

## Analysis and Evaluation of President Raisi's Eastward Policy

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### **Abstract**

This research aims to explore the strategic pivot in Iran's foreign policy toward Eastern countries under President Ebrahim Raisi. The study investigates the motivations behind this shift, its implications for Iran's international relations, and the effectiveness of this policy in achieving its intended goals. This article aims to dissect the conceptual underpinnings and theoretical content of Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy, situating it within broader theoretical and political contexts in international relations. The research question is: What are the driving forces behind Iran's increased engagement with Eastern countries under President Raisi, and how effective has this pivot been in enhancing Iran's geopolitical standing and economic stability? This article aims to prove analytically and descriptively the hypothesis that the Raisi administration's shift toward Eastern nations, particularly China and Russia, stems from a combination of economic necessity, geopolitical realignment, and the desire to evade Western sanctions. Findings: The research reveals that Raisi's policy has resulted in deeper economic and military collaborations with Eastern powers. However, while these moves have provided some economic relief and bolstered Iran's regional influence, they also present risks such as over-reliance on Eastern allies and potential geopolitical tensions with Western nations. The Raisi administration is orienting toward the East and establishing extensive ties with China and Russia in the military, economic, and security fields. The purpose of Iran's state is to form a global coalition against the US with Russia, China, and other states that oppose the Western world order.

**Keywords:** Iran, look to the East, Raisi's presidential term, Balanced foreign policy, Russia, China.

## Introduction

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran aimed to establish an independent foreign policy, free from the influence of Western and Eastern powers. People generally understand Iran's "Look East" policy as a strategy that aims to foster stronger political, economic, and strategic connections with Eastern hemisphere countries, particularly in Asia, with the goal of broadening alliance networks and reducing Iran's susceptibility to Western powers' influence (Azizi, 2023).

A variety of internal and external factors—particularly those that surfaced following the end of the Cold War in 1991—form the foundation of Iran's eastern policy. Below, we will delve into the various dimensions of these factors and their impact on Iran, which has consistently maintained strained relations with the West since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Despite the conclusion of the Sa'dabad Agreement in 2003 and the JCPOA in 2015, Iran and Western countries found themselves in a tense and uncertain situation due to the rupture of diplomatic relations with the U.S. and the problems and disputes in Iran's bilateral relations with the West. Iran adopted a unique foreign policy strategy, known as the "Pivot to the East" or "Eastern Strategy," to counteract the pressure from the West. In the 1990s, the Eastern Strategy concept gained prominence as a means to enhance relations with Russia, China, India, and other eastern states, as well as Latin America, especially in the aftermath of the U.S. "Dual Containment" Strategy in the Middle East. However, it primarily sought to curb relations with the U.S. and European countries and instead promote relations with eastern powers. This was particularly evident during the administration of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), during which the head of administration and his foreign minister emphasized the importance of this strategy. This strategy effectively improved Iran's relations with several eastern countries, elevating China to the top of the list of Iran's trade partners (Sanaei and Karami, 2022).

On the other hand, Raisi's foreign policy results from the interactions among domestic actors, developments in international politics, and government institutions. International politics, being dynamic in nature, also plays a significant role in shaping Raisi's foreign policy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine led to changes in the foreign policies of global and regional powers, as well as the effectiveness of international organizations like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN). Researchers in international relations saw the Russian invasion of

Ukraine as a turning point in international politics with implications for the international system. Under the leadership of the US, the Western front, previously scattered and divided during the Trump administration, united against Russia and sought to adopt a uniform policy for other global challenges. On the other hand, the Eastern powers like China took a more conservative and cautious approach.

Ebrahim Raisi's policies are generating outcomes in different political, economic, cultural, and social aspects of Iranian society. Different dimensions allow for the analysis, explanation, and assessment of these policies. Capable of influencing the success or failure of the government's plans, foreign policy is a major part of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the Raisi administration.

This article primarily focuses on the analysis of the foreign policy of the Raisi administration, with a particular focus on its approach toward the East. This article poses the question, "What were the features and characteristics of the Raisi administration's look-to-the-east policy in the foreign sphere?" The main goal of the Raisi administration's look-to-the-east policy was to achieve a multipolar order in the international system and to resist the hegemonic system of the West. In this regard, the Raisi administration made concerted efforts to establish partnerships or even alliances with eastern powers such as China and Russia and membership in organizations such as BRICS and Shanghai. This article includes the history of the Look East policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the main foreign policy, the coordinates of the Look East policy, and the main foreign policy toward the great powers.

### **1. Theoretical and Historical Foundations of Iran's 'Look to the East' Policy**

Iran's 'Look to the East' policy, marked by an increasing focus on alliances with Eastern powers such as China and Russia, is not only a pragmatic response to changing global dynamics but also a manifestation of deeper theoretical trends in international relations. This policy shift can be understood as part of Iran's broader vision of autonomy, sovereignty, and resistance against Western dominance, drawing on various ideological, historical, and geopolitical foundations.

At the heart of Iran's 'Look to the East' policy is the concept of multipolarity—the idea that the global order should be characterized by multiple centers of power rather than a single dominant power. This shift is a direct challenge to the unipolar world that emerged after the Cold War, in which the United States asserted hegemonic

control over global economic, political, and security systems. The theory of multipolarity, commonly explored in critical geopolitics and international relations theory, argues that a global system with multiple influential states or regions promotes stability, diversity, and equity in global governance (Gill, 1988).

For Iran, the move toward multipolarity is not merely a geopolitical strategy but a reflection of a broader philosophical stance against the centralized, U.S.-dominated global order. Iran seeks to establish a global order that distributes power more evenly, preventing any single state or coalition of states from unilaterally dictating global norms, by forging alliances with China, Russia, and other non-Western actors. Postcolonial thought roots this perspective, where historically subjugated or marginalized nations seek to assert their own agency in the international system.

The theory of sovereignty plays a central role in Iran's foreign policy. Sovereignty, in the classical sense, refers to a state's ability to make decisions without external interference. In the context of Iran's 'Look to the East' policy, sovereignty is not only a legal or political principle but also a moral and existential imperative. The Iranian leadership has repeatedly emphasized the necessity of strategic autonomy in the face of Western interventions, particularly U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. In a world where powerful states often dictate the terms of engagement, Iran views this autonomy as essential for maintaining its identity and independence.

In theoretical terms, the notion of autonomy in Iran's policy mirrors the idea of self-determination, a principle that has been central to both national and global political discourse, particularly among nations that have faced foreign domination. Iran's pivot toward Eastern powers, especially those like China and Russia that have similarly experienced tensions with Western powers, represents a collective stance on protecting sovereign rights and resisting external pressures. This alignment is grounded in a shared understanding of imperialism and interventionism, which regards the sovereignty of nations as essential to establishing a just international order.

One can also understand Iran's 'Look to the East' policy as a part of a broader philosophical critique of Western liberalism. The West, particularly the U.S., has long promoted a liberal international order—characterized by free markets, democracy, and human rights—as the ideal global framework. However, critics often criticize this order for its hypocrisy, selective enforcement, and dominance by a small group of powerful states. People perceive the

Eastern alternatives, represented by China and Russia, as providing a more egalitarian and multipolar model of international relations. Philosophically, this aligns with a broader tradition of anti-globalization thought that critiques the homogenizing forces of Western neoliberalism, advocating instead for a global order that is more diverse, decentralized, and culturally respectful. The shift toward the East, therefore, is not merely a political or economic choice but a philosophical stance against the idea that one way of life should dominate others. People view Iran's engagement with Eastern powers as a step toward a more pluralistic world, where different governance systems and cultural values can coexist without one imposing its will on the other (Fukuyama, 1992).

The 'Look to the East' policy emerges from a complex ideational matrix shaped by historical experiences, ideological commitments, and strategic necessities. Central to this policy is the belief that Western powers have consistently undermined Iran's sovereignty and development through economic sanctions and political pressures. Consequently, the Raisi administration posits that a strategic pivot toward Eastern nations—particularly China and Russia—offers a pragmatic alternative to reduce dependence on the West and bolster Iran's geopolitical standing.

- *Historical Context:* Iran's historical experiences with colonialism and imperialism have profoundly shaped its foreign policy outlook. The legacy of Western interventionism has fostered a pervasive skepticism about Western intentions. Raisi's policy reflects a historical narrative aimed at counteracting the perceived hegemonic tendencies of Western powers by strengthening relationships with Eastern nations, which are viewed as more equitable partners.
- *Ideological Resonance:* Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy resonates with the ideological tenets of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which emphasizes resistance against Western hegemony and the promotion of a multipolar world order. The policy aligns with the broader ideological framework of the Iranian state, which advocates for a strategic realignment that challenges the unipolar dominance of the West and supports a more balanced global power structure.

Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy can be examined from multiple perspectives:

- **Realist Perspective:** From a realist perspective, the policy represents a strategic response to the shifting dynamics of international power. Realism emphasizes the pursuit of national

interests and security through power balancing (Waltz, 1979). Raisi's approach reflects a pragmatic adjustment to the evolving power landscape, seeking to enhance Iran's strategic position by aligning with rising Eastern powers. In an increasingly multipolar world, this alignment serves as a counterbalance to Western influence and secures Iran's national interests.

- **Constructivist Insights:** Constructivist theories highlight the role of identity, norms, and social constructs in shaping foreign policy. (Wendt, 1999). Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy is not only a strategic choice but also a reflection of constructed identities and norms within Iran. The policy embodies a collective identity that resists Western dominance and seeks to forge a new alignment based on shared historical experiences and ideological affinities with Eastern countries. This constructivist perspective underscores the role of ideational factors and identity in influencing Iran's foreign policy decisions.
- **Philosophy of Resistance:** The policy also reflects a philosophical commitment to resistance and self-reliance. The 'Look to the East' policy embodies a broader philosophy of resilience against external pressures and sanctions. It represents an ideological stance that values sovereignty and independence over dependence on Western economic and political systems. This philosophy underscores a commitment to national dignity and the pursuit of alternative pathways for development and security.

In practical terms, Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy involves several strategic initiatives:

- **Economic Cooperation:** The policy has resulted in increased economic cooperation with Eastern countries, including significant trade agreements and investments. This economic engagement aims to mitigate the impact of Western sanctions and provide alternative sources of revenue and technology.
- **Military and Security Cooperation:** The Raisi administration has sought to strengthen military and security ties with Eastern partners, enhancing Iran's defensive capabilities and regional influence. This includes joint military exercises and strategic partnerships that serve to bolster Iran's security and deterrence posture.
- **Diplomatic Realignment:** The policy involves a diplomatic realignment toward Eastern countries, reflected in increased high-level visits, bilateral agreements, and collaborative initiatives. This diplomatic shift is intended to foster stronger political and economic ties with Eastern nations and to



counterbalance Western influence.

The 'Look to the East' policy dates back to the 1960s. During the American-Soviet Detente in the 1960s, Iran aimed to reduce tensions with the Soviet Union, foster stronger relations, and establish itself as a regional power in the Middle East. In response to this policy, the Soviet Union established many factories in Iranian cities like Ahvaz and Isfahan.

President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani faced the dual challenges of international isolation and economic hardship in the early 1990s. The catastrophic effects of the eight-year war with Iraq made economic reconstruction a primary priority. However, strained relations with the West barred Iran from sourcing Western investments for its economic activities. In the face of these hurdles, Iran saw opportunities in the collapse of the Soviet Union and looked toward cooperating with the newly independent neighboring republics. Furthermore, Iran sought to strengthen its relations with Asian countries, adopting a developmental model with the aim of transforming itself into an "Islamic Japan." Iran aimed to expand its diplomatic and economic frontiers toward Eastern countries, viewing them as potential markets for its oil and gas exports, as well as potential sources of investment and technology transfer. However, during the 1990s, Iran's eastward orientation was not yet a robust strategy but rather a tactical response to internal and external pressures. Factors such as ideological differences, Western influence on Asian countries, and regional rivalries curtailed the effectiveness of the policy. (Azizi, 2023)

In the 2000s, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the then president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, introduced the concept of 'Look to the East' policy as a principle and goal in his foreign policy. The Islamic Republic interpreted the "east" as the culture and civilization of the East, with a focus on regional perspectives. This pragmatic perspective, rooted in reason, embraces integration and can be effectively implemented within the framework of "alliances and coalitions." An outlined definition of the identity, status, and geography of the East can guarantee the strengthening of Iran's national interests. Iranians and foreign policy-makers focused on this policy during the Ahmadinejad administration since Iran was disappointed in the West and a distrustful atmosphere prevailed in Iran-West relations, particularly about Iran's nuclear program (Askari, 2020). Raisi's term highlights and intensifies this approach.

The experience of an eastward foreign policy during Ahmadinejad's government indicates the inefficacy of the approach

in securing Iran's national interests. Russia has regulated its economic, military, and security cooperation with Iran in response to US concerns and worries. The absence of economic investments, delaying the delivery of the S300 missile system, backing Israeli attacks on Syria, joining the US in enforcing targeted sanctions, and approving resolutions against Iran are all indications of a self-serving Russian policy that disregards Iran's national interests. During the Ahmadinejad administration, China also voted in favor of the anti-Iranian resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

## **2. Strategic Principles and Core Orientations Under President Raisi**

Iran's foreign policy during Ebrahim Raisi's term can be considered a replacement for the Western-leaning approach during the Rouhani administration. Islamic Republic policymakers now believe that, with the hostile decisions enforced by western countries, the West's approach to Iran has not changed. They also argue that the situation has intensified to such an extent that Donald Trump, the former US president, has adopted a maximum pressure policy against Iran, in addition to withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Raisi's foreign policy aims to revitalize the revolution that fought against US hegemony and expel American forces from the region, especially Iraq. The key component of "Resistance" is the key component of this revolutionary side of the "Axis of Resistance" that pursues geopolitical opposition with the US and Israel in the region. He has also verified Iran's "resistance economy" as a means to circumvent the US sanctions (Forough, 2021).

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the late former foreign minister of Iran, described Iran's foreign policy strategy as a "balanced foreign policy." He asserted, "The 21st century belongs to Asia, where we see emerging economic powers" (Amir-Abdollahian, 2022). According to Amir-Abdollahian, Iranian diplomacy aimed to expand relations with all countries through an "Asia-centered" perspective, with a particular focus on strengthening ties with Iran's neighbors, guided by a deep understanding of global developments. In this context, the concept of "balanced foreign policy" sought to enhance Iran's capacity to protect its national interests while maintaining its strategic independence.

In 2021, Ebrahim Raisi's election heralded a new phase in Iran's 'Look to the East' policy. His policy is premised on the belief that Eastern countries, particularly China and Russia, are more reliable



partners for Iran than the West. The Raisi administration achieved significant progress by executing the 25-year strategic partnership agreement with China, securing full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and enhancing trade relations with Russia. Russia's war in Ukraine, coupled with the escalating global rivalry between the United States and China, has reinforced Iran's perception of the "West's decline." Consequently, Iran has placed greater faith in its economic and geopolitical prospects through partnerships with Moscow, Beijing, and other non-Western powers. For Raisi and his administration, the "Look East" strategy holds the potential to not only counter the impact of American sanctions on Iran but also expand Iran's range of strategic options in the long run (Azizi, 2023).

Raisi's foreign policy has become unidimensional due to the consolidation of various institutions and the alignment of the government with other state bodies in shaping Iran's relations with other countries, particularly its neighbors.

The US's denial of the JCPOA recertification in 2018 led Iran's political system to highlight the US's untrustworthiness. Iran then adopted the 'Look to the East' policy in its foreign policy, a strategy known as the "Iranian pivot to Asia." "This pivot, which is Raisi's main foreign policy priority, has both geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions to it" (Forough, 2021, p. 4).

Since the inauguration of the Raisi administration in 2020, Iran's foreign policy has shifted from focusing on the West and building relations with the US and Europe to focusing on the East and strengthening relations with Russia and China. Despite receiving strong support from conservative factions, since Raisi's inauguration in 2020, Iran's foreign policy has shifted from focusing on the West and building relationships with the US and Europe to focusing on the East and strengthening ties with Russia and China. Despite strong opposition from conservative factions, other foreign policy-making institutions successfully implemented the "Look East" policy. The Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iranian Parliament) is also in line with the government's policies. In the beginning, the uniformity of power created much hope for resolving Iran's economic problems; however, gradually the US disagreements with Iran and efforts to win further points, the US inflexibility in the talks, and the Russo-Ukrainian War put a stop to JCPOA talks. (Zaccara, 2021). The Islamic Consultative Assembly (Iranian Parliament) is also in line with the government's policies. In the beginning, the uniformity of power created much hope for resolving

Iran's economic problems; however, gradually, US disagreements with Iran, efforts to win further points, US inflexibility in the talks, the Russo-Ukrainian War, and unrest in Iran put a stop to JCPOA talks, which influenced Iran's foreign policy.

A domestic consequence of the Look-to-the-East policy has been the increased homogenization of the sociopolitical structure and the contraction of the middle class. Additionally, this policy marginalized reformists who advocated looking to the West, eliminating them from the political structure of Iran (Heirannia, 2022).

In Raisi's foreign policy, Iran has endeavored to fortify its ties with emerging powers such as China, Russia, and India, all within the confines of the international framework. This strategy is based on the shifting economic-political balance toward Asia and the resulting opportunities. Accordingly, Iran's shift toward regionalism in Eurasia and its ongoing efforts to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) represent the advancement of the new global order and pledge to pursue "a balanced, active, dynamic, and smart foreign policy based on mutual respect, prioritizing relations with neighbors and Asia, developing balanced relations with all regions of the world, and strengthening the role of economic diplomacy and international trade" upon his confirmation as Raisi's foreign minister (Amir-Abdollahian, 2021).

At the beginning of his term, the Raisi administration emphasized its goals to revive the JCPOA, attract economic investments in Iran, adopt an east-leaning policy, and reinforce Iran's economic power under the slogan "powerful Iran." Raisi's foreign policy encompasses "Asia-centered" geopolitical dynamics, including:

- Cooperation with Russia and China,
- Membership in the Shanghai Organization and BRICS: Iran's government has achieved a significant milestone by successfully joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization after years of arduous efforts. Alongside this achievement, Iran's foreign policy agenda includes collaboration with the BRICS member states, aiming to diversify access to international resources and means to meet economic, monetary, and financial requirements. By becoming a member of these leading political, security, and economic mechanisms, Iran demonstrates its unwavering determination to play a consequential role in shaping multilateral structures and mechanisms. The SCO comprises member states that represent approximately 40% of the global population and possess 20% of the world's gross domestic product. These

countries engage in trade surpassing \$650 billion annually. A key motive behind countries' efforts to join the SCO lies in their desire to counter unilateral policies and actions, particularly from the West, notably the United States. Iran, recognizing the shifting dynamics of the international arena, has strategically entered the SCO with a resolute and steadfast will, aligning with the organization's vision of "progressive and independent development." This move comes as power gradually transfers from the West to the East, with America and Europe experiencing a decline in their ability to control international developments. Meanwhile, China, Russia, BRICS members, and influential Asian regional powers have capitalized on these opportunities and assumed more active roles in global affairs. (Bagheri, 2023)

- Collaboration and cooperation with the Afghan government following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.
- Furthermore, Iran engages in diplomatic discussions with its regional adversaries, primarily Saudi Arabia, with the aim of alleviating tensions in the Middle East. The restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after nearly seven years, facilitated by China's commendable mediation efforts, marks a pivotal shift in Iran's foreign policy. It is anticipated that the expansion of these ties across multiple dimensions in 2023–2024 will not only reshape the regional landscape but also influence the strategic orientations of major global powers in ways favorable to Iran. From a strategic standpoint, this political reconciliation has the potential to foster positive developments across various sectors and unlock opportunities for bilateral cooperation, which have remained largely untapped due to the influence of extraregional powers and longstanding political-ideological differences between the two nations. In this regard, Iran should prioritize strengthening its cooperation with the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and transforming it into one of the most effective regional security treaties. Iran and Saudi Arabia should prioritize establishing a unified approach and coordinated foreign policy among the countries belonging to the Islamic World, fostering coordination and alignment in pursuing the common interests and goals of the Islamic World, and fostering regional peace and cooperation in the New Year. Of course, this improvement of relations between the two key countries of the West Asian region can have wider regional consequences and achievements. If properly managed, it

will also help to improve the relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran with other neighbors, especially the Arab neighbors. The Islamic Republic of Iran has so far taken practical steps to improve its relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. It is necessary to follow this process in relations with other Arab countries (Strategic Council of Foreign Relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2023).

### **3. Iran's Bilateral Relations and Strategic Partnerships with Eastern Powers**

It seems that the elite and politicians working under the Raisi administration have placed trust in the Russians and Chinese. They assume that Russia and China will support Iran economically, politically, and in terms of security against the West, led by the US. They believe Russia and China will form an anti-Western coalition with Iran.

By becoming a member of BRICS and the Shanghai Organization and being close to Russia and China, Iran is trying to change the world order from the unipolar one and strengthen the multipolar order in the world. In this regard, the Iranian government sought to structure its foreign policy toward the global powers in the following manner:

The Islamic Republic's view of the international system is based on three axes of global power. The first—the liberal order based on institutions and laws created after World War II—is weakening because American hegemony is declining. Russia and China form a second axis that is on the rise. The third axis unites Iran with this emerging new global order, which includes Moscow and Beijing (Heiranniaia, 2022).

According to Dareini, “Iranian strategists are convinced that the US's strategic direction toward Iran remains unchanged. Weakening Iran economically and preventing its prosperity and economic development has been a key goal of both Republican and Democratic administrations” (Dareini, 2021).

By consolidating power and imposing various human rights, political, economic, and security sanctions on Iran, alongside supporting the 2022 protesters, the Western-aligned structure of the international system sought to challenge Iran's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the Raisi administration successfully implemented its foreign policy objectives, effectively managing and containing the crisis. Iran's primary concerns regarding the United States have been clearly identified:

- U.S. forces in the Middle East
- U.S. arms and aid to adversaries, including Saudi Arabia and Israel
- Economic sanctions
- Sabotage and cyber-attacks on its nuclear program
- Diplomatic pressure and condemnation of the government
- Support for opposition groups (The Iran Primer, 2023)

At this point, the Iranian government criticized the western powers, especially America, for their interference in Iran's internal affairs, the imposition of extensive sanctions, their support for riots, and their role in creating insecurity in Iran.

Some analysts highlight several potential opportunities for Iran, the most significant of which include fostering strong relationships with influential eastern players, leveraging energy exports as a strategic asset, and leveraging Iran's unique position in relations with China, India, and other eastern nations. Additionally, Iran's advantageous geopolitical and geoeconomic position in the region and, consequently, globally, fosters interdependence among nations and enhances security in the new era (Adami, 2013, p. 120).

The Russia-Iran relationship holds crucial importance in shaping future international developments, with institutionalized and strategic ties between the two nations. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, a crisis with global ramifications, is an ongoing concern that we aspire to see resolved promptly, with the West stopping its interventions. Irrespective of this conflict, Russia possesses the capacity to assume a renewed role in forthcoming international developments and the global multipolar order. The Iranian government has placed significant emphasis on deepening interactions with Russia, seeking to establish the North-South transit route as a prominent agenda item in foreign policy discussions. Bilateral trade and investment have increased substantially, fostering enhanced international cooperation. Defense collaboration has also advanced, bolstering the defense capabilities and deterrence capacity of Iran. Russia plays a pivotal role in peaceful nuclear energy, particularly in the construction of nuclear power plants in Iran, further strengthening cooperation in this area (Bagheri, 2023).

Iran's position and role are crucial for the eastern strategy, given its experience of effective cooperation with Russia in the field of counterterrorism and stabilization in other countries, its national and regional capacities, its important role in the ECO, and its geopolitical position in the north-south corridor and the Asian Silk Road. To put it another way, Iran plays a crucial role in any regional and international initiative or order. Iran is the interface of cultural, intellectual,

security, and institutional trends in the three strategic regions of the Middle East, Eurasia, and Asia. These important communication features, along with economic, energy, and security capabilities, can give Iran an important position as a responsible and positive actor in shaping the future regional and international system. The experience of effective Iranian-Russian security cooperation in Syria will be an important possibility for stability and security in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Sanaci and Karami, 2022).

Strengthening Iran-Russia relations depends on the overlaying of regional and international security interests. Tehran has fixed its regional policy in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus in line with Russia's interests. This aspect of security is a basis of the post-Cold War bilateral relations of Russia and Iran. Furthermore, the decline in US international influence—evident since the 2000s—has enabled Russia and Iran to forge a shared ideological narrative opposing "western powers." Iran also aims to leverage Russia's influence to counteract the US's confrontational policy against Iran, which includes efforts to change the regime or alter its behavior. That is to say, Tehran has added a new dimension to its relationship with Moscow by seeking to preserve the main ideological tenets of its regime. Since 1991, this relationship has become crucial for the survival of a regime grappling with both domestic opposition and external pressure from Washington, a pressure that intensified during the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021 (Therme, 2022:5).

From the earliest stages of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the Raisi administration has maintained a cautious yet close relationship with Russia. Russia is among the states that have cooperated with Tehran in security and defense (Garduno Garcia, 2022). In Iran's view, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and tensions between the US and China will soon defy the US sanctions.

The Western (American and European) media and politicians believe that Russia is trying to introduce Iran as its ally in continuing the war in Ukraine. In their view, Iran has entered the war by sending military drones and aids to Russia to be used against Ukraine (which is widely and unprecedentedly supported by the West). The Iranian government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have refuted this connection, considering it a manipulation by the media. This has been strongly promoted by the Western media for a year, mobilizing Western and world public opinion against Russia to justify large-scale military, advisory, and economic aid to Ukraine. The public opinion in the West has become anti-Russian.



Exacerbating the situation, European governments—particularly Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—are pursuing additional sanctions against Iran while simultaneously interfering in its domestic affairs by supporting the continuation and intensification of internal unrest.

The Iranian government has prioritized long-term cooperation with China, leading to the successful implementation of strategic agreements between the two nations. This collaboration has resulted in a notable surge in bilateral economic relations, positively influencing Iran's GDP growth and trade balance. Furthermore, political engagements with China have expanded across various domains, allowing Iran to establish a meaningful presence on the global stage. Defense cooperation has also flourished, evident through joint military exercises involving Iran, Russia, and China, highlighting the commitment to safeguard regional and international peace. (Bagheri, 2023)

Ebrahim Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy marks a significant reorientation in Iran's foreign policy, characterized by a deliberate pivot from engagement with the West toward deepening strategic partnerships with Eastern powers, particularly China and Russia. Central to this approach is the belief that alignment with these nations—both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—can bolster Iran's economic resilience and provide critical diplomatic cover, especially in relation to its nuclear program. Raisi has emphasized the importance of cooperation within multilateral frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), viewing these institutions as platforms for advancing Iran's economic interests and enhancing regional peace and security..

This eastward shift is grounded in both pragmatic and ideological considerations. On a strategic level, it represents an effort to counterbalance U.S. pressure by fostering closer ties with powers outside the Western bloc. Economically, it reflects recognition of the shifting global order, in which Eastern countries—especially China—have emerged as new centers of wealth creation and industrial capacity. Whereas economic power was once concentrated in the hands of Western states, the rise of Asia has offered alternative sources of trade, investment, and technological cooperation. Upon taking office, Raisi prioritized strengthening Iran's economic and political relations with China, Russia, and regional actors such as the Eurasian Economic Union. His administration views permanent membership in the SCO as a means of unlocking economic opportunities and obtaining political-security support in the face of Western hostility. This optimism

among Iran's executive elite is rooted in the belief that Eastern partnerships can help mitigate domestic economic challenges and reinforce Iran's geopolitical leverage.

Nonetheless, the 'Look to the East' policy presents both opportunities and limitations. While it offers an alternative to Western dependency and aligns with Iran's resistance-oriented foreign policy doctrine, it also risks increasing Iran's reliance on a narrow set of external partners. The success of this policy is contingent upon the reliability of Eastern allies and the stability of international alignments—both of which are subject to fluctuation. Moreover, as Kamrava (2021) argues, while the policy reflects a coherent ideological orientation and a calculated strategic rationale, its long-term viability depends on broader geopolitical shifts and the evolving dynamics of global power distribution. Using an international relations framework, the 'Look to the East' policy may thus be critically assessed through strategic, economic, security, political, and diplomatic lenses, revealing both its potential as a counter-hegemonic tool and its susceptibility to external constraints.

#### **a) Strategic Dimension**

From a strategic standpoint, Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy represents a pragmatic realignment aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of Western sanctions and pressures. Realism, a dominant theory in international relations, emphasizes the pursuit of national interests and balance of power. Raisi's policy aligns with this perspective by seeking to enhance Iran's strategic leverage through partnerships with Eastern powers.

**1- Geopolitical Realignment:** The pivot toward Eastern alliances aims to offset Western dominance and mitigate Iran's geopolitical vulnerabilities. By engaging with China and Russia, Iran aims to diversify its strategic partnerships and diminish its reliance on Western-centric international systems.

**2- Strategic Diversification:** The policy also reflects a strategic diversification strategy, enabling Iran to hedge against the risks associated with over-reliance on any single bloc. This diversification seeks to enhance Iran's resilience in a rapidly changing global order.

However, this approach is not without risks. The deepening dependency on Eastern partners may limit Iran's strategic autonomy and expose it to new forms of influence and control. Moreover, the effectiveness of this strategy is contingent upon the stability and reliability of Eastern allies, which could be subject to fluctuations in international relations.

**b) Political Dimension**

Politically, Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy represents a significant departure from previous administrations' more balanced approach. Reiterating Iran's sovereignty and reducing Western interference in its domestic affairs drives this policy.

**1- Sovereignty and Autonomy:** The policy underscores a commitment to protecting national sovereignty against perceived Western encroachment. By aligning with Eastern powers, Iran aims to strengthen its political autonomy and assert its position in the global arena.

**2- Domestic Legitimacy:** The policy also serves to bolster Raisi's domestic legitimacy by appealing to nationalist sentiments and showcasing a firm stance against Western pressure. It reinforces the narrative of resistance and self-reliance, which resonates with significant segments of the Iranian population.

Despite these advantages, the policy may encounter domestic challenges. There could be skepticism about the effectiveness of relying heavily on Eastern partners and potential criticisms regarding the long-term implications for Iran's political and strategic autonomy.

**c) Security Dimension**

From a security perspective, the 'Look to the East' policy involves significant military and strategic dimensions. Iran's security strategy has historically emphasized deterrence and regional influence, and this policy represents an extension of these objectives.

**1- Military Collaboration:** The Raisi administration has sought to enhance military cooperation with Eastern countries, including joint exercises and defense agreements. This collaboration aims to bolster Iran's defensive capabilities and deter potential adversaries.

**2- Strategic Partnerships:** The policy seeks to leverage strategic partnerships with China and Russia to counterbalance U.S. and Western military presence in the region. This involves not only military cooperation but also strategic dialogues to address common security concerns.

However, the security dimension of the policy faces several challenges. Increased military collaboration with Eastern powers may provoke reactions from other regional actors and complicate Iran's relationships with Western countries. Additionally, reliance on external military support could impact Iran's strategic flexibility and lead to potential dependency issues.

**d) Economic Dimension**

Economically, Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy aims to address the challenges posed by Western sanctions and economic isolation. The

policy focuses on enhancing economic ties with Eastern nations, particularly in trade, investment, and technology transfer.

**1- Economic Partnerships:** The policy has led to increased trade agreements and investments from Eastern countries. Notably, Iran has sought to capitalize on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secure substantial investments in infrastructure and energy sectors.

**2- Economic Resilience:** By diversifying its economic partnerships, Iran aims to reduce its vulnerability to Western sanctions and economic pressures. This diversification seeks to create alternative revenue streams and enhance economic resilience.

Nevertheless, the economic advantages of the policy are mitigated by potential challenges. Economic dependence on a few Eastern powers may limit Iran's negotiating leverage and expose it to economic vulnerabilities. Additionally, the effectiveness of these economic partnerships is dependent on the stability and commitment of Eastern partners.

#### **e) Diplomatic Dimension**

Diplomatically, Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy reflects a strategic pivot aimed at reconfiguring Iran's international alliances and partnerships.

**1- Diplomatic Engagement:** The policy has led to increased diplomatic engagement with Eastern countries, including high-level visits, bilateral agreements, and cooperative initiatives. This engagement seeks to strengthen political and economic ties and enhance Iran's international standing.

**2- Multilateral Dynamics:** The policy also involves navigating multilateral frameworks involving Eastern powers. For example, Iran has sought to engage more actively in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and enhance its role in regional and global forums.

Despite these diplomatic efforts, the policy may encounter several obstacles. The shift toward Eastern alliances could strain Iran's relationships with traditional Western partners and impact its ability to participate in Western-led multilateral initiatives. Additionally, the policy's effectiveness in achieving diplomatic goals will depend on the evolving dynamics of international relations and the broader geopolitical context.

#### **Conclusion**

Iran's 'Look to the East' policy is not merely a tactical response to the challenges posed by Western sanctions and pressures; it is a deeply philosophical and ideological stance that challenges the

prevailing assumptions of the global order. By pursuing multipolarity, sovereignty, and an alternative vision of global governance, Iran seeks to carve out a space where nations, particularly in the Global South, can assert their independence and resist the imposition of Western norms. This shift reflects a broader philosophical critique of the liberal international order and a call for a more diverse, decentralized world order based on respect for regional autonomy and cultural diversity.

The 'Look to the East' policy under Ebrahim Raisi represents a multifaceted strategic shift driven by historical experiences, ideological commitments, and philosophical considerations. It reflects a broader quest for sovereignty, resistance to Western dominance, and the pursuit of strategic realignment in a changing global order. As Iran continues to navigate its foreign policy landscape, the implications of this doctrine will likely unfold in complex and evolving ways, shaping the future trajectory of Iran's international relations. Ebrahim Raisi's 'Look to the East' policy seeks to address Iran's geopolitical challenges and enhance its position in a changing global order. From a strategic, political, security, economic, and diplomatic perspective, the policy reflects a pragmatic response to Western pressures and an attempt to leverage partnerships with Eastern powers.

However, the policy is not without risks and challenges. The potential for greater dependency on Eastern allies, the complexities of managing international relations, and the need for effective implementation of economic and security agreements present substantial challenges.

Trump's anti-Iranian actions convinced the Raisi administration that trusting the West and expanding relations with western countries will not only fail to safeguard Iran's national interests but also cause irreparable damage to the Islamic Republic's political system. Thus, Iran's foreign policy adopted a look-to-the-East strategy. We can assess the adoption of the 'Look to the East' policy in Raisi's foreign policy from two perspectives. First, the Raisi administration attempted to use the capacity of Russia and China to neutralize the US efforts to form an international consensus against the Islamic Republic. Second, the recent emergence of the East as a source of power and wealth has paved the way to address some of Iran's needs. In Raisi's view, the old Western order is declining, and a new Eastern order is replacing it.

People view his foreign policy as a continuation of the Islamic Republic's ideological goals.. The overall nature of Iran's foreign

policy and strategic orientation remained unchanged when Raisi came to power. Nonetheless, there were changes in tactics, tone, and priorities in Iran's foreign policy. He specified two general priorities: improving relations with Iran's neighbors and developing ties with Asian countries, including China and Russia. Analysts assessed this as a revision in Iran's foreign policy and the beginning of a new era. Iran has sought to sustain and expand economic and military relations with Beijing and Moscow, reflected in what the analysts have called the 'Look to the East' policy.

Despite the strategic benefits, Iran's Look East policy is not without its challenges. For instance, pragmatic calculations, rather than ideological alignment, often drive China and Russia's crucial partnerships. China's growing economic and geopolitical interests in the Middle East may at times conflict with Iran's priorities, particularly in areas such as energy security and regional stability. Moreover, the long-term sustainability of Iran's economic ties with East Asia is dependent on the broader global economic environment, which includes fluctuations in oil prices and China's domestic economic policies.

The Raisi administration strives to pursue diverse demands and considerations in its foreign policy and protects Iran's interests and security, which seeks to strengthen and increase Shia ideology internationally and military power and security to ensure the regime's survival. The Raisi administration orientation is toward the East, with a focus on establishing extensive military, economic, and security ties with China and Russia. The purpose of the Raisi administration is to form a global coalition against the US with Russia, China, and other states that oppose the Western world order.



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