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# Iran and the Emerging New World Order: A Strategic Realignment Toward the SCO and BRICS

**Alireza Sheikh Mohammadi**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding author).


alireza\_ah@pnu.ac.ir

 0000-0001-6471-8124

**Sakineh Hashemi**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

s.hashemi@pnu.ac.ir

 0000-0000-0000-0000

## **Abstract**

This article offers a thorough examination of Iran's strategic realignment toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc within the evolving international political landscape. Utilizing a neoclassical realist framework, the research delves into the systemic pressures and intrinsic state-level factors that influence Iran's foreign policy decisions. The research method adopted encompasses both qualitative analysis and a review of primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical recalibration. Key findings suggest that a blend of economic, diplomatic, and strategic imperatives propels Iran's shift. Economically, affiliations with the SCO and BRICS present Iran with enhanced trade opportunities, investment prospects, and alternative financing mechanisms in the backdrop of Western sanctions. Diplomatically, these affiliations enhance Iran's regional and global standing, providing platforms for constructive dialogue and strategic cooperation. Strategically, the realignment has profound implications for both West Asian power dynamics and the broader global power structures, hinting at a transition toward a more multipolar world order. However, the research also uncovers multifaceted challenges that Iran confronts in this strategic pivot, ranging from managing diverse priorities within the SCO and BRICS to reconciling domestic objectives with global aspirations. In essence, the article sheds light on Iran's adaptive foreign policy strategy amidst a changing global order. By answering questions related to the motivations, benefits, and challenges of Iran's strategic realignment, this research provides valuable insights into the future trajectory of geopolitical dynamics in West Asia and beyond.

**Keywords:** Iran, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, West Asian Power Dynamics, Multipolar World Order, Foreign Policy, Economic Diplomacy, Global Power Structures.



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## Introduction

The early 21st century has witnessed tectonic shifts in global power dynamics marked by the steady erosion of the Western-dominated world order and the emergence of a new multipolar configuration (Abushanab, 2023, pp. 125-126; Moyo, 2021, p. 14). The rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc exemplifies this transition, fundamentally challenging prevailing unipolar structures by offering alternative platforms for cooperation, development, and global governance (Zhang, 2022, pp. 368-369). Within this evolving landscape, the Islamic Republic of Iran has initiated a strategic realignment aimed at forging closer ties with the SCO and BRICS, reflecting its agency in navigating the emerging multipolar order (Seifi & Khorramshad, 2019, pp. 38-39; Sabet-Saeidi, 2012, p. 70).

Iran's foreign policy posture has undergone significant evolution since the 1979 Revolution, balancing ideology and pragmatism. However, its resistance identity vis-à-vis Western imperialism remains a constant, even as tactical orientations transform based on threat perceptions and national interests (Barzegar, 2013, p. 141). In this vein, Iran's outreach to the SCO and BRICS signifies a strategy of diversifying partnerships to dilute US hegemony while advancing its vision of a just world order. Deeper integration with the SCO and BRICS allows Iran to leverage the geopolitical influence and economic might of these rising powers to neutralize sanctions pressure and expand its regional clout.

Formed in 2001, the SCO originated from the Shanghai Five, established in 1996. It expanded in June 2017 to include India and Pakistan, thereby augmenting its influence in Eurasian geopolitics (Lanteigne, 2018, pp. 124-125). In July 2023, Iran further bolstered the organization's stature by joining its ranks. On the other hand, the BRICS alliance, known for its significant sway in international systems owing to the demographic and economic strength of its members, has invited Iran and other nations, with official membership set to begin on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 (Pinto, 2023). As a newly inducted member of the SCO and a prospective member of BRICS, Iran envisions leveraging these affiliations to its advantage, aligning with these pivotal organizations that are instrumental in sculpting the emerging multipolar world order.

Yet, Iran's strategic pivot is not without complexities. The nation

grapples with challenges like U.S. sanctions, regional rivalries, and the task of aligning its interests with the diverse and sometimes conflicting priorities of SCO and BRICS members. Furthermore, as Tehran navigates this intricate geopolitical terrain, it must also judiciously manage its relationships with key regional actors, notably China and Russia, ensuring that its regional security posture and global position are not compromised.

In light of these complexities, this article offers a comprehensive analysis of Iran's strategic realignment, probing its underlying motivations and assessing the ensuing opportunities, challenges, and broader implications. To enrich this analysis and provide a structured theoretical backdrop, the article harnesses neoclassical realism theory. This theoretical approach, a synthesis of classical realism and neorealism, elucidates how states' foreign policies are influenced by both overarching systemic factors, such as power distribution and threat landscapes, and intrinsic domestic elements, including the perceptions, interests, and ideologies of political elites (Rose, 1998, pp. 146-147).

Neoclassical realism posits that states, as rational actors, strive to maximize their security and interests in an anarchic world. However, their behavior is shaped by relative capabilities, external environment, and internal characteristics. This perspective aids in comprehending how Iran's strategic realignment is impacted by the evolving dynamics of the international system and the internal features of its political system.

In particular, neoclassical realism can help us address the following questions:

- How does Iran perceive its relative power position and its external threats in the emerging multipolar world order?
- How does Iran balance its relations with different actors in the SCO and BRICS, as well as with other regional and global powers?

To delve into these issues, the forthcoming section of this article will review the literature on the emerging multipolar world order, the role of the SCO and BRICS, and Iran's foreign policy orientation. Following that, we will introduce neoclassical realism theory and explain how it can help us understand Iran's strategic realignment. Then, we will apply the neoclassical realism framework to analyze Iran's relations with each of the SCO and BRICS countries and its participation in their initiatives. Finally, we will evaluate the benefits and challenges that Iran faces in its strategic realignment toward the SCO and BRICS, as well as the

implications for regional stability and global power dynamics.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the article will thematically analyze pertinent books, articles, reports, documents, speeches, statements, and media coverage to holistically assess Iran's evolving role in the emerging new world order.

## **1. Review of Previous Research**

The purpose of this section is to review the most important existing literature on the emerging multipolar world order, the role of the SCO and BRICS, and Iran's foreign policy orientation. These themes are relevant for understanding Iran's strategic realignment toward the SCO and BRICS, as well as its challenges and implications. The literature review will also identify the gaps and limitations that our article aims to address.

### **The emerging multipolar world order**

As the post-Cold War era of US unipolar dominance wanes, there's a discernible shift toward a multipolar global order. This redistribution of power, characterized by the ascent of nations like China, India, and Russia, as well as influential blocs such as the EU and BRICS, is challenging the hitherto prevalent American hegemony (Ikenberry, 2018; Haass, 2008; Zakaria, 2020). While scholars like Layne (2012) and Wohlforth & Brooks (2016) engage in debates about the stability and extent of this emerging multipolarity, there's a general consensus that the global power landscape is undergoing a significant transformation.

### **Iran and the global power transition**

Amidst the shifting global power dynamics, Iran's strategic position is capturing significant attention. Abedi and Aslani (2021) emphasize that, despite facing pressure from the West, Tehran views the multipolar transition as a strategic opportunity. The nation is keen on strengthening its security and international standing, particularly by fostering ties with emergent powers like China. Yet, this alignment comes with its own set of challenges, most notably US sanctions, historical animosities, and the nuances in Iran-US relations. Abedi and Aslani (2021) suggest that Iran's optimal pathway involves a pragmatic engagement with ascending powers and global institutions, contingent on resolving nuclear and sanctions dilemmas with the West.

This view aligns with the recent scholarship of Papageorgiou et

al. (2021), which highlights an emerging strategic triangle among China, Iran, and Russia. This formation is seen as a response to counterbalance the United States' dominance. The convergence of these states is driven by factors such as US unilateralism, manifested in actions like NATO's eastward expansion, sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, and the US trade war with China. Additionally, Iran's own sanctions history and the broader US posture during the COVID-19 pandemic have further intensified this realignment.

Papageorgiou et al. (2021) employs the soft balancing theory to elucidate the strategies these nations adopt against US power. Their findings reveal an inclination toward soft balancing mechanisms, predominantly economic strengthening, and intricate diplomacy within international institutions. Moreover, territorial denial, given the regional significance of this strategic triangle, has been pursued on several fronts. Such insights expand our understanding of Iran's strategic position, suggesting not just a pivot toward emergent powers but a more complex, triangular balancing act that may lean toward hard-balancing strategies in the long term. Concurrently, scholars such as Fathollah-Nejad (2021) emphasize the blend of systemic and domestic factors shaping Iran's foreign policy decisions, underscoring the intricate balance Tehran must strike in its affiliations with global entities like the SCO, BRICS, and other stakeholders.

### **The SCO and BRICS in the new world order**

Organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS are emblematic of the rise of alternative power centers in the multipolar world. The SCO, encompassing major Eurasian nations, has evolved into a pivotal bloc focusing on security and economic collaboration. According to Lanteigne (2020), the SCO has become a key regional institution that reflects China's and Russia's interests and influence in Central Asia and beyond. Similarly, BRICS, as Armijo and Roberts (2014) emphasize, offers a platform for emerging economies to coordinate on global governance issues. However, the academic discourse also underscores the challenges these organizations face, particularly in reconciling the varied interests of their members. As Holt (2022) highlights, the China-led Belt and Road Initiative faces obstacles in Central Asia due to misaligned economic interests and security concerns between China and local regimes. This exemplifies the



difficulties faced by organizations like the SCO and BRICS in bridging divergent internal priorities.

### **Iran's foreign policy orientation**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the dynamism of Iran's foreign policy, oscillating between ideology and pragmatism, has been a focal point for experts. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the dynamism of Iran's foreign policy, oscillating between ideology and pragmatism, has been a focal point for experts. While Esfandiary and Tabatabai (2019) provide a comprehensive account of Iran's relations with China and Russia as its key partners in the multipolar order, analyses by scholars such as Juneau (2014) highlight the pragmatic shifts, albeit within the contours of its Islamist ideology. Understanding these nuanced drivers is essential to contextualizing Iran's strategic realignment in the multipolar era.

In essence, the literature paints a portrait of a world in flux, with the rise of new power centers and the relative decline of established hegemons. This backdrop is crucial in analyzing Iran's strategic calculus and its engagement with entities like the SCO and BRICS.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Strategic Realignment**

In the realm of international relations, theoretical frameworks serve as guiding lenses to unpack and interpret intricate geopolitical phenomena. In this context, our article turns to neoclassical realism to shed light on Iran's strategic realignment in the emerging multipolar world order.

Emerging as a response to perceived gaps in the post-Cold War era, neoclassical realism bridges classical realism and structural neorealism. While neorealism focuses heavily on the anarchic structure of the international system and power distribution as driving state behavior, it often falls short of explaining variations in state foreign policies. Neoclassical realism fills this void by factoring in domestic variables and state-level considerations (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 16-17).

The core of neoclassical realism rests on three intertwined variables: the systemic environment, cognitive processes, and domestic dynamics. Systemically, it acknowledges the anarchic nature of international relations, much like its neorealist counterpart. However, it differentiates by emphasizing the subjective perceptions of power and threats by state leaders, suggesting that states might not uniformly respond to systemic pressures due to their

interpretations of external environments (Rose, 1998, pp. 152-153).

Cognitively, neoclassical realism accentuates the significance of perception in foreign policy decision-making. It posits that leaders often operate with incomplete or skewed information, which can catalyze miscalculations or overreactions. Individual beliefs, ideologies, biases, and even emotions further color their decision-making processes (Rose, 1998, pp. 154-155).

Lastly, at the domestic front, neoclassical realism recognizes the interplay of state institutions, elites, and societal actors in shaping a state's external behavior (Schweller, 2004: 61). It suggests that crafting foreign policies involves considering not only external threats but also internal dynamics, constraints, and opportunities. This framework brings into focus the state's power potential, its ability to mobilize resources, and the myriad domestic pressures that can sway policy directions (Rose, 1998, pp. 156-157).

Applying this multi-dimensional lens of neoclassical realism to Iran offers a nuanced understanding of its strategic pivot toward the SCO and BRICS. This framework will guide the ensuing analysis, allowing us to delve deeper into Iran's relations with member countries and its participation in their initiatives, all the while considering both its external and internal motivations.

### **3. Iran's Strategic Adaptation: A Neoclassical Realist Perspective**

The global transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order has ushered in a complex tapestry of geopolitical shifts, redefining inter-state relationships and challenging traditional power structures. In this transformative setting, states are recalibrating their strategic inclinations to better align with the emerging dynamics. Iran, a nation historically positioned at the crossroads of East and West, stands at a pivotal juncture. Its foreign policy, deeply rooted in its historical experiences and resistance identity, is undergoing a strategic adaptation, seeking to diversify its alliances and minimize dependency on the West.

While the neoclassical realism framework posits that states respond to systemic pressures, it emphasizes the significant role of domestic variables and state-level perceptions in shaping foreign policy. Within this theoretical milieu, Iran's strategic realignment can be understood as a nuanced interplay of its perceptions of the international system, the geopolitical shifts, its regional ambitions, and domestic imperatives.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc, as symbols of the emerging multipolar world, offer Iran

avenues for diplomatic, economic, and strategic collaboration. These organizations, while challenging Western hegemony, represent opportunities for Iran to bolster its regional influence, mitigate the impact of sanctions, and articulate its vision of global governance. However, this eastward pivot is not merely a pragmatic adjustment; it's a reflection of Iran's broader strategic calculus, considering both its aspirations as a regional power and its challenges on the global stage.

As we navigate through this section, we shall intricately explore the various facets of Iran's strategic adaptation. From understanding its responses to changing geopolitics to analyzing its engagements with pivotal international organizations, and from assessing the regional implications of its realignment to delving into the domestic drivers of its foreign policy, we aim to offer a comprehensive neoclassical realist perspective on Iran's strategic maneuvers in the evolving multipolar world.

With this overarching description setting the stage, the subsequent subsections will delve deeper into the specifics of Iran's strategic choices, its engagements with the SCO and BRICS, the broader regional and global implications, and the domestic determinants influencing its foreign policy orientation.

### **3-1. Adapting Foreign Policy to Shifting Geopolitics**

The steady transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order has compelled Iran to significantly recalibrate its foreign policy strategy. Iran envisions an opportunity to reshape its strategic posture and pursue greater self-reliance as the global landscape undergoes transformation, characterized by the decline of US hegemony and the rise of alternative power centers in Eurasia. This subsection will analyze how Iran is adapting its foreign policy orientation in response to the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the emerging multipolar era.

According to the neoclassical realist perspective, systemic pressures impel states to adapt their foreign policies based on changed threat perceptions and power realities (Kitchen, 2010, p. 117). However, leaders subjectively interpret global shifts and balance internal and external imperatives influencing adaptation (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 6-7). In Iran's case, its strategic culture, rooted in anti-imperialism, and its revolutionary ethos reinforce the leadership's desire to leverage the multipolar transition to diversify its alliances and dilute Western dominance (Juneau, 2014, p. 23).

As the SCO and BRICS emerge as centers of influence, Tehran

has initiated an eastern-oriented strategic pivot (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 125). This not only expands its room for diplomatic maneuvering but also intertwines with its vision of a just global order and desire to uplift the developing world. Joining these organizations provides Iran avenues to resist coercive pressures from the West, shape global governance norms, and articulate an anti-hegemonic agenda. The lifting of UN sanctions on Iran in 2023 has further accelerated this shift by removing constraints on its economic integration and regional influence.

However, Iran faces challenges in harmonizing the priorities of SCO and BRICS members, many of whom maintain close ties with the West (Jahangiri & Vafaei Sa'di, 2018, p. 142). Its balancing strategy requires nuanced engagement, leveraging convergences on issues like terrorism while circumventing discord over Middle East tensions. Adapting to multipolarity also entails the risk of overextending Iran's strategic commitments as it seeks to project power abroad. Nevertheless, recalibrating its foreign policy enables Tehran to claim greater strategic autonomy and reshape its role as a pivotal Eurasian actor in the emerging world order.

### **3-2. Engaging with the SCO and BRICS**

The evolution toward a multipolar world order, marked by the emergence of new geopolitical power centers and a diminishing US hegemony, has revealed new strategic avenues for Iran. Recognizing the shifting global dynamics, Iran, positioned as a crucial Eurasian player, has actively sought to recalibrate its foreign policy. Central to this recalibration is its engagement with influential organizations like the SCO and BRICS, which stand as viable alternatives to the traditionally Western-dominated international landscape. This subsection delves into Iran's motivations, challenges, and the depth of its participation within these blocs, offering insights into how these affiliations align with Tehran's broader foreign policy vision and interests.

Drawing from the lens of neoclassical realism, which posits that while systemic pressures influence state actions, the subjective perceptions of leadership and internal dynamics equally shape foreign policy decisions (Korolev & Portyakov, 2018, p. 416). In the context of Iran, strengthening ties with the SCO and BRICS is not merely a response to systemic shifts. Instead, it aligns with the leadership's perception of these entities as potent platforms to counterbalance US influence, resist Western pressures, and articulate an alternative vision of global governance.

The SCO, enhanced by its inclusion of significant players like India and Pakistan, has fortified its standing in Eurasian geopolitics. For Iran, this association serves multiple purposes: it diversifies Tehran's strategic alliances in its vicinity, paves the way for economic integration, counteracts the challenges posed by sanctions, and solidifies its identity as a core Eurasian entity. However, certain regional complexities, such as divergent views on issues like Syria and Afghanistan, demand adept diplomatic maneuvering on Iran's part.

On a similar note, Iran's alignment with BRICS resonates with its aspirations to champion the causes of the Global South and advocate for a democratized global governance system (Simbar et al., 2020, p. 166). The collaborative endeavors, such as the New Development Bank (NDB) of BRICS and engagements on platforms like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), not only enhance Iran's economic prospects but also amplify its diplomatic influence. Yet, geopolitical complexities, such as the Sino-Iranian dynamics in Central Asia and the nuanced Sino-Russian rivalry, necessitate a careful balancing strategy from Tehran.

In essence, Iran's proactive engagements with the SCO and BRICS epitomize its strategic adaptation to the evolving multipolar world. These affiliations provide Tehran with much-needed diplomatic leverage, avenues for economic diversification, and a platform to champion its vision of a just global order. However, the path is strewn with challenges as Iran seeks to synchronize its anti-imperialistic ethos with the pragmatic requisites of diplomacy, all while harmonizing its interests amidst the diverse priorities of member states. As we journey forward, it becomes evident that Iran's strategic associations with these blocs are both an opportunity and a testament to its diplomatic agility in the current global order.

### **3-3. Regional Stability and Global Power Dynamics**

The global shift from a unipolar to a multipolar order has dramatically transformed the geopolitical landscape, prompting nations like Iran, strategically positioned at the nexus of East and West, to recalibrate their foreign policy. This recalibration, notably Iran's pivot toward the SCO and BRICS, resonates deeply not only within its borders but also across West Asia and the broader international arena.

West Asia, a region characterized by historical complexities, sectarian divides, and intricate geopolitical rivalries, stands as a

testament to the ripple effects of Iran's strategic decisions (Esmailzadeh, 2023, pp. 50-53). Rooted in the tenets of neoclassical realism, Iran's foreign policy choices, driven by systemic pressures and state-specific imperatives, promise to reshape regional dynamics. By diversifying its alliances and seeking alternatives to Western-centric platforms, Iran challenges traditional power paradigms, opening potential avenues for dialogue and collaboration. This strategic recalibration, while potentially alleviating regional pressures, also carries the risk of introducing new dynamics and tensions.

On a regional scale, Iran's deeper affiliations with the SCO and BRICS could foster a climate conducive to cooperation, especially if Iran adopts a conciliatory stance. The SCO and BRICS provide Tehran with an important mechanism to achieve some foreign policy goals, especially the "Look to the East" policy (Hamyani & Sajjadpour, 2022, p. 71). Such engagements might pave the way for constructive dialogues on pressing issues, like the Syrian crisis, and mitigate pressures from neighboring states. However, if perceived as a move to intensify regional rivalries or an arms race, it might inadvertently exacerbate existing tensions.

Iran's strategic choices also promise to recalibrate the balance of power in West Asia. Historically characterized by a tug-of-war between regional powerhouses, Iran's strengthening ties with emerging global blocs could potentially shift the prevailing status quo, prompting other actors to reevaluate their diplomatic postures.

Globally, Iran's alignment with the SCO and BRICS not only bolsters its position against Western hegemony but also contributes to the broader shift toward a multipolar world. However, while Iran's influence grows, it remains somewhat overshadowed by established powers, and its ambitions to shape international governance could face challenges due to concerns about disrupting the global status quo.

Despite the potential benefits, Iran's strategic realignment is not devoid of challenges. It might amplify existing geopolitical tensions and give rise to new flashpoints, manifesting in various forms like proxy conflicts or economic rivalries.

In essence, Iran's strategic adaptation, informed by neoclassical realism, unfolds as a nuanced interplay of systemic pressures, regional goals, and its unique domestic imperatives. While this strategic pivot offers a promise of enhanced regional cooperation



and a more balanced power distribution, the potential for renewed tensions remains. As the international community closely observes Iran's maneuvers in this shifting geopolitical environment, the broader implications of its decisions on regional stability and global power dynamics will be under keen scrutiny.

### **3-4. Domestic Determinants**

Iran's foreign policy, influenced by systemic pressures and opportunities in the international system, is also profoundly shaped by various domestic factors and dynamics. According to neoclassical realism, states are not unitary actors but complex entities composed of different political institutions, strategic cultures, public opinions, and economic conditions that shape their foreign policy choices (Becker et al., 2015, p. 117). In this subsection, we will examine how these domestic determinants affect Iran's strategic adaptation to the multipolar world order.

#### **3-4-1. Political Institutions**

Iran's political system is a theocratic-republican hybrid, with a supreme leader who holds ultimate authority and an elected president. The supreme leader appoints key officials such as the head of the judiciary, the commander of the armed forces, and the members of the Guardian Council, which vets candidates for elections and reviews legislation. The president appoints the cabinet and heads the executive branch. The parliament (Majlis), elected by the people, has the power to pass laws and approve the budget. The political system also includes various informal networks of influence, such as clerical factions, revolutionary guards, bonyads (charitable foundations), and civil society groups.

Like many countries, Iran has a complex political system with multiple centers of power that shape its foreign policy decisions and implementation. The involvement of various institutions and factions, such as the supreme leader, president, parliament, revolutionary guards, and clerical networks, allows for diverse perspectives but can also lead to inconsistencies at times. However, this diversity enables dialogue and compromise among different political actors, which can facilitate foreign policy adaptation. For instance, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal required cooperation between the moderately reformist government and pragmatic support from other stakeholders. On the other hand, aspects like ideological differences

or institutional constraints can pose challenges for policy implementation and accountability. Overall, Iran's multifaceted political landscape both facilitates and hinders aspects of its foreign policy formulation.

#### ۳-4-2. Strategic Culture

Rooted in its rich history, ideological convictions, national identity, and geopolitical context, Iran's strategic culture is multifaceted. It embodies a deep sense of pride stemming from its ancient civilization and illustrious cultural heritage. Concurrently, it carries a sense of vulnerability, given Iran's past experiences with foreign interventions and dominations. A pivotal aspect of this culture is its resistance identity-manifested in its establishment as an Islamic Republic that stood up against Western imperialism, pioneering a distinct political system anchored in Shia Islam (Barzegar, 2013, pp. ۱۴۰-۱۴۱).

This strategic culture has profound implications for Iran's foreign policy, as follows:

- **Perception of the external environment:** Iran's strategic culture shapes its worldview, especially its understanding of threats and opportunities. It sees itself encircled by adversaries, notably Israel and the US, which it believes aim to compromise its sovereignty and security. Moreover, Iran considers itself a beacon for nations oppressed by Western dominance, advocating for a challenge against Western hegemony and perceived injustices.
- **Strategic preferences:** Influenced by its strategic culture, Iran leans toward self-reliance, often prioritizing its innate capabilities over external dependencies (Gholampour et al., 2021, p. 64). In terms of military strategy, there's a preference for asymmetric warfare, leveraging strategic partnerships, and employing supportive intermediaries, as opposed to conventional military engagements, to further its interests and deter potential threats.
- **Guiding values in foreign policy:** Iran's foreign policy rests on values of independence, sovereignty, justice, dignity, and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, Islamic principles play a significant role in shaping its interactions with other Muslim nations and entities.
- **Public opinion:** Factors like education, media exposure, social movements, economic conditions, and political events collectively shape Iran's public opinion. However, this opinion isn't monolithic; it mirrors the diversity and dynamism inherent in Iranian society. The public's sentiment significantly influences



foreign policy-it can both empower and restrict decision-makers, and it plays a crucial role in establishing the legitimacy and efficacy of their actions.

Drawing from various surveys and studies, the nuances of Iran's public opinion in relation to foreign policy can be outlined as follows:

- **SCO and BRICS engagement:** There is a general inclination in Iran's public opinion toward its involvement with the SCO and BRICS. These organizations are perceived as avenues for economic prospects, diplomatic acknowledgment, and strategic independence. Moreover, they are viewed as being more respectful of Iran's sovereignty compared to Western-centric institutions (Masoumi, 2023; Ansari, 2023).
- **Views on US and Israel:** The public sentiment in Iran tends to be critical of US policies and displays aversion toward Israel, primarily because they are seen as threats to Iran's security and self-respect. There's also a general reluctance to make concessions on issues like the nuclear program or regional roles, which are deemed essential for national interests (Iran Poll, 2019).
- **Stance on China and Russia:** The public sentiment is favorable toward China and Russia. They are perceived as strategic allies, and their support, especially in opposition to US sanctions and backing Iran's nuclear ambitions, is appreciated (Hadian, 2023; DW, 2021).
- **Perspective on India, Pakistan, and Turkey:** Public opinion shows ambivalence when it comes to India (Baruah, 2022), Pakistan (Karim, 2023), and Turkey (Stein & Bleek, 2012, p. 149; Kanat, 2016). Relations with these countries span both cooperative and competitive dimensions. In general, it is also logically obvious that public sentiments vary based on specific issues such as trade, energy, security, or regional disputes that affect Iran's interests and influence in the region.
- **Opinion on Brazil and South Africa:** The general sentiment toward Brazil and South Africa is positive, or at least not negative. They are recognized as rising powers with shared global aspirations and challenges. Their solidarity on issues like human rights and development is valued.

To conclude, public opinion in Iran acts as a key domestic factor influencing its foreign policy decisions. Representing the diverse preferences and values of Iranian society, it steers Iran's strategic adaptation within the evolving multipolar global scenario. Yet, this opinion isn't fixed-it evolves with changing situations, necessitating

continuous observation and assessment to comprehend its bearings on Iran's foreign policy.

#### **¶. Analysis of Findings: Evaluating Iran's Strategic Realignment**

This section provides a comprehensive evaluation of Iran's strategic realignment toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS bloc. It assesses the multifaceted benefits, risks, and complex challenges associated with Iran's eastward pivot and integration into these organizations.

The analysis also elucidates the far-reaching implications of Iran's shifting foreign policy alignment, examining its impacts on regional power dynamics in West Asia as well as broader transformations in global power structures.

As Iran charts its course in an evolving multipolar order, it must strike a delicate balance between its domestic priorities and global ambitions. This section will highlight the nuanced strategic decisions and trade-offs required as Tehran reconciles its internal and external imperatives.

Applying insights from the neoclassical realist perspective, the evaluation highlights that Iran's strategic realignment is shaped by both systemic pressures and intrinsic state-level factors. The concluding analysis sums up the key opportunities and dilemmas for Iran as it adapts its foreign policy strategy to the emerging global landscape.

#### **4-1. Harnessing the Potentials of SCO and BRICS Engagement**

In the intricate landscape of global geopolitics, Iran's strategic alignment with the SCO and BRICS emerges as a significant recalibration. Drawing inspiration from neoclassical realism, a framework that suggests nations are guided by systemic pressures while their foreign policies are also influenced by internal dynamics and leadership perceptions (Rose, 1998: 148; Smith, 2016, p. 316).

- **Economically**, the SCO and BRICS, entities that collectively wield substantial influence on global economic trajectories (Kirton & Larionova, 2022), present Iran with multifarious opportunities. From fostering trade collaborations to energy partnerships, the potential avenues are vast. Especially against the backdrop of Western sanctions, financial mechanisms like the NDB of BRICS and strategic projects like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) manifest as pivotal channels for Iran, offering both financial solace and strategic connectivity. Recent

statistics underscore the significant economic promise of Iran's BRICS membership, highlighting robust trade interactions, particularly in exports, which affirm the strategic importance of this alignment in Iran's economic diplomacy (Mehr News, 2023).

- **Diplomatically**, affiliations with these organizations amplify Iran's position on the international stage, providing platforms for dialogue on crucial issues ranging from security to sustainable development. They enhance Iran's diplomatic leverage, as evidenced by consistent stances against unilateral actions pertaining to Iran's nuclear program and endorsements of its peaceful nuclear endeavors within international frameworks.
- **Politically**, Iran's BRICS membership is anticipated to foster subtle shifts in regional alignments and diplomatic relations. It is viewed as a potential conduit for easing regional tensions, promoting reconciliation processes, and navigating nuanced foreign policies, reflecting the multifaceted influence of this membership beyond economic considerations.
- **Strategically**, alignment with the SCO and BRICS augments Iran's position against a predominantly Western-centric world order, resonating with its vision of a multipolar global order anchored in mutual respect and equity. This strategic recalibration enhances Iran's security and influence, promoting a more inclusive approach in global governance arenas, such as advocating for UNSC reforms.

#### 4-2. Traversing the Realignment Challenges

In the realm of international relations, strategic realignments, while presenting new avenues of opportunity, often usher in a set of inherent challenges. For Iran, the pivot toward the SCO and BRICS, while being a reflection of its broader strategic recalibration in the face of an evolving multipolar world, is not devoid of its share of intricacies.

A primary concern lies in managing relations amidst diverse membership priorities within the SCO and BRICS. These organizations, while unified in certain broader objectives, consist of member states with their own distinct national interests and geopolitical aspirations. For instance, while both Russia and China advocate a multipolar world, their strategies in Central Asia might diverge. Similarly, India's approach to regional connectivity might differ from China's Belt and Road Initiative. Navigating these intricate dynamics necessitates a nuanced understanding and adept diplomatic maneuvering on Iran's part to ensure its interests are

safeguarded while contributing constructively to the collective objectives of these organizations.

Moreover, regional dynamics present another layer of complexity. Iran's relations with neighboring countries and traditional rivals will inevitably influence its engagements within the SCO and BRICS frameworks. Balancing these regional dynamics, especially with countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel, while fostering productive relationships within the SCO and BRICS, will be a tightrope walk for Tehran.

Domestically, the alignment with SCO and BRICS might be subjected to varied perceptions. While certain factions might view it as a step toward breaking away from Western hegemony and sanctions, others might express concerns over the potential over-reliance on these eastern blocs. Addressing these domestic sentiments, ensuring transparency, and building a national consensus will be pivotal for the success of this realignment.

Lastly, potential resistance from traditional Western allies and institutions can't be overlooked. The West, especially the United States and its European allies, might perceive Iran's eastward pivot as a move to counter Western influence, potentially leading to diplomatic pushbacks and intensified efforts to curtail Iran's rise in these new frameworks.

Drawing from neoclassical realism, it becomes evident that Iran's move toward the SCO and BRICS is driven by systemic pressures, but its strategies within these frameworks will be deeply influenced by its perception of the internal and external environment. The interplay of these factors will dictate how Iran maneuvers through the challenges of its strategic realignment, ensuring that it doesn't merely react to global shifts but actively shapes its destiny within them.

### **4-3. Reframing West Asian Power Equilibrium**

West Asia, often recognized as a hotspot of geopolitical contestations, has long been characterized by shifting allegiances, power struggles, and enduring rivalries. Within this complex matrix, Iran emerges as a pivotal player, with its strategic realignment promising to bring about substantive changes to the regional power dynamics.

Iran's deeper engagement with the SCO and BRICS not only impacts its bilateral relations with member countries but also holds profound implications for the broader West Asian region. Neoclassical realism posits that while systemic pressures influence foreign policy choices, it's the interplay of these pressures with

state-level perceptions and capabilities that shapes the outcomes. In the context of West Asia, Iran's realignment can be seen as a response to both systemic pressures and its intrinsic quest for greater regional influence.

One of the immediate outcomes of this realignment is the potential shift in regional alliances. Traditional allies might reassess their positions, while erstwhile rivals could explore avenues of cooperation with Iran. This fluidity in alliances could lead to the emergence of new blocs within West Asia, driven by economic, strategic, and security considerations.

The balance of power within the region is also poised for recalibration. With Iran leveraging the economic, diplomatic, and strategic potentials of its affiliations with the SCO and BRICS, it stands to enhance its regional stature. This enhanced position could act as a counterweight to other regional powers, potentially reducing the asymmetry in power dynamics. Such shifts could alter conflict dynamics, especially in areas where Iran has vested interests, potentially leading to new conflict resolution mechanisms or the escalation of existing disputes.

Furthermore, Iran's key relationships within West Asia, especially with countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, will inevitably experience the ripple effects of its strategic realignment. While perceived geopolitical competition might strain some relationships, others could find common ground driven by mutual interests and changing regional dynamics.

In essence, Iran's strategic pivot toward the SCO and BRICS is not just an isolated foreign policy choice; it is a decision that reverberates across the West Asian region. The ramifications of this choice will shape the region's geopolitical landscape, influencing alliance structures, power balances, and regional stability. Through the lens of neoclassical realism, it becomes evident that Iran's strategic choices, while influenced by broader global shifts, deeply intertwine with its aspirations and perceived challenges within the West Asian context.

#### **4-4. Reshaping Global Power Structures**

The global stage is a realm of constant flux, with nations continually vying for influence and dominance. Traditional power centers, especially the Western hegemony led by the United States, have long shaped the contours of international politics. However, the winds of change are blowing, and multipolarity is increasingly becoming the defining characteristic of the contemporary world

order. Within this transformative landscape, Iran's strategic realignment toward the SCO and BRICS carries implications that extend far beyond its regional confines.

Drawing from neoclassical realism, while systemic pressures undoubtedly play a role in shaping foreign policy choices, it's the amalgamation of these external pressures with state-level perceptions and capabilities that truly steers outcomes. Iran's pivot, in this context, can be viewed as a manifestation of its ambitions to be a pivotal player in this shifting global matrix.

One of the most profound implications of Iran's realignment is the challenge it poses to Western dominance. The SCO and BRICS, as collective entities, represent a significant portion of the world's population, GDP, and resources. Their collective might, both economically and strategically, is a counterbalance to the traditionally Western-centric global order. With Iran augmenting this bloc's strength, the challenge to Western hegemony becomes even more pronounced. This doesn't just signify a shift in power dynamics but also portends a potential transformation in global norms, values, and governance structures, especially if these organizations start playing more active roles in global institutions.

The realignment also fosters the growth of multipolarity. With countries like China and Russia at the helm of these organizations, and with Iran's added weight, the global balance of power witnesses further distribution. This not only dilutes the unilateral decision-making capacities of any single power center but also ensures that global decisions are more representative of diverse interests. In a sense, the world moves toward a more egalitarian governance model, where power is more diffused and shared among a wider set of actors.

Furthermore, Iran's realignment could catalyze a broader reshuffling of global alliances. Countries that traditionally aligned with the West might reassess their positions, weighing the benefits of aligning with a rising East against the traditional security and economic guarantees offered by the West. This could lead to the creation of new global blocs or alliances, or even the strengthening of existing ones, based on shared interests and mutual benefits.

In essence, Iran's strategic pivot toward the SCO and BRICS is not a mere recalibration of its foreign policy; it's a move that has the potential to alter the very fabric of the global political order. By challenging the established norms and tilting toward a multipolar world, Iran's decisions could usher in a new chapter in international relations, where power dynamics are more balanced, alliances are more fluid, and global governance is more inclusive and



representative.

### ۴-5. Navigating Domestic Goals and Global Aspirations

In the realm of international relations, every nation must reconcile its domestic imperatives with its global aspirations. This interplay between internal objectives and external commitments is a complex dance, fraught with challenges but also replete with opportunities. For Iran, especially in the wake of its strategic realignment toward the SCO and BRICS, this balance becomes even more critical.

According to neoclassical realism, statesmen are also influenced by domestic considerations as they respond to systemic pressures. These internal factors, be they economic necessities, political dynamics, or societal demands, often temper a state's response to external stimuli. For Iran, this interplay has been particularly pronounced.

Domestically, Iran has its own unique set of challenges and priorities. From the economic aspirations of its burgeoning youth population to the sociopolitical demands of its diverse ethnic and religious groups, Tehran has to ensure that its foreign policy decisions resonate well at home. The benefits of aligning with the SCO and BRICS, for instance, need to be tangible enough to justify any compromises or trade-offs on the domestic front.

On the global stage, Iran's aspirations are clear: to be a pivotal player in the emerging multipolar world order. This requires not just strategic partnerships, like those with the SCO and BRICS, but also a careful navigation of its relations with traditional allies and adversaries. Iran's global ambitions, therefore, necessitate a dynamic foreign policy that can adapt to changing global realities while ensuring that core national interests are not compromised.

One of the most significant challenges in this navigation is ensuring that domestic imperatives do not unduly hinder global aspirations. For instance, while Iran's economic needs might necessitate closer ties with certain nations, its ideological or political stance might require a more cautious approach. Similarly, while global dynamics might suggest a pivot in a particular direction, domestic political considerations could mandate restraint.

However, this interplay is not just about challenges. It's also about opportunities. By effectively leveraging its domestic strengths, be it its rich cultural heritage, its strategic location, or its vast natural resources, Iran can enhance its global standing. Conversely, its global engagements can also be used to drive domestic growth, development, and stability.

In essence, for Iran, the path forward is not about choosing between domestic goals and global aspirations. It's about synthesizing the two and creating a coherent strategy where one complements the other. It's about recognizing that in today's interconnected world, domestic and global are not isolated realms but two sides of the same coin. And for a nation like Iran, with its rich history and promising future, this synthesis can be the key to a prosperous and influential position in the global order.

### **Conclusion**

The international political landscape is in a state of flux, with traditional power dynamics being challenged and new alliances emerging. Central to this transformation is Iran's strategic realignment toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS bloc. Using the neoclassical realist perspective, this article delved deep into the multifaceted dimensions of Iran's recalibration of foreign policy.

One of the key findings of this research is the economic impetus behind Iran's strategic shift. The potential for enhanced trade, investment opportunities, and access to alternative financing mechanisms, such as the New Development Bank, positions Iran favorably in the face of Western sanctions. Diplomatically, affiliations with the SCO and BRICS bolster Iran's regional and international stature, providing platforms for dialogue and strategic cooperation.

Moreover, our study highlighted the profound implications of this realignment for West Asian power dynamics. Iran's renewed engagements contribute to reshaping regional power structures, potentially leading to a more balanced power equilibrium. At the global level, Iran's pivot challenges the Western-dominated order, hinting at a more multipolar world order.

Yet, the path isn't devoid of challenges. Navigating the diverse priorities of SCO and BRICS members, addressing domestic sentiments, and anticipating potential resistance from the West require astute diplomacy and foresight. A crucial aspect that emerged from our analysis is the intricate balancing act that Iran must perform to reconcile its domestic objectives with global aspirations.

The neoclassical realist framework that underpins this research proved instrumental in providing nuanced insights into Iran's strategic decisions. By emphasizing both systemic pressures and intrinsic state-level factors, it allowed for a comprehensive understanding of Tehran's motivations and strategies. This theoretical lens underscored how leadership perceptions, national



capabilities, and external constraints collectively shape Iran's foreign policy trajectory.

In essence, Iran's strategic realignment, as illuminated by this study, is a testament to its adaptive foreign policy strategy. While the road ahead is fraught with challenges, the opportunities for Iran in the emerging global landscape are significant. As the international system continues to evolve, Iran's role and the choices it makes will undoubtedly be pivotal in shaping the future geopolitical order.

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