

Look East Policy: Regional Policy of Iran Towards Countries Located in the Sphere of the Iranian Civilization

Bahareh Sazmand*

Associate Professor, Department of Regional Studies, University of Tehran

Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, an important process of new regionalism has been expanding in the international arena and countries have tried to implement their regionalist policies either bilaterally, in the form of joint agreements, or through institutionalization and multilaterally, by forming regional organizations and entities or through multi-lateral agreements meant to realize one's objectives. Undoubtedly, the Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception to this rule, and the review of its policies in the recent years shows the special attention of the country to expanding relations with various countries in Asia, including East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the dimensions, aspects, types, and characteristics of relations with countries located in the sphere of the Iranian civilization within the framework of the regionalist policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran through look East policy. The author's main argument is that the look East policy and expansion of relations with neighboring countries have never been of strategic importance in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A review of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran shows that after the ninth government came to power in the country, a regionalist approach was put on the agenda based on re-defining foreign policy priorities. In other words, the new approach was "look to East" and expanding relations with various Asian countries became an axis in foreign policy. Although the look East policy was important at that time, it was not a strategic policy and was influenced by Iran's relations in the structure of the international system centered on the nuclear issue and the great powers, namely the P5 + 1 group. With United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA (the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action), and the gradual ineffectiveness of this agreement, the re-expansion of the Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with Asian and neighboring countries reemerged on the agenda of the twelfth government.

Keywords: Regionalism, Look East Policy, Iran, Iranian civilization, Foreign Policy.

* Corresponding Author's Email: bsazmand@ut.ac.ir

Introduction

The ninth government came to power with the Conservatives' victory in the ninth round of presidential elections. Given the fundamentalist emphasis on the subject of justice, this period can be called the period of justice-oriented fundamentalism. Despite some changes, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was committed to continuity during this period; thus, the nature and basis of foreign policy in the ninth government was a continuation of previous foreign policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Within the framework of these principles and intellectual foundations, however, its orientation and behavioral principles were different from previous periods. In this way, we witnessed a change in the orientation of foreign policy from a reformist-tolerant ideological framework in foreign policy to a revolutionary-aggressive approach. Accordingly, the ninth government placed three principles of fundamentalism, justice, and pacifism at the forefront of its foreign policy attitude. This was followed by a redefinition of relations with the West, look East policy, critical talks with the United States, the expansion of relations with Latin American countries, engagement with the PGCC (Persian Gulf Cooperation Council), reforming of international organizations, and a review of nuclear diplomacy in foreign policy (Sazmand and Tabrizi, 2012: 2).

Therefore, one of the pillars of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the ninth government onwards has been the expansion of relations with Asian countries in the form of the look East policy. This article tries to analyze and evaluate a few matters: first, what has been, since the ninth government, look East policy's approach towards Iran's neighbors and countries located in the sphere of Iranian civilization, what processes has it gone through, and what have been the results? And second, what strategies can be undertaken to expand relations with countries located in the sphere of Iranian civilization and strengthen look East policy?

A Review of Look East Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are three perspectives on look East policy. The first point of view defines the Eastern sphere as an ideological geographical sphere, and to some extent in contrast to the

Western sphere. In this view, Iran's foreign policy towards Latin American countries also fits into the Eastern circle, which is a value-oriented and ideological paradigm in opposition to the current Western (Euro-American) order and norms of the international system. The second view is purely ideological and puts the East against the West, which is reminiscent of the bipolar era of the East-West war; this time, the antagonism is discussed from the Islamist perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Eastern category includes the countries of the Islamic world as well. In contrast, there is a third view that sees the East as the sphere of Eastern civilization through a regional and neighborly lens; this is a pragmatic perspective that includes components of convergence even in the form of unity and coalition, and with the clear geographical, locational, and identity-based definition it provides for the East, it can serve the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Adami, 2010: 89). What is studied in this article is the third interpretation of the concept of look East policy with a pragmatic approach.

In the post-Islamic Revolution era, look East policy has been influenced by two general factors: first is Iran's unwillingness to accept the existing international order, and second is regional conditions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, United States' consolidation of power as the apparent victor of the Cold War, and its attempt to establish a new world order, Iran's foreign policy could not accept the new international order and mechanisms due to its ideological principles and values. Challenging this new situation that was supported by a strong coalition forced Iran to move towards cooperation and engagement with countries that although were part of the Eastern bloc in the past, were still dissatisfied with the international order based on American unilateralism. In this regard, the ideal of forming international arrangements with cooperation of all countries and institutions led Iran to pay more attention to the East (Hunter, 2010: 117).

Regional conditions also incentivized Iran's attention to the East. The identity-based isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East and the high mobility of the great powers in the central Asian region eliminated possibilities for Iran's comprehensive cooperation with countries in this region. In this regard, Asian

convergence could produce a comprehensive identity with stronger partners and act as a cover for identity retrieval and elimination of unwanted isolation in the surrounding environment for Iran. These two factors show that look East policy has a logical and implicit justification given the nature of the political system governing Iran.

Historically, if look East policy was a low-level approach under macro strategies of Iran's foreign policy in the period between the Islamic Revolution and the reformist administration of President Mohammad Khatami, it turned into a main strategy itself in light of several factors since 2005 with Ahmadinejad's presidency, and emphasized expanding relations with countries such as China, Russia and India. The first factor influencing this change goes back to the course of Iran's foreign policy in the years before 2005. In the eyes of the officials of the new government, look West policy or de-escalating tensions during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, especially in the form of nuclear negotiations, had not received an appropriate response. While the reformist government was seeking to build trust by suspending uranium enrichment and emphasizing dialogue regarding the nuclear project, the Western indifference and insensitivity to time led the new officials in Iran to lack trust in the Western proposals and approaches to the nuclear negotiations. In this regard, international and regional challenges encouraged Iran's foreign policy to take a different route in light of its nuclear program. In addition, unlike Khatami, who saw cooperation and confidence-building as effective in changing the Western behavior, in the eyes of Ahmadinejad's decision-makers, the threat of the United States and the West was an existential and strategic threat and Iran's changing behavior could not bring about a Western change of behavior or establish a just dynamic. The result of the difference in the approach taken by Iran and response received from the West provided the mental context for strengthening look East policy in foreign relations of Iran (Arghavani, 2015: 24).

Regionalism's place in the foreign policy of the ninth and tenth governments

As emphasized in the introduction, in recent years, regionalism has been a main axis of Iran's foreign policy, and in practice, bilateral and

multilateral measures have been taken to achieve this goal. Of course, the matter of regionalism has been discussed through various and at times opposing approaches, which are necessary to study. Over the past decades, Iran's foreign policy has challenged the balance between these approaches in a way that can be considered a theoretical challenge to the focus on different regional subsystems in the Arab Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and East Asia (Barzegar, 2009: 25).

Therefore, regionalism in the form of look East policy was not a new strategy but received more attention in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 2005 and after the ninth government came to power. Although this approach had been considered by previous governments in the past, the special circumstances prevailing Iran's current situation and existing disputes on certain subject areas, especially with the West, have made the effects of this policy more apparent. This policy has been mainly reflective and reactive in nature, rather than having a specific theoretical framework and practical foundations. Therefore, when Iran's negotiations with the West on its nuclear program did not reach the desired results, there was a significant willingness in Mr. Ahmadinejad's administration to reconsider its foreign policy approach, pay greater attention to regionalism in foreign policy, and establish closer ties with Eastern countries under the "Look East" policy (Saghafi Ameri and Ahadi, 2008: 11). If we overview Iran's foreign policy in the post-JCPOA period, we can conclude that after the U.S. withdrawal from the deal, the re-expansion of relations with Asian countries has re-emerged on the agenda of the diplomatic apparatus and received more attention.

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran's foreign policy was strongly influenced by the Iranian nuclear program. In the approach that Ahmadinejad's government took, some of the policies of Khatami's administration, especially its focus on the West and relations with Europe, were revised. The Iranian nuclear issue was serious enough to not only complicate relations between Iran and the United States, but also create conflict in relations of conservatives and neoconservatives in Washington, between the United States and its European allies, and between reformists and the rightists in Iran (Abrahamian, 2005: 445). Designing the process of fuel cycle aroused

the concern of Western governments and put the issue on the international agenda as an important concern. Denying passivity in foreign policy, the ninth government believed that the Islamic Republic of Iran should pursue active and respectful diplomacy in the field of foreign relations based on the three principles of "dignity, wisdom and expediency", because passive and flexible policies could create an illusion that Iran is in a weak position. Therefore, the most important issues in this regionalist policy in relation to Asian countries, including countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization, included:

- Positing Iran's position and capabilities, especially in the field of energy and energy security, as appropriate areas for cooperation;
- Building security in Asia and establishing appropriate regional security mechanisms;
- Strengthening regionalism and regional cooperation stemming from the second wave of regionalism (Saghafi Ameri and Ahadi, 2008: 13-10).

Within the framework of this regionalist policy, in parallel with the consolidation and development of bilateral economic relations, the Islamic Republic of Iran also benefited from multilateral regional mechanisms and structures to achieve its economic goals; the pursuit of these goals has been prioritized through regional organizations such as the ECO, the Group of Eight (Eight Developing Countries), the Indian Ocean Cooperation Organization (Sica) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In addition to cooperation in the field of energy, the expansion of transportation routes, including the North-South communication axis, which was signed by three countries, Iran, Russia, and India, could lead to the development and deepening of Iran-Asia relations. Accordingly, cooperation within the framework of ECO and Caspian littoral states once again became a priority in the foreign policy of Ahmadinejad's government. In fact, activating the ECO was one of the main pillars of Iran's regionalist policy.

Another axis of Iran's regionalist policy in the ninth government was the revival and expansion of cooperation with the Caspian Sea littoral states (Casco). The Islamic Republic of Iran carried out extensive diplomatic activities to convene the Summit of the Caspian littoral states in Tehran, and the efforts concluded in holding of the

second summit of the five Caspian Sea littoral states in Tehran on October 15, 2007 (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2008: 47). Within the framework of regionalist policy, Ahmadinejad's government used all bilateral and multilateral capacities to develop, deepen, and strengthen relations with Asian countries, including the countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization. In the meantime, some believed that this policy faced many limitations and obstacles. The American pressure on Asian countries not to develop cooperation with Iran was one of these limitations (Shariatinia, 2005: 2). As stated before, based on Islamic values, the Islamic Ummah considers the international system, which is culturally and historically Western in nature and based on the disintegration of political units and artificial borders, to be flawed and incomplete, and is taking steps to change it. In this regard, and in order to change the international system, the struggle against the United States as a hegemonic power in the international system is a priority.

Along with this issue, on the cultural level, Iran is a great civilization with a brilliant history that can be renowned worldwide. According to the above-mentioned norms, one of the goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this period is to achieve a hegemonic position and play a superior role in the region. Accordingly, the Islamic Republic of Iran at this time emphasizes achievement of the top position in the region in political, economic, cultural, military deterrence, and other fields. In this regard, one of the ways to achieve this goal is to turn towards multilateral regional cooperation, one of the manifestations of which has been the turn to the east and the establishment of regional cooperation.

The place of regionalism in the foreign policy of the eleventh and twelfth governments

During his campaign, Rouhani focused most of his attention on widespread criticism of the previous government's foreign policy, blaming an aggressive and tension-inducing foreign policy for much of the country's problems in most areas, especially the economic sphere. Therefore, he introduced the principles of his government's foreign policy under the framework of "constructive interaction with the world" and regarded it as a key to solving the political and

economic problems of the country. The Principles behind the idea of “constructive interaction with the world” were avoiding tension and pursuing detente, rationality and prudence in the field of foreign policy, building trust, improving Iran's image and prestige in the global arena, active and dynamic diplomacy, and striving to balance and improve Relations with countries of the world, especially neighboring countries (Rezaei and Torabi, 2013: 133).

In the 11th government, in spite of an emphasis on constructive interaction with the world, common interests, respect for other countries and international organizations, neutralizing threats, improving Iran's image, building trust, and finally serving to achieve the goals of Iran's vision, which is the country's growth and development (Rezaei and Torabi, 2013: 145), the greatest emphasis was in practice placed on improving Iran's image, building trust and negotiating with the United States, and improving relations with European countries within the framework of JCPOA; the balance in establishing relations with different countries in the West and the East was not maintained.

Thus, the approach of the Rouhani administration toward Asian and Eastern countries appears to be based on a passive tactic stemming from Trump's departure from the JCPOA under the UN Security Council resolution 2231. There are arguments that, despite the need to pay attention to the East and countries in the region, the government's current view comes from the emergency situation that followed the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Still, the Rouhani administration's first priority is to resolve tensions with the West and the United States, and this is evident from the volume of contacts and statements made by officials.

This situation will definitely affect the other side as well, because the current policies create this perception of Iran in the region and among Eastern countries that Iran only turns to the East when there is tension with the West, which is not a strategic approach. This situation will lead to doubtfulness regarding both sides' determination, so obligations will be unfulfilled, the level of contracts will remain limited to the purchase of energy and exchange of consumer goods, and nothing special will happen. This is exactly what happened in the context of Iran's membership in the Shanghai Agreement; China,

despite Iran's effective presence, never supported Iran's permanent membership in this economic agreement (Sotoudeh, 1397/10/2 Dana Information Network). Therefore, reviewing the Iranian foreign policy in the post-JCPOA period will lead us to the same conclusion that after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, re-expansion of relations with Asian countries has re-emerged on the diplomatic agenda and received more attention.

The Capacity of the Countries in the Sphere of Iranian Civilization Regarding the "Look East" Policy

"The sphere of Iranian civilization, in a conceptual way, reflects the influence and exchanges of Iranian identity-civilization in relation to countries of the region and the fusion of our cultural and civilizational heritage with them in a cultural and civilizational body. The common cultural-civilizational framework that has emerged through the common linguistic, cultural and social elements and components is the result of a vast historical experience that has linked knowledge and identity and given rise to 'civilized consciousness'. The sphere of Iranian civilization refers to the geographical area in which the culture and civilization known as Iranian culture and civilization flows. According to this definition, all people of this area belong to a great civilization, which is united by elements such as religion, history, common culture, enduring forms of living, and the world of common myths, forming an interconnected set" (Nazari, 2011: 22-23).

The sphere of Iranian civilization in a limited sense is comprised of territories where the majority of people speak Persian and includes the countries of Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. In a broader sense, however, it is the area covered by the great Iranian empire in the past, which would translate to the Iranian plateau in western Asia, comprised of present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, the southern shores of the Persian Gulf, and much of the Indian subcontinent (Ghasemi, 2009: 2).

Reviewing the look East policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the ninth government onwards shows that the look east policy towards Asian countries, especially the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization, has always been overshadowed by the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the West and never turned into a

strategic policy. Another point is that security aspects have always prevailed the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the economic and cultural aspects have been defined under the banner of security policy-making.

Therefore, two things seem essential in this regard: First, the look East policy needs to be reconsidered and must become an independent and strategic policy from a tactical and reactionary point of view. Second, considering the cultural, historical, civilizational, linguistic, religious, and other commonalities with the countries of the region, especially the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization, the regional policy of Iran can be reviewed and the look East policy towards countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization can be defined as a strategic priority for Iran's foreign policy.

The expansion of Iran's relations with countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization has contextual and conditional requirements that when considered and realized can lead to convergence among these countries, especially from a cultural aspect. Components that can be considered as providing the primary ground for expanding cooperation between them include:

- The geographical component,
- Common historical memories or common historical perceptions,
- Common rituals and customs,
- Celebrities and intellectuals,
- Religion,
- Language and literature.

Therefore, the principles of Iranian foreign policy should not be based on a misunderstanding of national interests, but centered on the sphere of Iranian civilization, a civilization that was formed from the link between Islamism and Iranism. In other words, the "civilization-based foreign policy of look East" means a policy that is not limited to present-day Iran, rather shows attachment to all components of this civilization, even those that survived within political units outside Iran. Countries with strong material and spiritual ties to each other share common backgrounds, values, cultures and interests (Javadi Arjmand et al., 2013: 39-40).

Conclusion and Providing Solutions

According to the points raised in the previous section, it can be said that regionalist policy in the form of look East towards the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization should move away from its initial reactionary and reflective nature and become a strategic and long-term plan in Iranian foreign policy. This shift needs to happen because economically, the investment of Asians in Iran has not been enough to compensate for the Western investment, and the pressure from the West, especially the United States, has discouraged some Asian countries and led to withdrawal of investments from Iran. The political success of this policy has been even more limited than the economic aspect since none of Iran's Asian partners were willing to stand up to the West in support of Iran's nuclear program; some of them have even used this issue to get points from the West.

Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic of Iran can more easily form alliances and converge with countries located in the sphere of its civilization due to common Eastern civilizational background and cultural, historical, and identity-based commonalities with inhabitants of this region. Therefore, Iran must adopt a strategic and long-term approach toward the great Eastern society and design an appropriate strategy to make the best use of the maximum capacity of Asian countries and promote its national interests. In this regard, considering the existence of cultural, historical, religious, linguistic, and other commonalities among countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization, it is possible to offer suggestions focusing on different dimensions of diplomacy to be considered as solutions to expand cooperation between the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization as part of look East policy:

- A regional organization or union should be established in this regard (for example, under the name of the Regional Organization of the Countries of the Sphere Iranian Civilization or the Regional Union of Civilizations) in order to strengthen the cooperation of member countries. In fact, studying concrete and successful examples of regional convergence shows that the creation of an institution or union plays a very important role in the development of interactions, meetings, expert consultations, and purposeful discussions. It is worth noting that the effort to

create a union takes precedence over forming an organization because successful examples of convergence, such as the European Union or ASEAN, are mostly unions.

- If the members agree to form a regional civilization-based union, the interaction, meetings, consultations and discussions among them within the union will pave the way for the establishment of common norms. In the sphere of Iranian civilization, there are hidden norms that are important for and respected by all members. So, if this union is formed, it can be expected that, as a result of interactions, consultations, discussions, and meetings of members within the union, favorable conditions will be provided for the internalization and institutionalization of these norms among members and the formation of a collective identity. As these special norms are known in ASEAN as the "ASEAN Way", the "Ways of Civilization" can be emphasized in this civilization-based regional union, and extensive efforts can be made to institutionalize and internalize these unique norms.
- Another point is that using the tools of public diplomacy, these interactions should take place both at the level of policymakers and at the communal level of the general public, and should not be limited to policymakers. In other words, these interactions take place at all levels of governmental and non-governmental sectors. In fact, the formation of a collective identity or cultural convergence among members of the sphere of Iranian civilization requires special attention to the level of societies because, as mentioned, the process of cultural convergence is a time-consuming process and needs to be achieved at all levels. Perhaps societies and people are more interested in converging with other peoples of the Iranian sphere of civilization due to cultural commonalities, and paying attention to this is a prerequisite for achieving convergence among these countries. Many researchers of convergence even believe that convergence is a bottom-up process and people and communities play an important role in its realization.
- The next proposed solution is to emphasize the common customs of the member countries in annual festivals and

demonstrate them through films, celebrations, and exhibitions for all audiences, both governmental and non-governmental entities.

- The next proposal in the form of media diplomacy is production of films in which there is an emphasis on the common and ancient rituals of the Iranian civilization. Unfortunately, studies show that no serious and significant steps have been taken in this regard by the authorities and experts. The production of effective and powerful films on this subject and their translation into the languages of other countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization can be effective because one way to introduce this ancient heritage to the people within the Iranian sphere of civilization is broad casting influential historical and documentary films in which special attention is paid to the geographical area, historical dimensions, cultural aspects, and commonalities of the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization.
- In addition to the production of specialized films discussed in the previous point, formation of collective identity among the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization is also possible through the publication of specialized books and publications about the Iranian civilization and detailed explanation of the religious, economic, social, political, cultural, social, philosophical, anthropological, and historical aspects of the civilization. This solution, which is based on public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy more specifically, emphasizes publishing specialized books and publications on the Iranian civilization indifferent subjects (literature, art, politics, culture, history, geography, economics, philosophy, etc.) and different languages.
- Facilitating citizens' travel to other countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization and to witness the common celebrations and rituals is in the field of tourism diplomacy.
- Another suggestion of media diplomacy is creating a network of media within the sphere of the Iranian civilization and introducing common customs of all countries through this network. Of course, the implementation of this proposal requires

a separate research project to assess the feasibility of the establishment of such media network.

- Another solution is to consider is highlighting the similarities of the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization in textbooks. One way to create a collective identity is to emphasize complex social learning, and one method of complex social learning is through textbooks. It is suggested that in textbooks related to this topic like history, social sciences, geography, and literature in different educational levels of all these member counties, a section be dedicated to the subject of regional similarities in the area of Iranian civilization.
- The creation of a culture channel can also be considered a tool for the realization of collective identity formation through media diplomacy. Taking into account the positive measures taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) regarding the establishment and creation of specialized channels for sports, children, health, Quran, and business, it is suggested that a specialized channel called culture be created and an important part its programs dedicated to the regular study of cultural and civilizational commonalities among countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization. In addition, translation of programs into the regional languages can make it possible for citizens of countries in the sphere of Iranian civilization to also use these programs, and more space will be provided for realization of collective identity.
- Translating the works already published on the subject of Iranian civilization into different languages, especially the languages of the countries of the Iranian civilization, is another way to achieve collective identity.
- Finally, production of various animations and video clips on the commonalities of the countries of the sphere of Iranian civilization and their distribution to children and adolescents are another way to achieve collective identity. In fact, another manifestation of complex social learning is education through simple means like movie-screening and animations.

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