

## **Iran's regional centrality and isolation**

*The U.S. has a tough choice between its strategic objectives in West Asia and the implications of Iran's location*

### **Hamid Ansari**

A recent essay in Foreign Affairs argues that “Tehran has not achieved any of its lofty ambitions, but it has made progress towards them – and it is feeling emboldened by its recent successes”. It argues that “Iran is both self-assured and deeply insecure”, “displays external vigour that conceals ultimately incurable internal maladies”, has “built its foreign policy on the twin pillars of confronting the United States and Israel” and is “closer to realising its vision than it was a decade ago”. Yet, despite its success in cultivating militant groups across West Asia, there are tangible signs that it has overreached and that two-thirds of young Arabs in the region now view Iran as an adversary. The essay concedes that “Washington’s perception of Iran has suffered from four decades of estrangement and strategic narcissism”. Given the geopolitical and historical backdrop of Iran, does this reflect the totality of the country’s interests and strategic perceptions?

A decade earlier, John Limbert, former senior diplomat who was one of the hostages of the embassy siege of 1979, felt certain rules seem to guide U.S. policy over the years. They include: “(i) Never walk through an open door. Instead, bang your head against a wall; (ii) Never say yes to anything that the other side proposes. Doing so will make you weak; and (iii) The other side is infinitely hostile, devious, domineering and irrational. It is the embodiment of all that is evil.”

### **Political stability**

With an area of 1.6 million sq km, Iran is the 18th largest country in the world in terms of area. It shares land borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Iraq and maritime borders with Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. In its long history it has experienced periods of conflict, imperial dominance and foreign occupation and most recently, a revolution. All these left a mark on its collective memory. Its culture has been hugely influential in world history and rightly depicted as an ‘Empire of the Mind.’

Since the revolution of 1979, and the end of the U.S. security umbrella under the latter’s Twin Pillars policy, Iran has been concerned about national security given its long and porous borders with Iraq and Afghanistan. Refugees have poured in from Afghanistan and an armed aggression resulted in the decade-long war with Iraq. With Pakistan, there was a moment of unease after the Bangladesh War of 1971, but was soon set at rest by India.

Despite the upheavals of the post-revolutionary era and the war, Iran maintained a degree of political stability. This was thanks to its power structure, based on a multitude of loosely connected and generally fiercely competitive power centres. These power centres remain formally grounded in the Constitution and the structure emanating from it and actually grounded in the religio-political associations emanating from the clerical leadership that retains an exclusive grip on state power. Each of these also has its own factional tussles with its own power to facilitate or obstruct individual policies. The locus of individual decisions therefore is always a challenging exercise.

Revolutionary slogans apart, Iran's foreign policy has focused on safeguarding independence, national sovereignty, and national interests and is characterised by conscious adjustment to the reality of regional interests in what has been described as the reality of strategic loneliness. This was evident in the ambivalent reaction to the U.S. attack on Iraq.

The end of the Khomeini era, and the period of Hashemi Rafsanjani, witnessed Iran's attempts to regain a role in regional affairs. These initiatives were built upon by former President Mohammad Khatami. A beginning was made with regional policy envisaging three circles: the Persian Gulf, the Arab East and Eurasia.

### **Relationship with the U.S.**

Apart from other matters, contention between the West and Iran developed on the latter's nuclear energy plans, which were initially developed before the revolution with U.S. assistance, but viewed very differently subsequently. Iranian scientists in the meantime developed them to the stage when alarm bells were sounded about their intentions.

All of this is reflected in Iran's relationship with the U.S., which underwent an overnight transition. Initially an ally, Iran became hostile and bitter in individual and national terms. Over time, the perception tended to change; in the past three decades, attempts have been made to mend matters. There were many issues of contention, each with its own subjective angles, but they came to be focused on the nuclear question.

In May 2003, and after America's success in the Iraq war, Iran offered through the Swiss intermediary full negotiations with the U.S. This was ignored by the George Bush administration. In October 2003, the Tehran Declaration was reached between Iran and the European Union (EU). Iran agreed to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) including the Additional Protocol, and temporarily suspend all uranium enrichment. In September and October 2003, the IAEA conducted several facility inspections. In July 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was concluded between Iran and the P5+1 and the EU. The Donald Trump administration

certified Iran's compliance with the agreements twice in 2017, but in May 2018, withdrew from it promising a better deal. This did not happen.

After changes of administration in both Tehran and Washington, quiet negotiations were resumed in Vienna in the expectation of an early success with an Iranian insistence on returning to the original terms of the JCPOA. The Ukraine war and the western regime of sanctions on Russia become an impediment; so is the Iranian insistence that U.S. sanctions be lifted on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, so effective in Iraq, Syria and with Hezbollah, and also playing a role in the Iranian economy. Some of the Gulf Cooperation Council states are supporting a powerful U.S.-lobby in this endeavour.

Despite being a victim of the regime of sanctions for long, Iran has been unrelenting in the development of military technologies. This is evident from its growing capabilities for asymmetric warfare in the region and its success in creating conventionally armed, precision-guided missiles and more effective air defence. Alongside is the apprehension of Iran crossing the much-dreaded nuclear threshold in a region that has India, Pakistan and Israel (undeclared) as nuclear capable nations. Some experts believe that if the stalemate in negotiations continues, Iran may even give notice of withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and, in a play on Israel's policy of 'strategic ambiguity' opt for an approach of 'creative ambiguity'.

In the final analysis, the U.S. has a difficult choice between its strategic objectives, requirements, and capabilities in West Asia in relation to Israel and the conservative Arab bloc on the one hand and with the reality of Iran's regional centrality and its implications, on the other. The failure of the so-called Arab Spring and the formalisation of the Abraham Accord is one aspect of it. Its domestic political compulsions and those of Israel were well reflected by the Israeli scholar Martin Kramer in 2011: 'In Israel we are for the status quo. Not only do we believe the status quo is sustainable, we think it is the job of the U.S. to sustain it.' To overcome this impasse, the centrality of Iran in its own neighbourhood has to be recognised along with the latter's commitment to regional cooperation.

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