

and lexicon, has often been represented as an “isolated actor,” “unpredictable,” or “severed from international cooperation networks”. This image-construction, primarily the product of sanction policies, media operations, and structural attempts to constrain Iran at the margin of the international system, has not only diminished global perception of Iran but also has had direct consequences for the country’s economic, diplomatic, and even foreign-investment relations. With membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, this dominant narrative underwent a fissure and metamorphosis. The official presence of Iran in an institution whose members

include China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and a constellation of important Asian countries, transferred Iran from a position that, based on the Western narrative, was situated at “the margin,” to the center of a burgeoning Asian bloc. This bloc, which in total possesses more than \$500 billion of internal trade, and in which the volume of exchanges among some of its members (such as China and Central Asia) increases annually with double-digit growth, will play a determinative role in the future Asian order. This transfer is not merely symbolic; rather, it reflects the transformation of Iran’s perceptual position in the minds of regional and global actors. The SCO enabled Iran

to present itself as an active, responsible, and potential partner in major Asian security and economic projects. This identity metamorphosis possesses multilayered effects. First, the confidence of Asian and Eurasian investors in Iran increased because membership in the SCO is a signifier of relative stability, collaborative capability, and access to an expansive network of regional markets and infrastructures. Second, Iran’s diplomatic weight in regional and international dialogues was fortified because its presence alongside major Asian powers elevates Iran’s strategic position and enhances its negotiating capacity. Third, the perceptual

isolation of Iran — which the West had reproduced for years through media and public diplomacy — has been markedly reduced. Iran is now viewed within a framework that includes more than half of the global population and a significant portion of global production. In other words, Iran’s membership in the SCO, from an identity perspective, has engendered a kind of self-redefinition in a world in transition; a self-redefinition that has liberated Iran from a constrained, threat-centered, and isolated image and has situated it as a natural and credible actor in the new Asian order. This transformation, if actively managed, can leave a lasting im-

act on all dimensions of Iranian national interests — from the economy and security to foreign policy and development. In sum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for Iran, is not merely a cooperation institution, but rather a new pathway for the pursuit of national interests in the domains of security, economy, politics, and identity. This organization renders Iran’s security networked, detaches the country’s economy from sanction-susceptible pathways, stabilizes Iran’s position in the future Asian order, and amplifies the country’s capacity for active agency in a multipolar world. If Iran can utilize these capacities with an active, coordinated, and

forward-looking approach, the SCO can become the backbone of Iran’s Asian strategy. This trajectory transfers Iran from a reactive condition to an active-agent condition, and relocates national interests from a narrow and constrained framework to a multidimensional, stable, and future-oriented framework. In a world in which the center of gravity of power is transferring toward Asia, Iranian presence in the SCO is not merely a tactical choice, but a strategic necessity for guaranteeing the security and prosperity of future generations.

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Asianization, redefinition of Iran’s ‘Look to East’ strategy

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OPINION

The structural transformation of the international system over the past two decades has gradually reshaped the material and normative foundations of power. The ongoing decentralization away from the West and the growing role of Asian actors in shaping the global economy, international governance norms, and technological networks are among the most visible signs of this shift. Consequently, the concept of the “East” is no longer merely a geographical direction; rather, it emerges as a civilizational and strategic domain endowed with new epistemic, economic, and institutional capacities. Within this context, Iran’s “Look to the East” policy can be understood as part of a broader process of strategic adaptation to the emerging Asian order — an order in which both the distribution of power and the distribution of meaning diverge from the Western-centric model, and diverse patterns of intra-Asian development and cooperation replace the exclusive centrality of the West. From a theoretical standpoint, Asianization signifies the gradual shift in the global system’s geopolitical and geoeconomic center of gravity toward Asia. This shift is not the result of a single political decision, but rather the outcome of three simultaneous historical trends: first, the saturation of growth capacities in the Western capitalist system and its resulting need for Asian markets and labor; second, the technological and infrastructural rise of emerging powers in the East; and third, the emergence of non-Western discourses on development, governance, and political legitimacy. As a result, Asia has transformed from an object of global politics into one of its principal sources of definition. In this setting, Iran — strategically situated between West Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent — is compelled to recalibrate its role within a framework in which agency is increasingly centered in the East. Analytically, the Look to the East strategy may be viewed as Iran’s systematic response to three key constraints: structural



The photo shows the Azadi Tower, a symbol of Iran, situated in a map that highlights Russia and China, the two greatest world powers to Iran’s East.
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constraints in the international system arising from the concentration of power in the West; environmental constraints in West Asia driven by insecurity and regional rivalries; and institutional constraints rooted in the Western dominance of global economic structures. Iran’s response to these constraints has not taken the form of isolationism, but rather the expansion of diversified linkages with Asian actors. In this sense, the Look to the East policy reflects the logical continuation of the Islamic Republic’s doctrine of political independence, aimed at creating a form of intra-systemic balancing through deeper engagement with new centers of power. At the conceptual level, the Look to the East approach requires a redefinition of the very notion of the “East” within the broader process of Asianization. In this understanding, the East is not constructed as the “other” vis-à-vis the West, but as a network of economic, technological, and cultural relations grounded in the principles of coexistence and mutual independence. This reconceptualization elevates the Look to the East policy from a mere political orientation to a structural strategy. Within this framework, Iran’s objective is not merely to change its economic partners; rather, it seeks to reconstruct its position within the orbit of Asian power — an orbit in which economic cooperation with China, technological engagement with India, and security collaboration with Russia consti-

tute complementary components of a broader strategic logic. Historically, Iran’s orientation toward the East has precedents that go beyond contemporary developments. The tradition of eastern policy in Iran has rested upon two pillars: territorial continuity with Asian geopolitical structures and epistemic continuity with the East’s justice-centered discourse. These elements have taken different forms across various historical periods, from the 19th-century policy of “negative equilibrium” to the post-revolutionary doctrine of “neither East nor West”. Yet, their overall direction has consistently aimed at preserving autonomous decision-making in the face of global power monopolies. Accordingly, the current Look to the East orientation may be viewed as the logical extension of this historical tradition, now reproduced through contemporary Asian dynamics. From the perspective of international relations theory, Iran’s Asianization strategy can be interpreted through the lenses of structural neorealism and defensive realism. As global power balances shift, a rational actor seeking survival and stability turns toward coalition-building with aligned powers in neighboring regions. At the same time, this behavior involves constructivist dimensions: the Look to the East strategy is linked not only to the material logic of power balancing but also to the redefinition of Iran’s international identity. This identity is grounded in independence, justice, and resistance to

domination; values that resonate within emerging Asian discourses. In other words, Asianization for Iran is simultaneously a material strategy and a rearticulation of political identity at the international level. The continuation and deepening of Asianization require an understanding of the web of mutual interdependencies between Iran and other Asian powers. Iran positions itself in its eastern engagements not as a subordinate actor, but as an agent capable of generating regional meaning and order. This self-understand-

ing aligns with Asia’s multilateral logic; a logic that emphasizes relative autonomy and balanced distribution of benefits in contrast to Western hegemonic structures. Within this framework, Iran’s membership in institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS should be viewed not simply as diplomatic events, but as markers of Iran’s integration into the emerging Asian power network. The overall outcome of these trends is that the Look to the East policy, in the context of Asianization, constitutes part of the broader process of global order recalibration. Through this policy, the Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to consolidate its position as a status quo power within the evolving Asian order — an order founded on multi-centricity, coexistence, and the rejection of Western exclusivity. In this sense, the Look to the East approach is not a negation of the West, but a redefinition of Iran’s relationship with global power structures on the basis of its independent interests and identity. Thus, Asianization represents not merely a reaction to international crises, but a gradual transition in Iran’s foreign policy toward a higher level of strategic self-awareness; one in which the East becomes the central arena for the pursuit of independence and balance.

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The signage of the entrance to Iran’s Foreign Ministry reads, “Neither East nor West — Islamic Republic.” This harks back to a famous slogan during the country’s 1979 Islamic Revolution.
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