

Iran and the Global Transition of Power: Perspectives and Viewpoints

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Abstract

Iran, despite great geopolitical and geo-economics potential, faces many complex internal and external predicaments due to its independent foreign policy and lack of dependence on international powers. On one hand, the cooperation of other actors with the severe US sanctions against Iran also seems to be influenced by Iran's independent policy. On the other hand, the change in power relations has shown the signs of the emergence of new world order. In such a circumstance, some believe that Iran can enjoy greater security and enhance its international standing by shifting its orientation toward the new great power. Accordingly, the present study seeks to identify and explain the uncertainties affecting Iran's orientation in the evolution of the international order. The hypothesis is that the drivers of the nuclear agreement or disagreement, the lifting of sanctions against Iran or Iran bypassing the sanctions on the one hand, and the existing critical uncertainties, the anti-Iranian policy of the United States, and the pessimism and mistrust between Iran and the United States, on the other hand, affect Iran's orientation in the changing conditions of the global order. The research aims to examine the conditions and tools of Iran in maintaining an independent and

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active foreign policy. The research method in this article is a combination of the analytical-explanatory retrospective method with a futuristic approach based on scenario building.

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was considerable certainty about the dominance of the American unipolar order in the world; the new role of the United States in the global order, and especially its unilateral actions in various regions, was a clear indication of the formation and consolidation of the American order in the world. However, developments in the last three decades, with the rise of European actors, China, and Russia, have made some analysts believe that the unilateral global order is collapsing and multilateral world order is taking shape. China is considered the main rival of the United States in the new international order, but the European Union, Russia, India, etc. will also have a chance to introduce themselves as new powers in this system. This uncertainty has led to bringing up important ideas and debates about the future of the international order. This research, while examining the possibility of the occurrence of a bipolar or multipolar global order, will evaluate scenarios facing Iran in the new world order. The main question of this study is “what are the drivers of Iran's foreign policy towards the evolution of the international order? The paper aims to analyze Iran’s status and standing vis-a-vis the new indicators of international powers, as well as the choices facing Tehran. The hypothesis is that the drivers of the nuclear agreement or disagreement, the lifting of sanctions against Iran or Iran bypassing the sanctions on the one hand, and the existing critical uncertainties, the anti-Iranian policy of the United States, and the pessimism and mistrust between Iran and the United States, on the other hand, affect Iran's orientation in the changing conditions of the global order.

Methodology

As there is always a complex set of possible, and likely undesirable or somewhat desirable futures, there is an exploratory approach to this research based on theories of international relations. But at the same time, because the issue is related to the nationality of researchers, it also resorts to a normative approach. Thus, the researchers will attempt to explain the desired scenario, the characteristics and requirements for its realization, as well as the unfavorable and competing scenarios by using Trend Impact Analysis. The goal is to provide an image of future to policymakers and decision makers as a basis for shaping trends. In this regard, three important steps are taken. In the first step, the possible trends and scenarios that exist against the international order are explained. In the second step, the choices that Iran has ahead are discussed. In the third step, strategies that will improve Iran's position will be explored.

It is important to note that this paper is based on several key assumptions. The first assumption is that according to the trends, the international order is on the path of change and Iran's standing will change in the new situation. Another assumption, therefore, is the correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable, and based on this, the prospect of this correlation is explained and analyzed according to the relevant components.

I- Iran and International Order

Current international order: Structure and features: Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crumbling of the bipolar international order, there has been much debate among international theorists about the criteria needed to stabilize the order, or its possible alternatives. In the meantime, one of the most important issues was the possibility of American hegemony in the world, about which there was much disagreement (Lauren, 2008) Although the theoretical currents of international relations, whether realism or idealism and related branches, considered different indicators for hegemony, all believed the existence of a hegemonic

system requires unequal distribution of power and a dominant superpower. Robert Cohen, like Joseph Nye, described the hegemonic state as having the motivation and power to uphold the fundamental rules governing relations between states (Keohane, 1984).

Based on these indicators, competing views were also expressed that the United States is either unable or essentially incapable of establishing hegemony. Wilkinson argued that the United States was a non-hegemonic unipolar power because it could not make other great powers obey it, and sometimes failed in the face of small or medium-sized powers. However, he did not consider non-hegemonic unipolar order to be inherently unstable, and he believed that this system, too, could last for decades (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 143).

By acknowledging the formation of a unipolar order, Kenneth Waltz, on the other hand, argued that the main reason for the instability of the unipolar system was Russia's ability to restore power, ambition and the US' extensive foreign policy (Waltz, 1993).

By the end of the first decade of the twenty first century, the United States was considered the sole dominant superpower, despite minor disagreements among theorists about the characteristics of a hegemonic power. In recent decade, the conflict of US interests with Russia and then China becoming the second largest economic power in the world, fueled doubts about the stability of the unipolar order, and made the issue of the evolution of the international order a serious debate. Henry Kissinger sees a change in the international order with the advent of China as inevitable, and at the same time believes that the United States will not be able to eliminate the new rival at a low cost with a Cold War approach (Kissinger, 2012). Charles Kupchan, author of *The End of the American Era*, refers to historical cycles and writes that the end of the United States' era of governance and unilateralism is unavoidable. He argues that as a result of inevitable fluctuation of powers, Europe and later Asia will enter the arena of global powers

and will compete with the United States. According to him, with the beginning of the age of technology and the expansion of human communication, trends have changed and as a result, political, social and identity structures within societies will also change. In this regard, change within the United States will manifest itself in the form of reduced public participation in political processes, on the one hand, and the diminishing role of American national identity, and the widening of various ethnic and racial divisions and faults. Kupchan cites domestic demands in the United States for the country's strategic withdrawal from the regions of conflict as one of the main reasons for the collapse of the unipolar system. According to Kupchan, one of the reasons for the collapse of the unipolar order is the unification of European powers and the emergence of Asian power and its balancing effects on world power (Kupchan, 2003).

Due to the diversification in international relations, the existing global order has entered an era of bipolar or multipolar order. Although the US is yet leading the global politics, different countries' relations have become intertwined. Thus, the US also requires bilateral and multilateral cooperation to resolve the problems which cannot be handled by the US power only (Haass, 2014, p. 70).

The current situation has also led to regional processes to happen independent of a hegemonic power. As a result, regional orders have been carrying more weight in the course of evolution on the international order.

For example, the Syrian crisis and the rise of ISIS from 2014 to its defeat in 2019 had severely affected the world order. Similarly, Coronavirus pandemic and its global implications have increased competition for access to prevention and treatment equipment, rather than increased international cooperation.

Iran's Position in Current International Order: After the Islamic Revolution, Iran placed itself Among the critical discourses of the international order with its pro-Revolution discourse and the slogan of 'neither the East nor the West'. The pro-Revolution

discourse meant Iran's full independence from foreigners and superpowers, its lack of reliance on the Eastern and Western blocs, and its call for a change in international relations in favor of global justice and weak nations. The set of actions taken in the first two years of the Iranian revolution based on 'neither the East nor the West' strategy were as in the following (Valipour-razmi, 2004, pp. 81-83):

A- Withdrawal from The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1979

B- Severing ties with Egypt in 1979, following the conclusion of the Camp David agreement

C- Termination of Chapters 5 and 6 of The Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship (1921)

D- Membership in the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979

E- Cancellation of the 1959 Iran-US agreement by the Revolution Council in 1979

F- Severing ties with Morocco late 1979

In this regard, some analysts saw the Iraqi invasion on Iran in 1980 as an implicit agreement of the superpowers of the time to counter the pro-Revolution discourse, specifically at a time that Iran claimed to have considerable international presence. The imposed war and all kinds of unilateral and multilateral US sanctions changed the scope of Iran's activities and role. While the fight against Israel was one of the goals of the Islamic Revolution, Iran focused on forming an axis of resistance in the Middle East. In contrast, US Twin Pillars policy (in the pre-Revolution era) also gave way to increased American support for Persian Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia (Khosravi, 2008, p. 33). The formation of a coalition of Sunni states in the Persian Gulf led by Saudi Arabia, pushed Iran to form a framework based on axis of resistance.

The security environment of the Middle East has always been an important issue in the national security doctrine of Iran, given historical, cultural, geopolitical and geo-economic considerations, as well as revolutionary and religious discourse. On the other hand, weakening the axis of resistance plays an important role in

advancing the anti-Iranian policies of the United States, Israel and some Arab and Sunni states (Adami & Keshavarzi Moghaddam, 2015, pp. 1-4).

In the last three decades, coinciding with the US efforts for global hegemony, Iran has always enjoyed a high position as one of the influential players in the Middle East due to the axis of resistance. The concept of the axis of resistance, which was formed about three decades ago in the context of regional events, is associated with the names of state actors and military and paramilitary groups in the region, and pursues two common goals: 1. opposing the establishment of a stable Israel; and 2. opposing the establishment of an American-Arab-Israeli order in the Middle East.

At the same time, the actors have a political, economic and security relationship with each other in order to achieve above-mentioned goals. Accordingly, Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah of Lebanon, resistance groups in Palestine have mainly been considered as members of axis of Islamic resistance in the region for the past three decades. However, in the last decade Syria, Ansarullah of Yemen, and Al-Hashd Al-Sha'bi (Popular Mobilization Forces) of Iraq have joined as new members of the axis. In the meantime, the Iran is known as a theorist and the most important member of the resistance axis due to its revolutionary discourse, regional power and its important role in forming, coordinating and providing the axis with material and spiritual support, as well as systematizing the performance of these groups.

The axis gained more authority after emergence of a Shia government in Iraq and then the 33-day war in Lebanon that led to the defeat of Israel and the stabilization of Hezbollah in Lebanon (Adami & Keshavarzi Moghaddam, 2015, pp. 1-4).

According to many analysts, the creation and strengthening of terrorist groups such as ISIS and provoking a civil war in Syria with the aim of overthrowing the government of president Bashar al-Assad and the Shia government of Iraq was a strategy to implicitly weaken the resistance axis and as a result to increase Israel's

security. In fact, Iran's policy, in the framework of presence in Syria, active role in Iraq and supporting Ansarullah in Yemen, is in the framework of resistance axis security strategy and confrontation with Saudi Arabia, Israel and the American order.

Despite the discriminatory policies of many international institutions and organizations in line with US strategy against Iran, Tehran has welcomed membership and active role in all international organizations, institutions, and treaties over the past four decades. Iran is a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), while Israel is not a party to either.

II- Iran and The Future Prospect of the International Order

As realists say change of the international order is inevitable, but different scenarios can be suggested about the relations among the actors. Wilkinson identifies possible scenarios as alternatives to the non-hegemonic unipolar situation: bipolar, tripolar (due to the rise of the European Union and China) or multipolar orders (Wilkinson, *Unipolarity without hegemony*, 1999, p. 143). Indicators for the evolution of the international order are as in the following (Hadian, 2003):

1. Inefficiency of the power or powers that shape the international order for international cooperation
2. Increased anarchy
3. Increase or change of power indicators
4. Increased pessimism and competition among states for security
5. Increased the number of the states who claim to be a great power

It can also be deduced from international relations theories that the stages of establishing a new international order include the following steps, which do not necessarily happen in a step-by-step manner, but can also occur in parallel: 1. The state of anarchy and the lack of an international community 2. The balance of

competitive, hostile and sometimes exclusion-oriented power 3. Regionalism and geographical distribution of competitive power.

Following the inefficiency of a super power or powers or the lack of an international community, the first stage in the evolution of the international order is the increase in anarchy, which in turn raises security and survival issues and further increases the efforts of states to win more power. In other words, in anarchy, pessimism increases and conflict in the international environment increases. At the same time, the number of states claiming to be a power is increasing and the interaction of great powers to form institutions and for collaborations is decreasing. In fact, the first stage is a change in the actors' perception of the system, new opportunities and threats. At this stage, the great powers manifest themselves by expressing more power.

Many analysts agree on the definition of great powers, which refers to actors who are able to create a system of interdependence of power and security, and thus have the ability to set the rules of the game, create and control institutions, regimes and manage the existing order. However, different scenarios can be proposed about the hierarchy of the new international system: the re-emergence of a unipolar order with new or former super power, the emergence of a bipolar or multipolar order.

Reading between the lines of what the theorists of the international order say, it can be noted that the vast majority of the theorists believe that a bipolar system is more stable than a multipolar system and that it is in favor of international security. Because in a bipolar order, the great powers have more focus and confidence in their rival's behavior. On the other hand, there is a consensus among the thinkers that the global order can hardly be fully bipolar (Ikenberry, Mastanduno, & Wohlforth, 2009, p. 5) .

As a result, the question of how the actors are combined or organized in a bipolar or multipolar order, raises a variety of possibilities and scenarios. First, a new order will certainly not be formed without the tendency of medium and small actors to major poles. However, at least four different situations can occur vis-a-vis

the future of the current international order:

1. The US's renewed superiority in maintaining a unipolar order; This scenario is less likely due to new power indicators and predictions for the future of global economies (Law, 2018).

2. One of the scenarios about the structure of the future international order is like forming blocs in the era of bipolar world order, meaning that most actors will have to determine their relationship with one of the global powers. In fact, actors outside the blocs are unsafe or will be under more systemic pressures. The possible poles of this system are the United States and China.

3. Another possibility is the emergence of a multipolar system, which is less likely than a bipolar system in the near future. But a case of it, the bipolar or multipolar system, is more likely. In fact, the emergence of a bipolar system with several large powers that can regulate effective regional institutions and regimes.

4. Another scenario, which is much less likely, is based more on a liberal and institutionalist approach. According to this theoretical approach, in the new world order, the regional and international institutions and arrangements that are centered on the great powers, will dominate.

During the Cold War, there was a certain pattern of order based on bipolarity. The military rivalry between the two superpowers and their allies took place in the context of the North-South and East-West order, and the main actors were divided into two blocs. During the period of unilateral US domination, the major players in the world were either in the ranks of US allies or in a position of neutrality and often under US pressure. From this perspective, it seems that one of the problems for explaining the bipolar or multipolar international system has been solved in this framework. In other words, the actors will either be as client states of the global powers or they will be marginalized. But when it comes to new international powers, despite Waltz's traditional definition of five indicators - democracy and land, political mobilization, economic capacity, political stability, and military capability - (Waltz K. , 1979, p. 131) the analysis of their new features in the age of

technology becomes a little more complicated.

To explain the indicators of power in the new order, one can refer to the view of major theoretical approaches to power. From a realism point of view, the balance of power depends primarily on the function of tangible military assets such as armor and nuclear weapons that states possess (Mearsheimer, 2006). Despite the slight differences between theories on the definition of the dimensions of power, the issue that how much power is sufficient is also questionable. At the same time, one of the issues that makes the analysis of power in the new order difficult is the complexity of the system and the change in the indicators of power. In complex systems, actors with asymmetric powers are said to be able to exert influence. On the other hand, the existence of power is essentially dependent on the potential to materialize it.

Iran and Evolution of the International Order: The transition in world order can provoke new discussions about opportunities and limitations it can bring to Iranian foreign policy decision-makers. The new debate is what policy Iran can adopt towards the evolution of the international order and what factors and components will improve Iran's position and that what tools, facilities and restrictions the country has to maintain and improve its position. The answers to these questions can help explain Iran's strategy and predict its future approaches.

Maintaining the Status Quo: This policy aims maintaining the status quo, which is mainly adopted by governments that either cannot have a better choice or the current situation is more suitable for their security and role. What is meant by security here is mainly the secure situation against external threats, which is provided either independently or by combining your power with the power of others. Playing the right role is also related to the efficiency of the government. This policy raises the concern of such a government in the face of a trend that is changing the international order. The usual tool of this policy is diplomacy and balance of power, which can prevent a change in the situation. However, this policy can also come at a cost, such as emphasizing international

order at the cost of any injustice, non-adherence to universal moral principles, and reducing the relative independence of action according to the patterns of the international coalition. Its advantage is also in maintaining the relative stability of the international community and in maintaining the necessary conditions for advancing the former policies.

There are reasons to suggest that Iran does not want to maintain the status quo. Iran has been one of the countries seeking change since the Islamic Revolution and the formation of the Islamic Republic. The country has suffered from war, sanctions and anti-Iranian policies of the United States and its allies for decades. Besides, anti-hegemonic and justice-oriented discourse of the Iranian leaders, support the argument why Tehran does not favor preserving the current order.

Adjusting or Changing the Status Quo: This policy is pursued by two groups of actors who either pursue certain values as universal values or consider the current situation to their detriment or unfair. Adopting a reformist or transformational approach depends on a variety of factors. Taking up the type of reformist approach or fundamental change can depend on historical, ideological, geopolitical and even individual factors of decision-makers of states, such as: how much the states that challenges the current system, is capable of changing the status quo or confident about its capabilities. Or how much it believes in the ideology and the establishment of the values it seeks. Richard Rosecrance does not make a big difference between these factors and believes that in order to introduce states that want to change the status quo, it is enough to consider their intentions. Because intentions are as decisive as capabilities (Rosecrance, 2008).

There is a huge difference between states that want to reform or fundamentally change the status quo. States with a reformist approach believe that international cooperation can help strengthen international values and norms and improve the security of states, because fundamental change in the current situation is fraught with costs and threats. The usual tools of this policy, apart from

diplomacy, include international and regional economic, legal, institutional instruments. Multilateralism can perhaps be considered as the main mechanism used by the reformist approach in the international order.

One of the main challenges of this approach is that naturally state actors are always pessimistic about each other's intentions and are always evaluating their intentions. As a result, the coalition of the reformist state with the dominant state will not be sustained under the influence of pessimistic considerations or will not provide much benefit to the dissatisfied state. This will make the reformist state to seek to surpass the dominant power or at least to reach a level similar to the level of the dominant state. Thus, sooner or later the dissatisfied actor will turn to support a fundamental change to the status quo. One of the most recent highlights in this regard is the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, of which the United States withdrew despite full compliance from Iranian side. The US claimed to have uncertainty over Iran's long-term intentions. Donald Trump's withdrawal from many bilateral and multilateral international agreements during his presidency cannot be considered only as his individual choices. A significant portion of these decisions were based on US structural pessimism about the intentions of Washington's European and non-European allies.

An assessment of Iran's foreign policy performance over the past four decades also shows that a domestic faction in Iran, known as the Reformists, which has been in power at intervals, is subject to the policy of reforming the current international situation by gradually increasing the power through international cooperation. However, in the last decade, following the experience of the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal under Donald Trump and the delay of the Joe Biden administration in reviving the agreement, this discourse has been weakened among the elites. On the other hand, the Principlist faction, by adhering to the Principlist discourse with key concepts such as the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the global revolution, fighting corruption and oppression and promoting justice, believes in transnational duties and responsibilities for the

Iran as one of the agents of the divine global government (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2007). In fact, both general approaches in the foreign policy of the Iran consider the foundation of the international order as unfair and emphasize the need to change it.

In general, Iran, in a situation of desire to change the status quo and the evolution of the international order, logically has four choices ahead:

First; Adopting a policy of passive neutrality

Second; Adopting a pro-West policy

Third; Adopting a pro-East policy

Fourth; Adopting an independent active policy

The history of Iran's foreign policy shows that for various historical, geopolitical, cultural and religious reasons in international turning points, even if Iran is inclined to adopt a policy of passive neutrality, it will not be able to stay away from the flood of developments. As said before, one of the stages in the evolution of the international order is the geographical distribution of power, which includes the strategic region of the Middle East.

Therefore, it is more appropriate for Iran to play an active role in international processes. At the same time, given anti-Iranian policies of the West, four decades of sanctions, the West's discriminatory policies against Iran, and as a result of Iran's revisionist approach to the international order, pro-West policies face many doubts in the country.

In fact, if Iran wants to play an influential role in the evolution of the global order and change of the status quo through coalition and alliance, it has only two desirable choices in the direction of anti-hegemonic discourse: either a pro-East policy or an active independent policy. Given that China is the main competitor to the dominant pro-West discourse, the least costly strategy in terms of tools and facilities is an Eastward policy. In this regard, the 25-year strategic cooperation document between Iran and China, as well as Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are mentioned as indicators for Iran's accession to the new pole of the international order. The most important driver of this

scenario is the continuation of US sanctions and the policy of maximum pressure against Iran. Naturally, based on the logic of the foreign policy of all countries, Iran also wants to increase its power, position, influence and resources, and as a result, an independent policy is a more desirable option for Iran.

One of the most important uncertainties facing the scenario of an active independent Iran is the resistance of the great powers to the increasing number of rivals in the international system. Because one of the competing scenarios of the bipolar system is the multipolar situation. A multipolar system means the existence of several states with close military, cultural and economic powers that are able to influence and regulate international relations by forming alliances and coalitions. Analysts believe that in such a system, despite more contradictions, there is less hostility (Deutsch & Singer, 1964). This scenario is reinforced by changing the power indicators and increasing the ability of more actors to exercise power. By that premise, Henry Kissinger cites Europe, China, Japan, Russia, and India as potential rivals to the United States in a multipolar system.

The most important driver for the scenario of an active independent Iran is that the change in the world order strengthens Iran's political-security approaches by turning the conflict of powers against each other, while reducing the pressure on Iran. The main principle in Iran's political-security approach is its strategic self-sufficiency in the transition of the world from the American unilateral order. But the new international conditions will put Iran in a position to choose to join new alliances and institutions that pose new threats and opportunities.

For the past four decades, Iran has been one of the countries that has remained committed to international organizations and institutions, despite its critical discourse toward the unjust structure of the world order. One of the strategies facing Iran is to use international organizations, institutions and arrangements to achieve international peace and security.

If anti-Iranian policies of the US continue, the alternative for

Tehran is to establish strategic relations with one of the Eastern powers, especially China. Prior to the 25-year Iran-China accord, major cooperation between Tehran and Beijing was limited to some not-so-great investments, trade, and agreements on arms and oil. The most important stimulus for this relationship, in addition to Iran's regional position, was the continuation of US hostile policies towards the two countries, which has led Tehran and Beijing to promote the relations into a strategic partnership. There are still ambiguities about the dimensions and future of the agreement. However, the important and indisputable point is the growth of China as a superpower, and the competition between China and the United States in strategic regions including the Middle East, as well as the need to use different capacities to increase Iran's position in the global value chain by using positive relations with this international power. In addition, it should be noted that Iran-China relations, in addition to bilateral will, is affected by regional and international trends, especially the trend of Sino-US relations. In fact, these trends can create different scenarios for Iran-China relations.

Conclusion

The basis of most theories on a change in world order is an emphasis on the unjust, discriminatory, conflicting, and therefore unacceptable nature of the status quo. As noted, not merely critical theorists, but realist theorists, more or less, do not rule out the practical possibility of change because of the natural obstacles to American hegemony, the natural cycle of the international order, and the improbability of hegemonic formation. However, it should be noted that in describing the current situation, we may look at it from a position of value-based opposition. It is not necessarily in Iran's interest to change the international order unless Iran makes a reasonable choice, by predicting the current trend and the following considerations:

Regardless of the difficulty of mapping Iran's national interests in the forthcoming options, logically, views on costs and benefits

may also differ. In other words, all arguments are based on analytical data. But it can be inferred that in the new international order, there will be more opportunities for Iran's strategic self-sufficiency, just as the country was able to avoid joining other actors at the height of tensions with the West, and the Western political pressures and economic sanctions. But the most important driver of this scenario is the nuclear deal and the lifting of the sanctions or neutralizing them. In contrast, the existing critical uncertainties are US anti-Iranian policies over the past four decades and pessimism and mistrust between Iran and the United States.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, after four decades of trial and error in foreign policy, and now with more strategic maturity, is able to secure its interests with a pragmatic approach to international powers.



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