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# Iran's Foreign Policy and Strategies

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By Kayhan BARZEGAR<sup>1</sup>

This paper approaches several strategic lines in Iran's foreign policy and national security strategies. Among these, the article presents the way in which the strategic stability of Iran has changed and evolved in relation with other powers, but also while facing threats and rivalries in the Middle East. As a result, Iran attempts to increase its relative security in a volatile region by deepening containment and deterrence mechanisms, especially when facing strategic discrepancies with the United States of America (US). Prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran perceived strategic stability in a coalition and close cooperation with the Western bloc and its regional allies. Currently, under different circumstances, achieving strategic stability is focused on achieving concrete national power, bolstering regional cooperation, and promoting regional multilateralism. There are two features, namely the "geographical centrality" and "identical values" that are paramount in shaping Iran's perspective in the region. The paper approaches different regional trends, beyond the ongoing crises in Afghanistan and Iraq that shaped Iran's strategies, hereby including the decisions of the US under the Presidency of Donald Trump, who conducted the so-called "maximum pressure" policy. These aspects have consolidated Iran's strategies for survival as a state and enforcing regional presence in a pragmatic manner, as proof of political rationality. Thus, one would witness more containment and deterrence, and presence in the region in the face of varied sources of instability. As a result, Iran has become more self-reliant, looking inward and finding new tools in order to cope with the threats, the newest challenge being the Covid-19 pandemic. Iran needs to affirm itself strongly in the region, preferably in a strong region, but also to be strong from within. A powerful turning point for Iran's line of action is represented by its nuclear programme. The same trends are likely to continue during the Biden Presidency unless Iran receives positive and constructive signs from the American side.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy, Strategic, Deterrence, Containment, Cooperation, Regional Multilateralism

## INTRODUCTION

The paper details several crucial features of strategic thinking for Iran's foreign policy and defense strategies. The strategic thinking of Iran has followed a natural evolution, according to the regional trends. Therefore, Iran has adopted a regional approach in order to improve its constrained economy

that hampers the achievement of some political and strategic goals. Regional multilateralism is at the forefront of Iran's foreign policy, both through hard and soft power tools.

As a matter of fact, in the Middle East, states are pursuing interests as well as wanting cooperation. The theme

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<sup>1</sup> Kayhan BARZEGAR is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at the Science and Research Branch of the Islamic Azad University, and senior academic adviser to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

of dialogue – cooperation is related to a natural form of interaction, the solution would be to accept some realities in the region and multilateralism. For instance, the war against terrorism has proven to be a success with various contributions, and Iran has played its own role in the fight against Daesh/so-called Islamic State and in the incursions into Syria – it has played a unique role, while it has changed its mindset about interventions. The regional situation is adjusting to new realities where regional actors are getting more prominent.

One should note that, overall, the Iran-US situation affecting regional relations of the Middle East. It happens as Washington is exerting pressure on Tehran and Iran is resisting the US, maintaining control over the economy, and making strategic decisions, despite severe constraints coming from the economic spectrum. In this context, Iran's foreign policy decisions have become more pragmatic. Iran feels under pressure, though its ruling power did not collapse, contrary to the US' aims. Iran strives to conduct its foreign policy with a combination of hard and soft power. During the Trump era, Iran has witnessed the formation of a coalition against Iran (aligning Saudi Arabia and Israel on the same axis), based on "maximum pressure" policy, with the very purpose of defeating the regime in Tehran. Iran responded with a "maximum resistance" policy. One needs a wait-and-see approach regarding how the Joe Biden Administration would manage to diminish the existing tensions. The exception in the recent

history of tense relations between Iran and US happened during the Obama mandate. That Administration decided to include Iran in the regional affairs, rather than exclude it. The nuclear deal remains a turning point in the evolution of Iran's foreign policy and strategies. Despite the challenges, it molded Iran's policies and brings in different perspectives concerning Iran's stability and interaction with the outside world, bringing about more rationality and less costly engagements. A new level of provocation was added by the Covid-19 pandemic, whose consequences are still unfolding.

The concept of "strategic stability" has developed over time. This notion dates back to the Cold War<sup>2</sup>. It differs at the individual level for each State, based on national, historical, and geopolitical characteristics.

Iran's understanding of strategic stability (in Persian: *Sebat e Rahbordi*) is very much connected to its relation with the great powers, notably with the United States in recent decades and its geopolitics manifested in the Middle Eastern arena. As a result, Iran has been adopting containment and deterrence policies, with the backdrop of proliferating threats in the volatile realm of the region.

Iran's policies and strategies are shaped by strong identity values and its specific geography. First, Iran is located in a favorable geographical (an important geographical crossroads and in a nexus of energy resources and routes) and socio-historical corridor (being Persian and Shiite). Such features come with

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<sup>2</sup> More details available at [www.posse.gatech.edu](http://www.posse.gatech.edu).

both restraints and opportunities and specific adjustments lately. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought us in a new situation when addressing regional issues, while geography and history are becoming increasingly significant in shaping regional policy.

The two factors of “geographical centrality” and “identical values” are pivotal in shaping Iran’s understanding of strategic stability in the region<sup>3</sup>. In this respect, Iran believes that strategic stability can only be achieved through collective efforts and increased regional cooperation, despite the existing differences between regional countries and different affiliations. This is why Iran’s alliance network relies on collaboration concerning regional issues, including a long-standing partnership with Syria and Iraq, the connection with non-state actors, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and global partners like Russia and China, Iran requiring their support, for example in Syrian matters<sup>4</sup>. Contrary to the rhetoric promoted by Western and Arab states on Iran’s regional hegemony, Iranian officials believe that regional problems and insecurity affect Iran itself, so Iran is responsible and accountable for managing regional instability. Through President Trump’s policy, Iran has been forced to address regional crises individually, with direct interests

in Afghanistan (Iran is interested in influencing intra-Afghan negotiations), in Syria and in Iraq, as well. For instance, it supports the Iraqi’s government policy, and in Yemen, Iran has superior leverage over Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabia was defeated by the Houthi with the support of Iran).

As far as “identical values” are concerned, Iran has a sense of responsibility and duty to build a strong state, based upon principles and values (national-Islamic) that hinder instability. This belief is proof of *particularism* in Iran’s foreign policy behavior, originating in Iran’s recognizable principles for safeguarding its national interests and security<sup>5</sup>. In point of fact, the role of culture, values, and general state principles play a crucial role in forming both Iran’s regional and foreign policy<sup>6</sup>. For instance, Iran manifested cautiousness regarding foreign powers in its sphere of influence in the neighborhood zone on the basis of historical experiences, yet it welcomed Russia’s military presence in the Syrian crisis for the fight against terrorism, despite ideological differences. Iran has made more pragmatic choices recently than the initial revolutionary spirit embodied by the 1979 Revolution. The leadership in Tehran is wary of the increasingly dangerous regional

<sup>3</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, “The Role of Regional Actors in the Syrian Crisis in the Light of Classic Realism and Constructivism”. *Iranian Diplomacy* (in Persian), June 22, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, & Divsallar, Abdoolrasol, “Political rationality in Iranian foreign policy”. *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2017, 40(1), 39-53. doi:10.1080/0163660x.2017.1302738.

<sup>5</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, “The role of Regional Actors in the Syrian Crisis in the Light of Classic Realism and Constructivism”. *Iranian Diplomacy* (in Persian), June 22, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Naghibzadeh, Ahmad, “Studying Iran’s Regional Status” (in Persian). *Middle East Studies Quarterly*, Issue 1, Winter 1996.

environment, in which one survival method is to garner more power.<sup>7</sup>

The manner in which Iran understands strategic stability leads the way to a few approaches in foreign policy: first, an assertive or active policy and second, an accommodative foreign policy, which the Iranian governments treated differently<sup>8</sup>. For instance, the Shah's foreign policy combined the two concepts. In the second and third decade of the Islamic Republic, Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami followed an accommodative policy, the line with a policy of *détente* at the regional and international levels. President Ahmadinejad was rather in favor of assertive behavior, fueled by friendlier relations with regional states. President Rouhani enabled a pragmatic policy striving to demonstrate a more balanced regional policy<sup>9</sup>. It brought to the attention the concept of "moderation", trying to decrease tensions with major Arab states, namely Saudi Arabia, offering an impetus for more inclusive international relations. The Rouhani Government introduced the concept of a "strong region" as a path towards peace and prosperity, and implicitly the strategic stability of the region<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, the conventional wisdom

among Iran's policy circles is that establishing strategic stability requires a "strong Iran" in the region<sup>11</sup>. All these steps are currently shaped by a turning point for Iran – the deal negotiated over its nuclear programme (concessions for Iran, implicitly more international interaction, in exchange for Iran reducing drastically the advancement in the nuclear programme). This conclusion of the deal marked the acquirement of more tangible power for Iran.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was concluded in July 2015, being signed between Iran and the world powers (US, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany). Iranian policy had a positive outlook, having in mind the prospects of lifting sanctions. For Iran, the ambitions of foreign policy need to be supported by mirroring economics, which is not possible under a harsh regime of sanctions. As such, the effect of economic sanctions and the political spectrum have made it possible to bring the issue of strategic stability within the debate of domestic policy, where it is claimed that Iran needs interaction with the world powers, in order to maintain stability. The Rouhani Administration chose to view strategic stability in the interaction with the

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<sup>7</sup> Amadi, Razi, "Two Reasons for Improving Military and Defensive Capability" (in Persian), 2016, [www.farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=32825](http://www.farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=32825). See also Barzegar, Kayhan and Rezaei, Masoud, "Ayatollah Khamenei's Strategic Thinking".

<sup>8</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, "Iran Foreign Policy After Saddam". *The Washington Quarterly*, 33 (1), 2010, pp. 173-189.

<sup>9</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, "The Iranian Factor in the Emerging Balance of Power in the Middle East", 9 September 2018. Retrieved from <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/iranian-factor-emerging-balance-power-middle-east-180909084735167.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ashena, Hesamoddin, "Competent States in Stronger Region: A Moderate Approach in Iran's Regional Policy" (in Persian). *Journal of Strategic Studies on Public Policy*, Issue 20, 2016, pp. 220-223.

<sup>11</sup> Mottaghi, Ebrahim, "Analyzing Iran's Forty-Year Islamic Revolution". *Mashraegh News*, January 15, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mashraeghnews.ir/tag>.

region and the world in the context of a “win-win” diplomacy<sup>12</sup>. This point breaks Western anti-Iranian rhetoric and recognizes the potential of Iran for ensuring more stability in a turbulent decade for the Middle East. The engagement for a détente is especially visible with European powers.

It was also momentum for shifting from Iran’s sense of distrust for the US regional policies, which during past decades were based on the regime change policy and introducing Iran as the main source of instability in the region. This perception did not last long, as the US withdrew unilaterally from the JCPOA (in May 2018) and the Presidency of Donald Trump led to the creation of an axis against Iran (with the help of Israel and Saudi Arabia). Iran even at some point proposed indirect regional cooperation with the US, provided that the principles of the nuclear deal were completely implemented<sup>13</sup>. This indicates the willingness for Iran to adjust according to the US’s role in the region.

Why is the nuclear programme a core of the strategic thinking of Iran? The *dominant* thinking believes that if Iran does not invest in a nuclear programme, Saudi Arabia will do so, causing a great source of instability for Iran<sup>14</sup>. However, acquiring such a weapon will force the regional and trans-regional players

to act more assertively towards Iran, trying to encircle Iran regionally and internationally. This is again costly and damaging for Iran’s national security and interests<sup>15</sup>. Any attempt to become the hegemonic power in the region is itself a main source of instability and problems, although the West portrays Iran as forcing itself as a hegemonic player in the region. If Iran would strive to be so, the US and its allies in the region can continue with the anti-Iranian rhetoric<sup>16</sup>. During the negotiations for the JCPOA, Iran distanced itself from a view that contests Iran’s nuclear programme. It represented a turning point for Iran. Thus, we can notice the disappointing aspect for Iran resulting from the fact that three European initiating states of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) in 2019 (the instrument that avoids the US ban on the use of existing financial infrastructure) have not been able to render it functional and have not fulfilled their obligations under the nuclear agreement as agreed. On the other hand, from a geostrategic perspective, it is recommended that Iran have the support of the European Union (EU), along with China and Russia, in the nuclear agreement revival. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom continue to engage with Iran strategically. However, Iran’s distrust

<sup>12</sup> Dehghanpisheh, Babak, “Iran’s Rouhani says goal of nuclear negotiations is ‘win-win’ outcome,” Reuters, February 11, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-politics/irans-rouhani-says-goal-of-nuclear-negotiations-is-win-win-outcome-idUSKBN0LF1L120150211>.

<sup>13</sup> Rozen, Luara, “Rouhani’s chief of staff: More US-Iran anti-terrorism cooperation possible,” Al-Monitor, September 27, 2015. [www.al-monitor.com/.../mohammad-nahavandian-interview-iran-hassan-rouhani.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/.../mohammad-nahavandian-interview-iran-hassan-rouhani.html).

<sup>14</sup> Zarif, Mohammad Javad, “Tackling the Iran-US Crisis: The Need For a Paradigm Shift”. *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring/Summer 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Hadian, Naser and Hormozi, Shani, “Iran Nuclear Program: Strategic Capabilities” (in Persian). *Political Science Research Journal*, Summer 2010, pp. 189-194.

<sup>16</sup> Zahrani, Mostafa, “Political Solution is Best to Sole the Syrian Crisis”. *Iranian Diplomacy*, April 4, 2017.

of EU states is based on the inaction of European states that have promised not to pursue the US sanctions policy.

There is another view in the Iranian strategic milieu that militates for independence and national power, derived from acquiring nuclear weapon, which equals deterrence. It avoids rivalries and concomitantly produces invaluable leverage for negotiation for Iran, especially in dealing with the US from an equal position<sup>17</sup>. This perspective created increased cautiousness vis-à-vis the US's real intentions *ab initio*. The unilateral withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA in May 2018 has seriously undermined the deal coming into effect, as the Europeans felt uncommitted to implementation without the American side. Iran needs from the Biden Administration the concrete first steps in lifting sanctions<sup>18</sup>. Iran's Parliament also passed a law obligating the government to halt implementing the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on 23 February 2021<sup>19</sup>. This withdrawal comes from the disappointment of Iranians who lacked benefits from the JCPOA over five years. They have always had the perception that the US is not acting according to the deal, whereas Iran respected the terms of the agreement according to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports. The NPT is also a relic of the Cold War, imposing many obligations on Iran

without giving any advantages to the country. Iran's academic elite considers that the "nuclear threshold" can create stability and security for Iran. It is part of strategic policy for the state of Iran, which has been the subject of threats and enmity by foreign states in the course of time. Beyond the importance given to the nuclear programme, recent years have prompted the need for regional cooperation.

Iran has developed a network of allies regionally, and shifted from the idea prior to 1979 – the centrality of the coalition with the West and its allies. Especially in the Persian Gulf, Iran is of the opinion that Persian Gulf security should be addressed regionally with the involvement of riparian states. As a result, Iran has proposed the security architecture HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavor) in 2019 which includes the suggestion that the area become free of nuclear weapons, weapons of mass destruction, and including an arrangement on arms control. Iran has the US in the proximity of its borders, and the US allies, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates that invested massively in militarization. Thus, Iran cannot renounce the missile program, neither nuclear enrichment. On the other hand, the Biden Administration pronounced itself in favor of regional security arrangements, but again Iran is very cautious regarding US promises.

Another layer is added to the previous regional conditions, namely

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<sup>17</sup> Mottaghi, Ebrahim, "Analyzing Iran's Forty-Year Islamic Revolution". Mashraegh News, January 15, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/tag>, pp.31-35.

<sup>18</sup> Vahdat, Amir, "Iran: US must lift sanctions before it lives up to nuke deal". Associated Press, February 7, 2021. Retrieved from <https://ifpnews.com/regional-multilateralism-to-better-serve-peace-and-security-in-middle-east>.

<sup>19</sup> Masterson, Julia, and Davenport, Kelsey, "Iran Passes Nuclear Law". *Arms Control Association*, December 10, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2020-12/p4-1-iran-nuclear-deal-alert>.



the global outbreak of Covid-19. The pandemic has not changed any existing geostrategic game, but at the same time has put states and nations in a position where they are more vigilant and willing to cooperate in a smaller context and appreciate the significance of regionalism in the context of cooperation. Instead of the global interdependence of the economy, we need to come up with new concepts of regional multilateralism and regional integration of economies, because they are needed at this time of the pandemic.

One should realize that Iran is actually facing a pandemic in a difficult period of sanctions and this makes it very difficult for the government to properly address its consequences, but, so far, the government has managed the available resources well, in the context of geopolitical constraints in a way that could continue simultaneously with foreign and domestic policy. At present, Iran is becoming aware that the available resources must be expanded correctly and in the context of good governance. Iran is becoming very inward-looking, and if it can cope with the pandemic, a strong Iran will emerge from this crisis, a state that can positively influence regional policy.

In the meantime, Iran does not neglect the global arena. Iran's approach to *multilateralism* is based on adaptation to an international setting. In recent times, even Iran evolved towards a strategy of looking East, in order to foster cooperation, as the cooperation with the West was compromised after

the inability to be more constructive regarding the implementation of the JCPOA. For the pragmatic reasons of Rouhani's governance, Iran emphasized a win-win diplomatic setting. Thus, Iran highlighted its role in bringing stability and security for the Middle East by engaging with peace negotiations such as the Astana Process (with Russia and Turkey) for resolving the Syrian crisis or fighting Daesh in Iraq. Russia and Turkey have a nuanced view of the regional dynamics according to their national security interests and therefore recognize the legitimacy and necessity of Iran's role and participation in any regional setting.

The so-called "maximum pressure" policy on Iran put in question this Iranian strategy, leading the country to count on itself by an "inward-looking" economic approach and resistance policy. This situation contours as "regional multilateralism"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, in Iran's foreign policy, there is now a change of approach by adjusting it to regional and international realities, given the greater integration with the policy of neighboring states (paying more attention to relations with neighboring states), according to the moderation principles preached during the Rouhani Presidency and at the same time the shift of politics towards the East. The Eastern reorientation has no ideological significance and emphasizes the dimensions of Iranian economic development and prosperity, based on geographical and historical determinants of Iran, as well as the

<sup>20</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, "Regional Multilateralism to Better Serve Peace and Security in Middle East". IFP News, December 23, 2019. Retrieved from <https://ifpnews.com/regional-multilateralism-to-better-serve-peace-and-security-in-middle-east>.

superiority of Iranian regional policy. In this context, Iran considers that negotiations with Saudi Arabia should be conducted in a broader form, as there is a risk that both states will be perceived as real threats. Thus, it is not recommended to discuss a security arrangement only between Iran and Saudi Arabia, without including Russia, China, and other regional states. Russia has proposed a security architecture similar to Iran's, and China has its own regional approach to implementing stability. China, which seeks regional stability for the flow of energy for its increased economic growth, supports a stable Iran. There must be a new approach according to the reality on the ground, and in addition to the countries already mentioned, it is recommended that the USA, Pakistan, and India be invited to the discussion. However, the future of regional security must be regional and address the region. In the conflict in Yemen, Iran is ready to support the Biden Administration by influencing the Houthi towards an inclusive government process.

Iran has few strategies on foreign policy. It shall act responsibly, carrying the duties derived from its own power, sticking to strategic patience, optimizing costs (the longstanding sanctions' regime effects), and reducing rivals' leeway<sup>21</sup>. Yet, the strategic stability has been based on the two elements of "containment" and "deterrence". This policy of containment aims to

minimize the potential threats through an increased relation with friendly regional political forces, as well as economic-cultural integration with the neighborhood zone. Second, the element of "deterrence" is further related to the conventional military aspect of Iran's strength – the ballistic programme – and full readiness for conducting asymmetric wars through mobilization of its regional network of allies. The matter of deterrence has evolved in Iran's strategic calculus recently and further linked to the concept of "preemption" of the threats from the region<sup>22</sup>. Based upon these considerations, Iran acted against Daesh or intervened in Syria. For instance, Iran's policy in Syria for supporting the Bashar Al Assad Government is due to the fact that Damascus has been a loyal geostrategic partner in an insecure neighborhood and that losing Syria will endanger Iran's geopolitical interests in the border regional politics. The tendency towards increased regional cooperation has always been strong in Iran's foreign policy strategy, yet it has been required to balance the other constant of the country's foreign policy, which is to deter the threats from the region, through hard and soft power. Having that in mind, Iran acted in order to face conventional and asymmetric threats.

At present, Iran's strategy in the Persian Gulf, especially at the Strait of Hormuz, is also based on containment

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<sup>21</sup> Barzegar, Kayhan, "The Iranian Factor in the Emerging Balance of Power in the Middle East", 9 September 2018. Retrieved from: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/iranian-factor-emerging-balance-power-middle-east-180909084735167.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Nasr, Vali, "Iran Among the Ruins, Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East". *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018.



and deterrence of the possible threats, based on its geopolitical considerations, aspirations, and power in the region. Iran gives primacy to the Strait of Hormuz. Preserving the security of this region both in terms of economic and political-security aspects are in the domain of Iran's vital national interests and security. For Iran, the US presence close to its borders causes a lot of concern and it is seen as a real source of instability. President Hassan Rouhani explained that securing Iran's needs to export energy is favorable to others' energy transports, as well<sup>23</sup>. In a slightly different manner, this defense strategy even existed in the time of the Shah.

Regarding ballistic capabilities, Iran will not negotiate as long as Saudi and Israeli capabilities pose threats to Iranian security. The problem is also a historical one because, during the war with Iraq, Iran did not have ballistic capabilities and suffered many losses. The issue of the ballistic program must be eliminated immediately from any discussion with Biden so that Iran and the US open the way for negotiations. If the mistake of leaving the ballistic program in question is maintained by Biden, then the negotiations are doomed to founder.

For Iran, the issue of missiles has both identity and tactical logic. Preserving the country's missile capabilities is the demand of the military forces, for the very scope of survival of the state. Second, domestic policies demand an upgrade of the

means that preserve Iran's sovereignty and dependence on foreign countries. Thus, the ballistic programme is perceived as a national domain where genuine advances (with local effort) were possible, despite many adversities. Accordingly, Iran has continued its missile tests and evolved it to an advanced and precision-guided stage, tests having been conducted in September 2020<sup>24</sup>.

Strengthening Iran's status in the regional balance of power has evolved gradually: first, there was the desire to create the strongest version of Iran in the region, second, to build Iran in a strong region, and, third, to create a strong Iran from within, after experiencing disappointment with the international engagements, notably in the aftermath of the JCPOA. For such purposes, it follows different containment and deterrence methods, as it feels challenged externally and in the regional arena.

Iran has adopted its strategies of foreign policy and security amid external threats, the extremist entities such as Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, Daesh, and other Takfiri factions. Iran has also faced US hostility, which under the Trump Administration took the form of a coalition against Iran, and ultimately the "maximum pressure" to which Iran responded with "maximum resilience". Many Iranian defense strategies look towards diminishing the US' anti-Iran actions (directly or via allied states) in the region/at the global level. This

<sup>23</sup> Reuters Staff, "If Iran can't export oil from Gulf, no other country can, Iran's president says". Reuters, December 4, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran-idUSKBN1O30MI>.

<sup>24</sup> Motamedi, Maziar, "Iran's Revolutionary Guard tests long-range missiles, drones". Al Jazeera.com, 16 January 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/16/irans-revolutionary-guards-test-long-range-missiles-drones>.

has become self-explanatory after the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force, to which Iran promised to respond with “hard revenge”. In addition, the US’ cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Israel against Iran transformed Tehran’s leadership movements into a more reactive, inward-looking manner that relies on its own “pre-emptive” defense mechanisms that cannot lessen the ballistic programme and the nuclear enrichment.

The clash with the Saudis’ policy intensified the geopolitical rivalry with Iran in the region, observed in the cases of Syria, Yemen, and other regional dossiers. As a result, Iran resorted to adjusting its defense strategy to the new political-security realities in the region, creating a network of proxies. For such purpose, Iran could not leave alone a loyal ally, Syria, where it accepted the presence of Russia for the purpose of avoiding the collapse of the Syrian State. Furthermore, Iran believes in a détente with Saudi Arabia, benefiting Iran’s bilateral and regional interests, securing Iran’s strategic assets in the region. Also, based on multilateralism, Iran considers it is not recommended to discuss a security arrangement only between Iran and Saudi Arabia, without including Russia, China, and other regional states. There must be a new approach according to the reality on the ground. The future of regional security must be regional and have the correct perceptions of the region.

Israel’s continuous threats to Iran, including menaces to nuclear facilities and its occasional air attacks on Iranian field positions in Syria and Iraq have led Iran to heighten its containment and deterrence policy. The antagonism with Israel has an ideological motivation and geopolitical substance, as it helps Iran integrate with Arab policies<sup>25</sup>. In fact, in response to Israeli threats, Iran resorted to a “balance of threat” strategy, adopting a “massive retaliation” tactic. To this very end, Iran is counting on its conventional improved missiles, and at the same time was working on enhancing its regional network, consolidating the positions of Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, Hashd al Shaabi (the People’s Mobilization Forces/PMF) in Iraq, and the Ansarullah forces in Yemen. All of these factions share the common interests of attacking Israel. All these entities pose vast conventional and guided missiles capable of targeting Israeli territories. In short, in this regional competition, Iran also needs the friendship and support of Arab states.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that Iran is very cautious in its approach vis-à-vis foreign powers, though lately it reoriented its strategy towards Eastern powers, mainly China, for pragmatic reasons, viewing the US as unreliable. It remains unclear even under the Biden Administration whether the US intention is to comply with the nuclear agreement – full compliance or only partial compliance. In these conditions, as a state feeling the duress of harsh

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<sup>25</sup> “Israeli Perceptions of and Policies Toward Iran.” *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, by Dalia Dassa Kaye et al., RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA, 2011, pp. 19–54. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1143osd.8](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg1143osd.8). Accessed 10 Apr. 2021.

economic sanctions, Iran naturally approaches the states that support its survival. At present, the Iranian leadership consider that relations with the Western side (the US and Western Europe) are not as important as they were before the signing of the nuclear agreement, giving priority to other areas (Eastern Europe, regional/neighboring states – with a focus on Afghanistan, the Caucasus states, and the East Asian states, and in the alternative the states of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America/

South). To these challenging factors, one can add the Covid-19 pandemic leaving an important footprint on the global economy and health systems, making states looking inward in order to maximize resources. Iran was not spared, on the contrary, it was one of the countries most affected in the Middle East. As a result, a setting for increased regional cooperation and the so-called regional multilateralism, pivots of Iran's foreign policy, is contoured more vividly.