

'Loneliness' neither honor nor inevitable fate

Necessity of conceptualizing regional order



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S P E E C H

Since 1979, Iran's foreign policy has been unique, bearing little resemblance to the policies of the approximately 206 recognized countries worldwide. I refer here to the memoirs of Vladimir Kuzichkin, a senior KGB officer in Iran, who wrote: "In [January] 1979, when the [Islamic] Revolution took place, and in the few following months, we paid three visits with the Soviet ambassador to meet Imam Khomeini. The first time, the ambassador presented the USSR's proposal for full support of the Iranian revolution. Imam Khomeini thanked him. The second time, the ambassador repeated the offer, but the Imam gave no response except to say 'Good-bye to you.' The third time, early in 1979, the Imam didn't even agree to meet the ambassador." Kuzichkin added: "It was quite surprising to us because anywhere in the world when someone took a stance against the US or chanted slogans, they usually welcomed our support, but they (Imam Khomeini) gave no such reception."

Later, Kuzichkin explained how the Islamic Revolution was positioned not only against the United States but also against the Soviet Union — referring to Iran's policy of "Neither East nor West". The eight-year war itself and Iran's rise as a significant regional power, despite lacking effective external support and under international pressure and sanctions, have made for Iran's foreign policy a genuinely distinctive case for many analysts.

However, conceptualizing high-level foreign policy is no easy task. Perhaps, before Dr. Mohiaddin Mesbahi, no one in Iran had tied together a cohesive analysis of it, though I don't think he claimed that himself; It is mostly their readers' interpretations that have built up this claim. I wish he were more present in Iran as before, so we could touch base with him directly. Before him, Dr. Ruhollah Ramezani, may God bless his soul, was a singular figure — most books later written on Iran's foreign policy either drew on his works or drew heavily from them.

He introduced the concept of "Kaleidoscopic" or "Multifaceted, Multicolored" foreign policy — but "multicolored" here is not in a negative sense, rather it implies diversity; Meaning Iran's foreign policy is compelled to answer to a broad range of international issues simultaneously. He extended this concept from the Safavid era through the Pahlavi period. Since then, no one has raised this concept regarding Iran's entire foreign policy over a long stretch. For example, the late Dr. Azghandi focused only on the Pahlavi period, labeling it a puppet government's policy, or recognized a discursive divide between different eras. Hence, grand conceptualization in foreign policy is an intriguing sub-



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ject and somewhat in line with our current conditions.

During the recent imposed 12-day war, beyond diplomatic statements, expressions of regret, or the occasional verbal support, some interesting developments popped up. For instance, despite Pakistan's verbal support for Iran, its government warned the Iranian ambassador not to let off any missiles toward Saudi Arabia since Pakistan has a defense pact with Saudi Arabia and would be forced to react in such a case. This is the very literal embodiment of "loneliness."

Our dear colleague Dr. Nematpour pointed out that the concept of "Strategic Loneliness" was brought up in a security conference in Pakistan in the mid-2000s. Though I did not see exactly who coined the term, it has been mentioned in an interview. Dr. Reisinezhad played a crucial role in elaborating on this topic. A search revealed about 30 papers, reports, and interviews from him on the subject over the past decade, published in newspapers, quarterly journals, and other sources on this subject. This concept has gained extensive application in Iranian foreign policy literature.

The critical point is that in-

terpretations of this concept have run ahead far beyond the original author's intent. I will explain and critique this later, and solutions must also be put forward. Here, we face related concepts that need to be clarified first. For instance, what exactly is a "strategic matter"? Often, trivial affairs are labeled as strategic, like "the Ministry of Agriculture's strategy," while in its true sense, a strategic matter relates to the government and national security over a long period within a competitive military environment. Without these four elements, something cannot be called strategic. But what "strategic loneliness" means for Iran is the absence of any "alliance". An alliance means two or more countries share a common threat and have practical agreements and mechanisms to respond collectively.

For example, Israel is a common threat to many Muslims, but there is neither will, agreement, nor joint action to confront it; Therefore, no alliance takes shape. A military coalition is not an alliance; Coalitions are usually short-term and situational. Strategic partnership is like the one between Iran and Russia. Here, strategic is used in a general sense.

The Iran-China agreement

signed five years ago is called a "strategic agreement," yet there is no clause on military alliance. The same goes for the Iran-Russia agreement. It should be noted that "alliance" depends on mutual acceptance and opening doors for the other party. Now, we must see whether a strategic alliance is even feasible for Iran, given today's international environment.

In Dr. Mesbahi's book, only one paper tackles this issue, titled "Free and Bound: Iran and the International System." This paper dedicates fewer than 10 lines to strategic loneliness, focusing more on Iran's possibilities and limitations within the international system. Another paper discusses trust in Iran-US relations, which is not much related to our topic — that is, "strategic loneliness". A third paper covers China and nuclear weapons expansion. The fourth is a valuable interview, more suitable for those familiar with international relations theory because without such a background, it might be misleading. Overall, just one paper directly relates to our subject. Notably, in this paper, Dr. Mesbahi touches on the concept of "strategic loneliness" only briefly. The paper's title asserts that the Iranian government was born with strategic loneliness

in 1979 following hostile relations with the US, implying this strategic constraint emerged post-Islamic Revolution and is not considered present before the revolution.

The abstract of the paper points out that three key elements play into Iran's relations with the international system:

- Political and military loneliness vis-à-vis the United States, which, despite all the pressure, has led to a sort of reluctant acceptance of Iran in the international order.

- Iran's role as a revisionist and anti-hegemonic actor in the normative and social sphere, laying out a third path of resistance against the liberal capitalist system — a path drawn from the culture of Ashura, leftist heritage, and transnational capacity-building.

- Economic and developmental vulnerability, which, according to the author, holds the key to Iran's main weakness in the international system.

The paper emphasizes that the fulcrum of Iran's foreign policy under current circumstances is internal legitimacy, a legitimacy whose continuity hinges on economic development and the preservation of normative legitimacy through a kind of nationalism and Ashura culture. This conclusion lines up with our



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Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Abbas Araghchi attends the UNSC meeting at UN headquarters in New York, US, on September 25, 2024.

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