

Iran 2026 horizon

Strategic imperatives for a new world order



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

The world stands on the threshold of 2026, not in a state of stasis, but in the midst of a historic and fundamental metamorphosis. If 2025 was, as described by many Western think tanks, the terminus of the classic liberal order, 2026 will be the year in which the contours of the new order and the geopolitical coordinates of the 21st century become distinct. The rapid developments initiated by Donald Trump's return to the White House and the shift in US policy-making have passed the initial shock phase via the imposed 12-day war between Iran and the Zionist regime and are now institutionalizing into new international procedures. For the Islamic Republic of Iran, as an anchor actor in West Asia situated at the heart of strategic intersections, a precise understanding of this transition is vital. In this context, the central question is this: in a world where multilateral institutions like the United Nations have been weakened, and the logic of transactionalism has replaced value-based commitments, how must our national interests be redefined and safeguarded? In this essay, by analyzing the trends of 2025 and looking toward the 2026 horizon, I argue that to successfully navigate this historic turning point, our nation requires a transition from reactivity to smart proactivity. This must be based on a precise recognition of the internal fissures within the West and the emerging opportunities in the East, ensuring the maximal protection and advancement of our national interests.

End of traditional diplomacy's era

A glance at Western think tanks reveals that most intellectuals view 2025 as a turning point in the collapse of decades-long diplomatic norms. The Trump administration in the United States, adopting an approach that could be termed "creative destruction" or, more pessimistically, a "mafia-style" approach, has targeted the structure of international institutions. Cutting UN funding, attacking the institutional independence of bodies like the Federal Reserve, and instrumentalizing trade tariffs were merely pieces of this puzzle. For Iranian policymakers, this shift carries a clear message: the era of relying on international law or traditional diplomatic procedures is over. We face a world where naked power and short-lived quid pro quo deals reign supreme, and securing national interests through the traditional diplomacy of the foreign ministry is no longer sufficient. While this environment appears unstable and perilous, it holds unparalleled opportunities for actors like Iran, who have learned to survive under the pressure of unjust sanctions. When the US evaluates its traditional allies through the logic of money, fissures emerge that creative Iranian diplomacy can penetrate.

West Asia; from fragile cease-fire to forced peace

One of the most critical vari-

ables of 2026 will be the security situation in West Asia. Field evidence and strategic analysis indicate that the Trump administration's approach in 2025 was a contradictory mix of maximum pressure and attempts at theatrical achievements. The cease-fire in Gaza, largely a product of the Zionist regime's military deadlock and the US president's need for an achievement to secure a Nobel Peace Prize, created a new atmosphere.

It is predicted that in 2026, Washington's pressure for an honorable exit of Netanyahu from power and the prevention of a reignited full-scale war will increase. This approach stems not from humanitarianism, but from the White House's desire to focus on competition with China and reduce military costs in the Middle East.

In the interim, our country, having weathered the experience of the imposed 12-day war with the Zionist regime, has solidified its position as the main backer of the Axis of Resistance. Iran has demonstrated that no sustainable security order can be formed without Tehran's presence and consent. 2026 is the time to diplomatically capitalize on field achievements; a time when deterrence power must be translated into sustainable political and economic interests.

Failure of tariff wars, Global South's pivot

In the realm of international political economy, 2025 held major lessons that must be applied by our country in 2026. Washington's tariff policies against emerging powers like India and Brazil, under the pretext of purchasing Russian oil or domestic issues, have yielded the opposite result, pushing these nations closer to China's economic orbit. This phenomenon represents a strategic victory for the "Look to the East" discourse and non-Western multilateralism that Iran has championed for years.

Economic analysts in reputable global think tanks estimate that while the US economy saw a bubble of growth in the short term due to protectionist policies and artificial intelligence, budget deficits and inflationary pressures will surface in 2026. Conversely, the convergence of the Global South within frameworks like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is accelerating.

For Iran, this means a golden op-



● BARBARA GIBSON/NEW STATESMAN

portunity to complete the North-South and East-West transit corridors. The trade isolation the West sought to impose on Iran is now shattering by America's own hand through the alienation of its allies.

Europe on precipice of nationalism

Developments in 2026 on the Green Continent are also of special significance for our diplomatic apparatus. Europe stands on the verge of sweeping political changes. Polls and political trends in the UK, France, and Germany indicate a surge in right-wing and nationalist movements, often labeled as populist. The potential collapse of the government in France and the rise of anti-migration and anti-Ukraine War parties in Germany signify a weakening of EU cohesion against external pressures.

A Europe embroiled in internal crises and political divergence will have less capacity to build consensus against Iran's nuclear or regional activities. Furthermore, given Trump's transactional approach and the likelihood of abandoning Ukraine, Europe will face a major security crisis on its eastern borders, shifting its security priorities. This transatlantic rift between Europe and the US, combined with Europe's internal disarray, provides greater breath-

ing room and maneuvering space for advancing Iran's national interests.

US midterm elections

Any outlook on 2026 is incomplete without considering US domestic developments. November 2026 marks the congressional midterm elections. US political history (with the exception of 2002) shows that the ruling party typically loses seats in midterms. If Democrats regain control of the House of Representatives, the Trump administration will face serious hurdles in advancing its agenda, reducing the risk of its quasi-authoritarianism. However, the more important point for our analysts is the state of the US economy at that time. If the stock market bubble bursts or the inflationary effects of tariffs become tangible for the American public, the Republican position will falter. This state of uncertainty in Washington means that any agreement or confrontation with this administration must be calibrated considering its limited political lifespan and internal challenges. Iran must not put all its eggs in the basket of either confrontation or engagement with a sitting administration; rather, we must envision diverse scenarios for the post-2026 era and the 2028 US elections.

Artificial intelligence, digital economy

While the US races at breakneck speed to dominate the realms of artificial intelligence (AI) and crypto-assets, the global digital divide is widening. 2026 will be the year when the real impacts of AI on productivity and indeed on social control become more apparent. Our country cannot remain indifferent to this technological transformation.

Trump's transactional strategy includes attempts to monopolize supply chains for critical materials (such as rare minerals) essential for high-tech industries. Iran, with its rich mineral resources and specialized human capital, has the potential to become a key node in the global supply chain, provided that tech diplomacy is activated in parallel to political diplomacy. Neglecting this domain in 2026 could result in irreversible strategic backwardness.

Strategic recommendations

Reviewing the above, it becomes clear that 2026 is not a year of tranquility, but a year of the consolidation of new patterns in the global order. The world ahead is one where ideological alliances would fade and get replaced by ad-hoc, interest-based coalitions. The United States, despite its military and economic power, is losing its soft power and ability to build global consensus due to isolationist and tension-inducing policies.

In this framework, the Islamic Republic of Iran requires a multi-faceted approach to preserve and elevate its national interests:

1. Smart reading of the adversary: It is essential to understand that the current US administration seeks deals and spectacles of success. This insight creates tools for our diplomatic apparatus to manage security threats with minimal cost. Utilizing regional levers to manage tension, without naive trust in Washington, must be on the agenda.

2. Diversifying strategic interactions: Diversification must accelerate. Now that Brazil, India, and other middle powers are disillusioned with US policies, it is the optimal time to strengthen BRICS ties and activate economic corridors. Iran's economy must be so interwoven with emerging economies that any unilateral sanction or pressure imposes a high cost on the global economy.

3. Endogenous resilience: The 2026 US midterms and the fragility of the Western economy demonstrate that relying on external variables to solve economic problems is a strategic error. The experience of 2025 proved that nations tying their economy and security to the fluctuations of the White House suffered the most damage.

In conclusion, our country must welcome 2026 with the self-confidence born of successfully weathering hard crises. We are no longer an isolated actor, but a power with whom rivals are forced to engage to restore stability to the region. The art of policy-making in the new year will be converting stability (this inevitable need of others) into tangible national interests; a year in which revolutionary rationality and agile diplomacy will guarantee the security and development of our beloved Iran.



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People rally in the iconic Enghelab Square of Tehran on June 24, 2025, to celebrate Iran's victory over the US and Israel, after the imposed 12-day war ended with the latter's unilateral request for a cease-fire.

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