

From his perspective, the nuclear program encompasses the central subject of the Islamic Revolution: the struggle for independence, protest against the inequality of foreign powers, the necessity of self-sufficiency, and the high credibility of Islam for possessing knowledge.

Nevertheless, the nuclear file in his discourse is not merely a symbol of confrontation; rather, it is also an instrument of engagement, an opportunity for power-building, and a factor in increasing bargaining power. His consent to the JCPOA and his emphasis on nuclear diplomacy indicate that this issue can also serve as critical engagement with the West.

From this perspective, the nuclear program in his discourse possesses three fundamental functions: the identity function, which entails the demonstration of independence and national dignity through the acquisition of advanced technology; the strategic function, which includes the creation of deterrence against external threats and the augmentation of bargaining power in negotiations; and the interactive function, which enables the creation of a foundation for dialogue and the reduction of pressures, as occurred in the JCPOA. These three functions demonstrate that the nuclear file in his discourse is not a zero-sum issue, but rather a fluid and multidimensional issue that assumes different roles according to circumstances.

#### 9. Neighborhood diplomacy and regionalism

One of the most significant transformations in foreign policy within the discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei in recent years is the prominence of neighborhood diplomacy and regionalism as a key strategy. This approach, which culminated in the Raisi administration with the restoration of Iran-Saudi relations mediated by China, is rooted in his view of the priority of neighbors and the management of the peripheral environment.

Ayatollah Khamenei holds the belief that the priority of foreign policy is neighboring and regional countries, and the strengthening of relations with neighbors is presented as a strategic necessity. This perspective stems not from weakness or passivity, but from a precise understanding of political geography and the intelligent management of threats and opportunities. Within this framework, regionalism is defined as a strategy for reducing security costs, increasing economic cooperation, and creating a regional order centered on Iran. He believes that regional countries must, relying on their own capacities, provide regional security, and the presence of foreigners not only does not contribute to security, but is itself a source of insecurity.

This approach has, in practice, led to policies such as the strengthening of North-South and East-West transit corridors; membership in regional organizations such as ECO, SCO, and the Eurasian Economic Union; the conclusion of trade agreements with neighbors; and the restoration and expansion of relations with Arab countries of the region. The restoration of Iran-Saudi relations in 2023, mediated by China, is one of the most important achievements of neighborhood diplomacy in recent years. This event is analyzable within the framework of interactionism and conflict management.

Within the framework of neighborhood diplomacy, connections and transit corridors hold a special position. Iran, due to its strategic location at the crossroads of North-South and East-West, can play the role of a bridge connecting Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and



Iranian President Seyyed Ali Khamenei (front-right) reviews an honor guard in front of the Great Hall of the People during an official visit to Beijing, China, on May 9, 1989. **REUTERS**

the Indian Ocean. This role is presented in his discourse as an opportunity for power-building and an instrument for de-dependency. The North-South Corridor for connecting India, Iran, the Caucasus, and Russia, and the revival of the Silk Road with China's cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative, are two prominent examples of this strategy.

#### 10. Power continuum; from deterrence to public diplomacy

In the discourse of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the concept of power is defined as a continuum that encompasses both soft power and hard power. This comprehensive view of power is rooted in his understanding of national power as a combination of material and spiritual capabilities that are employed in the service of national dignity and independence. In the dimension of hard power, deterrence and comprehensive defense are among the principal pillars of this discourse.

Deterrence signifies the creation of a capability that dissuades the enemy from any aggression against Iran, and comprehensive defense signifies the preparation and employment of all human capital and material and spiritual resources for the prevention and confrontation of any threat and aggression by enemies. Ayatollah Khamenei holds the belief that the power and effectiveness of diplomacy are not inferior to military power, PR, and economic capability, and in many cases are even greater; however, defense and military power simultaneously play a vital role as the support of diplomacy and a deterrence factor.

Within this framework, the extraterritorial deterrence strategy, which encompasses four layers from Iran's borders to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, has been designed as a coherent strategy. This strategy, relying on missile, drone, and proxy forces of the Axis of Resistance, provides the groundwork for in-depth defense and the management of threats beyond the borders.

In the dimension of soft power, public diplomacy and discursive power hold a key position. Public diplomacy means communication with nations rather than governments and the explanation of the values and ideals of the Islamic Revolution to global public opinion. Within this framework, he emphasizes support for freedom-seeking movements across the world, exposure of the dominators, and the propagation of the justice-seeking discourse.

Overall, the power continuum in

his discourse demonstrates that power is manifested not only in armaments and economics, but also in discourse, values, and cultural soft power. This perspective transforms Iran's foreign policy from a mere confrontational policy into a discursive-authoritative policy in which soft power and hard power exist in interaction with one another.

#### 11. Look East Policy and engagement with China and Russia

One of the most significant transformations in the foreign policy discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei in recent years is the emergence of the Look East strategy and engagement with emerging powers, particularly China and Russia. This approach, which was formulated in response to Western pressures and the shift in the balance of power in the international system, has, in practice, led to the conclusion of strategic agreements and membership in new international institutions.

The People's Republic of China, as the second-largest economic power in the world and a permanent member of the Security Council, plays a dual role in his discourse. On one hand, China is an economic partner for exiting sanctions and diversifying energy sources; on



Iranians mourn the death of their martyred Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in Tehran on March 1, 2026. **ATTA KENARE/AFP**

the other hand, it is considered a strategic ally against American hegemony. The 25-Year Strategic Partnership document between Iran and China, signed in 2021, is a watershed moment in these relations. This document, which emphasizes economic, political, and security cooperation, indicates Iran's long-term view toward the East.

Nevertheless, relations with China in his discourse do not signify dependency on the East, but rather intelligent balancing. Iran, by adopting the Look East strategy, seeks to create diversification in foreign relations and prevent complete isolation in the face of the West. China, for Iran, in addition to being a consumer market, is a source of technology, investment,

and consumer goods, and this relationship is defined on the basis of mutual benefit.

Russia, as a major power and permanent member of the Security Council, also holds a special position in his discourse. Iran-Russia cooperation in defense-military domains, including the purchase of S-300 and S-400 missile systems; energy domain, including cooperation in OPEC and OPEC+; and political coordination regarding the crises in Syria, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus, indicate the depth of these relations. Ayatollah Khamenei holds the belief that Russia can play an important role in establishing a multipolar order, and Iran-Russia cooperation can contribute to countering American hegemony in the region and the world.

Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and accession to the BRICS group are two important events in Iran's foreign policy that are analyzable within the framework of Look East and multilateralism. These memberships, in addition to reducing dependency on the West, can lead to increased bargaining power, diversification of economic partners, and the strengthening of Iran's regional position. The discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei



regards these memberships not merely as an economic action, but as a movement toward the multipolar order and a confrontation with unilateralism.

#### 12. Will the discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei persist?

In sum, the foreign policy discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei may be considered a discourse in evolution that, while adhering to principles, possesses considerable flexibility. This discourse, although confronted with serious challenges, on the whole provides a coherent strategic framework for the management of threats and the exploitation of opportunities in an environment filled with uncertainty. The future of this discourse depends, to a significant extent, on its capacity to maintain a balance between principles and expediencies, to manage relations with the West intelligently, to exploit maximally the capacities of the East, and to strengthen eco-

nomics and regional diplomacy. In this context, the new generation of Iran's foreign policy agents will play a decisive role in the evolution and innovation of this discourse, and it appears that, given the institutionalization efforts undertaken during the period of Ayatollah Khamenei, the continuation of his discourse is more reinforced than at any other time.

In final analysis, the foreign policy of Ayatollah Khamenei is founded upon the rejection of domination and the rejection of submission to domination. In this understanding, the world has always consisted of two parts: first, a minority that has sought to exercise hegemony and plunder nations; and second, a majority that has lived under their domination. The history of the world has been the history of conflict and engagement between these two sides. In the thought of Ayatollah Khamenei, the Islamic Republic is one of the few countries in history that has confronted and criticized this process.

The discourse of anti-hegemonic interactionism possesses two interconnected domains: first, the negative approach of combat with the dominant hegemonic system on the international stage; and second, the positive approach of solidarity with freedom-seeking countries, particularly Islamic countries, to construct a front against the imperialist desires of the hegemonic system. This discourse, which has evolved over four decades and, at each juncture, has encompassed different approaches in accordance with conditions, has experienced a dynamic transformation from sheer resistance in the 1980s to critical engagement in the 2010s and finally, to the Look East and neighborhood diplomacy in the recent decade.

The achievements of this discourse include: the strengthening of the independent and anti-hegemonic identity of the Islamic Republic, the creation of a broad social base among the nations of the Third World and liberation movements, the consolidation of Iran's regional role as the dominant power in West Asia, the acquisition of advanced defense and nuclear technologies, and the reduction of strategic dependency on the West through the Look East. Nevertheless, challenges, such as the high costs of confrontation with the hegemonic system, the economic limitations resulting from sanctions, and the difficulty of simultaneous engagement with the West and the East, continue to confront this discourse. For the future, the foreign policy discourse of the martyred Leader is evolving with three new approaches: first, resistance economy and self-sufficiency as a de-dependency strategy, which has crystallized in the Second Step Declaration of the Revolution; second, neighborhood diplomacy and regionalism, which has experienced a significant leap with the restoration of relations with Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf littoral states; and third, joining the new global order and synergy with emerging powers, particularly within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, which has provided a framework for multilateralism and evasion of American hegemony. The legacy left by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei is the "institutionalization" and "systematization" of a discourse whose substructure is an ideology based on dignity, wisdom, expediency, the rejection of domination, constructive engagement, and active participation in the international system, while preserving Revolutionary identity and principles. Hence, the replacement of the technocrats executing this discourse will not effect any change in the strategic trajectory of Iran's foreign policy.



The future of this discourse depends, to a significant extent, on its capacity to maintain a balance between principles and expediencies, to manage relations with the West intelligently, to exploit maximally the capacities of the East, and to strengthen economic and regional diplomacy. In this context, the new generation of Iran's foreign policy agents will play a decisive role in the evolution and innovation of this discourse, and it appears that, given the institutionalization efforts undertaken during the period of Ayatollah Khamenei, the continuation of his discourse is more reinforced than at any other time.