

and the Soviet Union, also wanted to secure Iran's oil resources, protect transportation routes, and establish the Persian Corridor as a supply route to the Soviet Union. The invasion forced Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Therefore, Reza Shah's close relationship with Germany contributed to his fall, but the invasion should also be understood within the broader strategic context of the Second World War.

Positive-Nationalism approach

After Mohammad Reza Pahlavi came to power, Iran gradually adopted a new foreign-policy approach that he described as "positive nationalism". The young shah initially had limited authority, particularly during the Allied occupation of Iran. However, over time, and especially after the 1953 coup, Iran became increasingly aligned with the United States. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi argued that Iran should remain an independent and sovereign country and conduct its foreign policy according to its national interests. At the same time, he believed that, among the major powers, the United States was Iran's most natural and reliable partner. He maintained that the United States, unlike Britain and Russia, had no territorial ambitions toward Iran and occasionally presented Iran and the United States as countries that shared certain cultural and political values, including individualism and opposition to communism. This was the shah's own interpretation, even though Iran itself remained an authoritarian monarchy. Throughout much of his rule, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi maintained a close relationship with Washington. Iran became an important American ally in the Middle East and one of the largest purchasers of American military equipment. The shah used this relationship to modernize Iran's armed forces, strengthen the Iranian state, and expand Iran's regional influence. However, the shah's closeness to the United States also became one of the factors that turned parts of the Iranian population against him. His opponents increasingly portrayed him as dependent on Washington and argued that the United States exercised excessive influence over Iran's domestic and foreign policies. This criticism was particularly important among religious opposition groups and supporters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Nevertheless, the shah's relationship with the United States was only one cause of the growing opposition that contributed to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Neither-East nor-West approach

With the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, Iranian-American relations deteriorated dramatically. One of the clearest examples was the seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, by militant Iranian students. Ayatollah Khomeini subsequently endorsed the seizure, and the crisis became a defining moment in the breakdown of relations between the two countries. However, Ayatollah Khomeini's foreign-policy doctrine of "Neither East nor West" did not begin with the hostage crisis. It had already been one of the principal slogans of the revolutionary movement and became a foundational principle of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini believed that Iran neither needed nor should seek dependence on



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (L) and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, walk together during the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23, 2024. ● REUTERS

either of the two principal global powers, the Soviet Union or the United States. He regarded both as imperialistic, expansionist, and oppressive powers, although the Islamic Republic's hostility toward the United States was generally much greater. Under the doctrine of "Neither East nor West," Iran claimed that it would preserve its independence from both Cold War blocs. Instead of relying on the major powers, Ayatollah Khomeini argued that Iran should build relations with Muslim countries, revolutionary movements, and what he described as oppressed nations. In theory, the doctrine rejected dependence on both Washington and Moscow. In practice, however, Iranian foreign policy remained shaped by the country's security needs, regional circumstances, and changing relationships with the major powers. Nevertheless, "Neither East nor West" became one of the central principles through which the Islamic Republic presented its foreign policy after 1979. However, like other Iranian foreign-policy approaches, the "Neither East nor West" doctrine changed in response to shifting international circumstances and Iran's domestic political environment. In 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a strong opponent of Iranian dependence on either the Soviet Union or the United States, passed away. His successor, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who was serving as president at the time, was selected as Iran's new Supreme Leader. Approximately two and a half years later, the Soviet Union — the "Red Empire" — collapsed. This event significantly transformed Iran's geopolitical environment. The emergence of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan created a belt of newly independent states between Iran and Russia. For the first time in modern history, the two countries no longer shared a direct land border. This territorial separation reduced Russia's image as an immediate threat. For nearly two centuries, Russia had expanded southward, seized Iranian territories, and pressured the Iranian government. After 1991, although Iran and Russia continued to compete in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian Sea, Russia no longer posed the same direct territorial threat.

The transformation of Russia itself was also important. Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was not a revolutionary communist regime. Both Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei rejected communism as an atheistic and materialistic ideology incompatible with Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini was particularly hostile toward the Soviet system, while Ayatollah Khamenei maintained the same ideological opposition but increasingly distinguished post-Soviet Russia from its communist predecessor. Soviet support for communist organizations such as the Tudeh Party, as well as its support for Iraq during much of the Iran-Iraq War, had contributed to Iranian distrust. The collapse of communism removed an important ideological source of tension between Tehran and Moscow. Russia's foreign policy was also changing. Some Russian leaders advocated integration with the West, while others argued that Russia should remain an independent great power. A third approach became associated with Yevgeny Primakov, who promoted a multipolar international order and closer relations with China, India, Iran, and other influential regional states. Iranian leaders welcomed this approach. They viewed multipolarity as an alternative to the American-dominated international system that emerged after the Cold War. From Tehran's perspective, post-Soviet Russia was not seeking global domination in the same way as the former Soviet Union, but instead was attempting to limit American influence by cooperating with other powers. Nevertheless, Iran did not immediately abandon "Neither East nor West". Under presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, Iran expanded relations with Russia and China while also seeking economic cooperation and improved relations with Europe. Later, under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as Iran's nuclear dispute with the United States and Europe intensified, Tehran accelerated the expansion of its relations with Eastern powers, including Russia, marking the full emergence of the "Pivot to the East" approach.

Pivot-to-the-East approach

Iranian leaders argued that "Neither East nor West" prohibited dependence on foreign powers, not cooperation with them. They also distinguished between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Russia no longer shared a border with Iran, promoted communist revolution, or possessed the same capacity for global expansion. Closer relations



Iranian leaders argued that "Neither East nor West" prohibited dependence on foreign powers, not cooperation with them. They also distinguished between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Russia no longer shared a border with Iran, promoted communist revolution, or possessed the same capacity for global expansion. Closer relations with Moscow were therefore presented as consistent with Iranian independence. They maintained that Iran could preserve its independence while using closer relations with Russia and China to counterbalance American pressure.

with Moscow were therefore presented as consistent with Iranian independence. Under the Pivot to the East, China became Iran's most important economic partner, purchasing Iranian oil and exporting manufactured goods to the country. India also played an economic role, although its relationship with Iran became increasingly limited by its growing ties with the United States. Russia, by contrast, primarily emerged as Iran's military, nuclear, and strategic partner. Iran needed to rebuild its armed forces after the Iran-Iraq War, while Russia became the Soviet Union's principal successor state and retained much of its military institutions, skilled personnel, design bureaus, and weapons-production capacity. Although the Soviet breakup left some important facilities in other former republics, the core of the arms industry remained in Russia, which increasingly needed foreign customers. Iran consequently purchased Russian aircraft, tanks, submarines, helicopters, missiles, and air-defense systems. Russia also completed the Bushehr nuclear power plant. However, the relationship was not a formal alliance and remained affected by mutual distrust. Russia sometimes delayed weapons transfers or limited cooperation under Western pressure. The partnership was therefore based less on trust than on shared interests, particularly an opposition to American influence. This cooperation became most visible in Syria. Iran supported Bashar al-Assad from the beginning of the Syrian war, while Russia directly intervened in September 2015. Russian aircraft provided air support to the Syrian forces, Iranian personnel, Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed groups operating on the ground. This marked the first sustained Iranian-Russian military campaign in a third country. The Pivot to the East became even more important after the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. It was further strengthened under president Ebrahim Raisi, whose government prioritized relations with neighboring countries and non-Western powers. In July 2023, Iran became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Relations with Russia were further institutionalized through the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, signed in January 2025. The treaty expanded cooperation in security, defense, energy, transportation, trade, and technology, although it did not create a formal military alliance or a mutual-defense commitment. By 2025, the Pivot to the East had become one of the principal directions of Iranian foreign policy. It had produced extensive economic relations with China, military and nuclear cooperation with Russia, joint operations in Syria, and Iran's growing participation in non-Western institutions. However, the Pivot to the East did not formally replace "Neither East nor West". Instead, Iranian leaders reinterpreted the older doctrine. They maintained that Iran could preserve its independence while using closer relations with Russia and China to counterbalance American pressure. Whether this represented genuine independence or a growing reliance on Eastern powers remained an important question. If the primary objective of Iran's Pivot to the East was to counterbalance the West and reduce pressure imposed mainly by the United States, the policy failed to deter the Israeli attack of June 13,

2025, the subsequent US strikes of June 22, and the joint US-Israeli war launched on Iran on February 28, 2026. The renewed exchanges of fire in the Persian Gulf and the reinstatement of the American naval blockade in July 2026 have raised an important question: should the Pivot to the East be considered a failure? The fact that neither Russia nor China intervened militarily has strengthened this criticism. Both condemned the 2026 attacks and called for diplomacy, but neither attempted to alter the military balance in Iran's favor. Future direction of Iran's foreign policy Iran now has three broad options. The first is greater isolation and avoidance of major alignments. This is unlikely to work. Iran's military infrastructure has suffered considerable damage, while the country needs weapons, air-defense systems, investment, and access to international markets to recover from the war, sanctions, and the blockade. The second option is a major pivot toward the West. Iran could attempt to de-escalate tensions, reach agreements with Washington and European governments, and reduce its dependence on Russia and China. Although this might appear pragmatic, it would be politically difficult. A close relationship with the United States would challenge one of the central ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic and could be portrayed domestically as surrender after a destructive war. This option is even less likely under Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Mojtaba Khamenei. His father, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, and his wife were killed in the opening attack of the 2026 war, alongside several members of the wider family. This creates both a personal grievance and a political constraint. Even if he favored de-escalation, an opening toward Washington after a US-Israeli war that killed his father would carry significant costs among his political base. The third and most likely option is the continuation of the Pivot to the East. Its failure to deter an American attack does not necessarily mean that Iran will abandon it. The Pivot to the East was a foreign-policy orientation, not a formal alliance. Iran had no mutual-defense treaty with either Russia or China and may therefore have expected more from these relationships than Moscow or Beijing had promised. Iranian leaders also understand that Russia and China have interests extending beyond Iran. China depends heavily on international trade and maintains one of its most important economic relationships with the United States, despite the decline in bilateral trade during 2025. Russia, meanwhile, remains focused on Ukraine and its broader confrontation with the West. Iran is therefore unlikely to abandon the Pivot to the East. In fact, continuing hostility with the United States may encourage Tehran to deepen it. Iran still needs foreign investment, weapons, technology, and diplomatic support, while its confrontation with Washington remains unresolved. The more important question is whether Russia and China will reciprocate, or whether Iran will discover that its eastern partners value the relationship only when the political and military costs remain limited.

The article first appeared on E-International Relations.