


From the Policy of Looking East to the Asian Policy

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Abstract

The policy of Looking East represents a strategic approach towards the regions beyond the eastern, southeastern, and northeastern borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, aiming to deepen harmonious relations with actors present in these areas. Consequently, the country has devoted particular attention to fostering cooperation and forming alliances with these actors, both through bilateral engagements and collective collaborations within the framework of regional convergence institutions, to secure national interests and enhance the country's security coefficient. Following the emergence of the Ahmadinejad administration, the Eastern Look has garnered increased importance, although it had been a consideration for previous governments. Iran's confrontations with the West, particularly over nuclear sanctions, have driven it to adopt policies in response to Western actions. Under the Raisi administration, Iran's "look east" policy, which had initially gained traction in theory, was pragmatically pursued and further developed as part of its Asian and neighboring strategies. This research examines how Iran has strengthened its relations with neighboring and eastern countries through this policy and evaluates the outcomes it has produced. In response to this question, we hypothesize that the Islamic Republic of Iran, through the development of the looking East and Asian and neighboring policies, initially reduced the pressure of Western sanctions against itself, leading to results such as the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, membership in the BRICS, membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the expansion of relations with neighboring countries. This research utilizes a qualitative research method with a trend analysis approach, drawing from library resources and scientific articles.

Keywords: Look East policy, Iran foreign relations, Asian and neighboring policies, Western sanctions, regional cooperation.

Introduction

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, three distinct perspectives shape its outlook toward the East. The first perspective defines the Eastern domain as a geographical and ideological realm, to some extent contrasting with the Western bloc. In this perspective, Iran's foreign policy towards Latin American countries also falls within the Eastern sphere, presenting a values-based and ideological approach opposing the current international order and norms of the West, particularly Europe and the United States. The second perspective is a purely ideological one, viewing the East versus the West in a manner that recalls the bipolar era of the East-West struggle, this time articulated from the perspective of Islamic orientation of the Islamic Republic of Iran and including Islamic world countries. Conversely, the third perspective regards the East as a civilizational domain with a regional and neighborly perspective. This pragmatic perspective encompasses elements of convergence, even in the form of union and coalition, and can secure the interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran with a clear definition of the identity, location, and geography of the East (Adami, 2010: 89). This article focuses on the third interpretation of the concept of the Eastern gaze, employing a pragmatic approach.

Since the post-Islamic Revolution era, two key factors have shaped Iran's approach to the East. The first factor relates to Iran's reluctance to embrace the existing international order. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consolidation of the United States' position as the apparent victor of the Cold War and its efforts to shape a new order, Iran's foreign policy based on its own principles and values could not accommodate the emerging international norms and mechanisms. Consequently, the necessity to challenge this new situation, which was backed by a powerful coalition, compelled Iran to move towards cooperation and interaction with countries that, although previously aligned with the Eastern bloc, were currently dissatisfied with the US unilateralist international order. From this perspective, the ideal of establishing international arrangements involving the collaboration of all nations and institutions prompted Iran to pay increasing attention to the East (Hunter, 2010:117). Furthermore, regional circumstances have also served as a kind of stimulus for Iran's attention to the East. The Islamic Republic of Iran's role in West Asia (the Middle East) and the growing presence of major powers in Central Asia created opportunities for comprehensive cooperation between Iran and the countries in this region. In this context, Asian convergence could

serve as a broad framework for identity formation, helping Iran recover its regional identity and mitigate its isolation by aligning with stronger partners in the surrounding regions. These two overarching factors suggest that Iran's eastward outlook, given the nature of its political system, had a logical and inherent justification.

The main question to be addressed in this article is how Iran has engaged in developing its relations with neighboring and Eastern countries by adopting an Eastward-looking policy and what the outcomes of this policy have been. Several books and articles have explored Iran's "Look East" policy and its relations with neighboring regions, though most have focused primarily on the politics of eastward orientation, with less attention given to broader Asian and neighboring policies. This article aims to fill that gap by examining these policies, particularly during the Raisi administration, which has placed a strong emphasis on this direction in its foreign policy. For example, Nozar Shafiei and Zahra Sadeghi, in their article "Iran's Foreign Policy Options Based on the Look East Policy," highlight how Iran's eastward shift became formalized under Ahmadinejad's administration due to nuclear tensions and Western threats. Ali Adami, in "The Strategy of the Look East Approach in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," critiques Iran's historical neglect of eastern strategies, while Kayhan Barzegar and Ali Adami stress the importance of regionalism and economic cooperation with eastern powers, especially for energy security. Finally, Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, in "Barriers to Achieving Neighborhood Policy and the Look to Asia in the Raisi Administration," outlines the challenges the current government faces in implementing its eastern and neighborhood-focused policies, citing international pressures and regional instabilities. This research builds on these perspectives, focusing on how the Raisi administration has operationalized its "Look East" policy and evaluating its outcomes. In this aim, the article categorizes its content into three main sections to address the question. The first section delves into the history, background, and achievements of the Look-to-the-East policy. In the second section, a conceptual rotation from the Look-to-the-East policy to an Asian policy in the thirteenth government is discussed. The third section focuses on the achievements of the Asian and neighboring policies in the Raisi administration.

1. The Look East Policy in Iran's Foreign Strategy: Context, Development, and Achievements

Iran's specific geographical, cultural, and economic position has consistently placed the ruling elite in the position to pursue a strategy of balance to safeguard its interests against both the East and the West in the international political arena. This strategy has been pursued to create the groundwork for preventing excesses on one side through extensive cooperation with the other party at a particular point in time. In this context, the policy of orienting towards either the East or the West, or rejecting both, represents approaches that have at times been on the agenda of Iran's foreign policy or have alternated with each other.

Within this framework, the significance of formulating an eastward policy from the Pahlavi regime prior to the Islamic Revolution until the early 1960s is found in Iran's prioritization of developing relations with the Soviet Union in its foreign policy. In 1962, Iran assured the Soviet Union in an agreement that it would not allow its territory to be used as a base for Soviet enemies or for the deployment of Western missiles. According to some experts, Iran's inclination towards the Soviet Union at that time was driven by the effort to break away from complete dependence on the United States and to become a dominant power in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean region. On the other hand, Iran was interested in pursuing a policy towards the Soviet Union that would lead to strong economic and trade relations between the two countries. This approach could have potentially fulfilled Iran's increasing need for armaments, which the West was not fully prepared to provide to Iran. (Saghafi Ameri & Ahadi, 2008: 73)

Another inclination of Iran towards the East can be traced back to approximately the years 1973 to 1977. In fact, the focus on the East during this period was also a component of Iran's foreign policy aimed at achieving regional superiority and expanding influence, not only in the Persian Gulf but also in a broader scope encompassing the Indian Ocean. At that time, Iran was considered a close ally of Pakistan along its eastern borders and maintained good relations with Afghanistan and many other countries in the region. However, in order to extend and enhance its influence in the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean, Iran felt the necessity of nurturing a close interaction with a significant country like India. Therefore, in a process of cooperation and friendship, Iran emerged as a significant investor and engaged in extensive economic interactions with this important country, including major

investments such as the establishment of the Iran-India Shipping Company, the Madras refinery, and investments in the Kudremukh iron ore mine. During this period, Iran took significant steps towards expanding its relations with other countries, including mediating in conflicts between Pakistan and Afghanistan and providing substantial financial assistance to these two countries. Furthermore, Iran laid important foundations for cooperation with China as well. (Saghafi Ameri & Ahadi, 2008: 73-74).

Post the Islamic Revolution, there have been two overarching determinants for Iran's eastward orientation: The first stems from Iran's unwillingness to embrace the existing international order. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the United States' perceived victory in the Cold War, Iran's foreign policy, rooted in its own principles and values, struggled to align with the emerging international norms and structures. Faced with this new global reality, and the dominance of a powerful Western coalition, Iran felt compelled to strengthen ties with nations that, though once part of the Eastern bloc, shared its dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led unilateral international order. This drive for new international alliances further fueled Iran's focus on the East as a strategic direction (Hunter, 2010: 117).

In addition to the international sphere, regional conditions also acted as a catalyst for Iran's focus on the East. Iran's identity isolation in the Middle East (2005: 118) and the increased activity of major powers in Central Asia (Akhavan Kazemi & Arghavani, 2011: 12; Haji Yousefi) drew Iran into comprehensive cooperation with countries in that region. In this regard, Asian convergence could serve as a comprehensive identity sphere with the presence of stronger allies to reclaim its identity and alleviate unintended isolation within its surroundings (Ahani, 2009: 669, Hunter, 2010: 117). These two overarching determinants signify that Iran's Eastward policy, considering the nature of the prevailing political system in Iran, had a rational and implicit justification.

Historically, during the period between the Islamic Revolution and the era of the Reformist government, the focus on the East was just one aspect within Iran's foreign policy's broader strategic approaches. Since 2005, with the ascent of Ahmadinejad as the President of Iran, several latent factors within Iranian foreign policy have transformed into a strategic approach emphasizing the expansion of relations with countries such as China, Russia, and India. The first influential factor contributing to this change can be traced back to the evolution of Iran's foreign policy in the years

preceding 2005. According to the perspective held by the officials of the new administration, the policy of Western orientation or tension reduction during Mohammad Khatami's presidency, especially in the context of nuclear negotiations, did not yield appropriate responses. While the reformist administration sought to build trust with the West through the suspension of uranium enrichment and continuous emphasis on dialogue to establish trust with the West and receive an appropriate response from them, the indifferent approach and rejection of Western proposals led to a fundamental mistrust of the West's offers and approaches in nuclear negotiations, fostering a distinct shift in Iran's foreign policy amid international and regional challenges, particularly in the framework of the nuclear program (Salehi & Arghavani, 2012: 493).

Alongside this, unlike Khatami, who viewed cooperation and confidence-building as a means to prompt a change in Western behavior, decision-makers in Ahmadinejad's administration perceived the threat posed by the United States and the West as an existential and strategic threat, deeming any change in Iran's behavior as futile in prompting a transformation in the West's behavior and the establishment of fair relations (Haji Yousefi, 2012: 408). The consequence of this differing approach and the responses received from the West provided the necessary intellectual groundwork for strengthening the focus on the East within Iran's foreign relations. The second influential factor can be attributed to Ahmadinejad's administration's specific interpretation of the policy of "constructive interaction." This policy, as delineated in the official interpretation influenced by the Vision Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran, aimed at positioning Iran as the leading economic, scientific, and technological power in the region, serving as an inspirational force within the Islamic world, and advocating constructive interaction in international relations. This approach was defined by "the adoption of an active, dynamic, influential, purposeful policy with awareness and a different understanding as a precise recognition of the political equations in the international community, the departure from the accused position, positioning as a claimant, and the entry into global politics as a powerful player by surpassing the stage of tension reduction" (Mohammadi, 2008: 137). The reference to a powerful entry into global politics indicates that under conditions where Iran's agency and that of other developing countries with regional and international interests do not align with those of major powers, the existing order cannot be fair and conducive to global peace. Therefore, it is imperative that

dissatisfied entities resist the current order on a united front. Consequently, within this doctrine, the differentiation of its levels (international, developing world, Islamic world, Middle East, and neighbors) emphasizes the significance of Iran's relations with Asian countries, including China, with the aim of potentially forming an Asian pole within the existing international system (Mohammadi, 2008: 138).

The emphasis on Third Worldism is considered another influential component. The shift in Iran's foreign policy from a focus on engagement and negotiation with the West to the expansion of relations with countries classified as "developing" or "Third World" in terms of economic and political characteristics is another factor that strengthened the focus on the East during this time. Although the Third Worldist orientation led to the expansion of relations with African and Latin American countries (Haji Yousefi, 2012: 408), the critical aspect of this approach towards the existing international system, especially in theoretical contexts, prompted Iran to deepen its relations with countries such as China, Russia, and India. In international economic terms, both parties emphasized the need to reform the international economic system and shared a common approach toward increasing capacities to play a role for countries considered to be emerging or re-emerging economically. Iran and these countries historically had a particular focus on the Third World in their foreign policies and did not pursue an ideological approach followed by Western nations regarding the Third World, accompanied by regime change. Another factor that led to Iran's increased focus on the East during this time was the convergence of strategic opportunities between Iran and the East. While Iran pursued opportunities such as increasing Eastern influence and unity, setting economic models, and seeking political convergence, during this period, major Eastern countries such as China and Russia sought avenues for expanding relations with Iran in fields such as enhanced security, energy, and geo-economic and geopolitical positioning (Adami, 2010: 112-123).

The government of "Prudence and Hope" (i.e., "Tadbir va Omid") sought to establish equilibrium in its foreign policy. The discourse of moderation entails and necessitates the establishment and perpetuation of structural equilibrium in foreign policy, requiring relations of the Islamic Republic of Iran to be established and developed in a balanced and symmetrical manner with various countries and regions. In particular, moderation necessitates that equilibrium and balance be established among the policies of

looking towards the West, looking towards the East, looking towards the South, looking towards the North, and looking towards geographical areas such as Third Worldism, Latin Americanism, and Islamic Worldism (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2013). The foreign policy of the "Prudence and Hope" administration can be evaluated around axes such as interactionism, mutual respect, win-win diplomacy, rejection of violence and extremism, tension reduction, and region-oriented approaches. In the first press conference held a few days after the elections, Rouhani prioritized foreign policy as friendly and close relations with all neighbors (Entekhab News Analysis Website, 28/8/2014).

The eleventh and twelfth administrations were operating within the discourse of moderation when the Iranian nuclear issue had escalated into a severe security and political crisis. The United States had managed to rally major powers against Iran to the extent that the most stringent economic sanctions imposed on Iran, evident in six United Nations Security Council resolutions, led to an unprecedented devaluation of the Iranian currency, a sharp decline in exports, and the withdrawal of foreign investments, thus bringing the foreign policy crisis to the daily lives of the people. During the administration of "Prudence and Hope," a balance between regional relations and tension reduction with the West was not established, and the focal point of Iran's foreign policy determination was its relations with the West. Ultimately, a project that failed was Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the failure to revive the JCPOA during President Rouhani's tenure.

In assessing the foreign policies of administrations over the past forty years, it can be said that the five governments of the Islamic Republic from 1980 to 2020 experienced different and sometimes conflicting orientations toward each other, all of which had a relatively influential impact on the strategic direction of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

2. From "Look East" to Asian Policy: The Raisi Administration's Strategic Shift

The strategy of looking to the East is the result of the emergence of a new and powerful force in shaping global order, a system that is not necessarily a Western one. This non-Western force is the outcome of power shifts in the world and the gradual formation of a more diverse international order. In this regard, we are witnessing the rise of emerging powers in the East, especially in East Asia. In

such circumstances, prioritizing the East over the West, favoring neighbors over distant entities, and giving preference to nations and countries with whom we share commonalities over others have become one of the top priorities of the foreign policy of the thirteenth government.

Given the unsuccessful experience of reducing foreign relations to repairing ties with the West and strengthening a realistic view of the emergence of China as a new economic and even military power, as well as Russia's Asia-oriented innovation strategy during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in general, and the thirteenth government, in particular, had placed the Look-to-the-East policy on its agenda. However, the official commencement of such a policy should be attributed to the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, especially after the disillusionment with the West during the nuclear dossier and the imposition of oil, banking, insurance, and shipping sanctions by the Obama administration after 2009 (Saghafi Ameri et al., 2008: 80).

With this explanation, one interpretation of the discourse surrounding the Look East Policy is that it is rooted in the pursuit of balancing foreign relations. Accordingly, it is posited that the Look to the East policy serves as a complement rather than a confrontation to the policy of the Look to the West glance, aiming at equilibrium in the discourse of foreign policy. In essence, the balance between the eastward glance and the westward glance in foreign policy discourse represents the primary objective inherent in the text and substance of the look to the east policy.

After the withdrawal of Donald Trump from the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Iran effectively came under severe sanctions. The value of the Iranian currency plummeted more intensely compared to the years 2012 and 2013, daily oil exports fell below 500,000 barrels, financial transactions became severely restricted, foreign investment reached its lowest level in the past thirty years, and the Iranian society faced financial crises, economic challenges, and negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Raisi administration, with a critical view towards the moderate government's foreign policy direction, believed that firstly, the Rouhani administration tied all aspects of the country's management to nuclear negotiations; secondly, the trust of the nuclear negotiation team in Europe and the United States led to the conclusion of a groundbreaking agreement in the JCPOA, which facilitated the Trump administration's exit from this international agreement; and thirdly, the Rouhani administration practically neglected regional

and neighboring relations and set its focal point in foreign policy on reaching an agreement with the United States. Based on these premises, the revolutionary principled proponents declared their foreign policy direction to be focused on neighboring relations and expanding ties with Asian countries (Center for Strategic Research).

The Islamic Republic of Iran in general and the Raisi administration in particular welcomed China's rise as a superpower. Geopolitically, Western sanctions pushed Iran towards moving towards China and other players such as India and Russia. Consequently, following the enforcement of the Trump administration's sanctions in 2018, Iran signed a comprehensive strategic 25-year agreement with China, effectively steering Iran's future geo-economics towards East Asian countries. Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a key strategic element of the eastward-looking policy of the thirteenth government. Undoubtedly, this membership has significant implications for Iran's relations with countries like China, Russia, and India, making Iran's entry into the international economy easier. This organization holds 21% of the world's oil reserves and 46% of gas reserves. Iran's membership marks a suitable starting point for the development of extensive economic relations with China, Russia, and other Eastern countries (Baseerat website, 2022).

The common point between multilateralism policy and the balanced approach in foreign policy is the focus on neighboring relations and regionalism. This emphasis, especially given the unsuccessful experiences of the Rohani administrations in establishing stable relations with neighbors due to prioritizing Western powers in defining foreign relations, is emerging more prominently. Thus, neighborly relations, or the neighborhood policy, is a crucial strategy of the thirteenth government alongside the Eastern-focused policy, ultimately aligning towards multilateralism. As emphasized by the Foreign Minister of this administration, it is believed that utilizing the capacities of neighboring countries, as well as the capacities of the Asian continent, and expanding interactions with all global sectors can serve to render sanctions ineffective.

Thus, neighborhood-centeredness and Asia-orientedness, along with the eastward-looking policy, are designated as the two fundamental pillars of the balanced foreign relations strategy in line with the grand strategy of neutralizing sanctions. In the perspective of the head of the Raisi administration's diplomatic apparatus, active economic diplomacy is envisioned as establishing effective

commercial and economic cooperation with neighbors: "We declared at the outset of the new administration, in the presence of esteemed representatives of the people in the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majles-e Shoraye Eslami) and the general public, that at least 40% of the Foreign Policy apparatus's activities in the thirteenth government are dedicated to economic diplomacy. This helped increase the volume of our trade exchanges with neighbors significantly. In some areas, we experienced a minimum increase of 36% and a maximum increase of 570% in trade volume. Active diplomacy alongside neighbors witnessed several significant developments. The first being that foreign currency inflow from neighboring positions played a crucial role for the country. The second being that the Islamic Republic of Iran has a high transit capacity, and due to our favorable geopolitical position, we were able to actively engage in north-south, east-west transit routes during this period" (with Saf-Awal program, 30/4/1401).

Iran has 15 neighboring countries, which has made it the second most neighborly country in the world, offering exceptional opportunities for diplomatic relations in the economic and cultural spheres. In past administrations, this potential has not been utilized effectively. Iran is a regional transportation hub, and the country's strategic position is suitable for promoting regional prosperity through the development and strengthening of transit and various energy corridors and lines to neighboring countries. President Raisi emphasized the lack of optimal utilization of these opportunities in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past decades: "The Islamic Republic has been very active in international activities and efforts, but it has not been balanced. For example, as much as the country's political relations have been promoted on the international stage, economic and commercial relations have not been given attention, and we have lagged behind in this area. Addressing those who raise these issues, I say that we have not acted balanced so far, and we need to establish a kind of balance in the country's foreign relations. Why have we not paid attention to our neighbors, and why do we not pay attention? Enormous commercial and economic potential can be established with the 15 neighboring countries" (Raisi, 2021).

The background and context for the emergence of the discourse on neighborly policy are the exit of Donald Trump, the former president of the United States, from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the commencement of a 'maximum pressure' campaign against Iran, spurred by the lobbying of AIPAC and some

Arab countries. Based on this, the strategic principle of the thirteenth government is to stand firm that the Islamic Republic of Iran must regulate its relations with its neighbors before commencing negotiations with global powers and return to the negotiation table with this backing. Therefore, what is evaluated as the difference in the neighborhood and Asian policy of the thirteenth government compared to the Rouhani government is the approach of the eleventh and twelfth governments to neighbors and the policy of independence and empowerment of neighborly policy in the thirteenth government.

3. Achievements of the Raisi Administration in Asian and Neighboring Policies

The Raisi administration has made notable strides in advancing Iran's Asian and neighboring policies, significantly shaping its foreign relations. This section explores key achievements under Raisi's leadership, beginning with the signing of a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Formed in 2014, the EAEU has emerged as a pivotal regional bloc for economic integration, and Iran's engagement with it marks a strategic move to circumvent Western sanctions and bolster regional economic ties. The section also covers Iran's recent membership in BRICS, an influential coalition poised to reshape global economic dynamics, and its accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a key player in regional security and economic cooperation. Finally, it examines the Raisi administration's concerted efforts to enhance relations with Iran's extensive network of neighboring countries, aiming to harness regional potentials and address long-standing foreign policy gaps.

3-1. Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union

The Eurasian Economic Union is a regional grouping in Central Asia that was formed in the post-Soviet era with the efforts of the Russian Federation in May 2014 (Andronova, 2016: 7). This regional institution facilitates the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among its members. Member states are obligated to pursue coordinated policies in specified areas within the agreements of the Eurasian Economic Union (, 2021). Given Iran's geopolitical and geostrategic position as a neighbor to the member countries of this Union, it can leverage its influential role within this Union. Furthermore, considering that the Eurasian Economic Union, alongside the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, holds substantial

potential for advancing the economic status of regional countries, Iran can utilize these capacities to secure its own interests (Mahkoui and Goodarzi, 2019: 538).

Moreover, following the United States' sanctions after the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and the imposition of economic restrictions, particularly in international trade, Iran has increasingly focused on developing economic relations with its neighbors. In implementing this approach, the Eurasian Economic Union, due to the limited volume of its economic ties with the United States and the dominance of Russian institutions within the Union, presents a fitting opportunity for expanding bilateral relations, especially under sanction conditions. The Islamic Republic of Iran's signing of a preferential trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union aims to alleviate the United States' sanction restrictions (Simbar and Gholamnia, 2021: 147).

In light of these considerations, within the framework of its Eastern foreign policy, Iran has promptly shown willingness to collaborate with the Eurasian Economic Union and successfully signed a preferential trade agreement and 14 other agreements with the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union by October 2019. The implementation of the preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union from October 2019 has certainly led to increased trade between these nations. This agreement covers approximately 51% of the total trade between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union and focuses on a wide spectrum of agricultural products (& Ghodsi, 2020: 1).

The trade volume of the Islamic Republic of Iran with the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union reached \$2.4 billion from October 2019, coinciding with the signing of a preferential trade agreement between the two parties, until June 2020. Iran's exports to the Eurasian Economic Union amounted to 1.65 million tons valued at \$681 million, while imports to Iran from five member countries of this Union were approximately 5.2 million tons worth \$1.73 billion, 67% of which occurred within the framework of the preferential trade agreement. It is expected that the signing of a preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union will lead to a 43% increase in Iran's exports in this area. Currently, Iran's exports to the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union are fluctuating, with the highest level of exports from Iran to Russia and the lowest level of exports from Iran to Kyrgyzstan among the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union (2019: 72).

One of the key factors enhancing Iran's cooperation with the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union is the country's capacities in agriculture and food production. Based on this premise and considering the implementation of the preferential trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union, it is anticipated that the greatest potential for increasing cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union lies in agriculture, chemicals, specifically in the trade of fruits and vegetables, textiles, metallic, and polymeric products (Adarov & Ghodsi, 2019: 2). Additionally, due to its geopolitical position, Iran can be significant for the Eurasian Economic Union. This is because, given Russia's challenges with Ukraine in gas exports to Europe and the landlocked nature of Central Asian countries, Iran's geographical position and its importance as one of the best routes for energy exports to other regions are notable.

Another important aspect of the Eurasian Economic Union is the role that countries situated along the New Silk Road have. Given Iran's position in the Silk Road and its membership in this Union, Iran's geo-economic position could have a significant impact. It is essential to note that although the Eurasian Economic Union, with its vast geographical expanse, high population, substantial oil and gas reserves, geopolitical significance, shared history, cultural ties among its members, and the presence of Russia as a key international power, has the potential to become a regional and international economic pole, obstacles such as inadequate economic indicators have hindered economic development and capital attraction in the member countries of the Union. On the other hand, the lack of balance in the size of these countries' economies has impeded the increase in the level of trade and the diversification of trade goods among them. In such circumstances, the inclusion of economic powers such as China, India, and Iran in this Union could help boost trade levels within it. Iran's accession to this Union can facilitate member countries' access to free (open) waters, subsequently increasing their commercial exchanges in global markets (and Shams-Abadi, 2020: 61).

Given the tensions that have arisen between Russia and the EU over Ukraine, Iran can take advantage of the situation and further engage in the regionalization process. The Russians have also shown interest in Iran's proposal to establish a free trade zone. They believe that this free trade zone can serve as a strong incentive for expanding bilateral trade and investment (Mahkoui & Goodarzi, 2019: 529). For Iran, increasing access to the Eurasian Economic

Union market is considered a strategically important issue. This is because it can to some extent alleviate the impact of the United States' sanctions on Iran's economy (Adarov & Ghodsi, 2019, p. 16). Despite the existing opportunities for cooperation between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union, there are significant challenges in this regard for Iran. Factors such as international sanctions, lack of economic complementarity, the dependence of Iran and the members of the Eurasian Economic Union on the sale of raw materials and energy, and geo-economic competition between the two sides have affected the economic relations between Iran and the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union in recent years, deviating from the expected situation (Simbar and Gholamnia, 2021: 147).

In summary, Iran and the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, despite having many capabilities such as geographical proximity, shared interests, and cultural ties, have been able to exploit only a small portion of the existing commercial capabilities and trade relations due to existing mistrust, Iran's weaknesses in addressing the needs of the markets of the Eurasian Economic Union member countries, US sanctions against Iran, outdated methods of production, packaging, and transportation of products in Iran, as well as a lack of understanding of the economic and industrial capabilities and market needs of both sides.

3-2. Membership in BRICS

The idea of forming BRICS was proposed in 2001 by the Goldman Sachs investment firm to predict the global economic situation and emerging powers (Hosseini and Ahmadi, 2017: 50). The key features that serve as binding factors for BRICS include their large and relatively stable populations and the economic growth potential of these countries. It is predicted that this group will become a dominant player on the international stage due to significant economic growth, with more optimistic forecasts evolving by 2030, suggesting that by 2050, the BRICS economy could surpass the G7 economies. In the coming decades, powerful countries like BRICS are expected to assert their influence on the international scene, potentially marginalizing superpowers such as the United States (Bailes, 2010: 6). The formation of BRICS has been influenced by the convergence of three elements: globalization of the economy, the economic growth of these countries, the legitimacy deficit in global financial institutions, the lack of effective representation of developing countries therein, and ultimately, unilateralism and the

diminishing role of multilateral governance as the principle legitimizing international cooperation between nations (Panahi, 2015: 6). Intellectuals consider the establishment of BRICS as one of the most significant geopolitical and geostrategic events of the new century and the third millennium because, given its potential and actual capabilities, this group has rapidly transformed into a powerful phenomenon and agent at the global level (Sanayi & Ebrahim Abadi, 2013: 30).

On January 1, 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran, along with the countries of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Egypt, officially joined the BRICS group. Originally comprised of five countries, the BRICS group extended invitations in August of the previous year to six additional countries to join. The primary goal of this group, which aims to counter the dominance of the global system led by the United States, has expanded its membership. Russia founded the BRICS group in 2009. Currently, it encompasses 42% of the world's population, 30% of the global geographical area, and contributes 24% of the world's economic output (Agency, 2023).

The potential geo-economic repercussions of Iran's accession to BRICS are as follows:

- a. Strengthening economic collaborations
- b. Diversification of economic partners
- c. Reinforcement of regional influence
- d. Access to financial resources
- e. Energy cooperation and security
- f. Trade and sanctions relief
- g. Access to agricultural innovations and food security

The most significant advantage of membership in this institution is gaining access to financial resources within the reserve mechanism and the new developmental bank of this institution. The US financial sanctions make it extremely challenging for Iran to access these resources. The difficulty in accessing the resources of these two institutions will pose a significant challenge to Iran's geo-economic accomplishments following its accession to this institution (Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines & Agriculture Research Center, 1402: 28-29).

3-3. Membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Global developments have increased the significance of countries cooperating with each other to confront various threats, many of which have acquired international dimensions. The inclination

towards regional cooperation to counter common threats has led to the formation of regional groupings and collaboration within regional institutions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is one of the most important security organizations that emerged in the post-Cold War era and has drawn the attention of the Islamic Republic of Iran from its inception. Accordingly, Iran was among the first countries to quickly express its desire to join the organization, showing eagerness for participation from the outset. In the light of strengthening the focus on the East in Iran's foreign policy, Iran rapidly expressed its willingness to join the organization and became an observer in 2005 (Koolaee, 2015: 41).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, formed with the aim of fostering trust among regional countries and combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, was evident from the outset that it shares numerous overlaps with Iran's regional security and foreign policy objectives (Karami & Karimian, 2017: 55). Indeed, one of the primary valuable aspects for Iran regarding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is how the organization is perceived as a geopolitical counterweight to the United States. From Iran's perspective, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can potentially hinder increased U.S. influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Through close collaboration and membership in the organization, Iran could strengthen its regional role and play a more influential part in the region's dynamics and in safeguarding its security. Several Central Asian countries within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are Muslim-majority and share significant religious and cultural affinities with Iran. Iran has strong economic motivations for joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Particularly, amid severe U.S. sanctions against Iran, the country hopes that by strengthening cooperation with the organization, it can mitigate some of the destructive effects of the sanctions on its economy (Akbarzadeh, 2004: 2-5). Furthermore, Iran intends to achieve some of its strategic foreign policy objectives through joining this organization and utilizing its capacities, albeit encountering implicit support from Russia and opposition from China due to concerns about provoking the United States (Karami & Karimian, 2017: 55).

In general, it can be said that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides Iran with a suitable opportunity to reflect its security concerns and contribute to delineating regional security arrangements. The membership of two major global powers, namely Russia and China, as actors with broad goals in the international arena,

has made the Shanghai Cooperation Organization extremely significant for Iran as a tool in countering the unipolarity of the United States. It was evident from the outset that Russia and China intend to utilize the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a regional balancing factor against U.S. hegemony, underscoring the extraordinary importance of the organization for Iran (Allison, 2004: 68).

Iran's observer membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has bolstered the prospect of its permanent membership in this organization, consequently enhancing Iran's international standing and fostering the development of its relations with member countries. The coordinated efforts within the framework of the organization to combat drug, human, and arms trafficking, as well as organized crime, a focus area of the organization, have provided an opportune situation for collaboration between the organization and countries like Iran. For Iran, engagement in the array of activities of this organization (endorsed within the framework of the 2002 St. Petersburg document) could potentially yield various benefits, especially given that regional cooperation has been of particular priority within Iran's foreign policy. Furthermore, a significant objective of this organization is to counteract the unilateralism of the United States, which presents another robust incentive for Iran to strengthen its collaboration with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, given the paramount importance of this matter within Iran's foreign policy. Iran's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has led to the opening of new avenues for interaction with regional countries, creating the necessary groundwork for further collaboration between Iran and the member states of this organization. The presence of two major global powers, namely Russia and China, in this organization has led Iran to believe that membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can enhance its security quotient (Haji Yousefi & Alvand, 2008: 184).

In summary, it can be acknowledged that the Islamic Republic's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will have both advantages and disadvantages for Iran. The most significant benefit of such membership will be the utilization of Russia and China's power to counterbalance the influence of the United States in the region, thereby reducing the impacts of the U.S.' hostile policies against Iran and its independence. However, permanent membership in this organization, considering certain provisions of its charter regarding the necessity to confront Islamic separatist groups, imposes conditions on Iran that are contradictory

to the Islamic Republic's policy of promoting Islamism (Valizadeh, 2008: 121).

3-4. Expansion of relations with neighboring countries

Iran, and its neighboring countries, is the second country with the most neighbors in the world after China. Additionally, if a broader regional context is considered, ten more countries are added, bringing the total number of neighboring countries, both bordering and non-bordering, to 25 countries. It must be acknowledged that despite being situated in an environment with diverse and abundant potentials, Iran has thus far lacked a coherent and explicit neighboring policy aimed at leveraging the potentials and capacities of its neighbors for the empowerment of the country. While the diverse potentials of Iran's neighboring environment have consistently necessitated the formulation of a strategic and robust neighboring policy to alert the country's policymakers to be vigilant to repel threats and capitalize on its opportunities.

The Raisi administration is the only government in the Islamic Republic of Iran that has formally incorporated a policy of regional neighborhood and convergence into its foreign policy framework. Prior to the establishment of the Raisi administration, despite general slogans regarding the development of relations with neighboring countries in previous administrations, this policy did not extend beyond rhetoric, as neither a plan nor a program was presented for its implementation, nor was there any purposeful and noticeable action from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic officials to improve relations with neighboring countries. In this regard, the policy of neighborhood should be considered as the hallmark of the thirteenth government's foreign policy. Within this framework, Ebrahim Raisi, the President of the thirteenth administration, and various sectors, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have repeatedly emphasized the importance of improving and expanding relations with neighboring countries as a strategic priority in the foreign policy of the thirteenth administration. Mr. Raisi emphasized during the inauguration ceremony for the presidency: "I extend my hand in friendship and brotherhood to all the countries of the region, especially our neighbors, and warmly shake their hands. The Islamic Republic of Iran considers neighboring countries and nations as relatives, and it considers the elevation of relations with its neighboring countries as its most important and principal foreign policy priority, seeking their dignity and elevation" (Website, August 5th, 2021).

One of the primary agendas of the foreign policy of the thirteenth government has been to prioritize the development of interactions and collaborations with regional countries in order to enhance convergence. Since the inception of the thirteenth government, attention to neighboring and regional countries has been among the fundamental priorities of the diplomatic apparatus, and the government has undertaken extensive measures in this regard.

The Raisi administration, by recognizing the historical vacuum in the neighborhood policy in Iran's foreign policy and the neglect of its opportunities, has founded its foreign policy based on the doctrine of neighborhood and convergence. Within the framework of this doctrine, the development of relations with neighbors and the promotion of regional convergence constitute the missing link in the country's foreign relations and act as a balancing element in its foreign policy. In this regard, the thirteenth government, with an expansive view of the neighborhood (including both immediate neighbors and neighbors of neighbors) and a definition of neighborhood policy beyond the concept of good neighboring, is based on principles such as respect for territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, indigenous regional order, cooperative security, and mutual interaction. It considers these as necessary conditions to shape strategic and systematic relations with neighbors and as prerequisites for regional convergence.

Conclusion

This article explores the foundations of Iran's "Look to the East" policy and its evolution into a broader Asian and neighboring policy framework under the thirteenth government. By examining key indicators, the study identifies the factors influencing this transition and its outcomes. The findings reveal that the thirteenth government, recognizing a historical gap in Iran's neighboring policies, shifted its foreign policy focus towards a multilateral approach grounded in the Global South. Key achievements during this period include Iran's accession to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the signing of a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, and the expansion of relations with neighboring countries. Unlike the earlier "Look to the East" policy, which primarily aimed at countering Western sanctions with limited tangible outcomes, the Asian and neighboring policies have led to substantial multilateral and bilateral successes, reflecting a more operational and strategic approach.

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