006: 71-78)

Under the US National Security Strategy for the 21st Century, Islamic Republic of Iran is among nations that have challenged the US government and the Western liberal democracy. The US is fearful of stability and tranquility in Iran, simply because it could be taken as a role model by other Islamic states. Stability in Iran creates an atmosphere of confidence for other nations to follow suit. (Commission for Devising US National Security Strategy for the 21st Century, 2001: 170). From the American position, Iran is building its power and this creates a lot of concerns. The main American concerns about Iran are as follows:

1- The US claims that Iran offers financial assistance to anti-Israeli groups and creates obstacles in the way of the Middle East peace process;

2- The US is concerned about Iran's missile program and other military capabilities;

3- Iran supports freedom-seeking movements such as the Hezbollah of Lebanon and the Palestinian groups which are on the US list of terror groups;

4- Iran's opposition to the US engagement in the Persian Gulf means it is against the modern US version of regional order;

5- Iran's access to nuclear weapons could shift the balance of power in the region in Iran's favor and against Israel;

6- Washington is concerned about the growing Iranian influence on the American continent and sees it as a threat to its own regional order. (Abbasi Ashlaqi, 2005: 272-273)

US takes the above points to justify its agenda to control and contain Iran. There are different aspects to its behavioral pattern towards Iran. In addition to the threat of using a military strike they have taken other measures that have soft natures. For instance, they seek regime change through non-military means, behavioral changes and psychological warfare. To this end, the US aggrandizes the perceived threats of Iranian policies and conducts. It tries to contain Iran regionally and internationally and by means of nonconventional

confrontations to force the European and the regional states to take Iran's strategic behavior as a clear and present threat. Their goal is to apply patterns and methods that could undercut Iran's international credibility. On the other hand, they create and control a psychological atmosphere so that signs of Iranian threat could be seen in regional and international spheres. Indeed, the ultimate goal is to gradually contain and isolate Iran. (Mottaghi, 2005:15)

The US tries to forge widespread consensus against Iran throughout the region. In this respect, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "Iran is the single most important strategic challenge for the US in the Middle East. At the same time, the progress in Iran's nuclear program will get Washington and the international community engaged in a way that confrontation with Iran would be more than ever necessary." Indeed, the paradigm of "Iran's regional emergence" has been one of the main worries for the US and its regional allies in recent history. The paradigm was accelerated by the wrong US policies - although it has been as a natural result of regional geopolitics and logics of power. This particular condition and outcome will not be troublesome for the region because of its nature, but since it is not in line with the unilateral policy of Washington in the Middle East it has been bombarded with political and belligerent propaganda. Hence, an Arab-Israeli coalition to counter Iran within the framework of the US macro regional strategies was the main objective of the gatherings in places such as "Annapolis". (Vali Pour Zoroumi, 2007: 33) The US is strengthening its military and defense ties with the regional states to stop them from inking similar ones with Iran. More to the point, it is increasing its military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan to tighten the security siege of Iran. Therefore, the US is trying to create a regional hegemonic system that does not include itself but takes in the Israeli hegemony.

The US has exerted its influence in international regimes and bodies and put pressure on them to serve its interests and not those of the international community. At the process, the course of restricting Iran is being implemented through these international organizations and anchored in their norms. The US role in Iran's nuclear case could be an obvious example in this respect. The US claims that Iran seeks to

develop nuclear weapons and that if it succeeds, it could change the rules of the game. Under the circumstances, Iran will have a different and dominant position in the region and even in the world. For that reason, it must be brought under control and contained. (Esfid Vajani, 2006: 82)

4-3-2 Europe

In the absence of cultural and historical commonalities, Iran and the European Union don't have strategic relations. However, the EU has a special position in the world order and plays an important regional role. So, it will be in the best interests of Islamic Republic of Iran to broaden its relations with the EU members. Iran is significantly important for the EU because of its geographical position:

- a thriving domestic market;
- rich oil and gas resources that could supply energy to the European continent;
- an influential security role in the Persian Gulf;
- importance in the Middle East peace process;
- the influence of its foreign policy in Shiite populated areas (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon);
- its role in creating peace and stability in Afghanistan and Iraq; and in
- helping the EU get into the Central Asian and Caucasus regions. (Khalouzadeh, 2001: 62)

However, the Islamic Revolution undermined the Iran-EU relations to a great extent. Iran revised its ties with the EU based on the new revolutionary ideals and since then these relations have been on a roller-coaster ride. There were other factors which undermined the relations, mainly because of Europeans' following of US policies against Iran and the prolonged Tehran-Washington standoff. Their human rights allegations against Iran, as well as Iran's nuclear power program, the Middle East peace process, political Islamism and the subject matter of Israel are among other factors in this regard. (Khalouzadeh, 2006: 77) That is the reason why Iran-EU relations can come to a standstill at anytime and as soon as a dispute surfaces.

Even Iran's internal affairs can dent these relations. However, for two reasons, a new EU foreign policy is in the making with regard to Iran. First, Iran's role and influence is growing by the day in regional equations, especially in Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine, and this has become a barrier in the way of non-regional powers' policies. Second, the EU sees Iran's regional influence as a rival to its policies in the volatile region of Middle East. Therefore, it is provoking the Arabs to block the Iranian influence, while using international pressures – the political costs of which are being paid by the US – to border Iran's overall regional influence. On the other hand, the Europeans cannot stand the idea of having a regional union or organization with Iran as its centre as it could strengthen its supremacy. The normal pattern for Europe is to keep Iran weak, under control and contained. It has been the case especially when we look back at the European policies during the tenures of former president Mohammad Khatami and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. (Pourhashemi, 2006: 14-15)

4-3-3 Russia

Iran and Russia have historically had different experiences with each other in terms of cooperation, aggression and even war. In the present circumstances, their relations are based on the following variables:

- 1-Relations Based on Neighborhood Exigencies;
- 2-Relations Based on Extra-Regional Necessities;

Iran and Russia face a unique and complex condition in their backyards. Regional necessities force them to collaborate, yet their motives, goals and inner desires are not in alignment and this stops them from having closer and sustainable ties or even forming a regional bloc. At the same time, their motives and goals are not too different or contradicting to turn the region into a battleground for rivalry. (www.csr.ir) Russia has always considered Iran as a tool for coordinating its US relations. Almost in all American-Russian negotiations the Tehran-Moscow ties have been one of the main topics of discussion. (Kolaei, 2005: 58)

For Russia, anti-Western Iran is an important and strategic bargaining chip in its pragmatic diplomacy with the US and the West. American analysts are of the opinion that the future of Russia will largely depend on its economic development and that politico-cultural factors will be less important. No wonder Moscow sees Tehran as a "rewarding customer" and not a "strategic ally". On the same token, Tehran has always tried to make the most of these trade-economic relations. This clearly means that the two sides have built special relations in which economic priorities are strengthened and prolonged by political costs, and political priorities by economic costs. The weak point of these ties is its nodal point. If the US starts to play a major role in Russia's national development program, problems will surface in Iran-Russian economic ties and Moscow will certainly change its Iran strategy, hence weakening Tehran's position. (Eftekhari, 2004: 285)

All things considered, Iran is not a strategic ally for Russia, but they have strategic relations within the framework of which the Russians continue to collaborate with their Iranian counterpart in nuclear and defense fields. (www.irdiplomacy.ir) The Russian role and position in Iran's nuclear case are totally different though. Moscow has to meet its obligations as a world power and also commit to the requirements of its ties with the West. On the other hand, it is claimed that Russia is rambled for Iran's intensions and gets more inclined towards the Western bloc. Undoubtedly, in its foreign policy, Moscow is trying to avoid choosing between Iran and the West. Russia acknowledges Iran's special role in places such as the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the southern regions of the former Soviet Union. At the same time it defines its ties with Tehran in a way that the developments come from the necessities and the governing principles of its ties with the West and not the advantages or limitations of relations with Tehran. On the same token, the persistence of such situation in Iran-Western relations, especially the frozen Tehran-Washington ties, benefits Russia. At the same time, an improvement of Tehran ties with the West, especially the US, will be a concern for Moscow. In this scenario, an improvement in Tehran-Washington ties will be a disaster for Moscow if it undermines its

present position in Iran's foreign policy and reduces the level of their political-economic relations. In this scenario, Iran could play a far more fitting role in the region by resolving its disputes with the West. At the same time, a change in the position of regional states towards Iran in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea will result in further isolation of Moscow with geopolitical consequences. The point is that when dealing with Iran's nuclear case, Moscow will be better off choosing the continuation of the grey condition i.e., prolonging the crisis and keeping the middle position to get the most out of Tehran-West disputes. (Moradi, 2005: 567-568)

4-3-4 China

Iran-China relations have so far been bilateral rather than being organizational. Different factors have cemented these ties, yet the trend has not been a continued one. The two countries are busily engaged in economic and military cooperation. The motives behind Beijing's ties with Tehran are very complex indeed and not necessarily limited to trade; rather they also have a political and strategic weight. Beijing sells arms to suit its foreign policy interests and objectives. So, it is too early to expect too much from the Beijing ties. More importantly, China depends on crude imports, a great portion of which comes from the American allies. This has forced China to seek allies in the oil-rich region of Persian Gulf in order to create equal opportunities for oil purchases. China also aims to broaden its ties with Iran to retaliate with the US over Taiwan and sees closer ties with Tehran as a bargaining chip with Washington over Taiwan. This provides China with pressure leverage in the event of an American action or threat over Taiwan. (Kaveh Jebelli, 2003: 152-153)

China acknowledges Iran as a potential great power – although it has never officially and publically stated that – and that in the future Iran could become a decisive factor in regional affairs, even in Asia. China sees Iran as a potential future partner and strives to strengthen its ties by employing common regional and international interests. Beijing believes that the US involvement in military and security deals in the Atlantic Ocean is aimed at containing China as a

superior player in regional equations. In addition, the war in Afghanistan and the presence of US forces along the Iranian border are seen as a serious challenge for Tehran and Beijing. Both countries are especially sensitive towards the security of Central Asian states. In fact, they view the security of these countries as part of their own national security. (www.gpf.com)

All things considered, China will never sacrifice its ties with the US for the sake of other governments. China needs Iran's energy but at the same time it has a huge volume of trade exchange with the United States. At times it offers incentives to Washington which might even include Iran in order to protect the trade. (www.majlis.ir) On the other hand, China seeks economic dexterity and it wants to at least come on top in Asia. Then again, those seeking a major role on the international stage will need economic and military apparatus. The starting point for becoming a power is creating rules and the Chinese have never been able to do that in military or economic fields – although they are walking in this direction. Hence, it is not wise for Iran to depend on China. Quite the opposite, Iran should try to reduce its vulnerability to such dependence by striking a strategic balance. (www.noandish.org)

4-4 New Models vs. American Model

The present conditions of world order don't support the US in implementing its unilateral policy and-or stabilizing its unilateralism system. To this end, the United States has always been alone and has been rebuked by the world public opinion - even by its allies. There are serious obstacles in the way of implementing the stated policies of the Bush the senior and Bush the junior, especially those pertaining to the invasion of Iraq. Certainly, it will be very difficult and even impossible to execute such a scenario in the 21st century for the following reasons:

1-International Resistance

International resistance against US began at the verge of its invasion of Iraq. The neocons in Washington have been unwilling to

make sacrifices (compromises) on issues such as Iran's ties with Russia and China, the implementation of the greater Middle East plan, collaboration with international conventions such as Kyoto protocol, International Criminal Court, and deep trans-Atlantic differences, among others. Besides, the European Union, headed by Germany and France, are not prepared to pursue their interests in line with the unilateral US policies. Although Russia and China do not find both scientifically and practically appropriate to oppose US policies at the present time, they are unhappy with it and not prepared to accept the American meddling in their regions.

2-Public Opinion

The world public opinion does not want to have a global sheriff for two obvious reasons: Firstly, it undermines the inherited structure of the 20th century which promotes humanistic efforts and values. This is because the UN charter is not in favor of such order. Secondly, it defies the spirit of the 21st century human beings which sees itself urbanized and pioneer in cultural development. The hegemonic system belongs to the era of empires and military rulers, indeed.

3-Global Needs

There are various and far-reaching needs in the world and a single superpower cannot meet them singlehandedly. The 9/11 events demonstrated the fact that even a hegemonic power such as the US is not able to ensure its own security. Also, problems such as the one created by the Zionist regime in the Middle East, or those in Afghanistan and Iraq, or protests by important players such as Iran, cannot be resolved by a single power.

4-Unrealistic Security Hypothesis

The perception of security through such approach is very important but unrealistic. The emphasis has been on indices such as military, warfare and technology, although these alone cannot be

sufficient to establish or properly manage such system. This is because modern alternatives of power have already emerged that lay emphasis on cultural, historic and political aspects, consequently undermining the hegemonic role of a political power. (Eftekhari, 2004: 274-275)

4-4-1 United Europe for Multilateral System

After the fall of the former Soviet Union, the European Union began to identify a special place for itself in the modern world order by organizing and broadening the scope of its international activities. In this sense, the EU is not looking for a hegemonic role in the modern world order. At the same time, it does not like to become marginalized or put up with Washington's unilateral divisions. The EU seeks to compensate for its past failures and strengthen/broaden its role and influence as an important contestant in the modern world. The EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana wrote in the draft of national security strategy for Europe that: The European Union is a global player and must be prepared to take global responsibilities, where there are new opportunities and threats. An energetic Europe can help face threats, take opportunities, and have global influence. To this end, we must help create a multilateral international system to lead us to a safer and fairer world."

The US aims to boost its position and power in the world within the framework of power hierarchy. The old continent also seeks to define its credibility in the new situation via its US relations. In other words, a completely independent Europe is an isolated Europe. But a Europe engaged with US relations will have a more serious weight on international affairs. As mentioned in its draft global strategy, EU relations with the other side of the Atlantic cannot be replaced. If Europe and the US work together, they could become an invincible force. (Karimi, 2003: 647-648)

4-4-1-1 US-EU Convergence Threats for Iran

Although some may assume that convergence between the United States and the European Union could create major

opportunities for Iran as the Iranian and Western interests are part and parcel and don't negate each other. Then again, it is mainly believed that such convergence could be troublesome for Tehran and the number of its threats would be far more than its opportunities. Some of these threats are as follows:

A-The US has encircled Iran from the west, north-west, north-east, south-east and along the eastern borders. The EU-US collaboration and convergence is aimed at besieging Iran. In fact, Iran has been surrounded not only by the US but also by the West.

B-European governments are pragmatic and realistic. Their convergence with US does in no way mean that they want to influence or avert Washington from its anti-Iran policies. Rather, under the convergence they are making optimum use of the American threat against Iran. In fact, they are even trying to tighten vice on Tehran;

C-The EU-US convergence creates greater consensus over their interests in different parts of the world, especially in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Middle East and the Persian Gulf. This could create a range of threats for Islamic Republic of Iran; (Emamzadeh-Fard, 2005: 138)

D-A combined hegemonic system encompassing the EU and the US could create some kind of division of labor for them and the UN. In such arrangement, the US could play the role of "threatening" with the EU and the UN as "the mediator" and "the legitimizing" respectively. This could also create dilemma for other players to either fight back or slowly but surely make painful compromises. That explains why a collective hegemony could create far more threats than a solo one. (Eftekhari, 2004: 283)

4-4-2 Asian Bloc

Given the macro objectives of China and Russia in the international arena, their strategic convergence could be inevitable. Since 1990s, they have both made strides to reduce the US hegemony, prevent unilateralism, create a balance and speed up globalization. If they succeed, they could increase their activities in joint fields through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and strengthen their powers aligned with regionalism and regional partnerships. (Talebifar

and Qazizadeh, 2004: 210) Under the circumstances, a multipolar system could emerge through reviving the Asian bloc as a superpower. This process could also help ensure international stability in the long-run.

4-4-2-1 Iran and SCO

Iran has an observer status at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization – although there is no consensus over the issue among Iranian diplomatic circles and academics. The opponents of Iran's SCO membership argue: China and Russia are using Iran as a strategic tool. Hence, its membership at the organization will not only fail to boost its position but also make it available as a foreign policy tool at the hands of China and Russia. Given Iran's position as well as the China-Russia associations, the country could be used as a bargaining chip on the political stage. For the same reason, the two countries have little room for maneuver when it comes to bilateral and multilateral ties with Iran. On the other hand, the historic relations between China and Russia are based on confidence-building and they both have independent agenda and priorities in international affairs. They also view the US as their best trading and economic partner. Hence, Iran's SCO membership will only exacerbate the security concerns of the Persian Gulf littoral states and Israel in relation to Iran. They might be forced to react and boost their ties with the US or even increase their anti-Iran posture.

The proponents of Iran's SCO membership argue: The move could help reduce regional threats; cement regional cooperation in security (fight against terrorism, drugs, arms trafficking, organized crime) and economic fields (transit of goods and energy); serve national interests (security, economic, political, cultural); and strengthen national resolve. If the SCO membership is for the above-mentioned purposes, which by the way is also the organization's stated goals, it will not disturb the rules of the game and certainly it will defy the vital interests of the EU and the US.

Although Central Asia is Iran's top foreign policy priority, it is yet to be the case in practice both on regional and international levels.

Issues in the region's southern parts - and soon western parts - are gradually becoming more urgent in terms of security for Tehran. The increased US pressures come as a direct consequence of the level of fragility in its internal and international environments. SCO is a non-military organization and Iran's membership will not defy international norms and regulations; quite the opposite, it will serve as further proof that Tehran is pursuing its policies through conventional international channels. (Talebifar & Qazizadeh, 2004: 227-232)

In sum, it is important for Islamic Republic of Iran to use the organization to create and strengthen its security environment. This is because the country's security environment is akin to the ones shared by other SCO member states. The importance of such point becomes ever-more evident once we consider the fact that Iran's security environment (Persian Gulf) is considered to be one of the most volatile and dangerous regions in the world. More to the point, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to realize the developmental objectives set in Iran's Twenty Year Prospect Plan in such unstable surroundings. Indeed, this clearly highlights the importance of stability and its institutionalization when it comes to ensuring security.

Conclusion

Thanks to its geographical position, rich natural resources, population density, economic and technological development and military strength, Iran has become an influential power across the region and the globe. This has forced the country to play a greater role in the region. Because of its distinguished political system, different ideology and independent foreign policy approach, the country faces severe restrictions by the international system. In fact, the ideological nature of Iran's political system and foreign policy approach is poles apart and not compatible with international patterns and norms. Additionally, major countries and great powers are creating restrictions for Iran. The hegemonic power aims to control the actions

of regional powers in places that have too much geo-strategic importance and are also rich in natural and energy resources.

Although emergence of regional powers does not have too much impact on global politics, once they emerge in strategic regions such as the Persian Gulf, they could undercut the influence of major powers. Besides, the more there are differences between the global views of regional and international powers, the greater would be their political tensions. Hence, the greatest volume of anti-Iran pressures and restrictions comes from the United States. Much to the dismay of Washington, Iran has always been successful in shifting the balance of power in the region against the US and even challenged the security models of the dominant power. That explains why they are trying to build global consensus for the sole purpose of containing and controlling Iran.

Into the bargain, other countries and powers such as Russia, China, France and Germany are of the opinion that the world order has had a multipolar structure after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Hence, the US must collaborate with other powers in managing and directing international affairs. At the same time, the Islamic Republic favors a multipolar world order. One of its macro foreign policies has been, and still is, to negate global unipolarism. The formation of a multipolar world has also imposed huge restrictions on Tehran which makes its regional supremacy more difficult than ever. This is because such order requires the collaboration and partnership of great powers which, by the way, are happy with the present order as it serves up their interests. As expected, they will continue to oppose the emergence of other powers which seek to change the pattern of power distribution and the rules of the game. The regional powers have challenged the established world order and the great powers pigeonhole Iran in such category, as a country that must be controlled and contained.

All things considered, if Iran plans to become a superpower in the region, it must first send the signal that it only seeks an intra-system transformation and is not fighting against it; Second, Iran must practice a multilateral policy in the region to meet its goal through alliance, coalition and convergence with the Persian Gulf littoral

states. The most important prerequisite in this respect has to be resolving all outstanding issues and misunderstandings, reforming the approaches through reducing tensions, confidence building and creating mutual economic and security reliance all the way through the region.

To sum up, Iran can only become a dominant power in the region by taking advantage of international developments and making the most of its powerful capacities in regional/international relations as well as international rivalries across the region. It is also indispensable for the country to understand the present world system and make strides to complete such an important national task.

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