

Iran's Geopolitical Strategy in the West Asia: Containment of 'Geography' and 'History'

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Abstract

The depth and extension of Iran's controversial connections with its proxies have caught eyes and thoughts. While much ink has been spilled to Iran's regional policy, the majority of these analyses, either intuitively or deliberately, build their explanation on the so-called 'Persian-Shia offensive intentions'. Conversely, the present paper seeks the roots of Iran's regional policy in its specific geography and history. From this perspective, Iran's regional policy is inseparable from its geopolitical strategies. To shed light on these strategies, the paper begins with the rise of the Persian Achaemenes until the establishment of the Islamic Republic, focusing on major driving forces behind Iran's regional policy and strategies. The paper elaborates on a foundational concept of 'strategic loneliness', as Iran's permanent feature, by highlighting the country's curse of geography and its long-standing historical insecurity. In following, it shows the consequential impact of Iran's strategic loneliness for the country's non-state foreign policymaking strategic connections with military non-state actors—in the containment of its regional enemies. The paper ultimately argues that while this policy has kept Iran's national integrity and security while entrapped the country in a durable 'geopolitical predicament' and deepened regional crisis in the Middle East.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, Strategic Loneliness, Historical Insecurity, Non-State Foreign Policy, Geopolitical Predicament*

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Introduction

The Persian Dilemma has been still catching eyes and thoughts of the western analyses. Once used to be the U.S. close ally in West Asia, Iran has rejected the post-Cold War order in the Middle East through its support for the political and military non-state actors. The majority of analyses on the pivotal factors responsible for Iran's regional policy, either intuitively or deliberately, build their explanation less on Iran's national and regional interests rather than on essentially and immortally cultural-ideological-normative narratives manifested in Iranian leaders' so-called 'Persian-Shia offensive intentions'.

To avoid such long-standing blind spots, an alternative explanation of major driving forces for Iran's regional policy should unchain itself from mainstream analytical biases and, in return, focus on pivotal factors with undeniable roles in the formation, dynamics, and trajectory of this policy. From this perspective, the article sets forth a new understanding of Iran's geopolitical strategy of support for its proxies. The paper explicates the evolution of Iran's geopolitical strategy as the unfolding of constant interaction among its specific geography and history. "What factors, at what levels of analysis and through what mechanisms have shaped Iran's geopolitical strategy?" This is the central question that guides the analytical narrative in the present paper. Within this framework, the paper tracks down Iran's geopolitical strategy in the region with regards to its 'Non-State Foreign Policy'. In following, the paper traces the major roots of this strategy by highlighting the concept of the 'strategic loneliness' as the country's permanent feature. In the next step,

the paper traces this concept by focusing on the country's historical insecurity and its specific geography. Last but not least, it assesses the broad contours of Iran's regional policy as well as its possible future path(s) for the regional balance of power in the West Asia with a focus on Iran's 'geopolitical predicament'. In short, the article focuses on more durable and consequential factors in shaping its geopolitical strategy: Iran's Geography and History.

I. Iran's Non-State Foreign Policy

A geopolitical strategy seeks to enhance the state's security and prosperity. It refers to concepts of strategy and geopolitics. On the one side, strategy is about how force is being contemplated. According to Freedman, strategy is the art of creating power to obtain the max political objective using available military means (Freedman, 1992). From this perspective, strategy is the product of dialogue between policy and military power (Gray and Sloan, 2014: 169), reconciling political ends with military means. On the other side, geopolitics examines the impact of geography on politics. It is concerned with how geographical factors affect the relations between states and the struggle for world domination (Foster, 2006: 1). Interconnecting power, world order, and geography, Geopolitics is the spatial study and practice of international relations in a way that international, regional, and local politics has a geopolitical dimension (Gray and Sloan, 2014: 164). Connecting physical geographical with a power struggle, geopolitics feeds a strategic imagination(s). Combining two concepts of geopolitics and strategy, the geopolitical strategy is the merger of strategic considerations with geopolitical factors. It is a strategy and foreign policy mainly guided by geographical factors while shaping political and military planning.

Within this context, the geopolitical strategy is derived by geopolitical narratives while targeting specific geographical locations. On the one side, geopolitical strategy refers to a specific strategy originated from a geopolitical narrative(s). These

narratives inspire specific strategies for statesmen to increase national power and security. At the same time, the geopolitical strategy targets a specific geographical location(s). From this perspective, George Kennan's famous Containment strategy "by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points" (Kennan, 1947) was not a geopolitical strategy since it did not refer to specific geographical locations. Conversely, Nicholas Spykman's theory of 'Rimland' advocated a geopolitical strategy through targeting specific geographical locations: "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world (Spykman, 2017). Like any strategy, geopolitical strategy requires utilizing military means and presence in specific geographical locations, normally coterminous with the opening of military bases and building a network of state and non-state alliances. Concisely put, geopolitical strategy is a manifestation of a state's shaping, rather being shaped, power on the globe.

Iran's geopolitical strategy is manifested in extensive networks with its regional proxies. In the post-American invasion of Iraq at 2003, these networks expanded to an unprecedented level as such that King Abdullah of Jordan coined a controversial phrase of the Shia Crescent in late in 2004. "If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new 'crescent' of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge to alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to the U.S. interests and allies," the King claimed (Wright and Baker. 2004). Sunni Arab leaders of the region have intertwined Iran's revolutionary ideology of political Shia Islam as a final driving force for the formation of the Shia Crescent. Accordingly, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 marks a genuine change of heart in the trajectory of Iran's regional policy. Nonetheless, this view ignores to trace the roots of Iran's support for its regional proxies before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the late 1950s, Pahlavi Iran initiated a heavy

support for the Iraqi Kurds, led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, to contain the Soviet-backed, pan-Arab regime of Baghdad. Simultaneously, Iran began backing the remote, isolated community of the Lebanese Shia as Seyyed Musa Sadr left Tehran to Tyre. Interestingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran followed the same strategy, fueled by revolutionary ideology of political Shia Islam. Indeed, Iran's geopolitical strategy is part of its 'non-state foreign policy'. This policy relates to how a state—Iran—builds and manages ties with a non-state actor(s) through mechanisms beyond the common foreign policy (Reisinezhad, 2018: 3). Crafted to contain regional threats, Iran's non-state foreign policy has been shaped around the armature of strategic connections with political-militant groups and movements in the region. Iran's support for the military and political non-state actors in the region emerged in the midst of the Cold War while reached its zenith in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The continuity of Iran's non-state foreign policy for more than sixty years reaffirms that the root of Iran's geopolitical strategy is not revolutionary ideology of political Shia Islam.

II. Geopolitical Foundation and Iran's Strategic Loneliness

Pahlavi Iran's support for the non-state actors shows that the final driving force behind Iran's geopolitical strategy is its 'historically strategic loneliness'. First coined by Mohiaddin Mesbahi, a prominent Iranian strategist, strategic loneliness refers to the fact that "Iran by design and by default has been strategically 'lonely' and deprived of meaningful alliances and great power bandwagoning" (Mesbahi, 2011: 9-34). It refers to the fact that Iran is lonely in both planning and operationalizing strategies as well as resisting against its enemies' strategies. strategic loneliness reaffirms that the cornerstone of Iran's national security is not predicated on its relations with the great powers. In contrast to Israel and Turkey whose national security doctrine have been predicated on the strategic alliance with the US and NATO,

respectively, Iran lacks any strategic ally. More significantly, Iran's strategic loneliness does not mean Iran's isolation. Indeed, its geographical centrality, revolutionary ideology and intricate tension with the U.S. have intensified Iran's loneliness, while made the country "busily engaged at the core and crossroads of all major regional and occasionally global issues of significant systemic ramification" (Mesbahi, 2011). Concisely put, 'geopolitical isolation' is an absurd concept for a country like Iran who has been historically under geopolitically systemic pressure.

Undoubtedly, Iran's strategic loneliness intensified with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the following Hostage Crisis. Later, it was the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) that reaffirmed strategic loneliness as revolutionary Iran fought a notorious, totalitarian Baath regime supported by both Cold War superpowers and their allies. Since the 90s, Iran has been under crippling sanctions for its nuclear program and support for its regional proxies. Only months ago, Iran paid its price when it lost Major General Soleimani as no country sided with Tehran in its response to the U.S. It was the most recent manifestation of Iran's strategic loneliness wherein the country was deprived of an effective state allies.

Nevertheless, strategic loneliness was not the Islamic Republic of Iran's exclusive characteristic. In the nineteenth century, the Qajar kings of Iran unsuccessfully tried to side with the third power, including France and the U.S., to neutralize the powerful Russians and British influence in the country. Only after losing vast provinces in Caucasia, Central Asia, and South Asia, they found out that Iran lacked a natural ally. Despite his hatred towards his Qajar predecessors, Reza Shah Pahlavi followed the same logic as he began flirting with Nazi Germany. However, he soon paid the price when he was forced to resign from the crown in 1941 right after the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran. The Shah had also felt, by instinct and experience, Iran's omnipresent strategic loneliness. In contrast to the mainstream view, he never felt the U.S. full support for Iran. He knew that the United States'

attention to Iran is not genuine. In the late 40s, the Shah was told by the U.S. ambassador that “America would never go to war with the Soviets on account of Iran, to save Iran” (Parsi, 2007: 25). He was fully aware that in the case of the Soviet direct or indirect assault, particularly under Moscow or one of its regional allies’ invasion, no country would guarantee Iran’s national integration. Neither Iran-United States mutual defense agreement of 1959, nor the Baghdad Pact of 1955 and its heir, the CENTO of 1959, removed his geopolitical concerns. In his 1974 trip to Moscow, the Shah clarified his real view towards regional pacts and told Brezhnev, “... I want to share one of my experiences with you. That is, international organizations and alliances are nonsense and ineffective. ...” (Alam, 1995: 249-250). In the zenith of the Cold War, Iran was surrounded by the Soviet and its regional allies in Afghanistan and Iraq. Turkish and Pakistani states were unstable and the Arab Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf were weak. Not surprisingly, the Shah saw his country lacking a natural ally and, thus, felt insecure. “We are in a terrible situation since Moscow’s twin pincers coming down through Kabul and Baghdad surround us,” the Shah had shared his insecure feeling with his close aide, Assadollah Alam (Alam, 1995: 259). Pahlavi Iran’s strategic loneliness illustrated that the country lacked a reliable ally(s), particularly under military threats. In the Shah’s geopolitical calculation, relation with the U.S. as well as defensive regional pacts did not fully compensate Iran’s strategic loneliness. It was in this historical juncture that Pahlavi Iran built a non-state foreign policy with the Iraqi Kurds and, to a lesser degree, the Lebanese Shia to compensate Iran’s strategic loneliness and lack of reliable ally.

Pahlavi Iran’s non-state foreign policy was later followed by the Islamic Republic, though this time under the alleged title of ‘the Export of the Revolution’. Revolutionary Iran soon saw itself surrounded by the two superpowers and their allies. The bloody War with Baath Iraq reaffirmed that Iran was under permanent siege. Even in the post-war era, the US-orchestrated crippling

sanctions intensified Iran's historical strategic loneliness. For more than four decades, Iran has lacked great power allies in confronting the United States of America. Not surprisingly, the Revolutionary leaders reached a similar determining conclusion that Iran has no choice but to rely on strategic connections with military and political non-state actors in the region to keep the country's national security safe. Succinctly put, what lurks beneath Iran's non-state foreign policy is less predicated on Iran's ideology and the policy of the export of the Revolution rather than its historical strategic loneliness.

Strategic loneliness, a major driving force for Iran's non-state foreign policy, has led to a crucially lasting consequence for Iran's geopolitical strategy: defending the country's national security and territorial integrity beyond its borders. Iran's strategic loneliness lead to the very consequential facts for Iran's regional policy. First, and as history proves, there has been a naturally strategic alliance among Iran's regional foes. Phrased differently, pressing and even destroying Iran is the key commentator of the regional states and their great allied powers, despite their harsh tensions. Second, a mere defense of its national integrity at the frontline borders would lead to destructive defeats and national humiliation. Within this context, building strategic connections with non-state actors—the Iraqi Kurdish guerillas in the Pahlavi era and then Shia groups during the Islamic Republic—is a vital asset for Tehran to contain regional and global threats. In other words, the deployment of Iranian forces to conflict abroad is a notable struggle of Iran's power projection beyond its territory to compensate its strategic loneliness and to deter external threats. From Pahlavi to the Islamic Republic, Iranian leader has been confronted by similar, durable consequences rooted in Iran's strategic loneliness. It does not matter if the ideology of those in charge is nationalist/secular or Islamist/religious—Iran lacks natural defensive borders and its strategic loneliness is still vivid. On the contrary way, they took the same geopolitical strategy in keeping Iran's national integrity through siding with political and

militant non-state actors in the region. Phrased differently, strategic loneliness has convinced the Iranian leaders to seek to defend Iran's national integrity beyond its borders through an effective non-state foreign policy. In short, strategic loneliness is the foundation of Iran's geopolitical strategy that guides the country's regional policy in the West of Asia.

III. Historical Insecurity

Iran's 'strategic loneliness is rooted in its historical insecurity (Reisinezhad, 2018: 325). A summary of Iran's long history shows a durable pattern that shaped its strategic loneliness and, in following, geopolitical strategy. As the oldest, vivid nation of the world, Iran was born as a regional hegemon when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon on 29th October, 539 B.C. Since the collapse of the Achaemenid in 330 BC, Iran's fate oscillated between 'destructive occupation' and 'military encirclement'. After its glorious dawn at history, Iran was, by and large, forced to take the defensive position, rather than offensive ones. Regional powers and nomadic invasions imposed non-stopping threats to Iran's national integrity and security. The only exception was Nader Shah's short reign (1736-1747 AD) who revived Iran's regional hegemony temporarily. Furthermore, non-stopping wars with major regional powers sapped Iran's capacity, while left the country weak to contain more unknown, yet dangerous, external threats. Continuous geopolitical pressure also made Iranian sovereigns preoccupied constantly with fighting external invaders. Not surprisingly, Iran's central power was prone to internal threats and riots that challenged the country's national security. Succinctly put, Iran was under siege, destructive occupation, and internal collapse for more than two millenniums.

The first Persian dynasty, the Achaemenid (550-330 BC), was founded by Cyrus the Great (559-530 BC). Conquering Lydia in Minor Asia and Neo-Babylon in Mesopotamia and the Levant, Cyrus established from Fergana Valley and Indus River in the east to Gaza Strip and Bosphorus Strait in the west. His son and

successor, Cambodia (530-522 BC), conquered Egypt, Nubia, and Eastern Libya. Later, Darius the Great (522-486 BC) ruled the vastest empire the world had seen, from Libya and Danube in the West to Kashmir and Pamir Plateau in the East (Hinz, et al, 1992). Iran's regional dominance at the time was not merely based on military achievements; rather, it was also predicated on an unprecedented religious-cultural tolerance first imposed by Cyrus the Great (Koch, 1992; Holland, 2005). Heralding a cosmopolitan view of human rights much earlier than its modern version, this unique vision of religious freedom legitimized the longevity of the Achaemenes dynasty for about two decades. It was only the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta that challenged 'the Pax Persica'. The Greco-Persian Wars of 499-449 BC ended the Persian's successful military campaigns and left the Europe safe of the Persian rule. In response, the Persian kings began adopting a policy of divide-and-rule (Dandamaev, 1989: 256), setting Sparta against Athens to prevent the Greek city-states from turning their military campaigns to Persia. The Peloponnesian Wars of (479-431 BC) were major manifestations of the Persian version of 'Dual Containment' policy, ultimately led to the 'King's Peace' that recognized Persian hegemony in the Aegean Sea (Xenophon, 2000). Surprisingly, the Persian Empire was collapsed in 330 BC by a new-emerged, yet unknown, force: the Macedonian. It was Iran's first state destruction.

Iran was then ruled by Alexander and his successors in Asia, the Seleucid (312 BC–63 BC), for more than a century. Iran eventually revived again under the Parthian Arsacid (247 BC-224 AD). Extending Iran's territory from the Euphrates to Indo-Kush for almost five centuries, the Parthian Empire was surrounded by the Romans in the west and the Kushan Empire in the east (Sarkhosh and Stewart, 2017). It was Iran's first military encirclement in history. In contrast to the Achaemenid, the Parthian never enjoyed a strong will for regional hegemony nor had the capacity to impose it (Farrokh, 2007; Rae, 2014). Unstoppable wars with the eastern nomads and, particularly, the

Roman legions put the country in a defensive position (Sheldon, 2010). The geopolitical power competitions sapped the Arsacid government and left the country prone to domestic challenges as such that the Parthian reign was finally overthrown Persian Sassanid.

Iran's defensive regional policy did not, by and large, change during the second Persian Empire, the Sassanid (224-651 AD), that ruled a vast territory from Kashmir and Transoxiana to the Euphrates and the Black Sea. Although the Sassanid kings were more successful in defeating regional threats, they were, just like their Parthian processors (Daryaee, 2014), surrounded by the Roman and then Byzantium in the west and the Huns and then the Turks in the east for more than four centuries. In this era, Iran's military encirclement became harsher since in several instances there were strategic alliances between the Byzantium and the Turks in launching invasions of Iran's territory (Dignas and Winter, 2007; Maksymiuk, 2015). Continuous wars in eastern and, particularly, western fronts weakened Iran's military forces and paved the way for its second destruction. For the second time, a new-emerged, yet unknown force of the Arab Muslims conquered Iran.

Under the Arab Caliphate rule of the Rashidun (632-661 AD) and, especially, the Umayyad (661-750 AD), Iranians challenged Arab racist dominance—in contrast to Islam's message of equality and fraternity of all Muslim—through sequential, yet unsuccessful, uprisings.¹ Led by Abu Muslim,² Iranians ultimately overthrew the Arab Umayyad and replaced them with the more-

1. Al-Balādhurī. *Futuh al-Buldan: The Origins of the Islamic State: Translation with Annotations Geographic and Historic Notes of the Kitāb Futūh al-Buldān of al-Imām abu-l'Abbās Aḥmad ibn-Jābir al-Balādhuri*. 1. Translated by Philip Khuri Hitti. New York: Columbia University Press, 1916; Zarrinkoub, Abdolhossein, *The Arab Conquest of Iran and its aftermath: in Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 4, London, 1975.

2. His real name was Behzadan son of Vandad Hormoz.

Persianized Abbasid in 750 AD. They gradually re-established their local governments; however, the nomadic Turkmen invasion of 1040 AD postponed Iran's full revival. Notwithstanding, the strength and attraction of Iranians culture and civilization Persianized TurkIC dynasties.¹ In the end, unknown military forces of Mongols and then the Tatar totally destroyed the country in three waves of invasion—led by Genghis Khan, Hulagu Khan, and Tamerlane—and left the country in the dark decades between the mid 12th to the late 15th centuries.

After three centuries of continuous destruction, Iran finally reemerged under the Safavid (1501-1756 AD). Shah Ismail I (1501-1524 AD) reunited the country and ruled a vast territory from Euphrates and Transcaucasia to Hindukush and Oxus (Newman, 2008). More significantly, he reconstructed Iran's national identity by injecting the Twelver Shia Islam onto the Iranian plateau. The emergence of a new, powerful Shia state in the region had a huge ramification for other Shia communities in the West Asia while urged Sunni powers of the Ottoman Empire in the west and Uzbek Khanate in the east to ally against the Shia Safavid. For the next time, Iran was surrounded, though this time it was much more intensified since the geopolitical competition in Western Asia overlapped by geocultural forces of the Shia-Sunni dichotomy (Fragner, 2005). Such a harsh encirclement put the country again in the defensive position, made Safavid kings be constantly preoccupied with fighting Sunni powers in the western and eastern fronts, and ultimately left the country prone to domestic rebels. In the end, the Safavid kingdom was overthrown by Sunni Afghan rebels of Qandahar (Matthee, 2011).

For almost a century, Iran fell in the pitfall of chaos until Nader Shah (1736-1747 AD) emerged. As the last 'conquer of Asia', (Axworthy, 2009) Nader decisively defeated the Sunni powers of the Ottoman Turks and Uzbek Khans. The zenith of his

1. These dynasties included Ghaznavid (977-1186 D), the Seljuk (1037-1194 AD), and the Khwarazmian (1077-1231 AD).

undefeatable military campaigns was the conquest of Delhi, the capital city of the Indian Great Mughal. In the aftermath of the fall of the Persian Achaemenid Empire, it was the only time that Iran revived its regional preponderance, though time its regional hegemony was short. With Nader's assassination in 20 June 1747, chaos became omnipresent in Iran until the establishment of the Qajar reign in the late 18th century. The only exception was a short period of Karim Khan Zand (1751-1779 AD) who brought peace for the country for only two decades.

Search for Strength: In the aftermath of Nader Shah's assassination, Iran's encirclement was gradually revived; however, this time western powers of Tsarist Russia and the United Kingdom surrounded the country. In the early years of the Qajar reign, the Russian began making effort to reach the Persian Gulf to compensate for their historical lack of warm-water port. Russia finally conquered Iran's historical territories of the Caucasus in the Russo-Persian Wars (1804-1813 and 1826-1828). Since then, Russian expansionism permanently overtook Qajar kings' nightmares. At the same time, the British completed conquest of the Indian subcontinent.¹ Since then, defending the jewel in the British crown determined the trajectory of the Persian-British relation (Mahmud, 1999). Fully aware of the historical fact and geographical logic that the only land route to conquer India was Khyber Pass,² London obsessively intervened in Iran's domestic affairs to prevent the rise of 'Nader the Second'. Not surprisingly, they attacked south of Iran when Tehran had retaken Heart from the Afghan rebels and then forced Naser al-Din Shah Qajar to cede Heart and western Afghanistan to

1. Nader's conquest of Delhi after the Battle of Karnal of 24 February 1739 facilitated the British dominance over the Indian subcontinent. In other words, while his victory confirmed Iran's regional preponderance in the short term, it paved the way for the British final defeat of the Great Mughal.

2. The eastern point of Iranian Plateau and northwest of modern Pakistan border with Afghanistan.

British-backed Kabul emirate in the Treaty of Paris (1857). Indeed, Iran's first encounter with international level of global politics ended in humiliating defeats.

Beyond the Qajar's weakness, what lurked beneath these sequential defeats was the 'Great Game' as the hallmark of Russian-British geopolitical competition of the 19th century in Eurasia. While Russian tsars were worried about the British annexation of Emirate of Afghanistan and Central Asia, the British planned to contain Russian inroads into South Asia by making Afghanistan a protectorate and using a geostrategic belt of buffer states stretching from Khanat Khiva in the east to the Ottoman Empire in the west (Gebb, 1983). At the center of this belt lied Iran. Thus, efforts of controlling Iran determined the trajectory of Russian-British friction while transformed Iran to its major battlefield of the Great Game (Ewans, 2004). Within this context, Iran's full independence vanished by unstoppable loss of national territory. Surrounded by two powerful empires of the time, the Persian kings followed a delicate, yet notorious, balance by giving the Russian and the British economic privileges to prevent Iran's full disintegration. Until the end of the Great Game, Iran had lost vast territories in the northeast to Russia and southeast to the British-backed Kabul and British India.¹ The Great Game had kept capturing the Iranian Court and elites and shaped Iran's regional and internal policies.

In the middle of all these dark days, Iran lacked a strategic

1. According to the Treaty of Akhal of 1881, Iran ceased claim to Khwarazm and Transoxiana and lost its provinces in Turkestan. The treaty also set the Atrek River as Iran-Russia border in the east of the Caspian Sea and recognized Moscow's sovereignty over Iranian historical city of Merv and Eshgh Abad. Iran also lost eastern part of Baluchistan (modern Pakistan Baluchistan) to Britain in Haldich (1896) and first Goldsmith of 1863 arbitrations. Iran's Qajar ceded eastern Sistan (modern southwestern Afghanistan provinces of Nimruz, Helmand, and Farah) in the Second Goldsmith of 1872 and MacMahon 1903 Arbitrations.

ally in crafting its independent foreign policy. Moscow and London never accepted the presence of the third power, including the French and the American, in Iran's affairs. Neither French nor American was permitted as a major player in Iran. The worst yet to come. The UK and Russia ultimately agreed to stop the Great Game competition in the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols of 1895 only to prevent Germany (Gerard, 1897; Siegel, 2002). Later, the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 divided Iran's territory into three zones of influence and paved the way for a broader London-Moscow alliance against rising Germany. Indeed, the centroid of anti-German alliance was neither in Eastern Europe or the Western Front; rather, it was Iran (Frankopan, 2016). These transformations showed a bitter reality to Iranian elites that a long-term, yet catastrophic, the balance of Russia and Britain would not be effective if their surrounding predators put aside their rivalries.

Humiliating defeats and treaties, particularly Turkmenchay and Paris, shattered down the country's national pride. Iran's fiasco in Russo-Persian Wars and loss of Heart constructed a severe 'geopolitical headache' for a country with a deep-rooted 'sense of greatness'. Emerged out of the Iranians' vivid collective memory of their country's past glory, Iran's sense of greatness has been a major driving force for both the polity and society. Influenced by the European Enlightening, a newly-appeared class of Iranian intellectuals began seeking a solution to disentangle the country from national humiliation (Tabatabaie, 2007). Considering that revision of history plays with collective memory, these intellectuals injected a popular demand for national strength to contain regional and global threats in a newly-constructed civil society by highlighting Iran's glorious past. These efforts triggered the rise of national sentiments in the country, and ultimately culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Phrased differently, continuous geopolitical headache along with a national sense of greatness was culminated in a domestic pressure and revolution in the hope to strengthen the country and contain

regional and global threats.

Nevertheless, the next catastrophes plagued Iran: World War I and II. Although Iran declared neutrality in both destructive wars, the country was occupied due to its geostrategic position and vast oil fields. In World War I, Iran became a major battleground in Asia wherein the Russian Tsarist and the UK fought the Ottoman army and German fifth column. State collapse delegitimized Qajar monarchy and paved the way for Reza Khan—later Reza Shah Pahlavi—who reunited the country and revived national security. Less than a quarter of a century, Iran was occupied, this time by the Soviet Red Army and the British Royal Navy, in 1942 under the excuse of preventing the fall of the country into German Nazi orbit. For the next time, Iran was not able to escape from its destructive fate of foreign occupation.

Such a destructive pattern continued after the world wars. Post-War Iran experienced another round of instability. In the early 50s, the Oil Nationalization Movement, led by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, aimed at reviving Iran's full sovereignty by nationalizing oil. Nonetheless, his national struggle soon encountered the same fate as the UK militarily surrounded the country in the Persian Gulf and imposed sanctions on Iran. Ultimately, the British-American orchestrated coup overthrew Mosaddegh's democratic government in 1953 and shattered down the Iranian longstanding struggle to unchain the country from the Great Powers' interventions (Kinzer, 2008). Despite the continuous search for strength to prevent national humiliation, Iran was not able to contain regional and global threats, mostly due to the country's lack of geopolitical strategy in the region.

IV. The Shah, the Islamic Republic, and Iran's Non-State Foreign Policy

Iran finally disentangled itself from its longstanding fate of state collapse and military encirclement. An opportunity for this crucial transformation came knocking in the middle of the Cold War. In the post-coup era, Pahlavi Iran apparently became the U.S. major

ally in the Middle East. In the meantime, the Soviet infiltration of the region, combined with the rising tide of Pan-Arabism, intensified external threats to Iran's national integrity. These threats reached their zenith with the Coup of 1958 that toppled the pro-west Hashemite monarchy and then put the Pan-Arab republic of Iraq on Moscow's orbit.

The Coup of 1958 was a turning point in Iran's geopolitical strategy in the region, though. As pro-Moscow Abdel-Karim Qasim, Iraqi new leader, threatened Iran's national security by claiming over Iran's southwestern, oil-rich province Khuzestan, SAVAK—Pahlavi Iran's National Intelligence and Security Organization—was instructed by the Shah to build a strategic connection with the Iraqi Kurds who had been subjecting to Baghdad racial discrimination policies. With Iran's full support, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish leader, tied down Baghdad military machine and turned away pan-Arab Iraqi threat to Iran's territorial integrity.

Iran also supported a much more remote non-state entity: the Lebanese Shia. In the late 50s, Colonel Mojtaba Pashaie, head of the Middle East Directorate of SAVAK, suggested that "We should combat to and contain the threat in the East coast of the Mediterranean to prevent shedding blood on Iranian soil" (Reisinezhad, 2018: 1). It was the beginning of Iran's support for the Lebanese Shia. Indeed, the seed of Iranian-Lebanese Shia networks was planted in the middle of the Cold War, rather than 1979 (Reisinezhad, 2018: 2).

Direct and indirect support for the Lebanese Shia and, particularly, the Iraqi Kurds was the beginning of Iran's innovative geopolitical strategy, called 'non-state foreign policy', in the Middle East. For the first time in its long history, Iran was able to contain regional threats through its effective non-state foreign policy. Throughout his reign, the Shah stick to this type of geopolitical strategy to contain threatening Marxism and Pan-Arabism in the region. Iraqi leaders, from Qasim and Arif Brothers to al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein, were never able to crush

Iraqi Kurds— Pahlavi Iran's proxy at the time—until Baghdad was forced to concede in Arvand Rud in Algiers Agreement of 1975.

Interestingly, revolutionary Iran did not change Iran's non-state foreign policy and kept supporting military proxies, though this time mostly Shia non-state actors, in the West Asia. As a "lonely yet globalized" state (Mesbahi, 2011), revolutionary Iran has massively and acutely invested on strategic capacity building power via its non-state foreign policy to contain systemic pressure. Galvanized by its popular revolutionary idea, the Islamic Republic of Iran transformed the geocultural power arrangement in the region mainly through processing a successful non-state foreign policy. Despite its sharp contrast with Pahlavi Iran's policy toward the U.S., the Islamic Republic utilized the same geopolitical strategy in the region. This fact shows that Iran's non-state foreign policy is less an ideological policy rather than a geopolitical strategy with strong historical and geographical roots and driving forces.

Historical Insecurity and Encirclement Mentality: Sequential state destructions and continuous military encirclement provided Iran's durable 'historical insecurity'. Such a deep-rooted character has also been manifested in Iranian leaders' views over national security in a way that most of them believe that the country had a sharp and acute security problem (Reisinezhad, 2018: 327). This view has equalized development with 'becoming strong' ['Ghavi-Shodan' in Persian], particularly in the military domain. The Shah's vision of modernization differed significantly from the western recipe as he believed that the path to the modernization passed through heavy military reorganization, rather than socio-economic development. The Islamic Republic has also emphasized military achievement as a key figure of development and national strength. Not surprisingly, endemic missile projects are appreciated and framed as the pinnacle of the country's development. Indeed, the Iranian leaders rely less on culture or economics rather than military. What lurks beneath

such a durable pattern is Iran's historical insecurity.

Iran's historical insecurity has been also manifested in its national culture, particularly in dealing with the foreigner. Highlighting pessimism, xenophobia, and conspiracy theory, Iranian national culture lacks specific elements in facilitating and easing trust to and deal with non-Iranians, particularly the great powers. In a similar vein, this view naturalizes connections between the external foreigners/non-believers and internal spies/hypocrites within Iran's dominant national culture and political psychology (Reisinezhad, 2018: 330). This context facilitates securitization of internal opponents, while, by and large, invigorating Iranian sovereigns in dealing with domestic uprisings and riots. That is why challenging the central political system would be difficult in a country with durable historical insecurity.

Vulnerability and Proximity to the Threat Sources: Historical experiences feed us with ideas about the meaning of geography (Gray and Sloan, 2014: 168). The historical impact of the geographical features, according to Fernand Braudel, constitutes a 'longue duree' that shapes non-altered trends and behaviors (Lee and Braudel, 2012: 2). Colin Gray is right as he cogently argues the *longue duree* is a "structure, an architectural outline that time alters little (Gray and Sloan, 2014: 16). From this point of view, any country's specific geographical features drive historical patterns. Located at the heart of the Greater Middle East, between Nile-to-Oxus, Iran sees itself as the castle of the Near East. As Robert Kaplan argues, "Just as the Middle East is the quadrilateral for Afro-Eurasia, that is, for the World-Island, Iran is the Middle East's very own universal joint. Mackinder's pivot, rather than in the Central Asian steppe-land, should be moved to the Iranian plateau just to the south" (Kaplan, 2012: 158). Indeed, Iran is a very strategic joint that bestrides in the mouth of Asia, Africa, and Europe and sits between the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Specific rules of geography and history are strong and transparent in Iran where territorial integrity is hard to defend. Such specificity includes two factors of 'geographical

proximity to the threat sources' and 'geographical vulnerability' (Reisinezhad, 2018: 328).

Iran's proximity to the sources of the threats has been consequential for its national security and regional policy. While Tsarist Russian made efforts to reach warm water of the Persian Gulf, the UK was confident in turning a threat away from the Indian subcontinent by expanding its leverage in Iran. The historical Russian threat was then intensified with the establishment of the communist empire of the Soviets, while the rise of the Cold War pushed a new-coming superpower—United States of America—to replace the British forces in the Persian Gulf. It was in this context that the Shah argued, "We are forced to be counted as a pro-West state because we can never trust the Soviet" (Alam, 1995: 328). The Islamic Revolution, the Hostage Crisis, and then the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War gave fertile ground for the U.S. to launch its military presence in the Persian Gulf under the 'Carter Doctrine'. Iran's proximity to the threat sources did not disappear by the collapse of the USSR; rather, it got deepened by the U.S. increasing presence in the region through chain of military bases in Iraq, Afghanistan and South shore of the Persian Gulf. In short, Iran's physical adjacency to the threat sources has not vanished yet and, in return, posed existential threats to the country's national security.

Furthermore, Iran historically suffers from its geographical *vulnerability*, referring to the fact that the country's lack of natural defensive borders (Reisinezhad, 2018: 328). In contrast to the UK and the U.S.—whose territories are surrounded by seas and vast oceans—or Switzerland—whose territory lies at the heart of mountains—Iran's borders do not overlap natural defensive lines. Such a crucial characteristic, along with Iran's geostrategic location, has historically attracted different tribes and nations to the Iranian Plateau and, in return, shaped a bedrock for Iran's 'Curse of Geography' (Reisinezhad, 2018: 329). For more than three millenniums, several nations and tribes invaded the country for 232 times and from all directions. Despite Iranian central

governments' continuous defensive policies, the country was savagely devastated by the Macedonian, the Arabs, and Mongols. If God had built mountains or oceans around Iran's borders, then the Iranian Plateau would not have been such inviting territory for these invaders. It is a pure manifestation of the curse of geography.

Geography also refers to the interconnection of identity and place, rather than merely physical borders. Throughout history, Iran's geographical curse has been intensified with the country's two exclusive characteristics: Iran is the only 'Persian' and 'Shia Muslim' nation in the Middle East. Indeed, Iran has been surrounded by the sea of the Arab-Turk and Sunni people. Despite several destructive conquests of Persia, the Iranian did not lose their Persian culture and civilization—as, for instance, the Egyptian lost their ancient identity and became Arab—and even Persianized the Macedonian, Arab, Turk, and Mongol invaders. The Iranian also demarcated their identity with the rest of the Arab-Turkic Muslim as the Safavid injected the Twelver Shia Islam onto the Iranian plateau. Since then, the expansion of the Shia branch of Islam has been intertwined with Iran's regional power. Concisely put, to be Persian and Shia have deepened Iran's strategic loneliness.

The Middle East and Iran's Geopolitical Predicament: Iran's non-state foreign policy has been part of Iran's geopolitical strategy of 'Containment' since 1958 (Reisinezhad, 2018). Designed to stop enemies' strategies, Iran's non-state foreign policy has targeted a specific set of threats against its national security. In the decades after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran expanded its strategic ties with the Shia militant proxies to disentangle itself from great power politics, while highlighting his independent, yet challenging, regional policy. Strategic connections with its, mostly Shia, proxies in the region has been a central pillar, along with its endogenous missile program, in Iran's defensive policy in the region. indeed, these strategic connections have been framed as Iran's major assets, though destructive ones,

in Tehran's regional foes' eyes.

Furthermore, Iran's non-state foreign policy has been a major tool to legitimize its crucial role in the West of Asia. Iranian leaders have been well aware that a state's role was the currency of power, granted to a state by its neighbors by recognizing the legitimacy of the state's interests (Doran, 1971). The focal problem here is that revolutionary Iran's regional power has not been accepted by its neighbors, thus widening a diverging gap between its current power and demanding regional role. In this situation, Tehran invests more on its strategic connections with non-state entities. In other words, the more revolutionary Iran is kept away from the regional decision-making process, the more Iran sticks to its non-state foreign policy. Therefore, this specific foreign policy has potential to be a critical tool in pushing the regional states to grant a major regional role to Iran.

Nevertheless, Iran's non-state foreign policy has unintentionally intensified regional tension(s). One reason is rooted in the fact that the modern Middle East still lacks a strong, inclusive security institution or multi-lateral pact(s). Indeed, it has been a conflict-formed region with autonomous domestic and regional security levels. A major part of the Middle East was shaped out of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916; therefore, the regional countries—except for Iran and Turkey—have been postcolonial insecure states with weak national identity. The regional dynamics have been also driven by ideological competitions, religious-ethnic division, oil rival policies, border disputes, and power status. According to Barry Buzan, the Middle East is a 'Classic Regional Security Complex' that reminds pre-Cold War Europe (Buzan and Waver, 2003: 187). Mainly demonstrated in harsh patterns of 'enmity-amity,' (Buzan and Waver, 2003: 9) like Persian-Arab-Turk competition as well as Shia-Sunni and Islamic/Jewish one, the regional insecurity dynamic was vigorous and durable that no great powers have effective control over the region. On the contrary, the great powers have deepened, whether deliberately or unintentionally,

patterns of enmity and decreased the possibility of regional cooperation. Besides, state cooperation, particularly economic interactions, among the regional states is exceptionally low. The lack of states' overlapping interests has tarnished a dream of the establishment of a regional security institution. Within such a tense context, the security dilemma is an omnipresent issue, framing state actions, even defensive ones, as offensive actions. That is why Middle Eastern states highlight their defensive intentions while, at the same time, frame the others carry offensive actions. Not surprisingly, security and threat are keywords and common demand in the Middle Eastern, including Iranian, leaders' words.

Within this context, Iran has been trapped in a 'defensive-offensive complex' in the region (Reisinezhad, 2018: 330). As a lonely strategic state, Iran has suffered from lacking geographical impediments, meaning that it has never been able to defend its vast territory and uncontrollable borders in the frontier zone. Notwithstanding, Iran's non-state foreign policy—a long-running search of its 'defensive' strategy beyond its borders through building strategic connections with non-state actors—facilitates framing it as Iran's 'offensive' strategy in the Middle East. In the region without a strong, comprehensive collective security institution(s), state's defensive power projection beyond its borders would be soon framed as destabilizing moves. To put it more plainly, the historical lack of regional collective security institutions has translated Iran's defensive decisions, strategies, and moves—under both Pahlavi and the Islamic Republic—to "Persian" or/and "Shia" expansionism. It is, in short, Iran's durable 'geopolitical predicament' (Mesbahi, 2011). On the other side, the U.S. orchestrated 'containment' of Iran is perceived by the Iranian leaders as 'rollback' that ultimately ends in regime change and state collapse in Iran. It is the other side of Iran's geopolitical predicament.

Iran's specific geographical curse and historical insecurity—manifested in its strategic loneliness—combined with the lack of

collective regional security pacts and institutions intensified Iran's strategic loneliness and, in following, Iran's non-state foreign policy. Notwithstanding, this policy has put Iran's national security in danger. First, following a complicated non-state foreign policy in the crisis-driven Middle East needs vast, reliable financial resources. Although Iran's proxies in the region have been seemingly successful in turning threats from Iranian borders away, they have been sapping the country's financial resources. The U.S. crippling sanctions and then the Syrian Civil War, along with deepening socio-economic crisis in the society, have waned sources of Iran's non-state foreign policy. Recently, Iran has lost the major figure of its non-state foreign policy, General Qasim Suleiman. At the same time, Iran has suffered from its lack of power of 'influence translation'. Despite expanding its political-military leverage in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Tehran never shows its capability to translate its hard power to money. The key point for Iran is its will and capacity to cash its political influences on economic leverage and financial achievements. Without imposing 'true agency' in acting 'upon', rather than 'within', regional structures by making transformative decisions (Mesbahi, 2013: 7-51)—like settling nuclear crisis—Iran's current financial deficit preludes a threatening decline of its power projection in the region (Sariolghalam, 2016: 101-139). Second, Iran's non-state foreign policy has been securitized by the West and Iran's regional foes. Its support for the regional non-state entities, particularly Hezbollah, Hamas, and recently the Yemeni Houthi, has portrayed the country as a top state "sponsor of terrorism" and framed it as a major threat to international peace and security. Constructing and amplifying the discourse of 'Iranophobia' is the main manifestation of the anti-Iran campaign of 'threat inflation' (Rousseu and Rocio, 2006: 16-39) policy imposed by Tel-Aviv, Riyadh, and the White House to contain Iran's growing power in the region. More significantly, Iran's ties with non-state actors have extended the longevity, breadth, and depth of cycle of security dilemma in the region, in general, and offense-defense

complex for Iran, in particular. In the region without a strong, comprehensive collective security institution(s), state's defensive power projection beyond its borders would be soon framed as destabilizing moves. Succinctly put, insisting on the current trajectory of Iran's non-state foreign policy might endanger Iran's national security in the long run.

V. A New Framework for the Analysis of Iran's Geopolitical Strategy

Iran's specific geography and historical insecurity are integral elements and dimensions of regional policy and strategy. In addition to its geostrategic location and geographical proximity to the threat sources, Iran's geographical vulnerability and its lack of natural defense impediments have shaped the country's fate of territorial occupation and military encirclement for more than twenty-five centuries. This fact has nourished and galvanized Iran's historical insecurity. The final product is Iran's strategic loneliness. For a country with a deep sense of greatness, Iran's strategic loneliness pushes the country to take a dynamic geopolitical strategy—namely, non-state foreign policy—to preserve its national security and territorial integrity. Indeed, the very logic of geography and history reveals the fact that Iran's ultimate deterrence capabilities have been mainly predicated on its ability for the external power projection (Reisinezhad, 2016). Nonetheless, the lack of regional collective security institutions and pact(s) has trembled the credibility of this geopolitical strategy. Although Iran's non-state foreign policy has been partially effective in keeping the country's security safe, it has weakened Iran's financial sources and, more significantly, entrapped the country in a durable offensive-defensive complex. It is Iran's durable geopolitical predicament. (Figure 1)

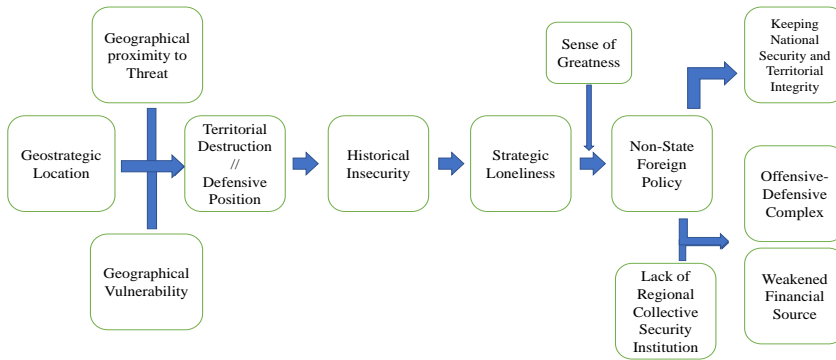


Figure 1

Iran's specific geography and history have crucially shaped its geopolitical strategy. However, it should be important to disentangle the argument from geographical and historical 'determinism'. At first glance, putting emphasis on these two factors opens door for fatalism while ignores human agency. Geography and history by no means determine state's approaches to use military force and regional strategies. In reality, human agency matters since it is men who decide and take action. There are still historical instances wherein men overcame the dictates of geography and unchained historical patterns. Nevertheless, "in the long run, those who are working in harmony with environmental influences will triumph over those who strive against them" (Parker and Mackinder, 1982: 121). Indeed, geography and historical trends limit human choices by constraining or instigating states' actions. To be more precise, geography and history provides a framework within which geopolitical strategy is formulated and implemented. They set contours on which trajectory and path is achievable and which is not. As Robert D. Kaplan cogently argues, "the more we remain preoccupied with current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter; but the more we look out over the span of the centuries, the more that geography plays a role (Kaplan, 2012: 28). Therefore, a balance between geography and history, on the one side, and the decisions and actions of men, on the other side,

matter for a deeper analysis of Iran's regional policy. In short, geography and history imprison Iranian leaders and delimit, rather than determine, their choices and opportunities for regional maneuver. The ideas emerge and vanish, the leaders are born and then die; but what remains durably is Iran's geography and history!

Conclusion

For more than half century, Iran's connections with its proxies have been the country's pivotal geopolitical strategy crafted to contain regional and global threats. In contrast to the mainstream view, this strategy is rooted less in Iran's revolutionary ideology rather than its specific geography and history. The paper shows that Iran's strategic loneliness is a very historical product of its specific geography and history. It also argued how Iran's geopolitical strategy has intensified its geopolitical predicament and entrapped the country in the offensive-defensive complex. Within this situation, regional cooperation in several domains, particularly the conflict resolution processes, is vital and necessary for Iran's regional policy. The establishment of a path-dependent bilateral or multilateral security institution(s) with regional states would be crucial for the stability of the Middle East. As the regional tensions spiraling out of control, building comprehensive collective security with tripartite power centers of Tehran-Ankara-Riyadh would deescalate geopolitical competition in the Middle East.

While it is a major driving force for the country's power projection beyond its borders, strategic loneliness sets Iran's center of gravity within its internal territory. Relying on the inside shows that Iran's center of gravity has predicated on 'state-society relation'; rather than on strategic alliance with whether the Great Powers or non-state actors. In other words, Iran's strategic loneliness shows intrinsic and independent foundations of Iran's national security. Within this context, popular support and legitimacy are the most crucial and vital assets for a country whose borders have been historically bloody frontier zone. It was this very fact ignored by the last Shah of Iran.

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