

Intellectual paradigm of Iran's martyred Leader in foreign policy

Rereading discourse of anti-hegemonic interactionism



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ANALYSIS EXCLUSIVE

The foreign policy of every nation constitutes a comprehensive mirror of that nation's identity, values, and strategic orientations within the international system. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Leadership, functioning as the supreme decision-making authority, executes a foundational role in the definition of principles, the determination of objectives, and the delineation of the foreign policy trajectory.

This piece, through the utilization of the speeches and correspondences of the martyred Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei during the temporal interval spanning the Persian calendar years of 1368 to 1398 (roughly equivalent to 1989–2019), undertakes a rereading of his intellectual paradigm in the domain of foreign policy.

The principal argument of this piece is that the foreign policy discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei has been formulated around the axis of "anti-hegemonic interactionism"; a discourse that rests upon two pillars, namely the negative and the positive. This discourse, through its susceptibility to three factors — the personal characteristics of the Leader, the internal exigencies of the system, and the transformations of the international system — has evolved across four decades and, at each juncture, has encompassed divergent approaches, from sheer resistance to critical engagement, in accordance with prevailing conditions.

Through an examination of key components such as the anti-hegemony bloc, resistance economy, neighborhood diplomacy, the Look East policy, and hybrid deterrence, the author arrives at the conclusion that the intellectual paradigm under investigation in foreign policy offers a comprehensive and coherent strategy for the management of threats and the exploitation of opportunities within an environment filled with uncertainty and, simultaneously, by virtue of institutionalization from discourse, possesses the requisite flexibility to respond to the transformations of the international system.

Position of the Leadership in Iran's foreign policy

In the Islamic Establishment of Iran, the Leadership is not merely the ultimate decision-making institution in the macro-affairs of the country, but rather the symbol of the ideological continuity of the Islamic Revolution and the determining reference for the principles and frameworks of foreign policy. This special status is rooted in three domains — religious, legal, and charismatic legitimacy — which empower the Leadership to function beyond managerial and executive exigencies as the "final arbiter" in the determination of ob-



Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei tends to a sapling that he had planted earlier, in his office premises on March 5, 2024.
● khamenei.ir

jectives, priorities, and orientations of foreign policy. The significance of this status is of such magnitude that any comprehension of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, absent an understanding of the Leader's intellectual paradigm, would remain incomplete and superficial.

The Islamic Republic perceives itself as the most prominent critic of the hegemonic system upon the international stage and ascribes to itself an inspirational and mobilizing role in the contemporary world; a role that acquires heightened relevance, particularly in relation to the Islamic world and freedom-seeking nations. This perspective, which, more than any other factor, is influenced by the role of the Leadership within this political unit, indicates that Iran's foreign policy must be considered among identity-value policies.

Hence, the discourse of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in the domain of foreign policy constitutes

preserving revolutionary identity, responding to domestic demands, and ensuring national security; and third, the structural transformations of the international system, encompassing everything from the bipolar system of the Cold War to the contemporary multipolar order. This discourse, across four decades, while preserving fixed principles, has demonstrated considerable flexibility in methods and tactics.

Foundational principles and intellectual bedrocks of foreign policy

1. Triangle of dignity, wisdom, and expediency

The principles of "dignity, wisdom, and expediency" may be considered the fundamental and immutable triangle of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic in the thought of Ayatollah Khamenei. These three principles, which are also foreseen in the country's 20-Year Vision Document as the bases of Iran's interaction with the

from principled stances is regarded as a violation of national dignity.

Wisdom signifies "acting sagaciously and judiciously". Within this framework, no imprudence should be permitted in diplomatic statements or in anything pertaining to foreign policy. Wisdom, contrary to certain superficial interpretations, signifies not passivity or retreat, but rather the precise calculation of cost-benefit, understanding the time, and understanding the place in the international arena. This principle immunizes foreign policy against rashness and emotionalism and emphasizes the necessity of meticulous and long-term planning. Expediency, which is defined in opposition to "personal expediency," signifies the expediency of the Islamic Revolution and the comprehensive expediency of the country. In this view, if an action is in the expediency of the country and the Revolution, yet is not in my personal expediency, what importance does that possess? Expediency in this discourse does not signify sheer utilitarianism; rather, it signifies Revolutionary rationality, which weighs material and spiritual interests upon a single scale and regards the long-term preservation of principles as identical with expediency. These three principles, in practice, constitute a mandatory triangle for the framework of international communications, and no infringement upon them is acceptable.

2. Rejection of dominator-dominated relations

One of the most fundamental principles of the foreign policy discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei is the rejection of any dominator-dominated relationship in the international arena. This principle, which is rooted in the Qur'anic teaching and Article 152 of the Constitution, operates as a foundational value in all dimensions of foreign policy.

From the perspective of Ayatollah Khamenei, the greatest injustice in the global community is the domination, the imposition of hegemony, and the division of the world's countries into dominator and dominated by the powerful. On this basis, all countries that do not wish to be under domination and do not desire to exercise domination, irrespective of race or language, are



considered friends of Iran. Conversely, any acceptance of domination implies submission and the encouragement of dominators, which, from an ethical standpoint, results in the humiliation of nations and the robbing of their identity; from a political standpoint, signifies the seizure of a nation's destiny; and from an economic standpoint, constitutes the plunder of a country's resources. The rejection of domination, in his discourse, is not merely a strategic principle but also an identity.

This perspective has transformed Iran's foreign policy, from the very inception of the Islamic Revolution, into a counter-discourse against the global hegemonic system. Iran, as a country that neither accepts domination nor seeks domination itself, endeavors to exhibit a model of independent existence within the international system. This approach, which is defined as independence in opposition to political dependency, signifies, in practice, the adoption of independent stances even in the face of global consensus. In this sense, if all the world were to reach a consensus on a particular issue, yet that issue was incompatible with the foundations of the Islamic Republic, Iran would explicitly reject it and preserve its independent positions.

3. Semiotics of the discourse of anti-hegemonic interactionism

The central signifier of the foreign policy discourse of Ayatollah Khamenei must be sought in the concept of "anti-hegemonic interactionism". The important point is that this discourse, contrary to initial perception, is not merely confrontational; rather, it is a combination of negation and affirmation. On one hand, it vehemently rejects any pursuit of domination and any acceptance of domination; on the other hand, it emphasizes constructive engagement with countries situated within the anti-hegemony chain. This duality, in effect, defines the anti-hegemonic identity of the Islamic Republic, which seeks the realization of its ideals not in passivity and isolation, but in critical engagement with the external world.

Within this framework, numerous concepts are identifiable as subsidiary signs of this discourse, each of which represents a portion of this intellectual paradigm. The preservation of territorial integrity and independence as identity-based and territorial red lines, the export of the Islamic Revolution as a transnational mission and the propagation of discourse, the unified Islamic ummah as an identity framework transcending the nation-state, dignity-wisdom-expediency as the strategic triangle of decision-making, principledism signifying adherence to foundations and non-compromise on principles, support for the oppressed as a justice-oriented and anti-hegemonic orientation, Islamic awakening as the vision for regional transformation, mutual



A member of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps walks past a mural painted on the walls of the former US embassy in the capital Tehran in 2019.
● AFP

a continuation of the path of Imam Khomeini, which has been reread and reproduced with the centrality of anti-hegemonic interactionism and under the influence of three key factors: first, his personal characteristics and civilizational view of Islam and its relation to the modern world; second, the internal exigencies of the Islamic Establishment, including the necessity of

world, provide a comprehensive framework for the regulation of foreign relations.

Dignity, in this view, signifies national honor and independence and is rooted in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an. Ayatollah Khamenei explains dignity in the following manner: "The Islamic society and establishment must not, in any of its international encounters, conduct itself in a way that culminates in the humiliation of Islam and Muslims." Dignity functions as a red line that no expediency should permit to be transgressed. Within this framework, the Iranian nation will not yield to any power, and any retreat



The discourse of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in the domain of foreign policy constitutes a continuation of the path of Imam Khomeini, which has been reread and reproduced with the centrality of anti-hegemonic interactionism and under the influence of three key factors: first, his personal characteristics and civilizational view of Islam and its relation to the modern world; second, the internal exigencies of the Islamic Establishment, including the necessity of preserving revolutionary identity, responding to domestic demands, and ensuring national security; and third, the structural transformations of the international system, encompassing everything from the bipolar system of the Cold War to the contemporary multipolar order.