Book Review

Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order

Reviewed by Fatemeh Mohammadi*


Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era written by Shireen Hunter is a major reference book on Iran particularly its foreign policy. It consists of two parts and ten chapters. The first part deals with thematic issues including the post-Soviet international system and the domestic context of Iran's foreign policy. The second part addresses case studies involving Iran's relations with the great powers, its neighboring countries, and other developing regions of the world.

The writer believes that the Soviet Union’s dismemberment in December 1991, as a result of its own internal developments and

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without any direct outside interference, was the most significant development in global politics of the second half of the 20th century. The USSR’s demise fundamentally altered the character of the international political system and equations of power among its major players. The characteristics of the emerging international system still remain unclear and to a considerable degree undefined, although economic, political, and military trends point to a system with multiple centers of power.

What has become quite clear, however, is that post-Soviet systemic developments have been detrimental to less powerful countries, albeit to varying degrees. For example, the elimination of the Cold War era zero-sum competition between the West and the Soviet bloc countries freed both sides in that conflict to intervene more boldly in other countries, including militarily. The U.S. war against Iraq in 1991, although occurring before the official end of the Soviet Union, as well as the Afghan and Iraq invasions of 2001 and 2003, respectively, would not have been possible during the height of the Cold War. Similarly, there has been a greater deal of international tolerance for turmoil in poor and powerless countries than could have been possible during the Cold War because the fear on the part of major powers that rivals might exploit that turmoil for their own ends has essentially disappeared. While all less powerful countries have been negatively affected by the post-Soviet systemic changes, those in the proximity of the former USSR and those with hostile relations with the West have suffered most. Iran is the best example of this category of states. Even before the USSR’s official demise, changes in Soviet foreign policy had led to a hardening of Western policy toward Iran.

Some countries have managed to deal more effectively with the adverse consequences of post-Soviet systemic changes and adjust to them. Iran has not been one of these countries. Instead, in the last two decades Iran has resisted the emerging new international system and, at least partly as a consequence of this resistance, has
incurred significant losses and setbacks. This work will analyze the systemic changes produced by the Soviet Union’s collapse. It will also demonstrate how and why Iran has failed fully to appreciate the dimensions of these systemic changes, to understand their impact on its own position and interest, and to adjust to them adequately. Until the end of the Second World War, the modern international political system was characterized by a multiplicity of power centers, which competed with and, at least among European states, balanced one another. By contrast, between about 1948 and 1989, the international system was characterized by a fierce competition between two power blocs, gathered around the United States and the USSR, competing for global hegemony and the hearts and minds of the less developed countries — hence its appellation as bipolar.

Iran, however, had been faced with an external environment which could be called bipolar almost since the dawn of the 19th century, as a consequence of several developments including the consolidation of British control in India, the expansion of the British military and political presence in the Persian Gulf, Russia’s southward imperial expansion and the ensuing Russo-British competition over Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia known as the Great Game, the lack of sufficient interest and presence of other great powers in Iran’s immediate environment, This bipolar condition had the following disadvantages for Iran: loss of territory both to Russia and Britain, the gaining of discriminatory and capitulatory advantages by Russia and Britain, such as excessive concessions on trade and granting of legal immunity to their subjects and Growing foreign interference in its internal affairs and the thwarting by the two competing powers of Iranian efforts at economic and political development. Nevertheless, this bipolar situation allowed Iran to retain most of its territory and its nominal independence. However, because, until the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution, Russo-British rivalry lacked an ideological dimension, the power equilibrium that protected Iran from the worst of
imperial predatory policies was highly unstable and susceptible to the changing state of Russo-British relations. Any dilution of competition between the two potentially could lead to their making a deal at Iran’s expense as they did, in fact, in 1907, when Russia and Britain signed a treaty that delineated their respective spheres of influence in Southwest and Central Asia and divided Iran into Russian and British spheres of influence.

Indeed, The Soviet Union’s collapse and the end of the Cold War fundamentally transformed the character of the international political system and interstate relations. It is still unclear what kind of a system will replace that of the Cold War era, partly because, since the USSR’s collapse other important events with significant systemic ramifications have occurred, notably 9/11 and the Afghan and Iraq wars. Nevertheless, the Soviet collapse has already triggered systemic changes, whose impact has been felt more strongly, and often negatively, by less powerful states, especially those located in the former USSR’s proximity. Iran is a good example of a country strongly and adversely affected by these systemic changes. Most important, post-Soviet systemic changes have rendered the external environment of Iran’s foreign policy far less hospitable. They have also created new security and foreign policy dilemmas and challenges for it, requiring a higher level of flexibility, realism, and skill on the part of Iranian diplomacy.

The underlying thesis of this volume is that Iran has not fully grasped the dimensions of the systemic changes caused by the USSR’s collapse, and it has not sufficiently adjusted its foreign policy objectives and practices to the new international realities.

Indeed, the writer maintains that Iran has failed to adjust to systemic changes. Occasional success in Iran's foreign policy had been the consequence of mistakes by regional and international players. Hunter argues to indicate that internal factors have been mainly responsible for Iran not being able to respond appropriately to post-Soviet systemic changes. These notably include the structure
of the Iranian political system, the continued influence of the revolutionary ideology on foreign policy, the still close connection between the system's ideology and its political legitimacy and the central importance of some aspects of the system's self-image and self-appointed role.

In view of these considerations, the methodology used in this volume will draw upon all these theories without trying to explain Iran’s foreign policy within any single theoretical framework. Instead, this study will draw on the insights provided by all relevant theories and particularly of foreign policy analysis. This discipline, with its emphasis on spanning the boundaries between the internal and external environments of foreign policy — or, as noted by Margot Light, of linking “the micro level of politics with the macro level of the international system,” the role of leaders, and bureaucratic politics — is particularly well-suited to a study of Iran’s foreign policy.

In this context, special attention is paid here to those internal political factors that are particularly influential in the case of revolutionary countries. In such regimes, legitimacy and survival are, wholly or partly, dependent on the pursuit of ideological goals in the foreign policy arena, and ideology is closely linked to power balances within the system, characteristics that make swift and timely policy adjustments in the face of substantial change difficult.

Generally speaking, the book has been written by a Western-oriented writer, though Hunter has a rather more fair outlook on Iran. Indeed, the writer regards Iran's foreign policy as failed and suggests that the only departure from this impasse lies in the rapprochement with the United States and Israel, whereas this materialist outlook arises from her misperception of the goals defined in Iran's foreign policy. Iran's foreign policy moves in the direction of its defined goals that includes both material and spiritual ones in which it has gained significant successes; successes that had to be mentioned in the book.
Nevertheless, this classification concerning case studies can provide the researchers in this field with useful information. In fact, it can be suggested that although the book is not a comprehensive one or a turning point in discussions of Iran, it is a useful book which has succeeded to attain its own presumed goals.