

IDEOLOGY AND PRAGMATISM IN IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract. This article examines the interaction between ideology and pragmatism in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It analyzes the ideological foundations established after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, including anti-Westernism, the export of the Islamic Revolution, and support for oppressed Muslim communities. At the same time, the study explores the growing importance of pragmatic considerations such as national interests, regional security, economic needs, and geopolitical realities. The article also highlights the role of major political institutions, particularly the Supreme Leader, the President, and the Supreme National Security Council, in shaping Iranian foreign policy. The study concludes that Iran's foreign policy is neither purely ideological nor entirely pragmatic, but rather a combination of both elements.

Keywords: Iranian foreign policy, ideology, pragmatism, Islamic Revolution, Supreme Leader, national interests, Middle East, nuclear program.

Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed a unique political and foreign policy model that combines ideological principles with pragmatic state interests. Iranian foreign policy has often been characterized by revolutionary ideals, anti-imperialist discourse, and resistance to Western influence. However, changing regional and international conditions, economic pressures, sanctions, and security challenges have gradually pushed Iran toward a more pragmatic approach. As a result, Iran's foreign policy today reflects a balance between ideological commitments and strategic national interests. This dual nature can be observed in Iran's regional policies, nuclear negotiations, and relations with global powers. Therefore, understanding the relationship between ideology and pragmatism is essential for analyzing the behavior and strategic priorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in international relations.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources related to Iranian foreign policy. The research relies on constitutional provisions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, official speeches of political leaders, government documents, and academic literature produced by both regional and Western scholars. In addition, the study applies a comparative and analytical approach to examine the interaction between ideological principles and pragmatic interests in Iran's foreign policy decision-making process. Particular attention is given to key foreign policy cases, including Iran's nuclear negotiations, regional strategies in the Middle East, and relations with Western powers. Through this approach, the research aims to identify how ideological and pragmatic factors coexist and influence the strategic behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

RESULTS

Following the 1979 revolution, Iran's foreign policy was formed based on a religious-national ideology. This ideology is based on Iran's vision of itself as the center of the Islamic world and is imbued with ideas of revolutionary spirit, struggle against despotic forces, and protection of the "mustazafs" (peoples under oppression). Iran portrays itself not merely as a nation-state, but as



the center of the Islamic Renaissance movement. In this regard, Iran's foreign policy has always relied on two main elements.

Therefore, Iran's foreign policy has historically been based on two main pillars. The first pillar is ideological commitment. These include the preservation and dissemination of the ideas of the Islamic revolution, the struggle against “tolerant” forces, and the establishment of justice in Muslim societies. The second pillar is state interests: ensuring security, strengthening regional power, and increasing political influence in the international arena. Tehran will try to maintain a balance between these two directions. However, since ideology is one of the main sources of the legitimacy of the regime, any pragmatic step in foreign policy is inevitably explained by an ideological basis¹. Diplomatic relations, economic agreements, or military cooperation are often interpreted in harmony with “revolutionary values.”

Napoleon Hill defines foreign policy as “a purposeful action aimed at promoting the interests of a single political community or state²”. This “purposeful action” can be a product of the state's internal agenda or a response to the actions of other actors in the outside world. According to Hunter, there are two main factors that determine such purposeful action: internal and external factors³. The interaction between the internal needs and realities of the state and the characteristics of the external environment in which it operates determines the behavior of the state of an external nature, that is, it shapes its foreign policy. Ideological approaches in foreign policy are of decisive importance for the Islamic Republic of Iran. But they have almost never been the only factor determining Iran's international positions. Tehran's policy is not always ideological, but based on the interests inherent in any independent state.

In foreign policy, elements of ideology and pragmatism inevitably intertwine. These two forces constitute the “double logic” of Iran's foreign policy. To understand this “double logic,” it is of great importance how Iran defines itself—that is, its political self-awareness and perceptions of its place on the international stage⁴. Iran not only considers itself the leader of the Islamic world culturally or religiously, but also imagines itself as the heart of the Middle East from a geopolitical and historical perspective. This vision embodies such concepts as the struggle against colonialism, independence from the West, sovereignty against external pressures, regional leadership, and achieving power through economic cooperation. These aspects are manifested not only in ideological statements but also in practical foreign policy. For example, Iran, while pursuing a harsh rhetoric against the US, Israel, or the West on an ideological basis, may simultaneously enter into negotiations with them for the sake of real political interests. This situation is clearly visible in international negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program.

In Iran's foreign policy, ideological principles such as the struggle against colonialism, opposition to Israel, “solidarity of the Muslim Ummah,” or “justice for the oppressed” are constantly repeated⁵. However, these principles are not always strict strategic guidelines, but are

¹ Barati, Alireza and Ahmadi, Syd Abas and Zarei, Bahador (2021), Explaining the Defense and Security Challenges of Sea-Oriented Development on the Regional and International Scale of Makran Coasts from the Point of View of Political Geography; Defense Strategy Quarterly, pp. 55-86.

² Griffiths, Steven. (2019). Energy diplomacy in a time of energy transition; Energy Strategy Reviews journal, www.elsevier.com/locate/esr, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2019>, pp 1-10.

³ Breuning, M. (2007). Foreign policy analysis. Palgrave Macmillan. – P. 100-218.

⁴ Saleh, A. (2025, September 16). *Between power and pressure: Iran's foreign policy in a fragmented world*. Middle East Institute Perspectives, National University of Singapore. Retrieved from <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/between-power-and-pressure-irans-foreign-policy-in-a-fragmented-world/>

⁵ Haghghat, SydSadegh (2006), The Foundations, Principles and Objectives of the Foreign Policy of the Islamic State; Qom: Publications of the Research Institute of Islamic Sciences and Culture, first edition.



often flexible in accordance with domestic political balance, international conditions, or regional calculations.

Iranian politicians and figures move cautiously between these two directions. In particular, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei acts on the basis of both ideology and realpolitik (i.e., a policy based on interests). He always emphasizes the balance of foreign policy between “revolutionary ideas” and “national interests”. Khamenei does not reject ideology entirely and treats pragmatism with extreme caution. At the same time, the Iranian leadership views foreign policy as a means of ensuring political unity in society. Ideological slogans unite internal political groups, but when necessary, decisions adapted to political needs are also adopted. For example, any diplomatic dialogue with the United States is ideologically denied, but in practice, these relations are maintained in a number of ways. In particular, it is carried out through informal diplomacy (“track II diplomacy”) or intermediaries. Similarly, any relations with Israel are formally denied, but based on strategic calculations, Iran's anti-Israeli stance remains volatile and cautious. Iran's foreign policy should be understood as a product of a combination of ideological and pragmatic approaches. In it, ideology often plays a symbolic, legitimating, and mobilizing role, while pragmatism dominates strategic decisions and diplomatic tactics.

The most fundamental internal conflict of Iran's foreign policy is the constant clash between the ideology of the Islamic revolution and the need to secure the interests of the state. Although the political elite tried to find a balance between the two, in practice, one often harmed the other. Iran has supported Hezbollah (Lebanon), the Houthis (Yemen), Hasht al-Shaabi (Iraq), and other Shia groups over the years⁶. This aid takes financial, military, and political forms and requires billions of dollars in public funds. Within Iran, the number of proponents of pragmatism is growing. Among them are former diplomats, economists, and even some clergy. These forces call for compromise in foreign policy, international integration, and putting economic interests first. However, this position is still politically weak. Because the Revolutionary Guard (RGC) is receiving economic benefits from ideological foreign policy. Ideological policy is a fundamental element of the system's legitimacy. Leadership institutions (such as the Supreme Leader) view the renunciation of ideology as a “human weakness.”

Actors and Institutions of Iranian Foreign Policy. Western political scientists have regarded Iran's foreign policy system as complex and ambiguous, noting that it is often unclear how the system is structured and which institutions possess the greatest influence in this sphere. Decision-making in Iranian foreign policy is a complicated and multidimensional process. This is primarily explained by the post-revolutionary political system's dual structure, which combines both theocratic and republican elements. The existence of formal and informal centers of power frequently leads to the emergence of diverse and sometimes conflicting foreign policy objectives.

The main formal institutions that directly influence Iran's foreign policy include the Supreme Leader, the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Guardian Council, the Expediency Discernment Council, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), and the Parliament (Majlis). However, the distribution of authority is not clearly defined; in practice, the balance between state institutions and revolutionary structures is shaped through political practice. This system conventionally operates through a three-stage decision-making tradition.

The first stage involves analyzing the foreign policy situation and formulating the government's position. This process takes place within formal institutions, although the Supreme Leader plays the decisive role. Strategic directions, particularly in matters of security and

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=8S>

⁶ Masoud Kazemzadeh (2013) Ayatollah Khamenei's Foreign Policy Orientation. Comparative Strategy, vol. 32 pp. 443-458.



geopolitics, are determined primarily on the basis of his general political guidelines⁷.

The second stage is the decision-making process itself, which is discussed not only within official institutions but also through informal political networks. Participants in this process include not only current government officials, but also former officials, religious leaders, representatives of security structures, and groups within the political elite. Consequently, decisions are often shaped not by a single institution, but by the balance among various centers of power.

The third stage involves reaching political consensus and formalizing the decision. Once consensus has been achieved among the elites, the final decision is approved by the Supreme Leader and thereby becomes state policy. In practice, this system transforms Iran's foreign policy into a form of "controlled collective decision-making" rather than one based on purely individual authority.

Foreign Policy Activity in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the powers and functions of various political institutions are defined by the Constitution. However, the constitution drafted after the 1979 Revolution contained a number of ambiguities and contradictions. In particular, the simultaneous existence of the positions of president and prime minister within the state structure intensified political rivalry and internal struggles among elites. One of the most important issues was that the constitution did not clearly specify who was ultimately responsible for directing foreign policy. As a result, conflicts of authority emerged among different political centers. By 1988–1989, the need to reorganize the system had become apparent. On the eve of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death, significant amendments were introduced to the constitution⁸. The primary objective of these reforms was to centralize the decision-making system, reduce internal conflicts, and create a balance among the interests of various political groups. According to the constitutional amendments of 1989, the office of prime minister was abolished and its powers were transferred to the president. This change was zakpeped in Article 113 of the Constitution⁹. Under this article, the president is considered the highest state official after the Supreme Leader and serves as the head of the executive branch.

Nevertheless, the most important powers related to foreign policy remained in the hands of the Supreme Leader. According to Article 110 of the Constitution, the Supreme Leader determines the general policies of the state, exercises supreme command over the armed forces, and makes final decisions on matters of war and peace. Therefore, the strategic directions of Iran's foreign policy are effectively controlled by the Supreme Leader.

The president's authority in foreign policy is defined in Article 125. According to this article, the president has the authority to sign international treaties, agreements, and contracts. In practice, however, such decisions are implemented in coordination with the Supreme Leader and other security institutions¹⁰. As a result of the 1989 reforms, two additional important institutions were established: the Expediency Discernment Council and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The status of the Expediency Discernment Council is defined in Article 112 of the Constitution. The council's primary function is to resolve disputes between the Parliament

⁷ Kamrava, M. (2007). *Iranian national-security debates: Factionalism and lost opportunities*. *Middle East Policy*. – P. 84–100.

⁸ Mohsen M. Milani (1992) *Iran's Active Neutrality During the Kuwaiti Crisis: Reasons and Ramifications*. *New Political Science*, vols. 21-22. pp. 41-60.

⁹ Iran (Islamic Republic of) 1979 (rev. 1989) Retrieved from: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989

¹⁰ Ibid



(Majlis) and the Guardian Council, as well as to advise the Supreme Leader on strategic matters¹¹. Over time, this council evolved into an important political platform influencing Iran's foreign policy and economic strategy.

The Supreme National Security Council was established under Article 176 of the Constitution. This council serves as the principal body coordinating national security, defense, and foreign policy matters. It is chaired by the president and includes military commanders, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, intelligence officials, and representatives of the Supreme Leader. The SNSC has played a particularly central role in negotiations concerning Iran's nuclear program.

Another important institution within Iran's political system is the Guardian Council. Its powers are outlined in Articles 91–99 of the Constitution. The council reviews legislation passed by parliament to ensure its compatibility with Islamic law and the Constitution. In addition, it supervises presidential, parliamentary, and Assembly of Experts elections. In practice, it is this council that determines who is eligible to run for office in elections. The powers of the Assembly of Experts are defined in Articles 107 and 111. This body has the authority to appoint the Supreme Leader, supervise his activities, and dismiss him if necessary. Theoretically, it represents the most significant mechanism of oversight over the Supreme Leader.

Thus, Iran's political system has developed as a complex structure characterized by the existence of multiple centers of power simultaneously. Although the Supreme Leader is considered the most powerful political figure, the president, parliament, the SNSC, the Guardian Council, and other institutions also play important roles in foreign policy and national security affairs. However, most of these institutions operate either directly or indirectly under the supervision of the Supreme Leader.

The role of the supreme leader in Iran's foreign policy. Constitutionally, the Supreme Leader stands above the President as the “Leader of the Islamic Revolution” and the “jurisprudential leader” (faqih). The Office of the Supreme Leader represents the real center of power in the country. This institution plays an active role not only in foreign policy but also at every stage of the political process. The authority to approve or reject foreign policy initiatives belongs to the Supreme Leader, who ultimately has the final say. For this reason, Iran's political system is often interpreted not merely as a semi-presidential or theocratic republic, but rather as a leader-centric political model.

According to the Constitution, the Supreme Leader — Vali-ye Faqih — is the religious-political authority empowered to provide the highest interpretation of Islamic law. In practice, he is not formally part of the state administrative apparatus, yet real political power is concentrated in his hands. His authority encompasses three principal spheres: administrative-political governance, religious-ideological supervision, and the determination of strategic security direction. The Office of the Supreme Leader — Beyt-e Rahbari — functions as the country's actual center of political coordination. It exercises coordinating oversight over state institutions, parliament, the judiciary, military structures, and foreign policy institutions. In the sphere of foreign policy, the most significant authority is the right to approve or reject initiatives. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs may conduct negotiations, and the president may propose diplomatic initiatives, but final political authorization belongs to the Supreme Leader. Consequently, Iran's diplomacy often operates through a form of “two-level diplomacy”: official government diplomacy and strategically approved diplomacy under the Supreme Leader. This characteristic distinguishes Iran's foreign policy from that of many other states, since the ultimate center of decision-making is located not within the executive branch, but within a higher religious-political institution. Personnel within the Office of the Supreme Leader participate in the formation of decisions across all political institutions, including foreign policy matters, and are informed of such

¹¹ Jalil Roshandel (2016) Iran's Foreign and Security Policies: How the Decisionmaking Process Evolved. Security Dialogue, vol. 31 (200). pp. 105-117.



processes in advance. In most cases, the Supreme Leader supports the president's political position. However, when disagreements emerge, he employs cautious yet effective mechanisms of pressure to assert his preferences. Fundamental foreign policy decisions — such as continuing negotiations with the E3+3 group or preserving Iran's right to enrich uranium — are adopted by the Supreme Leader on the basis of consensus following extensive consultations with the political elite. In shaping these decisions, both the Beyt-e Rahbari and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) play important roles. Public speeches delivered by the Supreme Leader are especially significant in the realm of foreign policy. Through these speeches, he communicates Iran's political direction not only to domestic audiences but also to the international community. Such statements define the ideological boundaries within which the government must operate. In certain cases, the Supreme Leader has pursued diplomatic policies independently from the official government channel, using cultural centers or defense attachés within embassies. This was particularly evident during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, whose policy of easing relations with the West created concerns that Iran might lose influence among radical Islamist forces. In summary, the decisive role in Iran's foreign policy belongs not to the executive branch, but to the institution of the Supreme Leader. While the president conducts negotiations and manages diplomatic affairs, the Supreme Leader determines the strategic direction and final political decisions.

CONCLUSION

Iranian foreign policy is shaped by a complex interaction between ideology and pragmatism. While the ideological principles of the Islamic Revolution continue to influence the country's political identity and strategic discourse, pragmatic considerations such as national security, economic interests, and regional influence play an equally important role in decision-making. The Supreme Leader remains the central authority in defining strategic directions, while other political institutions contribute to the implementation of foreign policy objectives. Overall, Iran's foreign policy demonstrates that ideological commitments and pragmatic interests are not mutually exclusive, but rather operate together in shaping the country's behavior in international relations.

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