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## **Multiplex Network Regionalism; A Theoretical Model for Iran's Multi-Neighborhood Foreign Policy**

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### **Abstract**

With the complexity of the international system and being in a state of transition, the evolution of regional systems and the foreign policy of countries requires structural adaptation to the strategic requirements of such a transition. What springs from these developments is that the classical analytical thinking of regionalism and the linear conception of foreign policy does not meet the complexities of the uncertainty age. Therefore, this fundamental question has been raised as the present study's direct engagement: How will Iran's foreign policy strategy as a multi-neighboring country with diverse and heterogeneous ones be reconstructed in the context of a complex international system? The paper's major reason lies in multiplex networked regionalism that will serve us as a suitable theoretical model so well to go beyond the linear thinking to the region and outline proactive regionalism based on multi-neighborhood foreign policy. Research findings by using the abduction method, show that drawing Iran's multiplex networked regionalism requires putting innovative and adaptive strategic diplomacy on the agenda and drawing a strategic partner's map based on smart synerg, which emphasizes the equifinality and dynamic equilibrium between Geopolitics, Geo-economics, and Geo-cultural dynamics.

**Keywords:** Multiplex Networked Regionalism, Strategic Diplomacy, Multi-neighborhood Foreign Policy, Smart Synergistic.

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### **1.Introduction**

The necessity of neighborhood policy in Iran's foreign policy has only recently taken serious attention in the country's intellectual and operational circles; especially, as one of the important priorities of foreign policy to reduce systemic pressures arising from international sanctions, it has been included in the agenda of Raisi administration. The neighbor is the immutable reality of the units in the international system, and the foreign policy of a state first of all and as a stage before regionalism, starts from its view of its neighbor (Tahaei and Mousavinia,2014:2). Respectively, the neighborhood policy leads us to the concept of multi-neighborhood foreign policy. In the foreign policy of multi-neighborhood, it is necessary to move far from mere interaction with neighboring countries to the policy of multi-neighborhood as a multi-neighbored country with diversity and heterogeneity of neighbors along with historical and civilizational intertwining surrounding it. Such a concept is more compatible with the complexity of the international system, environmental dynamics at the level of regions and its multi-layered regional systems, so that it is worthy to say we are entering the "era of uncertainty" (Goh,2022) in adapting to emergent realities.

Given to shattered Western-led world governance and the emergence of multiple centers of power in the world system, we are facing the evolution of global and regional orders in the terms of multiplex systems (Ghasemi, 2022:290; D'agostino and Scala,2014:37) and multilevel regionalism (Sakwa,2011) that has come to the fore rethinking the study of the structure of regional orders as one of the demanding research programs in IR literature. The evolution of the regional orders has at the same time ignited the opportunity and threat perception in the regional powers and has forced them to rethink and redefine their relations. As a result, it has become more difficult for the units to control the events and consequences of the actions, as well as to pursue national interests in the context of foreign policy. Although the interdependence of actors' interactions and their actions is central and prevalent in the international system, it does not follow linear patterns in such an order, but acts in a cycle and non-linear manner, according to Rosecrans' interpretation (Prantl,2021:2). It also has not accompanied with cooperation models, but with the emerging power conflicts, and has transformed the competitive international space in the geopolitical and geo-economic fields and intensified regional conflicts.

Accordingly, the paper try to answer this question that how can the requirements of Iran's multi-neighborhood foreign policy be explained in the context of a complex international system? How Multiplex regionalism can affect the need to pay attention to multi-neighborhood foreign policy? The main dissertation is that Iran's multiplex networked regionalism by shaping strategic diplomacy based on the principles and logic of complexity (synergism, equifinality, smart diplomacy) will serve us as a suitable theoretical model so well to outline proactive regionalism and design strategies for Iran's multi-neighborhood foreign policy.

In this context, the study of regional orders requires attention to a new approach and grasping new analytical and conceptual elements in the IR literature to embrace complexity. Enjoying the complexity approach in regional studies will pave the way to network analysis. In this regard, networked regionalism displays a new level of analysis in IR to provide the researcher with the case for embracing emerging realities at the regional level and its dynamics (Ghasemi,2018; Young,2017a,2017b). In such a situation, the agent's foreign and regional policy needs to turn their attention to the nonlinear logic and multilevel strategic games to deal with the problems raised by complexity. The consequence of such a development is that instead of a separate view of regions and a linear outlook in foreign policy, attention will be directed to interwoven interactions, interdependence of regions and multi-level regionalism. Iran is no exception, especially given its Central [Middle] geopolitical status is known as a multi-neighborhood country with diverse and heterogeneous neighbors surrounding it and putting it in an overlapping complex regional network. Its neighborhood policy, therefore, requires a new approach to go beyond a linear view of the region and foreign policy, and follow a proactive regionalism in its environment based on multiple foreign policies. The paper claims that multiplex networked regionalism, especially in line with the multiplex regional networks analytical model of Farhad Ghasemi (2011:177-186), would be a proper theoretical model for Iran's multi-neighborhood foreign policy and open a new perspective on the theoretical rethinking of regionalism and neighborhood policy in international relations literature.

Therefore, in this article, research methodology and research literature are discussed first. Then, the theoretical approach will be analyzed based on multiplex regionalism in the state of complexity, and the units' strategic diplomacy. In the next step, the research findings and analysis will be taken

into consideration based on drawing Iran's multiplex regional network and its strategic diplomacy in foreign policy.

## **2. Methodology**

Complexity creates a new level of analysis for IR that depicts a higher level of order beyond the three images presented by Waltz (Waltz, 1954:1979). Robert Jervis (1997) by examining the systemic effects of complexity in terms of increasing uncertainty by decision-makers about the nature of international politics and the choices before them, emphasizes that their analysis by standard exploratory methods is not possible, and it cannot provide analysts with a way to manage uncertainties. Moreover, multiple elements of complex systems include non-linearity causality, constant fluctuating equilibrium between dynamics and structures of orders, nonlinearity, and emergence, presents the limitations of linear thinking arising from instrumental rationality to produce results as well as deductive theorizing. The reason is that the international system is subject to unexpected outcomes and none of these linear methodologies in the networked world provide a proper answer.

Drawing on the existing literature on complexity and network analysis in the last decade, seek to concentrate on the limitations of the conventional thinking and its methodologies, and pay attention to the problems arising from the behavior of complex systems, especially through cooperation models, Network analysis, the study of the regimes complexity and multifaceted governance, enjoying the rules and concepts of the complexity approach (Morin, 1992; Osirini and et al, 2019; Prantl and Goh, 2016:2020; Corbetta, 2013, Kavalski, 2007:2015). In this context, the abduction method is one of the useful methodological tools to cope with the problems arising from the complexity and networked region, which emphasizes the best explanatory argument for explaining emerging facts concerning uncertainties and non-linearity causality (Bamberger, 2019; conary, 2021). The newly emerging facts resulting from the transition in the international system cannot be conclusively proven based on purely deductive or inductive inference. The abduction method focuses on explaining emerging facts and finds the best explanation. By forming a new analytical apparatus, it covers both practical reasoning and scientific research based on probability and uncertainty, instead of certainty.

## **2. Literature Review**

Considering the academic literature related to neighborhood policy, there are countless researches that specifically rely on the experience of a case study, including the European Union (Bagheri,2021; Ajili and et al,2021; Sbaghian,2020), Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus based on its consequences for Iran's regionalism (Hashemi and et al,2021) or China in East Asia (Ghorbani,2022). Their study have pay more attention to the neighborhood policy by having a coherent, long-term, comprehensive strategy, as well by looking at their failures and achievements, they tried to provide a theoretical model for Iran's neighborhood policy. A few other papers study have explore Iran's neighborhood policy in relations with some countries such as Azerbaijan (Hosseini Taghiabad and Alizadeh,2020), or separate regions such as Eurasia or West Asia (Abbasi Khoshkar,2022; Safavi and Farhadi,2020). In addition to that, there are few articles that deal with Iran's neighborhood policy on a theoretical and fundamental basis. Respectively, one of the polemic researches is the conceptualization of multi-neighborhood foreign policy by Mohsen Khalili (2018) which challenges an unvaried and integrated foreign policy-making for Iran and illustrates the multi-faceted nature of Iran's foreign policy. Considering the requirements of policymaking in the state of complexity, this article adopts this concept from the author, applies it in its own theoretical framework and conceptualizes it. In addition, the book entitled "Neighborhood Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Necessities and Requirements" (2021) using the opinions of experts in the field of international relations in Iran, talks about the necessity of a specific and operational strategy of the neighborhood policy and defines the security-oriented of the neighborhood policy as the basis of common and like-minded mechanisms of regional actors. Some researches relying on economic foundations for Iran's neighborhood policy or the need for neutralizing sanctions (Noormohammadi,2021; Shir Gholami,2021).

The researches carried out are on the border between a scientific article and a policy report, which is accompanied by description and prescription. Considering that the neighborhood policy does not happen in a vacuum and is affected by the intersection of global and regional systems, in the context of power transition in the international system and the competition of great powers, instability and fluidity, the patterns of friendship and enmity in the international system lead us to the necessity of theoretical and practical

discussions in adapting to the environmental complexities in formulating the neighborhood policy. Therefore, researches based on multi-level regionalism (Sakwa,2011) or network regionalism (Ohanyan,2015) relying on the interweaving of local, regional and international layers have been written in which the importance of communication and the increasing complexity of cooperation and conflict patterns have been paid attention, without addressing neighborhood politics. However, the analytical model of network regionalism by Farhad Ghasemi (2011) is one of the fundamental researches that is designed according to the complexity situation. Moreover, Ghasemi and Lotfian (2013) have studied the influence of the multiplex network on Iran's regional diplomacy. The present study uses his analytical model in line with the multi-neighborhood policy and discusses strategic diplomacy in line with this policy.

### **3.Theoretical Approach: Multiplex Network Regionalism**

If we consider complexity as the starting point of analysis, a networked approach to the region, by focusing on the systemic and institutional complexities of regionalism, enables IR researchers to have a better understanding of systemic dynamics and the role of external powers as well intra-regional. The most important emerging fact of the contemporary complex system is transition power due to the redistribution of power and wealth from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific, which has turned into a networked order based on distinct yet interconnected regional systems with multi-level and multi-layered features (Punnoose and Vinodan,2019; Acharya and Buzan,2019; Ghasemi,2018; Degterev and et al,2021). So, we are facing complex regional environments that have led to new regional structures and processes of regionalism, so that these structures and the nature of conflicts and cooperation do not merely reflect Strategic rivalries between external powers and their polarity (hegemonic, bipolar, or multipolar). Now, the United States does not have the necessary will and power to shoulder the responsibility of conflict management in conflict-ridden areas, and it pursues its strategic preferences by buck passing responsibility to regional allied governments and forming network coalitions. As a result, on the one hand, there is more room for emerging powers such as China and Russia to revive their power in the peripheral and global environment. On the other hand, it has given rise to the role of regional powers, which are moving from security dependence on external powers to pursuing minimum strategic independence based on proactive

regionalism. The fact guides us to rethink the structure of regionalism and its dynamics; this is because many regional actors have come to realize that their Western allies are no longer capable of acting and making effective changes in their environment. As Slater holds truly, states must shift their perspective of world politics from the "chessboard" to the "web" (Slaughter, 2017) so that we can better understand the nature of order and find appropriate analytical tools to enhance the position of units within the networked world.

Network analysis is grounded in three principles that makes it connected to the complexity approach: 1. Nodes (units) are behaviorally interdependent. This feature can cover the intra-regional dynamics with actors looking for cutting off their past behavioral patterns toward minimal strategic independence. 2. Ties between nodes can be channels for resource exchange (material and intangible). Therefore, the density of communication flows and feedback links between their interactions is important along with the distribution of power. In another word, complex systems are due to interaction and entanglement of communication links between order structures and its dynamics, and not due to the additive effects of different levels, whose features are complexity. 3. The level and density of connections between nodes create structures that affect the behavior of agents (Orsini and et al,2020:13-14; Hafner-Burton and et al,2009:562). The previous first and second principles shape the network model and the third principle crystalize the network architecture. The network model displays the quality of the distribution of links in the network based on the agent's profit/cost calculations considering geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural capacities. Network architecture also indicates the position of nodes in the network which determines the potential to influence the results (Joshi and Mahmud,2020). The network model and architecture together will shape the regional network structure. In such a structure, the geographical location gives way to geographical space, and the boundaries of the region are determined not by territorial boundaries, but the connections and feedback mechanisms that bring the various levels of the region together (Ghasemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi,2013:98). So, it is not liminal borders, but In-between political space that has an important role in determining the space of transition between borders and beyond. Therefore, a node (unit) with high in-between centrality has a higher capacity to facilitate or limit

interactions between other nodes, especially between units in a network disconnected from each other (Sarvestani and et al,2019:182).

In addition, the polarity in a regional network will not only be determined by the distribution of power, but also by the density of the link and the position of the nodes in the network. In this structure, a set of intertwined networks will form based on cooperation, and conflict relationships, which are rarely cohesive and isomorph, and mostly have the form of interconnected multi-layered networks in which the network layers are connected to each other (Corbetta,2013:637). The result is the formation of multilayered and multiplex networks (D'Agostino and Scala,2014:37; Buldú, Pablo-Martí and Aguirre,2019:2) as well multileveled and multiplex regionalism (Ghasemi,2011; Ghsemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi,2013) that depict the complexity and interdependence as characteristics of world politics today.

In multi-layered networks, Sakwa (2011) truly points out four forms of regionalism covering conflict and cooperation: micro-regions, encompassing the sub-national units, focusing on intra-state and ethnic or religious issues in a broader geopolitical context that cuts across contingent state borders; Meso-regions include regions within regions (sub-networks), focusing on dynamics between states or proto-states. At this level, regional actors go beyond identity and ethnic non-governmental groups, so that from the geo-economic dimension, we are witness the emergence of regional economies and regional-oriented projects as order-driven components, like ASEAN in Southeast Asia. In the geopolitical dimension, it may also include the relationship between states and state-like units that have an incomplete nation-state formation process, in this case, it will be the weakest link in regional governance chain; Macro-regions refers to the relationship between the regional hegemon and its suzerains. In such networks, there is a high degree of power concentration, especially since it is more likely to be controlled by a large regional power; Mega-regions, encompassing the various external great powers along with their regional allied states. In these regions, a higher level of institutionalization is observed and the degree of concentration of power is comparatively lower (Sakwa,2011:468; Ohanyan,2015:52).

The result of the four dimensions of multi-level regionalism is a multi-layered, multiplex regional network with an overlapping regional architecture, in which the crosroad of different borders of different layers of



the network is observed. The interference of spaces and borders led to the interference of systems and networks, which gives shape to the concept of multiplex networks. In Ghasemi's analytical model, the formation of overlapping networks arises from several issues: functionally, the interference or overlapping of networks arises from the combination of three distinct geopolitics, geo-economics and geo-cultural networks with different principles and foundations. In addition, overlapping in different thematic and spatial areas led to the overlapping roles of the network's constituent units. These two issues, along with the thematic link and mutual actions within the networks as well the overlapping of identity, geographical and functional borders have come to realize multiplex networks (Ghasemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi,2013:98; Ghasemi,2014:227).

Multiplex networked regionalism is highly clustered, and each of them has central units whose repeated and constant interactions with other nodes (units) indicate the distribution of pressures in the regional and global network. In other words, the pressures are mostly moving toward the networks or sub-networks of the region and their central units. The great powers with a central position in the regional network, seek to influence the outcomes or outputs by manipulating or altering the patterns of interactions or cutting the opposing unit links off strategic sources of the regional network. As a result, asymmetric order will be dominated in the region, which challenges the traditional order in regional analysis (Shirkhani and Mahrough,2021:21). In the traditional order, there was a simple definition of order parameters and relationships between them, the most important feature of which was power symmetry between actors in defining systemic processes and results. Moreover, there was hierarchy between subjects, and military power was considered the most important element in solving systemic problems. However, in the multiplex regional network, the principle of diversity based on the diversity of units, boundaries, rules and interactions has caused the complexity of power and its internal diversity, especially the importance of smart power (Ghasemi,2015:102-101).

In such regions, there are diverse and simultaneous power cycles in geopolitical, geo-economic and, geo-cultural dynamics, which do not necessarily meet equifinality. Rather, the asymmetry and asynchronous dynamics of units' national growth in each of these cycles will cause multiple fluctuated equilibrium in the regional and international systems so that each of them can be the output of sub-dynamics in the main one.

Therefore, different actors may be in different stages of power (growth, maturity and decline) in each of these cycles. For example, in the geopolitical dimension they may be in the upper cycle of power and in the geo-economic or geo-cultural dimension they may be in the downward cycle of power (and vice versa) (Ghasemi,2019:200-201). The result will be multiple central units and different cycles in the regional network, in which the regional units simultaneously make their proper strategic efforts.

The diversity of power cycles and fluctuated equilibrium make the operational code (geopolitical code, geo-economic code, and geo-culture code) prominent whose dynamics change over time. The operating codes of multiplex networked regionalism will be relational. It means the structure of distribution of links between nodes and centrality will be important to achieve a central position in the overlapping networks of the region (Flint and et al,2009). In such systems, due to the interaction link between the components and the way of interaction between the feedback loops of different layers of the network, a kind of interconnection is observed in the interests of the units or their possible damages. In this situation, manipulation in each of the mentioned levels of the regional order can have strategic consequences on other levels and as a result, there is a possibility of spillover of currents in each level of the network to other levels of the regional network (Ghasemi,2019:202). This led to multi-level strategic games be dominate in such systems in which multiple actors, by forming synergistic models, will shape to the coalition game based on cooperation, conflict or competition. The main purpose in such games is to reach the strategic balance point, and it includes a set of strategies that in line with Nash equilibrium, even in the situation of non-cooperation and conflict between the actors, it is possible to reach the strategic balance and stabilize the regional system. However, unlike simple systems, where strategic stability was achieved through strategic weapons, in complex and overlapping systems, strategic stability is the result of the function of various factors and forces, and also the function of the network will depend on the principle of simultaneity of behavioral patterns and their synergistic models. Now the main question is how complex systems and multiplex regional networks facilitate the strategic policy agenda? Or how can synergy be created between what happens at different levels of regional governance?

#### **4. Multiplex Networks and Unit's Strategic Diplomacy**

In multiplex regionalism, the foreign policy of governments regarding the unprecedented interconnection of different levels and the entry of different variables is changing under three variables:

strategic emergence, the complexity of issues on the government political agenda, and sensitive dependence in which dynamics system to be highly sensitive to initial condition so that push the overlapping and multi-layered regionalism to divergent patterns of behavior (Scartozzi,2018). To address the political challenges posed by the above variables, the foreign policy of states, especially multi-neighboring states must be based on nonlinear concepts and strategic games of non-zero-sum. For this reason, instead of directing bilateral or multilateral diplomatic relations to achieve political results, these states need to look for new and innovative ways to adapt to the dynamics system. As prantl (2021,8) points out, strategic diplomacy is taken from the complexity perspective and relies more on nonlinear mechanisms and an adaptive (non-mechanical) analytical framework.

- 1- Strategic surprises: complex and networked systems may be subject to path dependence like any other system, but at the same time, they may bring unpredictable results and surprises, e.g., 2008 financial crisis, Covid 19, new geopolitical crisis. Such strategic surprises are new challenges for the foreign policy of governments due to the uncertainty and reduction of response time to crises as well as the destructive changes they have brought.
- 2- Political issues on the government political agenda: the complexity, communication and networking of the regions has made it impossible to deal with the issues separately. In such conditions, not only are we facing the complexity of security regimes and conflicts, but also the problems of collective action have become more complicated by challenging the hierarchy of different subject areas. So, in the multiplex network regionalism, the boundaries of the subject in which the problem of collective action is defined are not drawn by the system alone, but are the conscious and strategic choice of the actors who analyze and adopt foreign policy (Prantl, 2021:7-8).
- 3- Sensitive dependence: Variables include change, and change is associated with motivating or stimulating. Although some changes

are stable and understandable, nothing is stable or understandable when it comes to sensitive variables. It is the presence of these sensitive and volatile variables that can often act as a mediator for increasing mutation in results such as second and third order effects. In another word, in sensitive dependence dynamics system is highly sensitive to initial condition so that push the overlapping and multi-layered regionalism to divergent patterns of behavior (Scartozzi, 2018). Interestingly, along with sensitive variables, there are other influential sources such as friendly and enemy forces, the internal structure of the country in question, and other things that have the potential to have non-linear consequences on a high scale (Hall and Citrenbaum, 2009:13-14). In this situation, any change in nodes in each network causes a total change in the behavior of the regional system, or by internationalizing the regional values, it causes a total change in the behavior of the global system (Ghasemi, 2019:219-221).

In order to address the political challenges arising from the above variables, states' foreign policy, especially multi-neighbored governments located in overlapping geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-cultural areas, should be based on non-linear concepts and non-zero-sum strategic games. For this reason, their foreign policy should look for new and innovative ways to achieve political results instead of focusing merely on bilateral or multilateral diplomatic relations. As prantl (2021:8) points out, strategic diplomacy is taken from the complexity perspective and relies more on nonlinear mechanisms and an adaptive (non-mechanical) analytical framework. The importance of this issue is that the relationship between problems and their solutions in such a context is not clear and do not subject to the linear approach of cause and effect. Linear thinking is a result of limited rationality, which is common in traditional models of diplomacy. However, the underlying principle in strategic diplomacy is cybernetics (interactions and links), which delve deeply into the intertwined concepts of power, diplomatic statecraft, and the structure of the system to link between them by distributing sensitive interdependence in a regional network.

The distribution of sensitive dependencies is based on the identification of the main linking agents, then synchronizing and equifinaling geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-culture clusters in different layers of the regional network. At first, it requires to do so in the dynamics of military power and

its internal components (the geopolitics of sea, land, air, and space). Then, strategic diplomacy will distribute sensitive dependencies based on coupling and synchronizing geopolitical dynamics with geo-economic and geo-cultural ones in different layers of the region (Ghasemi,2019:175). Therefore, unlike classic diplomacy, the response to strategic threats is not based on balancing military capability with the military power of the rival or adversary, but by balancing military power with economic or geo-cultural power and the link between their main interaction flows with each other.

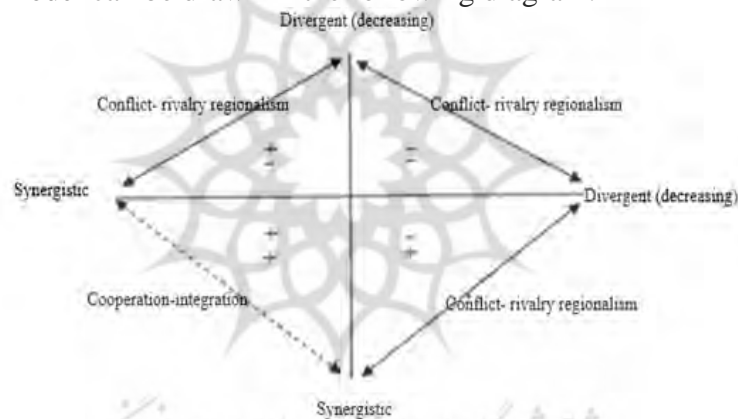
Considering this, instead of relative power, the best strategy for maximizing political space will be through the exert of structural power based on four types constructive, innovative, transformational, and destructive power (Avelino and Rotmans,2009:554). Respectively, the most important question facing states' foreign policy is how to balance between the four forms of power in different subject areas? What is the most appropriate strategic entry point in multiplex regionalism so that it can influence complex adaptive systems? Our contribution to the literature is that the network model based on the two concepts of "synergistic dynamics" and "divergent dynamics" helps outline Strategic diplomacy. As Ghasemi (2019:186) truly mentions, in synergistic dynamics, different types of power support each other and become synergistic by joining together. But divergent dynamics due to the rivalry and antagonistic strategic cycles of the hegemonic power and its regional allies with the revisionist powers or the divergent pattern of behavior between the external powers mega-regions with sub-network and clusters, cause the power dynamics between these types of units to be divergent.

The formation of the above dynamics arises from the feedback mechanism of different layers of regionalism of the units involved in the regions. The overlapping boundaries of the synergistic and divergent dynamics in these layers will lead to the formation of multilevel strategic games in the operational field, which are manifested in the multiplex regionalism in four forms:

- 1- Overlapping two divergent (decreasing) dynamics: The result is conflict, instability, transitional equilibrium, and consequently, the formation of a transitional space rather than an integration into regionalism.

- 2- Overlapping two synergistic dynamics: The result is the spread of cooperation and the slipover of economic cooperation into security one, in turn, steps toward regional integration.
- 3- Overlapping divergent with synergistic dynamics: the result is conflicting patterns of behavior and instability so that we witness a transitional space rather than an integration into regionalism.
- 4- Overlapping synergistic with divergent dynamics: The result, as in the previous case, is instability, transitional balance, and non-integration into regionalism.

Divergent and synergistic dynamics give rise to four aspects of cooperation and conflict, on which theoretical and analytical conclusions can be drawn about the regionalism and regional integration process. The mentioned analytical model can be drawn in the following diagram:



**Figure (1): Analytical Model of Regional Convergence and Integration**

Based on the diagram above, on the right and top of the box, overlapping of the two divergent dynamics pave the way for instability in the regional order, and transitional space will prevail. At the bottom right, the conflict between two divergent and synergistic dynamics in geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural components creates instability, fluctuated equilibrium, and consequently, rivalry or conflicting regionalism. At the bottom left of the box, overlapping the boundaries of the two synergistic dynamics, due to the synergistic and synchronized geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-cultural dynamics in regional and inter-cluster networks lead to regional stability and cooperation. However, it is worthy of note one of the analytical principles of small-world networks is that becoming the

international system so clustered leads to the formation of powers with centrality in each cluster. Therefore, the structural equilibrium of these powers within the same network (considering other conditions constant) leads their behavioral patterns with each other based on competition, and finally, in case of inefficiency of the system order management it brings about conflict and war. Given to this principle, overlapping of the edge of geopolitical and geo-economic synergistic dynamics, especially when accompanied by the presence of external interferer power or structural equivalent of central units in the region, does not necessarily lead to regional convergence, and synergism in such circumstances, in turn, has the potential for conflict and probably war. Finally, at the top and left of the box, the overlapping of synergistic and divergent dynamics in the network due to the lack of synchronization between geopolitical, geo-economic or geo-cultural components lead to the instability of the region, non-integration, and rivalry regionalism.

The overlapping of synergistic and divergent dynamics in different layers of order causes regional networks becoming clustered which their connectivity, in turn, leads to the multiple patterns and layers of order and the multiple equilibrium points. The clustering function of multiplex regional networks is the result of the bifurcation of the order caused by the multitude environmental pressures, and is considered as one of the prominent principles of complex systems. Accordingly, regional networks, each with their own special pattern of order, try to provide their burgeoning needs by establishing feedback interactions, and operate through positive or negative synergistic dynamics. In positive synergy, the global or regional system bifurcate to reduce internal disorder as well to increase its power projection to deal with disorder. However, in negative synergy, the system bifurcation results from the externality processes, and strategic rivalry.

Considering this, Regionalism does not result from a simple inter-governmental architecture based on a single organization and linear patterns of behavior but is a complimentary, competitive, and overlapping set of institutions and patterns of behavior that requires effective strategic diplomacy to reduce uncertainty. The fluidity of operational environments in such multiplex and complex networks causes the strategic actions of units to change with the smallest change, and sometimes these changes occur very quickly. Rapid changes in coalition games and strategic actions are accompanied by changes in decision-making. The change in decision-

making is along with a change in the knowledge necessary to adapt to changes, manage threats and reduce uncertainty (Hall and Citrenbaum, 2009:15-16). Such practical knowledge also requires strategic diplomacy relying on the principles and logic of complex systems to reduce uncertainty, and the traditional models of diplomacy and neighborhood policy are lack of appropriate knowledge to be responsible for adapting to such rapid and unpredictable changes.

The multi-neighborhood policy includes a series of strategic games that provide the possibility of reaching equilibrium points in such a context of overlapping and multiplex network space, which is characterized by fluctuating balance. Tracking threats, emphasizing on the information monitoring and identification system, flexibility and simultaneity in linking multiple centers and clusters of geopolitics, geo-economics and geo-culture as well distributing communication horizontally among nodes, layers or multiple branches will be of the principles of strategic diplomacy in regulating multi-neighborhood policies, which allows them to adapt well to rapid changes in contrast to the inflexibility of hierarchical approaches of traditional diplomacy models; Although they always operate in a state of ambiguity caused by the fluctuating balance and fluidity of the environment. The diversity of the fluctuating equilibrium will also led to "multidimensional Goal-oriented dynamics" (Volosencu,2017; Diaconescu and et al,2016; Ghasemi,2019) for agents in such regional systems, which in turn pave the way for different ways in order to reach equifinality of agents' strategic patterns to achieve their goals. Ghasemi reminds that in such a multiplex regional network, we are faced with four types of actors:

- 1- Controlling actors who have a central position in the network architecture and play a dominant role in shaping regional network policies. Due to the multi-level functioning of overlapping networks, in each of the levels, certain units may play a role as a controlling actor. As interconnected network operate in multi-levels, at each of the levels, certain units may play as a controlling actor and in each of the military, economic, cultural and other related areas, different units may have a controlling role that affects the structure of the regional network so that it leads to hierarchical unipolar, bipolar or multipolar order.
- 2- Limiting actors who, although they do not have the same power as the controlling actor, limit the order structure of the regional network



and its agents which affect the on their priority or the intensity and weakness of their decisions.

- 3- Intervening actors who have the mediator role in complex conflicts within the network. It usually happens when there is no third party to solve existing conflicts. Therefore, the role of international political broker can be used to express their role.
- 4- Instrumental actors who facilitating processes or sometimes as obstacles. Media diplomacy can also play such a role in many cases (Ghasemi,2011:183).

Multiplex Network regionalism is the result of such a combination of the network model (the feedback between synergistic and divergent dynamics) and the network architecture (the position of the units in the regional network) that act in a clustering way because of nonlinear and complex function as well and shape the strategic games and foreign policy of the units through the distribution of sensitive dependence between the network links.

### **5.Findings**

When it comes to regionalism in most parts of Asia, we mainly face network regionalism in contrast to institutional regionalism in Europe. Some of the multi-neighborhood Asian countries such as Iran, China, and Russia, due to covering a wider geographical area, are placed in the overlapping space of networked regionalism, which enforces its requirements on these countries' foreign policy in pursuing strategic diplomacy. Iran has the most neighboring countries in the world after China. Neighboring with Central Asia and the Caucasus region, South Asia, West, and Southwest Asia has placed Iran in the geo-political and geo-economic overlapping environment of the regional network. Hence, having multiple neighboring countries has dominated Iran's surrounding environment which is located at the world's strategic crossroads from the geo-political, geo-economic, and geo-cultural perspective. Geo-politically, Iran is located in the East-West passage and the intersection of the Northern geo-political depth (the heartland region) and the Southern depth (the Rimland region) (Noruzizadeh and et al,2022). Geo-economically, Iran is based in the center of strategic energy ellipse and international transit among the primary energy-consuming of Europe, China, and India. Geo-culturally, Iran is at the center of the regional network of the Islamic world in the West Asian region and a cultural-civilizational bridge

for its bordering countries. Consequently, in terms of its location in the structure of the regional multiplex network, Iran is a part of several regions, each of which has its own intra-regional dynamics and extra-regional concerns due to the overlapping of geographical, economic, and identity functions.

On the other hand, with the international system entering the systemic transition period and changing the geo-political structure of the global system and its geographical scope, Iran's surrounding environment is changing from the perspective of geo-political and geo-economic values. For this reason, Iran needs a multi-neighborhood foreign policy to replace its traditional diplomacy with strategic diplomacy by designing a multi-layered regional network. Accordingly, multiplex networked regionalism means transformation of Iran's foreign policy from attention and commitment to the single regional environment towards national security grand strategy based on a multi-neighborhood foreign policy and proactive regionalism in its surrounding environment. Given to this, Iran's strategic diplomacy in designing a multiplex network regionalism should determine each node's location in a way that is based on the density of communication flows and the distribution of sensitive dependence between the links of the network. This should enhance Iran's strategic status in the international system by strengthening the position and centrality, corridor (East-West, Northern, Southern), linking (religious, and cultural-civilizational), bridge (Economic trading, economic-political brokering), and inter-regional (connector of regional orders) roles (Khalili,2018:130).

## **6. Analysis of Findings**

### **6-1. Delineation of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Multiplex Networked Regionalism**

The delineation of the multiplex networked regionalism of the Islamic Republic of Iran is influenced by two external and internal variables. The external variable refers to the function of the world's political and economic order and the role of external powers, and Iran is in the in-between position of the strategic-operational network of great powers, namely the US, Russia, and China, which force it to shape its political and diplomatic relations based on synergistic and divergent (decreasing) dynamics with these trans-regional great powers. The internal variable in drawing the multiplex regional network of Iran is influenced by local conflicts in sun-national and micro regions and regional conflicts caused by the emergence of new

strategic actors into the complex regional environment. Taliban's regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021 and exercising relative sovereignty on this country on the Eastern borders of Iran, sub-national conflicts in Western and Southwestern Asia, transforming the nature of the activism of Chechen sub-national groups in the Caucasus from the logic of nationalistic state-building to Islamic jihadism, and formation of trans-ethnic loyalty in the form of Islamic Emirate (Sakwa,2011:478) have provoked the ethnic-religious faults and multifaceted the nature of riots and conflicts around Iran. At the same time at the levels of the medium (meso-regions) and macro-network regions, with the shift in the geography of the US conflicts from West Asia to the Asia-Pacific and its military modification or withdrawal from South and West Asia, throughout the region, a new opportunity has arisen for regional powers to get involved in the region's order-making processes. Having found out of the West's reduced capacity in influencing the developments around them, many of the US allies in the region have sought the hedging strategy (between alliance and balance) to exert influence and active regionalism. The structural equilibrium of these powers, such as Turkey and the Zionist regime, with Iran in the joint operational scene has led to the escalation of conflictual and antagonistic behaviors. Therefore, due to regionalism becoming more competitive and belligerent, every action of external powers has the potential to become a new source of tension. To resolve these tensions, Iran needs strategic diplomacy more than ever to guide the complex and rapid transitions in today's geo-political and geo-economic cycles.

The above two variables result in the clustering of Iran's regional macro network as an emergent reality. As Ghasemi noted in the analytical model of the multiplex regional network, the intersection (interference) between the function of various geographical, functional, and identity variables and the simultaneity of their activity and influence forms the multiplex network of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on geo-political, geo-economic and geo-cultural clusters (Ghasemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi,2013:106). Each of these clusters has its strategic cycles and regional units and some extra-regional units are members of all of them at the same time and are influenced by its variables. The most important of these agents of the regional network around Iran are: 1. Extra-regional intervening powers that may compete with each other in different regional sub-networks; 2. Regional powers that are allies of the extra-regional intervening powers; 3. Regional revisionist

unit; 4. Anti-systemic and proxy groups (Ghasemi and Einollahi, 2016:130). The simultaneous intersection/interference of different environments and borders of different layers of geo-politics, geo-economics, and geo-culture of each of these agents forms Iran's multiplex regionalism of Iran.

#### **6-1-1. Geo-Political Network**

As mentioned earlier, Iran's geo-political network is the result of the functional intersection/interference of the power cycle of Iran and its member countries at the levels of the regional order and also intersection with global power cycle in which Iran is located in the in-between-ness position of the strategic-operational network of the world's main powers, namely the US, Russia, and China. Currently, due to the system being in a state of global power transition, the world geo-political network is witnessing the competition between the US and China on a global scale and the US and Russia in Eurasia that are changing the geo-political structure and its geographical scope by manipulating the points of strategic goals. This affects the geo-strategic and geo-political structure of Iran's neighborhood. Therefore, in drawing its multiplex networked regionalism and multi-neighborhood policy, Iran should shape its political and diplomatic environment based on synergistic and divergent dynamics with large extra-regional powers or aligned regional powers.

Therefore, Iran's position as a geographical crossroads connects five regional networks: Central Asia; South Caucasus, Southwest Asia, West Asia, and the Mediterranean. In Central Asia, Iran shares borders with Russia and China, which shapes the overlapping of Iran's geo-political environment with them. Following the collapse of the bipolar system led by the Soviet Union and the US and the independence of former republics of the Soviet Union which led to 15 new state actors neighboring Iran, the regional network has always been in a state of instability and transition due to the power vacuum, lack of internal cohesion and the intervention of extra-regional actors and has been the source of numerous geo-political tensions. In addition to the common border with Russia, this region is considered a part of the geo-political environment and traditional sphere of influence of this country. China and Central Asia share a 3297-kilometers border (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). This geographical proximity has led to the formation of strategic relations with these countries (Aghahasani, 2019). In the cluster or sub-network of the South Caucasus, Iran shares borders with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey (Northeastern Turkey).

Russia's extra-regional power and its membership in this sub-network have pushed the order structure of this region towards a hegemonic structure based on cooperation (Ghasemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi,2013:108). On the other hand, the intervention of the extra-regional power of the US and its western allies as well as Israel in this sub-network as a competitor of the hegemonic structure of Russia and the presence and activism of the regional powers of Turkey, have added enormous complexities to the order equations of this geo-political cluster, so that the strategic competition between Russia and the US (along with the EU, Turkey, and Israel) in the Eurasian area (Ukraine crisis 2022) which exerts its effects on the sub-network and the Iranian-Turkish competition and Turkey and Israel's efforts along with Azerbaijan Republic to change the geo-political structure of Iran's northern borders (Karabakh crisis 2021) have placed the South Caucasus region within Iran's security sphere.

In the regional network of Southwest Asia, Afghanistan is considered a part of the overlapping regionalism of China, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), and Russia, due to the geo-political situation of Central Asia. As stated earlier, the change in the global cycle of power from the US-led Euro-Atlantic to the Chinese-led Asia-Pacific has caused a change in the geography of the US conflict from Southwest and West Asia to the Asia-Pacific. The change first resulted in the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's regaining control in August 2021 under the 2020 Doha Agreement, which was a new reality that has directly affected the national security of Iran and its Eastern borders. Such a development has provided new opportunities and challenges for the regional powers of Pakistan, China, and Iran, as well as the extra-regional actors in West Asia in the overlapping order-making processes of the regional network, which will lead to many unpredictable consequences due to the fluidity of the operational sphere. In the regional network of West Asia, the regional network of Iran overlaps with three sub-networks of the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and the regionalism of extra-regional powers. Since in networked regionalism, the geographic space has replaced geographic location, Iran's regional network has parallel, overlapping, and sometimes competitive interests with the regional network of Russia and China in West Asia. In the Mediterranean area, although Iran shares (indirect) borders with the Mediterranean through Turkey and Syria, due to the structural equilibrium of Iran and Turkey, the overlapping regional

network of the two countries has a competitive and sometimes conflicting structure, and therefore a reducing (divergent) power dynamics. Iran's sharing borders with Persian Gulf countries has also made this cluster important as a part of Iran's security sphere, but due to political and religious inconsistencies, Iran's power dynamics with this sub-network is divergent.

Based on what was mentioned, it can be seen that Iran's geographical borders and geo-political space interfere with the borders and geo-political space of China and Russia in the regional networks and sub-networks in its neighborhood and they have a kind of overlapping membership in it, that the overlapping in these orders has caused the connection between them through a common operational scene. Iran's multi-neighborhood policy requires the expansion of Iran's bilateral ties (20-year strategic partnership agreement with China and Russia) to tripartite ties with them, i.e., Iran-China-Russia or multilateral ties with the participation of regional partners and also strengthening regional institutions such as ECO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The interference (crossroad) of the regional orders of Iran, Russia, and China due to their common position on the world order as challengers of the existing world order and common regional threats has forged a bond and strengthened their synergy. What matters most here is the simultaneous formation and linking of each of the bilateral, tripartite, institutional, and multilateral agreements and their equifinality to strengthen inter-regional synergy. All four regional orders of these units have such common operational scenes that due to the overlap of their interests and strategic actions, it has become a synergistic cluster (Ghasemi, 2019: 186-187). On the other hand, the interference of the regional network of these units with the US as an extra-regional actor in its surrounding environment and their conflicting stances with this country have caused the formation of competitive power dynamics between them.

#### **6-1-2. Geo-Economic Network**

The geo-economic network of Iran includes several regional areas in its neighborhood. Its most important functional link with the global value chain in accordance with the Persian Gulf sub-network as the world energy production and supply. Therefore, its functional link with the global value chain and exchange conforms to the consumer units of this commodity, and the interconnectedness resulting from this linking has increased the sensitivity and vulnerability of the units of this region. It results in the high

cost of conflict processes and the importance of security and stability for regional and global units. In general, in the chain of production, supply, and global marketing, three regional value chains of North America, Europe (centered on Germany), and East Asia (centered on Japan) have been formed and established, which interact with each other to form the global value chain (Shariatinia,2016:107). Iran has no place in any of these regional value chains. However, it plays a role marginally in the form of providing energy supply to consumer units in these regional value chains, which due to regional geo-economic components, has been a stimulus for strengthening regional stability or instability and Iran's economic security. Concerning the geo-politicization of world trade and the actors' inclination to selective globalization, the geographical position of countries is of particular importance in the way of their participation and role in the value chain. Iran has a high potential in the field of international transit due to its central, linking and inter-regional position and its sharing borders with Central Asia and South Caucasus, South, and Southwest Asia. These regions, which are not deeply connected in any of the value chains mentioned above, now have a high potential for economic growth and development with the Chinese Belt and Road initiative as a China-centered value chain. The land route of this initiative includes three corridors: 1. The Baltic route through which China, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe are connected; 2. The route from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea through which China is connected to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central and Western Asia; 3. The third route connects China to South and Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Maritime Silk Road also connects China's coasts due to increasing investment in port infrastructure in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean from one route, the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean in the second route, and the Arctic Ocean as the third route to Europe and Africa (Kue,2017; Cai,2017: 2; Shariatinia,2016:100).

These corridors act as linking loops connecting different regions to the China-centered value chain and Iran according to its geographical location has the potential to connect with these corridors. Iran's multi-neighborhood policy in drawing a multiplex geo-economic network requires that, while paying attention to its own interests, security, and relative advantage, it also pays attention to the relative advantages of the neighborhood environment and common interests with its neighbors. Furthermore, Iran should adjust

bilateral agreements and contracts with each of the neighbors located on the Belt and road in such a way that, according to Shariatinia (2016:102), it leads to “optimization of each other’s infrastructure links and assimilation or integrating of technical systems” so that it “leads to the expansion of international transit routes and the formation of an infrastructure network that will gradually and step by step connect all regions in Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa”. Iran’s success in redefining its geo-economic position in the China-centered value chain depends on the simultaneity and equifinality of transit links and industrial policies, financial convergence, and extensive communication with China and the countries across the route to strengthen its position in the regional identity of the China-centered global value chain, which acts as a synergistic cluster with China. Iran should also activate its synergistic dynamics with Russia and China and neighbors that have overlapping membership in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and Eurasian Economic Union by activating its synergistic dynamics with Russia by linking China’s Belt and Road Initiative with Russia in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union. Due to Turkey’s competition and its struggle to change the geo-political structure of Iran’s northern borders and linking these plans to its economic plans, this synergy acts as divergent dynamics for Iran and leads to new conflict patterns in Central Asia, Caucasus, and Eurasia.

### **6-1-3. Geo-Culture Network**

Geo-culture networks mainly include similarities in historical, civilizational, religious, ethnic, racial, and religious relations. Iran and the Middle Eastern countries, Southwest Asia, and Caucasus Asia share ethnic, cultural, linguistic, civilizational, and Islamic ties (Ghasemi and Lotfian Akbarabadi, 2013:113). On the other hand, cultural awareness offers an advantage and superiority in the situation of complexity in forming the geo-culture network. It shows our increased awareness of the cultural context, which can be as important, or even more important, as the awareness of the geographical context. Cultural awareness helps decision-makers and their forces understand the principles of a culture and its institutions, people, views, and behavior. It also helps them predict the results of actions and effects applied not only to the enemy and competitors but also to the people and the target population. What matters most here are the observable cultural variables, which are the visible and invisible characteristics resulting from the lifestyles of an ethnic group or certain religious elements



(Hall and Citrenbaum,2009). Of course, such variables are very subtle, new, and transient. But many great and regional powers try to create geo-cultural networks and proxy groups by relying on observable cultural variables and a comprehensive understanding of ethnic groups, tribes, religious elements, political parties, and other social groups and relationships between different groups, government structures and processes, local and regional background and also local and national leaders. They try to change the geo-political structure of the region in line with their desired regional order by synergizing the above elements with military forces, neutral groups, and indigenous people. Like the movements that Turkey is trying to perform in the Northern borders of Iran in the South Caucasus by combining the military component with linguistic and ethnic ties which will be divergent dynamics for Iran. Since Turkey's Eurasianism approach constitutes a challenge to Russia's traditional influence in this region, the partnership between Iran and Russia can act as synergistic dynamics (strategic complementary) against Turkey's geo-political and geo-cultural pressures. Therefore, it can be seen that sometimes the linking points that connect the clusters and different parts of the regional network and link them to other extra-regional networks and regions have a cultural nature, and interpreting them will be principle to understand the operational environment and adopt appropriate strategies.

In this regard, the first question facing Iran is: what is the end point of its strategic diplomacy in the multiplex regional network? In the last 30-40 years, the strategic preferences of Iran's neighboring countries to maintain regional stability have been faced with the military superiority of the interventionist power of the US. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, Russia's strategic preference in the macro-regional network has been to maintain regional stability based on maintaining its military and political superiority and curbing the institutional expansion of NATO and pro-Western trends in the region, which, of course, has faced the resistance of regional actors against its policies to establish a new order. With the US withdrawal from West and Southwest Asia, the new strategic preferences of regional powers, especially Turkey and Israel, are being formulated and oriented based on a possible regional order without the US to pursue a more or less independent strategy by formulating proactive and assertive regionalism, while benefiting from the partnership with emerging Eastern powers, namely Russia and China. The ultimate goal of Iran's strategic diplomacy has

always been based on the formation of a regional order without the US. However, Iran's equifinality of strategic diplomacy with other regional powers will not necessarily bring stability and regional integration due to their structural equilibrium and conflicting strategic cycles. It is moving toward parallel order-making structures and with the asymmetry of the conflicts and uncertainties caused by their policies in interference with Iran's macro-regional network (in the South Caucasus, South Asia, and Iran's maritime environment), there is a risk of spreading insecurity (network externalization) and bringing unwanted systemic consequences such as changing the geo-political structure of Iran's neighborhood.

Therefore, Iran needs a wide strategic redefinition of its vital interests in formulating, stabilizing, and optimizing strategic planning to use geo-political, geo-economic, and geo-cultural capacities to connect them in the neighborhood environment and overlapping regions. Accordingly, salient components in strategic planning are:

1. **Designing an Adaptive and Innovative Foreign Policy:** Instead of being based on bilateral relations in the neighborhood and regional environment, which will cause the stability of structural divisions and regional disunity, Iran's foreign policy should put the multi-neighborhood policy top on the agenda in a way that conforms to the complexity of regional overlapping networks. For this purpose, in strategic planning, Iran should keep the overlapping environments of the regional system (inter-regional dynamics) below the threshold to avoid the change of geo-political and geo-economic structures in its neighborhood (new dynamics in the South Caucasus and its shared borders with neighboring countries). To realize it, Iran's networked regionalism must be flexible to be able to absorb shocks in a state of complexity and self-organization and take advantage of crises to find new equilibrium points.
2. **Smart Synergy:** Iran's traditional diplomacy is mainly security-oriented, and military and hard power forms the basis of its diplomatic actions. In strategic diplomacy, it is important to reach a new state of smart synergy based on linking and making bridge between layers and network clusters in overlapping regions (Ghasemi,2019). The first step in smart synergy is the distribution of communication flows through links with units that have a central position in regional systems, linking between clusters through units

that have an in-between-ness and close position in regional overlapping networks.

Since the capabilities are scattered at geographical and thematic levels, smart synergy is first done through geo-political synergy. In the first layer, geo-political synergy requires synchronizing and equifinality in the dynamics of military power and its internal components (sea, land, air, and space geo-politics) and also the synergy of active and passive defense, caused by new cyber threats. In the second layer, identifying strategic partners and enemies and drawing a map of strategic allies based on common resources and interests in regional overlapping points. The systemic dynamics of Iran with Russia and China, which are dissatisfied with the system order, are synergistic. China and Russia's mutual concerns regarding security, economic and institutional interests as well as the security threats caused by terrorism, extremism, and the multifaceted nature of non-governmental and transnational actors in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and South Asia have led to the adoption of coordinated policies by the two countries which have an effective role in the regional balance. In such a situation, Iran can integrate its geo-political space with their geo-political environment by adopting a proactive regionalism and a cooperative approach to get closer to securing its economic and security interests. (Safari and et al,2020:104). As a result, if the Iran-Russia-China partnership focuses on the network mechanisms of production, transfer, and balancing of threats, it will act as reducing dynamics for the US and its regional allies.

Another part of smart synergy is a geo-economic synergy which will be practical through the development of transport infrastructures and maximum utilization of them, considering Iran's position as a geographical crossroads based on strategic partnerships with neighboring countries and finding regional strategic partners. Considering the importance of regional resources and their strategic value in geo-economic synergy, it can be seen that Iran has a central position in the two major global energy centers, namely the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Basin, connecting the three energy-consuming super-networks of the Indian subcontinent, China and the European Union (Noruzizadeh and et al,2022).

Also, Iran's position in transit and its access to open waters has given it the position of a bridge for the landlocked countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Afghanistan. Respectively, Chabahar port as Iran's only oceanic port and one of the overlapping points of the multi-level regionalism in the region has the feature of regional integration with the participation of neighboring countries and involving them in the geo-politics of this ocean port in the field of transit, commercial, and maritime cooperation. If this port is connected to the railway network and its backshore development takes place, it can play the role of the hub of the Persian Gulf region and the connecting link between regional and extra-regional systems (Akbari and et al,2022:85-87). The development of Iran's transit roads with Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut can also provide unique opportunities for economic exchanges. Geo-economic synergy requires identifying the location of nodes in each region and overlapping areas of the regional macro network and connecting them through node diplomacy to strengthen Iran's centrality position by security dependency and economic development of the neighboring countries to the national geographical space and its connection with the global power network.

Geo-cultural synergy refers to Iran benefiting from similar cultural-civilizational characteristics with neighboring countries and reinforcing resistance groups in the macro-regional network through multifaceted foreign policy. Smart synergism is realized in how to tie or untie\_(Khalili,2018:130) the flow of communication and distribution of sensitive dependence between the above geo-political, geo-economic, and geo-cultural campaigns through smart balancing and counterbalance of various elements of power and threats between them. The linear pursuit of each of the discussed campaigns without synergy between them will make Iran unprofitable from the special linking and centrality position in the overlapping regional network and will bring strategic losses.

3. **Shaping Institutional Procedures:** Benefiting from regional institutional capacities, such as Iran's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the ECO regional organization, and the signing of a preferential trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union can enable the transition from linear and binary

foreign policy to institutional procedures with a strategic correlation between specific sectors of national industry and transnational commerce with regional production networks. But the complicated economic order of the region due to the connection with the global economic network and transnational and trans-regional production networks along with the challenges caused by sanctions and Iran's isolation from the global financial structure have led to Iran's inactive economic strategies as compared to the foreign policy's security strategies. Therefore, its strategic diplomacy in shaping institutional procedures should be non-linear and flexible. Central Asia's position as the center of China's Silk Road Economic Belt project and Russia's proposal to connect the Eurasian Economic Union with this project in the form of the "Russia-China Eurasian Partnership" (Meirambekov and Abdkhodaei,2022:213) can be a suitable opportunity for Iran to create a new equilibrium point against the US. In this way, Iran will be able to link its focal (inter-regional) position in the multiplex network of the region (link, corridor, bridge) to the Eurasian partnership of China and Russia, to strengthen the synergistic dynamics against the US divergent dynamics. Linking the economic institutional procedure to the security institutional procedure through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will help Iran form a multi-level defense diplomacy. Since Iran's interests with its strategic partners and neighboring countries are a combination of similar, parallel, competitive, and conflicting interests, Iran's strategic diplomacy requires the drawing of both cooperative and conflictive models as well as distributing sensitive dependencies between them through balancing and synchronizing the values of strategic agreements and capabilities to deepen regionalism by making interconnection in both possible strategic benefits and losses.

## **7.Results**

This research attempted to show that networked regionalism provides a suitable analytical method to study the diversity of conflicting perceptions of regionalism. Due to its multi-layered and multi-body structure, multiplex regionalism can be a suitable theoretical approach for the foreign policy of multi-neighborhood countries like Iran which is located in the overlapping geo-political and geo-economic environment of the regional multi-level

network. The in-between-ness position of Iran as a corridor, bridge, and linking country has given it an irreplaceable position to connect the inner, middle, and outer space of the world order network to fulfill the country's international and centrality potential. But achieving this goal requires a transformation in strategic diplomacy as conformed to the complexity of the multi-level regional environment and emerging realities. Iran's strategic diplomacy requires the design of innovative and adaptive strategies, and its pursuit requires proactive regionalism in overlapping regional environments. Therefore, multiplex networked regionalism means moving from linear strategies in foreign policy to multi-neighborhood foreign policy with synergy between geo-political, geo-economic, and geo-cultural capacities and balancing different elements of power. Whether the result of the above strategies will be adaptive or not, depends on the distribution of preferences, communication and sensitive dependence between units regarding possible desirable results, and the degree of their realization forms conflicting dynamics.

### **8.Appreciation**

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