Iran's Coalition-Building Strategy Within Its Neighborliness Policy: Emphasis on the Axis of Resistance

Mostafa Esmaeili
Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, National Defense University, Tehran, Iran.
esmaili133@gmail.com   0000-0002-3215-5256

Mehdi Haqshenas
PhD Student in Political Science, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding author).
haghshenas.ndu@gmail.com   0000-0000-0000-0000

Abstract

Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's foreign policy has exhibited a strategic duality, making it one of the most complex on the global stage. A cursory review of its policies and decision-making across different administrations reveals a "sinusoidal" and seemingly erratic trajectory—ranging from the pro-Western inclinations of Bazargan's interim government to the revolutionary export-oriented approach of later administrations. However, a deeper analysis of Iran's foreign policy over the past four decades suggests that, despite its oscillations, it has followed a consistent linear trajectory, firmly rooted in the constitutional framework and committed to its role as a champion of liberation movements. In this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran has effectively leveraged a significant portion of its capabilities. Moreover, due to Iran's rich historical and cultural heritage, its neighborliness policy is key in fostering coalitions with neighboring communities and governments. Recognizing its significant and influential role in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the conceptual and practical dimensions of this influence are apparent in the political behavior of the country, whether intentionally or unintentionally, directly or indirectly. This research employs an analytical-explanatory method and an inductive approach, structuring its analysis within a multidimensional framework that considers historical, cultural, geographical, political, and economic factors. Key variables and concepts examined include coalition-building, the Axis of Resistance, and the neighborliness policy. Ultimately, the study offers solutions to address the obstacles and crises confronting the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Introduction

Iran is situated in a highly strategic geopolitical location in the world, positioned at the geographical center of Islam and sharing borders with 15 neighboring countries: Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Kazakhstan. This places Iran second in the number of neighbors globally, following China. Iran has demonstrated its historical and civilizational capacities throughout history, playing a dynamic and influential role in regional and international relations. This central role, coupled with its influence over its neighboring nations across various material and spiritual dimensions, offers Iran a political, economic, and ideological edge, particularly since many of these countries were gradually separated from Iran over the past few centuries. This context enhances Iran's cultural and linguistic authority in its neighborliness policies.

The normative common ground regarding neighborliness policies between Iran and its neighboring countries is significantly influenced by the element of "Islam," particularly "Shi'ism." Iran has leveraged this cultural authority to reinforce the Shiite system during two pivotal historical periods: the Safavid era and the Islamic Revolution. Despite the shared values and religious commonalities, these two Islamic/Shiite governments have pursued different approaches in their neighborliness policies. Although neighborliness policy is a contemporary concept, its essence can be traced back to the foreign policy of the Safavid dynasty, which balanced political, cultural/ideological, and economic dimensions, elaboration of which can even be the foundation for a separate thesis or research project focused on neighborliness policy. However, what will enable the reader to draw a meaningful comparison between these two periods within this research is an examination of the role of each dimension of neighborliness policy in the foreign policy of each of these Shiite (political) establishments.

The emergence of the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 marked a significant transnational phenomenon focused on Shi'ite values, positioning itself between the two ideological forces of "Russian Communism" and "Western Liberalism" during the Cold War as a "third paradigm." This resulted in the Islamic Republic facing opposition and hostility from both dominant global power poles, particularly regarding its foreign policy ideals, such as the "theory of (revolution) export," aimed at curtailing the revolution's spread to vulnerable countries in the region, such as Iraq. This dynamic

ultimately led to the Ba'athist regime of Iraq launching an attack on the Islamic Republic of Iran, backed by both global powers. Consequently, these circumstances pushed the Islamic Republic towards adopting a more ideologically driven approach than the Safavid era. In this framework, the economic dimensions of the neighborliness policy have been comparatively sidelined in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This research adopts an explanatory-analytical method and employs a relational approach that integrates historical and cultural factors. Through an examination of contextual conditions, it seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy within the framework of balance of power theories. Furthermore, this study aims to elucidate both the underlying rationale and the mechanisms through which Iran has implemented its neighborliness policy over the past four decades.

1. Understanding the Concepts and Strategic Dimensions of Iran's Neighborliness Policy

From a geopolitical standpoint, a "neighboring country" is a nation that shares a border with another. An approach towards a neighbor not only marks the onset of a state's foreign policy but also serves as the foundation for its foreign and security strategies (Chung, 2010: 143).

The concept of "neighborliness" has its origins in the term "neighborliness unit," which was first introduced by Clarence A. Perry in the 1920s as a framework for understanding development and urbanization (Ser Ali & Pour Dehami, 2016: 7). This concept later permeated the humanities, particularly political science, geography, and international relations. The concept of neighborliness extends beyond mere proximity, while neighboring countries may share certain relations, such as collaborative security efforts against non-neighbors, either as friendly, bilateral, multilateral, or natural relations. The notion of neighborliness, however, signifies a deeper connection encompassing a collection of moral, social, political, economic, and cultural ties among neighbors grounded in historical context rather than transient. It embodies a geographical and normative reality enriched with conventional and ethical dimensions. Thus, neighborliness policy represents a strategic initiative designed to foster a sense of "intertwining" and "complementarity" across various spheres, transcending the physical and geographical confines of mere neighboring and bilateral relations.

This concept encompasses varying grades and intensities, reflecting the degree of geographical proximity and cultural, linguistic, and religious commonalities. It also considers the volume and depth of economic exchanges, the alignment of interests and resources, and the shared benefits. Additionally, the status and quality of relationships with other actors contribute to the diverse meanings and levels of interaction in the neighborliness between the two countries. Consequently, neighborliness policy is viewed as an interactive and intersubjective process, whether bilateral or multilateral, rather than a one-sided, unilateral action (Shirgholami, 2021: 53-51). Therefore, it is asserted that neighborliness marks the end of geography and the beginning of culture (Tahai & Mousavi Nia, 2014: 10).

Conversely, the supra-governmental nature of the neighborliness concept encompasses the history, culture, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of the people in two neighboring countries. This definition transcends the idea of mere proximity and extends beyond a series of friendly treaties and agreements between these nations. Although the concept of neighborliness is relatively new, its historical reality is recognized as one of the oldest variables in international relations (Jackson, 2006: 217). And until there is a shift from "being a neighbor" to fostering a true sense of "neighborliness" in state relations, it will be unlikely to observe essential neighborliness characteristics—such as security, development, ethical values, environmental cooperation, and respect for identity, independence, and freedom—among neighboring states, irrespective of their size, population, or military strength. National-level interpretations of neighborliness components are flawed and unrealistic and viewed as costly and destructive (Tahai & Mousavi Nia, 2014: 181). In essence, 'neighborliness' is a moral initiative rather than a doctrinal policy; realizing this concept does not necessitate extensive national security doctrines or elaborate foreign policy strategies (Bary, 2005: 52).

The study of neighborly relations among countries is often mistakenly discussed within the framework of "regionalism." It is important to recognize that neighborliness serves as a pre-regionalism stage and a necessary condition for its realization; regionalism cannot materialize without bilateral agreements. Although neighborliness is acknowledged as a foundational element in the formation of regions (Tahai & Mousavi Nia, 2013: 166), it has been largely overlooked in the classification of the four levels of foreign policy geography-neighbor, region, trans-region, and

international. This oversight is particularly notable given the lack of a clear and robust definition of the concept of neighborliness, which, like many fundamental concepts in political science, is often described in abstract terms. However, its practical importance is evident, akin to an unwritten law; the complexity surrounding the ontology of neighborliness results in a neglect of this concept in the literature and research within international relations. In comparison to regionalism, neighbors have garnered less attention, and the topic of neighborliness itself has received even less focus than the two previously mentioned concepts (Lin, 2010: 5).

In examining the spectrum of neighborliness relations, the discourses surrounding interactions between neighboring countries within an ideal-typical state-conceptually derived from Max Weber-can be categorized into two main groups. The first, convergence discourses (favorable neighborliness), encompass limited cooperation, extensive cooperation, and the formation of regional blocs. The second group, divergence discourses (negative neighborliness), includes cold relations, crises, and instances of war among neighbors (Ravandi, Barzegar, Azghandi, 2022: 3).

The concept of the "neighborliness policy" is influenced by the "European Union Neighborliness Policy," a geopolitical strategy to foster greater convergence among European states. Similarly, the "Chinese Neighborliness Policy," often referred to as the "Good Neighbor Policy," seeks to alleviate the concerns of neighboring countries while establishing a network of economic relations between China and its neighbors. Aside from these prominent examples, international literature on neighborliness policy has primarily emerged within international law and various United Nations documents, where it is discussed in terms of "good neighborliness" and "good neighborly relations," irrespective of the specific nature of the concept. While the European Union may be evaluated within a regional context, its formation is deeply rooted in the economic neighborliness relations between Germany and France, which reflects an evolution stemming from the "Coal and Steel Union" established between these two nations. This formation can be considered a seminal example of the continuity of neighborliness policy in a modern framework.

In recent years, however, China's adoption of its neighborliness policy may be seen as the most significant and sustained example of "neighborliness diplomacy" in its foreign policy, evolving through four distinct stages: the "Good Neighbor Policy" under Deng Xiaoping, the "Partner Neighbor Policy" during Jiang Zemin's era,

the "Good, Secure, and Prosperous Neighbor Policy" under Hu Jintao, and the "Community of Shared Future" policy introduced by Xi Jinping. This latter policy, outlined on November 29, 2013, marked a strategic focus on neighborly diplomacy aimed at realizing the "Chinese Dream" (Ghorbani, 2022: 1; Xinhua, 2012).

Thus, China can be recognized as a country that has earnestly embraced the principles of neighborliness policy within its foreign policy, adapting to contemporary temporal and environmental challenges.

Notably, while this concept plays a central role in foreign policy and is a practical term in international relations, its theoretical foundations and scope remain inadequately defined. However, Dr. Hassan Sheikhol Eslami defines 'neighborliness policy' as "the will and planning to utilize the opportunities presented by geographical proximity while managing the threats this geography can pose in relationships" (Sheikhol Eslami, 2021). This definition suggests that neighborliness policy represents a peaceful engagement with the potentials of neighboring countries for mutual benefit.

To examine the role of neighborliness policy within the broader context of foreign policy, it is useful to reference Nolan's definition, which characterizes foreign policy as encompassing the actions, principles, and official decisions of a government, particularly in relation to the interests and circumstances of other states and international organizations (Nolan, 2002: 562). Based on this definition, the foundational level of a state's foreign relations pertains to the neighborliness domain. Defining regional, trans-regional, and international relations becomes challenging without understanding this aspect. Despite its significance, this crucial element is often overlooked in the theoretical frameworks of international relations.

As discussed earlier, neighborliness is primarily a cultural-normative concept rooted in historical context. Consequently, neighborly relations tend to be more ethical and organic than political. While most benefits derived from neighborliness policies are linked to political and economic interactions, it is the shared beliefs and collective sentiments of communities that can lead to political and economic advantages within the realm of neighborliness dynamics. This approach transcends merely establishing connections through political relations and government treaties. Furthermore, there is often an inherent attraction from neighboring countries toward a nation that embodies shared values. This attraction is influenced not only by historical and cultural

backgrounds but also by the geopolitical position and capabilities of the central country in this context.

Iran possesses a distinctive geopolitical position characterized by several key aspects:

1- Middle Status: Positioned at the intersection of East and West, as well as North and South, Iran occupies a central location in the Middle East, making it strategically significant within the global landscape.

2- Corridor Status: Iran serves as a vital crossroads in the East-West and North-South corridors.

3- Link Status: The country functions as a geographical nexus, facilitating connections across diverse religious, cultural, and civilizational domains, including Iranian (Zoroastrian and Manichaean), Abrahamic (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Hindu, and Buddhist traditions.

4- Economic Bridge Status: Iran's geographic position plays a critical role in facilitating global trade and commerce.

5- Inter-Regional Status: Iran acts as a pivotal connector between various regional political systems.

In addition to its various statuses, Iran possesses substantial attributes, including a rich cultural and civilizational heritage, significant energy resources, robust transit, and economic potential, as well as noteworthy scientific and ideological strengths. Moreover, Iran's focus on its Shi'ite cultural identity has contributed to the establishment of the Axis of Resistance, which increasingly challenges the foreign policies of the West, particularly those of the United States (Uzun, 2011: 135).

These capacities have positioned the Islamic Republic of Iran as the ideological center for its neighbors. By drawing on its historical legacy, cultural norms, and other factors examined in this study, Iran has effectively utilized the strategic opportunities afforded by its favorable neighborly relations. This has enabled the Islamic Republic to strengthen the Axis of Resistance and balance the region's threats and power over the past decade.

2. The Islamic Republic of Iran's Coalition-Building with Non-State Actors in Its Neighborliness Policy

Coalition and alliance-building are crucial pillars and strategies within a country's foreign policy, significantly impacting the advancement of material and spiritual interests. Lowe and Spencer define coalition-building at two distinct levels. The first level hinges on the actions and attitudes of a nation's political officials, who,

from time to time, emphasize the importance of cooperation and alliances with other actors. This approach can lead to processes that foster political mobility and diversity in strategic actions. In this context, the effectiveness of convergence and coalition efforts increases with greater pragmatism in the foreign policy actions of political elites.

The second level of coalition-building highlights the fundamental role of political culture and sociological indicators within a country's populace. In a way, that indicates a desire for cooperation in the political culture of these societies (Spencer & Lowe, 2006: 37).

In the theory of neighborliness, the second level of the aforementioned definition plays a more significant role, highlighting that non-state actors are the primary participants and agents. In contrast, diplomatic relations and agreements are typically orchestrated by national governments, with political elites and leaders predominantly representing both sides in treaties and alliances (Zenonas, 2004: 4). Therefore, the concept of neighborliness-as a form of constructive regional engagement-relies on spontaneous, voluntary, sincere, and informal relationships. These relationships differ from the predominantly material and opportunistic interactions typical of diplomatic relations, instead emphasizing ethical considerations and shared values.

In other words, if equal relationships are regarded as the highest standard of ethics-driven diplomacy in international relations, it is important to recognize that, as development and dependency theories suggest, such relationships often lead to the exploitation of weaker states under the guise of equality. In contrast, neighborly relations go beyond this notion of "equality" and embrace the concept of "brotherhood." Therefore, this research not only discusses the concept of neighborliness policy but also points out the theory of exporting the revolution. The coalition-building efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly through its cultural and operational arm, the Quds Force, especially during General Qasem Soleimani's command, leveraging the advantages of neighborliness and public networking through shared cultural, traditional, and religious values-such as anti-oppression, resistance, martyrdom, equality, and brotherhood-can be viewed as a crucial initial step in Iran's foreign policy aimed at actualizing this export theory.

In addition to state treaties aimed at strengthening the Axis of Resistance, such as agreements between Iran and the governments of Russia, Iraq, and Syria concerning the terrorist threats posed by

ISIS and Western-affiliated groups, Iran has a solid legal foundation for supporting the oppressed people globally. This foundation is reinforced by the establishment of the Quds Force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps following the war with the Ba'ath regime of Iraq in 1989. Moreover, the exemplary leadership of General Soleimani from 2000 to 2019 played a pivotal role in this regard. Iran successfully navigated a series of significant security crises by adhering to a key principle of neighborliness policy-transferring the initiative of cooperation and convergence plans to local governments and popular groups while supporting these coalitions as proxies. It achieved this by fostering networked alliances across various countries, including Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, encompassing a diverse range of Shiite and Sunni groups. Such efforts helped counterbalance threats and enabled a practical balance of regional power. The recent engagement of Saudi Arabia in reconciliation efforts with the Islamic Republic of Iran, following a decade of intense rivalry, serves as a testament to this assertion. Saudi Arabia, recognized as the land of revelation and the birthplace of Islam, holds a significant role in shaping the shared culture of its neighboring countries through the Islamic faith. However, considering the various aspects of neighborliness theory, it is the Islamic Republic of Iran that occupies a central position in the region. This influence extends beyond the Axis of Resistance and Shiite groups; it can also be observed in the "Islamic Awakening" among regional communities-often referred to by the West as the Arab Spring. The foreign policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran have been instrumental in this context.

By harnessing this historical and cultural spirit of neighborliness, alongside other influential factors, Iran has exerted a cultural influence in the region that stands in contrast to the political and economic sway of the West. Additionally, Iran has effectively navigated its competition with other regional players, like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, in recent decades. It is important to note that while cultural superiority is the most significant aspect of neighborliness policy, political and economic dominance also play critical roles in sustaining this normative and ideological hegemony.

3. The Quds Force and the Integration of Cultural, Operational, and Strategic Functions in Iran's Neighborliness Policy

Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, various political and political-military parties and groups opposed to the regime,

such as the Tudeh Party, the People's Mojahedin Organization, the People's Fedai Guerrillas, the Paykar Organization, the Kurdistan Party, among others, swiftly organized themselves to confront the Islamic Revolution. In response to these threats, the revolutionary leaders recognized the need to preserve, rebuild, and organize the Islamic Republic Army and also establish another revolutionary institution dedicated to safeguarding the Islamic Revolution and the emerging Islamic Republic. Even the interim government, which struggled to align with revolutionary institutions, acknowledged the necessity of forming and organizing such a force, given the weaknesses of existing military and law enforcement bodies (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 2004: 261). Thus, establishing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) can be viewed as the first public coalition-building effort of the Islamic Republic of Iran to counter the threats posed by internal political and military groups. This coalition quickly became crucial in defending the nation with the onset of the Iran-Iraq war and gradually received organization and resources in response to the growing insecurities. The second instance of coalition-building by the Islamic Republic is evident during the war and the various overseas activities of the IRGC, notably through the establishment of the "Lebanese Corps" and the military wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (formed by Iraqi Shiites and opponents of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'ath Party after seeking refuge in Iran), known as the "Badr Corps." However, following the conclusion of the war and the development of the IRGC's overseas division called the Quds Force, the coalition-building efforts of the Islamic Republic became more structured and intricate. Particularly under General Soleimani's leadership, this force effectively trained a network of Shiite and Sunni popular groups from diverse national backgrounds within the Axis of Resistance, utilizing them to confront national and regional security threats, such as the rise of terrorism (Rezaei, previous, p. 67; Amir-Abdollahian, 2020: 221-222).

In introducing the Quds Force, a report from the Israeli Special Intelligence Center describes the force as follows: The Quds Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was established in 1990 to expand the country's activities abroad. Over time, it has evolved into a pivotal element of the Islamic Republic's strategy to bolster its regional power and strategic interests through military and political operations. General Qasem Soleimani, who became the commander of the IRGC Quds Force in 1998, was the second individual to hold this position, following Ahmad Vahidi.

Prior to his rise in prominence, General Soleimani was relatively low-profile and had been placed on a U.S. blacklist due to various allegations. He played a vital role in amplifying Iran's influence across the Middle East, particularly during the regional upheavals known as the Arab Spring. The Quds Force is Iran's most powerful security unit, comprised of elite operational teams conducting numerous significant missions. This highly organized military unit features multiple command centers and specialized divisions for covert operations, and it holds a strategic position among Iran's top officials, significantly shaping the country's overseas decision-making. Through proxy engagements, the IRGC Quds Force extends financial and logistical support to militant groups, aiming to confront Iran's adversaries both regionally and globally (Zimmt, 2015).

The Quds Force was established alongside the escalation of U.S. military interventions in the region. Following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the United States sought to reassert its dominance in global affairs, particularly in light of the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, which became apparent the following August in 1991. The U.S. leveraged Iraq's aggression against Kuwait as a pretext to form an "international operational coalition" by employing the UN Security Council resolution issued on January 16. This coalition comprised 22 countries, although only half were significant. Key members included the U.S. and Canada from the Americas; the UK, France, and Spain from Europe; Egypt from Africa; and Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan from Asia. The coalition deployed approximately 814,000 military personnel, with the U.S. contributing 575,000 troops and Europe providing around 60,000, accounting for 78% of the total forces. The contributions from U.S. regional allies-Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Pakistan-represented 17%. In comparison, the remaining 5% came from countries such as Syria, Kuwait, the UAE, Morocco, Bangladesh, Oman, Niger, Bahrain, Senegal, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Honduras, and Afghanistan, all of which participated in a largely symbolic capacity. The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the establishment of a global and regional coalition, coupled with the rhetoric employed by the Americans during that period and afterward, posed a significant threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This was primarily because the threat expanded to both the south and west of Iran, while at the same time, Iran was viewed as the sole major impediment to the U.S.'s absolute dominance in the region. This situation raised considerable concerns within Iran. The military readiness and the deployment of several divisions from the IRGC

and the Iranian army to the southwestern borders over nearly a year underscored Iran's deep apprehension. In response and guided by the leader's directives, the Islamic Republic of Iran assessed the scope and depth of the threat and subsequently established two resistance forces along with the Quds Force (Zarei, 2014, p. 6).

The Quds Force, as the executive and operational arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, has played a crucial role over the past three decades in promoting the values of the Islamic Revolution to neighboring countries. The Islamic Republic has also aimed to leverage its cultural assets as part of its neighborliness policy through intricate and coordinated efforts aligned with its broader foreign policy goals. The Quds Force's objectives include "conflict management within the context of proxy wars," the "strategic use of movement diplomacy" for coalition-building and multilateral engagement, and advancing a policy of threat balancing. This approach has involved the strategic use of cultural, religious, linguistic, and ideological ties within the communities of neighboring countries, fostering a sense of shared identity through popular networks and coalitions (such as the Popular Mobilization Forces, Ansar Allah, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Fatemiyoun) alongside collaboration with governments (including Russia, Syria, and Iraq) that form the core of the Axis of Resistance. These strategies have significantly shifted the regional balance of power in favor of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The following sections will explore some of the strategic models employed by the Quds Force under General Qasem Soleimani's leadership in forming and strengthening the Axis of Resistance.

3-1. Building Power Network

The Spanish theorist and sociologist Manuel Castells articulates the concept of network power. He posits that networks function as communicative structures within societies, fundamentally influencing power dynamics. Therefore, to challenge existing power structures, it is essential to create anti-power networks capable of disrupting the connections that underpin power networks (Jamalzadeh & Khajeh Ali, 2016: 101).

Castells posits that power is multidimensional and structured according to the interests and values of influential actors within planned networks across all areas of human activity. Furthermore, power networks in various domains are interconnected. This interconnection occurs through a fundamental mechanism known as "switching power," which refers to the ability to link two or more

distinct networks, thereby enhancing power for each network within its respective domain (Castells, 2014: 16). In this context, anti-power can be understood as intentionally altering power dynamics by reconfiguring networks around alternative interests and values or disrupting dominant switches. This process unfolds concurrently with switching resistance networks and movements for social change.

General Qasem Soleimani functioned as a pivotal connector, establishing an anti-power network opposing the U.S. through alliances formed around Iran's interests and alternative values and disrupting prevailing power dynamics. The six principal networks that constitute "Iran's anti-power networks" include "Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," "Ansar Allah of Yemen," "Hezbollah of Lebanon," "Heidariyoun," "Fatemiyoun," and "Zainabiyoun" of Syria. These networks were interlinked by key connectors comprising members of the IRGC Quds Force and Iranian advisory groups, all under General Qasem Soleimani's leadership. The political and military maneuvers of this anti-power network have disrupted the regional balance of power in favor of Iran, and they continue their operations in the region even after Soleimani's assassination.

3-2. Dispersion of Power

One of the key aspects highlighted in postmodern power discourse is the fluidity and dispersion of power. Proponents of this perspective argue that power is not merely a capacity for action concentrated in the hands of a select few individuals or groups; rather, it is a multi-faceted force mobilized by a myriad of social networks. Consequently, power should not be viewed as a structure or institution but as a "complex strategic situation" and a "multiplicity of relationships among forces" (Mirzayi, Soltani Bahram, & Qasemzadeh, 2012: 16).

The Quds Force shifted the notion of power beyond the military sphere for Iran, exploring it within the social landscapes of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Yemen. General Soleimani, in this context, recognized power as residing in relationships and the significance of various situations, as well as in the verbal and linguistic interactions among individuals, classes, and social groups. He aimed to harness this power to benefit the resistance movement (Navabakhsh & Karimi, 2009: 49).

3-3. Shifting the Power Dynamic

In the aftermath of the 9/11 incident, the United States seized the opportunity to reshape the power dynamics in the region (Dehshiar, 2002, p. 3). For the U.S., the hierarchical order of the 1990s had ended, giving rise to a new era characterized by the realization of Francis Fukuyama's notion of the "end of history" and the hegemony of America. Consequently, President Bush Jr. once again articulated the vision of a new world order and an American-led global framework, echoing sentiments expressed by his father.

In this context, the United States characterized any political movement, group, or nation that opposed its policies with terms such as "rogue," "failed state," or "axis of evil." These labels facilitated the U.S. in orchestrating a narrative that garnered global consensus for the invasion of Afghanistan. The attack on Afghanistan provided an opportunity for the U.S. to establish a strategic presence near Iran, allowing for greater management of pressure on the Iranian regime. Two years after the Taliban was overthrown, the U.S. turned its attention to Iraq in 2003, Iran's other neighbor, justifying the invasion with the assertion that Saddam Hussein was producing weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. believed that its presence in Iraq would put Iran under pressure, making it more susceptible to potential attack. Furthermore, U.S. military bases in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait were seen as key to limiting Iran's mobility in the south, setting the stage for a shift in the balance of power in West Asia. Consequently, the U.S. earnestly pursued the "Greater Middle East Initiative" across various platforms. The toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria was a critical component of this plan, aimed at isolating Iran by severing its connections with Hezbollah and the broader resistance front, facilitating the reconciliation project with Israel, and alleviating political-military pressures on Tel Aviv. However, this U.S. and Western initiative ultimately failed, largely due to the strategic efforts of General Soleimani. With Iran's support, the Assad government endured, resulting in a significant shift in the regional power dynamic in favor of Iran (Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2020: 12).

3-4. Managing the Power Play

U.S. officials believed that the "Arab Spring" an expression used in the West to describe the revolutions in the region as 'Arabic,' as opposed to Islamic-could be equated with the "Islamic Awakening" (Amir-Abdollahian, 2020: 25). They saw it as an opportunity to

alter political leadership across West Asia easily. However, General Qasem Soleimani's adept management of the regional power dynamics revealed that Americans lacked a comprehensive understanding of West Asia's history and geography. Soleimani's correct assessment of the region's geography, cultural strengths, and effective engagement with popular movements and political-religious leaders ultimately shifted the balance of power in favor of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

4. The Economic Dimension of Iran's Neighborliness Policy: Leveraging Historical and Geopolitical Strengths for Regional Diplomacy

The economy is recognized as a crucial and influential prerequisite in formulating neighborliness policy. Although its impact on shaping neighborliness relations may not be as prominent as history and culture, its role in sustaining and enhancing these relations is undoubtedly as significant as various countries' historical and cultural backdrops.

The economic foundation is visible in international diplomatic engagements and neighborly interactions, which extend beyond mere diplomatic relations driven solely by the material interests of governments. However, this critical aspect of neighborliness policy has received delayed attention in this research due to the oversight of its effective and constructive role in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's distinct geographical position enables it to be the second country in the world, following China, in terms of the number of neighboring nations, boasting 15. With a population exceeding 600 million and a market valued at $1.2 trillion in imports, this region presents significant opportunities. Many of these countries in a not-so-distant past belonged to Iran and possess cultural elements that are susceptible to influences from Iran, and practically, regardless of diplomatic relations, material relations, and trade competitions, Iran has a trump card known as "neighborliness." Iran can harness this historical and cultural leverage in the economic arena. However, despite this potential, Iran's exports to its neighboring countries amount to only $22 billion, reflecting a mere 2% share of the overall import market within this region (Shirgholami, 2021: 58).

This underscores the profound significance of the economy for the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the one hand, the necessity for an economy independent of oil that leverages economic advantages-rooted in several centuries of cultural and historical prominence-is a

crucial foundation for Iran's neighborliness policy. Coupled with over four decades of resilience and the implementation of security, cultural, and political strategies in the region, these factors create a conducive environment for Iran to engage economically at both diplomatic and neighborliness levels. On the other hand, continuing the Islamic Republic's bipolar approach-focused on promoting the theory of export and adhering to constitutional commitments in supporting resistance movements-complicates its bilateral and multilateral relations with regional and global powers. This approach emphasizes balancing power, employing a neighborliness policy, and enhancing soft power while maintaining a non-aggressive stance. There is a pressing need to address the economic dimension in order to strengthen existing alliances, implement proxy policies, avoid hegemonic roles, and balance power to achieve the goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In other words, whether Iran seeks to maintain the current foreign policy paradox of simultaneously enhancing both soft and hard power, balancing threats from regional and international adversaries through neighborliness policies and building both state and non-state coalitions, or whether it intends to go against neighborliness dynamics by aspiring to be a regional hegemon with the soft power derived from neighborliness policy, none of these strategies-especially under current conditions such as the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan and escalating tensions with Israel following recent attacks on Gaza—can be realized without an economic perspective integrated into the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Additionally, maximizing cultural and ideological credibility in the region will be crucial. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the world's foremost nuclear power during the Cold War, serves as a historical reminder of the importance of the economy in advancing revisionist policies. After four decades of navigating the Cold War with major global powers, the Islamic Republic of Iran is unlikely to deviate from this pattern. A practical assessment reveals that the continuation of the Islamic Republic's complex foreign policy-often regarded as one of the most intricate in the world-cannot be envisaged independently of financial resources. Given the current internal and external changes, maximizing regional market utilization, revitalizing the domestic economy, and preparing for impending economic challenges are essential.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran, following its transnational revolution in 1979, established constitutional principles aimed at altering and reforming the existing global order and norms in international relations and organizations. This commitment included explicit and effective support for movements opposing Western-American policies and relationships. With its rhetoric of exporting the revolution, Iran has faced a wave of domestic and foreign adversaries since the revolution's early years, both in regional and international spheres. These opponents ranged from internal unrest, marked by the rise of political parties and groups in the late 1970s, to the invasion by Iraq's Ba'ath regime, which feared the spread of the Shiite revolution. These events can be regarded as the initial political and military confrontations against the Islamic Republic's positions.

Consequently, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was compelled to pursue coalitions and alliances for survival. The pursuit of the theory of export, varying in intensity, allowed the regime to maintain its existence through considering threat balance. Subsequently, by implementing neighborliness policies and leveraging its cultural and historical background, Iran utilized the advantages of these policies in its foreign strategy to achieve a form of power equilibrium, which this research refers to as cultural/normative soft power.

This research posits that the coalition-building efforts of the Islamic Republic of Iran are rooted in a balance of threats and the application of a neighborliness policy. However, it is crucial to recognize that the nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran is distinct from that of other regional states. The Islamic Revolution in Iran aspires to its ideals, policies, and overarching objectives that transcend the national level. For instance, no other government in the world, whether Arab or non-Arab Muslim, demonstrates such a commitment to opposing the Zionist regime as the Islamic Republic of Iran does. Over the past four decades, Iran's anti-Israeli stance may even be perceived as more profound and coherent than that of Palestinian resistance groups. Thus, for this regime, reliance solely on a balance of threats cannot be viewed as the primary long-term strategy for its foreign policy and international relations. In simpler terms, change without power is unlikely.

The central argument of this research is to draw connections among variables and elements that may initially seem unrelated or contradictory. However, when examined from a long-term, deeper, and broader perspective, the primary challenge of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy emerges as a complex interplay of contradictions and multiple dimensions, some of which may be

entirely opposed to one another. These various elements and dimensions within Iran's foreign policy contribute to a particularly complex and sensitive situation.

The dimensions of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be analyzed from specific components to the overall framework as follows:

≠**Balance of Threat and Survival:** This fundamental principle necessitates power and is manifested through three primary approaches within the Islamic Republic's foreign policy:

a. Enhancing defense and military capabilities as strategic instruments to mitigate threats.

b. Establishing state treaties and agreements that reflect the existing diplomatic relations within the global system, grounded in shared interests, and aimed at temporary alignment with international mechanisms (considering the Islamic Republic of Iran's revisionist stance towards international organizations and relations).

c. Fostering state and non-state coalition-building based on regional relationships and common cultural, religious, and ideological ties with neighboring countries.

≠**Balance of Power:** This represents the fundamental theoretical and practical challenge in implementing the foreign policies of the Islamic Republic. It involves balancing the enhancement of military, defense, and cultural power and the necessity of power-seeking without overtly revealing it. This is due to the inherent contradiction between neighborliness privileges and the assertion of power. In essence, the Islamic Republic has acquired a power that it must carefully manage: on the one hand, it must refrain from using it in order to maintain it, while on the other hand, the balance of power is crucial to advancing its extensive interests in the region due to its legal and ideological foundations. Over the past four decades, despite variations in intensity across different administrations, the Islamic Republic of Iran has navigated this complex duality within its foreign policy. It is now recognized as a significant player in the region. It has effectively demonstrated a cohesive foreign policy that aligns with its military and defense capabilities to fulfill its objectives and ideals by overcoming considerable national and regional security crises and maintaining the Axis of Resistance amid more than a decade of substantial political, military, and ideological transformations. However, the insufficient representation of one of the key elements of neighborliness relations in the regime's macro-level policies could lead to future challenges and crises, which will be explored further in the suggestions and conclusions.

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