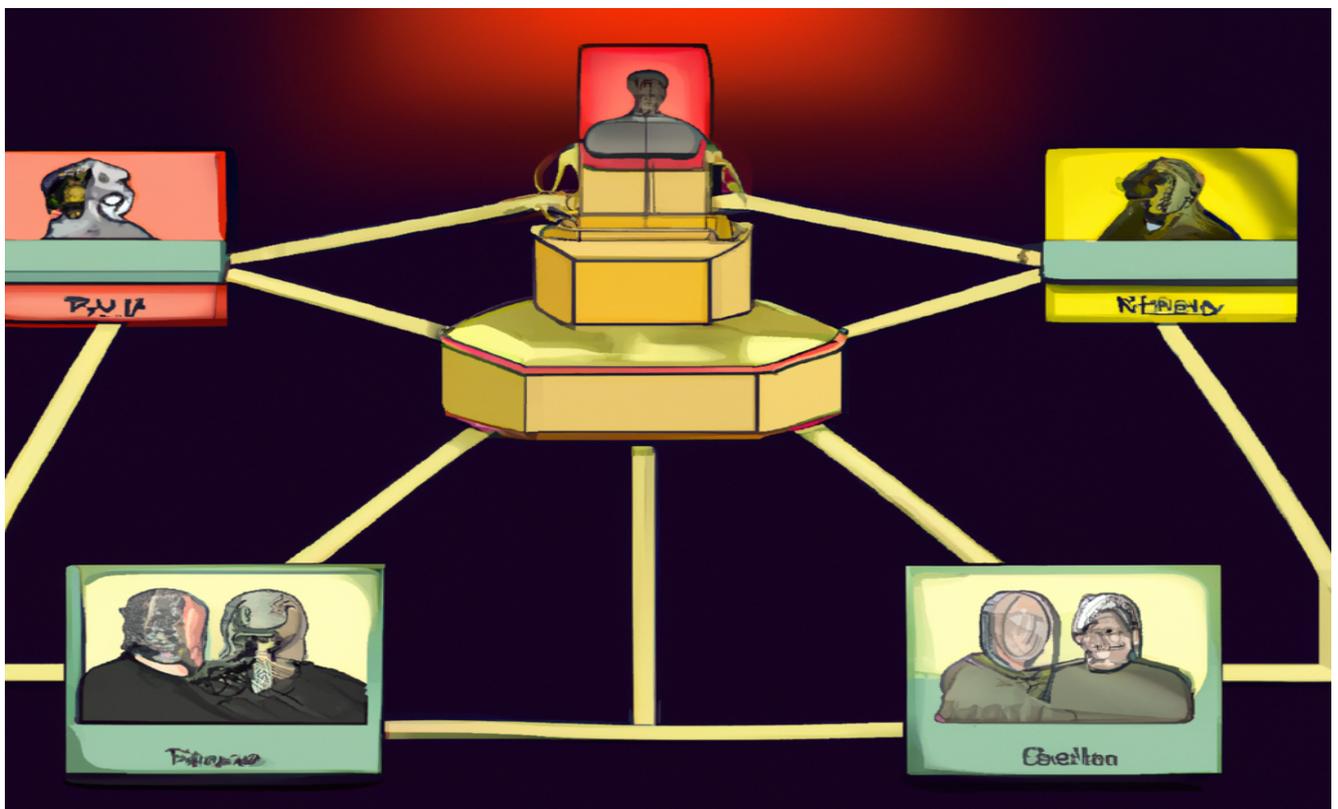


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A Review on Iranian Energy Diplomacy in Its
Foreign Policy's Institutional Context

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Introduction

Despite the single official name of the Islamic Republic to represent the country's political system, it has been built on two pillars of governance: the president as the head of government, and the supreme leader as the head of state. The political structure is based on a policymaking system that is highly dualistic and dominates the relations between the supreme leader and the executive branch of power. Even though the new era of Iran's foreign policy commences after the Iran revolution in 1979, this study has been focused on the years beyond 1988, the coincidental year of the end of the Iraq-Iran war and the death of the first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Imam Khomeini. Immediately after his death, the political system changed to empower the supreme leader in governance and policymaking. In this regard, this article provides a thorough description and critical analysis of Iran's political system and foreign policy making, focusing specifically on its energy diplomacy.

Neoclassical realism as the theory of foreign policy

The international system, as well as domestic actors and structures, influence a state's foreign policy. According to the tenet of neoclassical realism, foreign policy

is a dependent variable, as it incorporates the relative power capabilities of the state and the perception of leaders about relative power capabilities. Leaders need the freedom to direct the state's resources wherever and whenever necessary. Based on this theory, besides the state, leaders and statesmen are key actors in foreign policy-making. In this regard, Fareed Zakaria in his book *From Wealth to Power*, underlines that "Statesmen, not nations, confront the international system".¹ Statesmen also construct the architecture of the international system. Statesmen cannot use all the power of the state regardless of what it is: military, economic, or resource capabilities. According to Orban, states expand as a consequence of material resource expansion.²

According to Taliaferro, the power of states to emulate internal balancing is a function of the level of external vulnerability as mediated through the "extractive and mobilization capacity of existing state institutions".³ On the other side, the state's vulnerability to external threats is a function of social fragmentation. In other words, the degree of state-sponsored nationalism, or the extractive capacity of society and embedded statist (or anti-statist) ideology shape the state response to the external vulnerability by emulating new offset strategies or persisting in existing



strategies.⁴ Energy resources are employed more frequently in foreign policy to realise foreign interests in states where the energy sector is more closely tied to the government than in states where the energy sector is more separate from the government. When the energy sector has a more distinct type of governmental structure, it is more difficult to transfer energy resources from national power to state power. This explains why countries far away from democracy employ energy resources as their policy tools.⁵ Moreover, while the state is potentially autonomous of societal forces, it is not necessarily so. Depending on domestic political arrangements, states vary in their ability both to enact policy responses to international challenges and to raise revenue and resources to implement policy choices.⁶

Iran's political structure: A historical review

From a historical view, the first Iranian Parliament, under the name of 'National Consultative Assembly', was established on 6 August 1906, during the Persian Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911 as the legislature organ.⁷ The Constitution provided the functioning of a more modern state of constitutional

monarchy in the absolute monarchy of the Qajar dynasty. After the overthrowing of the constitutional monarchy of the Pahlavi dynasty on 11 February 1979, the Constitution/ Basic Law of the Islamic Republic of Iran replaced the Monarchy's Constitution, and the name of the Parliament was updated to 'Islamic Consultative Assembly'. The new Islamic Constitution was ratified on 24 October 1979, with a referendum approved by 99.5% of voters with a 71.6% turnout based on removing the constitutional monarchy and transforming it into a republic system.⁸

The Iranian revolution in 1979 changed the relationship between state and religion (political dominance by clerics), the power national executive (replacement of the monarchy Leader), and the official name of the country (changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran) as well as many other changes.⁹ The new political system was introduced with a philosophy of governance that was claimed to be in common with that of other democratic nations except for its unique theocratic overlay.¹⁰ The preliminary Islamic political system valid in 1979-1989 was based on a parliamentary democracy where the head of state (or the President) was distinct from the head of government (or the prime minister). In the first version of the Constitution, the people directly vote for their representatives in the



parliament, in the assembly of experts, and for the president of state; then, the prime minister and the supreme leader were the two persons that should be elected from the inside of the political system, the former by the parliament and the latter by the assembly of experts. Based on the constitution, the Islamic political structure does have three distinct sources of power and governance, legislative power, judicial power, and the president who has the executive power of government. The president as well as the members of the parliament would be elected directly by the people for one four-year term. The presidency duration is restricted to two terms. All the ministers who are nominated by the president should be approved by the parliament and would be directly responsible for it. The main difference between Iran's republic with other formal republics had been defined in its theocratic theme enforced by the assembly of experts besides the position of the supreme leader in a supervisor role. The assembly of experts consists of clerics who are directly elected by national ballot for an eight-year term and appoints the supreme leader. Besides choosing the supreme leader, the responsibilities of the assembly of experts would have been defined to monitor his performance and remove him if he is deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties.¹¹ Other official duties of the supreme leader

would be the appointment of the head of the judiciary and confirming the appointment of the prime minister. The judiciary has been defined as an independent power like the government or the parliament, but the head of the Judiciary would be appointed by the supreme leader. The prime minister should have been offered by the president to the parliament for a vote of confidence. Then the supreme leader confirmed the prime minister as the head of government. In the original version of the constitution, the supreme leader was not in charge of confirming the president's election.

A decade after the Iranian revolution, the revised Islamic constitution has been amended on 28 July 1989, with stress on autocracy and empowering the supreme leader or *vilayet-e-faqih* (mandate of the jurist).¹² The first amendment of the Islamic constitution has been revised by merging the office of the prime minister with the presidency and putting the supreme leader at the centre of power as the head of state. This amendment introduced an updated political system that differs from the one introduced in the referendum in October 1979. The amendments granted the control of the armed forces from the government to the supreme leader. The constitutional reform also brought up the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) whose decisions must be confirmed



officially by the supreme leader.¹³ The amendment to the constitution affirmed the autocratic rule of God (*vilayet-e-faqih*), the concept of an absolute ruler over state affairs, and religious law (shari'a) enshrined in the 1979 Constitution.¹⁴ The principle of *vilayet-e-faqih* continues to institutionalise the ideals of the 1979 revolution and the dominance of the supreme leader. The other purpose of the constitutional amendment was to revoke the prime minister's office. By revising the constitution of the Islamic republic in 1989, the political system transits from a parliamentary system to a presidential system by weakening the parliament in deriving the legitimacy of the government and empowering the supreme leader. By this update, the supreme leader shall confirm the president's election that has not been in the first revision of the constitution. Figure 01 exhibits in the appendix an illustration of the current political system at the top level.

The veto powers

The veto players, by definition, are the individuals or collective actors "whose agreement is necessary for a change of the status quo".¹⁵ They use their power to block policy initiatives to reshape governmental policies.¹⁶ The two main bodies that have veto power and can exercise their vetoes are

the Guardian Council and Expediency Council.

Guardian Council

The Guardian Council oversees confirming the compatibility of legislative acts of parliament based on Islamic and constitutional laws. That means they are vested with the authority to interpret the constitution. The council consists of twelve members: six Islamic jurisprudences appointed by the supreme leader, and six legal scholars recommended by the head of the judiciary to the parliament, then appointed by the parliamentary vote from 12 candidates. The guardian council must approve all bills passed by parliament and has the power to veto them if it considers them inconsistent with the constitution and Islamic law. If it deems that a law passed by parliament is incompatible with the constitution or Islamic law, it is referred to parliament for revision. The council can also bar candidates from standing in elections to parliament, the presidency, and the assembly of experts. All the candidates for the presidential race, parliament, and the assembly of experts must be screened by the guardian council. Only clerics can join the assembly of experts and candidates for any national elections are vetted by the guardian council.¹⁷



Expediency Council

Apart from the guardian council, there is the non-elected institution of the expediency council whose members are appointed by the supreme leader from different Iranian political factions and parties. In 1988, when stalemates between parliament and the council of guardians proved intractable, Ayatollah Imam Khomeini created the Expediency Council and charged it with mediating disputes between the two bodies. This institution consists of elites ousted from elected power. These elites are often co-opted into parallel, non-elected institutions like the expediency council rather than face career obliteration, thereby allowing them to reorganise, and incentivising them to perpetuate the system.¹⁸ Now, according to the constitution, the Expediency Council serves as an advisory body to the supreme leader, making it one of the most powerful governing bodies in the country.

The council oversees three main responsibilities: first, breaking stalemates and adjudicating differences between parliament and the guardian council, second, advising the supreme leader, and third, proposing guidelines for the macro policies and grand strategies of the Islamic Republic.¹⁹ All the macro policies and grand strategies mentioned in this research

have been generated in the expediency council and affirmed by the supreme leader, such as Energy Macro Policy, Twenty-Year National Vision, Resistance Economy Macro Policy, and Environment Macro Policy.²⁰

High councils involved in foreign policy decision-making

The Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS)

The Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) was created in the new revision of Article 176 of the revised constitution in 1989. As the commander in chief, the supreme leader leads the army through the SCNS. The supreme leader's support is crucial in the implementation of foreign-policy decisions. In the SCNS, his representatives follow and convey the views of the supreme leader to this decision-making body, though indirectly.²¹ SCNS duties are defined in three main areas: (1) determining defence and security policies; (2) coordinating political, social, informational, cultural, and economic activities concerning general defence and security concerns; and (3) confronting domestic and foreign threats. Based on the constitution, the President chairs the SCNS, which consists of the following members:²²



1. The heads of the three powers (the president, the head of judiciary, and the speaker of parliament)
2. The commander-in-chief of the armed forces
3. The administrative officer of the budget and programming
4. Two representatives elected by the supreme leader
5. The ministers of state, foreign affairs, and intelligence
6. The highest designated minister and the highest authority of the army Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC)

One of the biggest changes in the 2000s is the way that the SNSC has moved from facilitating decision-making during the Iran–Iraq War to becoming the principle of foreign policy decision-making and policy implementation. All security forces report to the SCNS, which is headed by the supreme leader’s direct representative. The SNSC includes representatives from the IRGC and senior clerics, and top officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, intelligence, and interior. The council deals with issues surrounding the nuclear programme and regional and security policy.²³

The Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (SCFR)

The Strategic Council on Foreign Relations (SCFR) was created in 2006, which oversees the President’s foreign policy

performance. The SCFR is a think tank with a strategic role of an advisory body to the supreme leader. This council holds a strategic perspective on the issue of foreign relations. Based on the supreme leader’s decree of establishment the goal of this council is “to engage and assume a role in major policymaking, open up new horizons in the era of foreign relations, benefit from the elite, and develop indicators to realise objectives of the Iran Outlook Plan”.²⁴ The council has been established to curtail President Ahmadinejad’s power at that time, but it still follows the first-hand duties by adding the old foreign affairs hands. The council is supposed to facilitate the country’s decision-making process, by finding new foreign policy approaches and making use of foreign policy experts, according to the decree. The first head of the council suggested that the executive branch has failed to implement national strategies. He said the supreme leader “sensed a deficiency” in which there was no strategy for the implementation of his policies.²⁵

Armed Forces and Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps

Iran’s armed forces have roles in both the foreign and domestic politics of the country. When the Islamic revolution succeeded, the revolutionaries needed to



implement their policies without relying on the regular military (Artesh) which was untrusted due to their association with the overthrown regime. The IRGC emerged in the post-revolutionary era and expanded in the Iraq-Iran war. The Artesh's call to arms to meet the Iraqi invasion helped the regular armed forces restore their reputation as a genuine national institution. Over time, the regime's trust in the regular military grew, and its loyalty was rewarded with stronger ties and public recognition of its service. Also, after the Iraqi invasion, the Artesh could firm up its separate identity. Until the end of the Iraq-Iran war and before the constitution revision, the prime minister oversaw coordination between the two armies as the general chief of the staff of the armed forces. The supreme leader, as the commander in chief, led the armed forces through the parliament (the speaker of the parliament) in charge and the cabinet (the prime minister).²⁶

Regarding international cooperation, Iran's energy industry experienced a setback during the first half of the 2010s. Sanctions imposed by the US and EU amid the nuclear programme crisis forced all the Western IOCs to leave Iran and caused a decline in oil production and exports. Unlike the oil sector, the damage to Iran's natural gas industries was comparatively modest and Iran succeeded in keeping production

growing. This expansion largely relied on local companies including companies belonging to IRGC to avoid being left behind the IOCs. In 2011, President Ahmadinejad appointed the head of IRGC's business conglomerate as petroleum minister. Moreover, for political reasons, there was always a desire to strongly involve local companies: domestically to keep businesses affiliated with the conservatives satisfied, and internationally to protect against over-dependence/vulnerability considering sanctions risks.²⁷

Although the IRGC had already extended its economic influence during the 1990s, with interests in the oil and gas sector, the natural gas sector nonetheless represents a new apex. The award of a no-bid contract to develop the fifteenth and sixteenth phases of the South Pars Gas Field by the National Oil Company of Iran (NIOC) to the IRGC's engineering corps GHORB, also known as Khatam ul-Anbiya, on 25 June 2006, can be seen as the consolidation of the IRGC in Iran's lucrative oil and gas industry. The National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) has for instance also selected GHORB to build a 56-inch and 900-km gas pipeline (IGAT-7) from Asaluye to Iranshahr, representing the Iranian leg of the so-called "peace pipeline" to Pakistan and India.²⁸



Having special status in Iran, IRGC members have been able to go onto privileged positions in the education system or start businesses under the IRGC aegis, but not immediately into the government.²⁹ Under Ahmadinejad, the IRGC's influence (partly through its construction arm, Khatam ul-Anbia) has grown within the NIOC and throughout the Iranian economy.³⁰ In 2006, Khatam won a contract to develop South Pars phases 15 and 16 and took over Sadra Yard, a platform builder and submersible oil-rig company operating in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea.³¹ IRGC investments in oil and gas ventures in South Pars have since been cut back. However, the IRGC maintains the capability to operate a covert infrastructure, from 'invisible' piers in the Persian Gulf to control of airports in Iran, which enables it to import everything Iran might need, from consumer goods to nuclear technology.³² Sanctions, therefore, empower the IRGC because can profit from them, and this translates into greater political power.

Today, the IRGC is at the very centre of power in the Iranian regime. It has now advanced so far, because of its vicinity to the supreme leader's office, shared political and economic objectives, and a shared strategic view with conservatives, and it enjoys the highest level of support among

all military forces.³³ President Rouhani has been trying to reduce the IRGC's dominant role as well as to improve transparency and market-reform fields.³⁴ Given the broader objective of Rouhani's government to gradually reduce the economic involvement of the IRGC, domestic politics might undercut production growth in petroleum industries.³⁵ The IRGC does not have a direct role in foreign policymaking, but it has an effective role.³⁶ Therefore, in 2010, the former US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, described Iran as a 'military dictatorship'.³⁷ Some scholars compare it to the KGB in the former USSR or the FSB in Russia.³⁸ This suggests that the ideological and legitimising forces of Islam that were on display during the Islamic Revolution may no longer be required by the IRGC as it supplants the traditional role of the Iranian government.³⁹

Decision-making in foreign policy

Several major offices are responsible for foreign policy and energy diplomacy and put their emphasis on the practice of policymaking to pursue consistency, synergies, and the reduction of tensions between different policy objectives and their implementation: the supreme leader, the expediency council, the SCNS, the SCFR, the parliament, the president, and the minister of foreign affairs.⁴⁰ Based on



Article 3 of the constitution the “government of Iran is obliged to use all of its resources” in “the organization of the nation’s foreign policy” to achieve the objectives of the Islamic Republic.⁴¹ In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducts the routine and mundane issues related to foreign policy. For instance, it does not seem plausible that in an international conference on oil and gas, national delegations would include bureaucrats from the Ministry of Petroleum without representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The parliament, including its energy committee, appears to be among the leading arenas for major energy-related decisions because it can approve or block major decisions, including oil and gas contracts, and launch inquiries into the Ministry of Petroleum or the state-run National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and its subsidiaries. In the parliament, political factions and groups can scrutinise export-import contracts and the involvement of certain companies. However, as with the political system in Iran, the decision-making in the energy sector of Iran is not a straightforward matter and the responsibilities are subject to frequent change. As Valérie Marcel concludes, “The energy decision-making system in Iran is a maze that foreign investors often find impenetrable. Adding to this complexity is the fact that major decision-makers hold

multiple posts, with numerous crossover links between the minister, NIOC managers, and the advisers; for example, the Minister of Petroleum and his deputy ministers also head major state-run companies and their subsidiaries. This multi-post structure means that numerous people are in charge who form contending power centres and a multiplicity of official views”.⁴²

Furthermore, there are autonomous bodies and organisations that can influence the normal energy decision-making in Iran, such as the NIOC general assembly, the Supreme Economic Council, and the Supreme Energy Council. This explanation provides the competitiveness of the agenda-setting process in foreign affairs.

At the same time, as specified within the constitution, five major offices are responsible for foreign policy: the supreme leader, the president, the head of the expediency council, and the foreign minister. This explanation provides the competitiveness of the agenda-setting process in foreign affairs. Despite the emphasis that foreign policy is to be served by a single institutional framework, the foreign policy system is governed by two different policymaking methods and three lines of thought. The first policymaking method is the ‘leadership method’. This



functions on the principle of the *vilayet-e-faqih*, which the supreme leader defines, the IRGC defends, the SCFR promotes, and the SCNS represents.

Yet, the SCNS formulates foreign, military, and security policies. The SCFR assists the supreme leader in policymaking in foreign affairs. The veto powers are strong enough to contain the parliamentary systems because the guardian council can withdraw support from the parliament and the expediency council can replace the new policy agenda. The second policymaking method is the 'presidential method'. The basic principle of this method is that the government retains control over policymaking in foreign affairs through the dominant position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its embassies in foreign states, cooperates with SCNS in the elaboration of foreign policy, and coordinates its foreign policies. For the line of thought, three lines have been distinguished and argued by scholars in the decision-making process in Iranian foreign affairs. The first group that believes in a unified Muslim *ummah*,⁴³ and commitment to Islamic values, refrain from rapprochement with the US. The second group believes that Iran, as a nation-state, must play a key role in international events for the sake of safeguarding Iranian national interests. The third group does not

distinguish any conflict between Islamic values and Iranian national interests. They believe that Islamic identity is also part of Iran's national interests. Maleki agrees with the agent-centred analysis by arguing that foreign policy brings religious hierarchy and parliamentary democracy together for decision-making that constitutes a unique administrative impact on foreign policy.⁴⁴ Karimifard underlines the significance of the national identity by discussing how Iran's perception of other states influences its foreign policy and orientation.⁴⁵ Akbarzadeh and Barry similarly argue that Iran's foreign policy choices rest upon Iranism (nationalism), Islam and Shi'ism.⁴⁶ Sariolghalam attempts to interpret Iranian foreign policy through its relations and conflicts with the US and/or Israel by adopting a strategic perspective. He uses the political realism approach to distinguish what is and what should be idealism in foreign policy leading to catastrophes and tragedies. He then combines decision-making theories and foreign policies at a tri-level analysis (bureaucracy, decision-making groups, and individuals) and concludes that the individual variable is vitally important in Iran's foreign policy decision-making process.

Because of the legal and practical supremacy of agents over structures in Iran's political system, individuals rather



than structures play a decisive role in formulating and implementing Iran's foreign policy. The scientific study of this domain and the individual decision-making structure in this field will have a positive impact on rational foreign policy. From the point of this view, the basic principles of Iranian foreign policy are based on the country's political geography, its enormous energy resources, its sensitivity to independence and national sovereignty, and the tendency of Iranian culture for Western science, technology, and culture. Sariolghalam believes that reaching these goals depends on a transnational coalition and alliance as well as on rational decision-making in foreign policy.⁴⁷ "The inherent duality of parliamentary democracy and theocracy", as Maleki called it, has been sustained as a huge unsolved problem after four decades of the establishment even in agency-based theories.⁴⁸ The point is that good studies in decision-making in Iranian foreign affairs should acknowledge its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions to identify their primary focus, namely: agency, structure, or discourse - or a hybrid of these. Expanded analysis requires an independent focus work streamlined on Iranian foreign affairs.

Foreign Policy Implementation

Evaluating the different implementation phase of different presidencies give us a picture of the main trends and the principal determinative elements of Iran's foreign petroleum strategy in the latest decades after 1988.

The first decade of the Islamic republic was spent on a transition from monarchy to the Islamic republic based on the principle of rule by Islamic jurists and consolidating the foundation of the newborn republic. The second decade, or the post-war stage, advocated pragmatism, development, and welfare. The third frame is assigned to political reforms as some scholars believe that the Islamic Republic of Iran contains some republican and democratic features but does not fulfil all the promises of the Iran revolution. Some others recall the Islamic Republic of Iran as a theocratic state that denies the basic social and political rights of the common people. Religious scholars of the Iranian reformist era (1997-2005) have done a remarkable performance in promoting a democratic-secular articulation of state authority within a religious context. The fourth timeframe was formed by a coalition of Islamic radicals and conservatives while the conflicts in 2009-2010 became active in response to the presidential election fraud.



The protesters gradually demanded an Iranian republic to replace the Islamic Republic which might undermine the legitimacy of the overall high-level policy of the Islamic Republic. Ahmad Sadri argues that: "... radical reform counts heavily on the inherent instability and lack of legitimacy of the right-wing theocracy." Steve Bruce argues that: "either the will of God or will of the people is sovereign." The fifth timeframe is the moderation stage which balances radicals and reformists with minimising the political disputes inside the society and among people and the state. Table 1 illustrates all these frames in a tableau.

*Post-Iraq-Iran war construction period
(1989-1997)*

First, the picture of Iran's economic structure at the end years of the Iraq-Iran war was a scene of a disaster. The country was in a financial crisis because of the decline in oil prices between 1986 and 1987, along with unemployment, the virtual collapse of the private sector, and underdeveloped or war-damaged infrastructure. In 1986, the average price of West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil rose to \$14 per barrel and \$17 in 1987.⁴⁹ The price of Iranian oil was lower than WTI oil and was about \$12 in 1986. With the ending of the Iraq-Iran war, reconstruction

in economic and foreign policy was emphasised by the government headed by Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani. With the Constitution revision in 1989 and ratification of the constitutional amendments, the prime minister's office was revoked by revising the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, resulting in a balance of power between Parliament and the President increasing the presidential power.

The presidency of Rafsanjani was a period of significant change in the goals and strategies of Iranian foreign policy. His main goal was to promote economic development based on liberalism through a free-market exchange, and integration with the global economy. This approach was supported by both Tehran's traditional market (Bazar) and social conservatives in the parliament. While the leftists, especially the reformists in opposition to Rafsanjani, asked for the so-called "Islamic economic system," he stated that his policy was an "Islamic mixed economy," combining free-market with government intervention.⁵⁰

The main themes of his consolidation policy and economic reform programme were: First, boosting economic growth to overcome the financial constraints of falling oil prices and being able to meet the needs of a growing population. Second, liberal economic policy will end the



political and economic isolation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The relative realisation of these goals in completing the revolutionary ideological ideals leftover from the Stabilisation and Transition phase (1979-1988) ensured the stability of the Islamic Republic.

Therefore, the restructuring and privatisation phase began to stimulate the ailing economy through a liberal economic policy. When Rafsanjani's government faced inadequate domestic funding – a combination of falling oil prices, damaged economies and infrastructure, and low oil production – it was forced to make dramatic policy changes. The new policy was to pursue economic liberalisation and attract foreign investment, which also created opportunities in foreign policy. With this policymaking, fundamental policies such as exporting revolution and Islamisation were promoted to a more pragmatic policy based on national interests. Based on the primary ideological value of the Iran revolution, the country's energy policy - and in particular oil policy- had lost its link with foreign policy. Pragmatic policies in Rafsanjani's government remade the connections between national interests and ideological values. He advocates close ties with Russia, China, and India within the framework of the "Asian Identity."⁵¹ Therefore, he was successful in expanding trade and attracting

investment through the development of mutually beneficial state-to-state relations, but not with the United States. Following the 1990–91 Gulf War, Washington adopted a policy of 'dual containment' towards Iran and Iraq, which is branded as the region's two 'rogue' states.⁵² The policy of using energy diplomacy in the process of normalising relations with the United States led to awarding Conoco's oil and gas contract in 1995, though the deal had been broken ten days after it was signed because of US President Bill Clinton's executive order banning the American companies to do a business with Iran. The relative realisation of these policy goals in completing the revolutionary ideological ideals leftover from the Consolidation and Transition phase (1979-1988) ensured the stability of the Islamic Republic.⁵³

Political reforms (1997-2005)

Khatami won the Presidential election in 1997 with the slogan of full implementation of the constitution. He had the chance of significant support in Parliament, while his affiliated party, the Reformist Party (Islamic Iran Participation Front) won the 1999 parliamentary elections. He has drawn the attention of the Iranian people and the attention of the world's nations by criticising past eras and emphasising religious democracy and the idea of a



dialogue between civilisations. Economically, the first term of Khatami's presidency coincided with the Asian financial crisis (1997-1999) and the general recession. Iran's shift to expand and focus on the Asian market - as U.S. and European markets were gradually blocked by sanctions - made the country particularly vulnerable to the impact of the Asian financial crisis. In the area of foreign policy, the overall trend during Khatami's presidency was to weaken relations between the EU and Iran and the desire of international energy companies, especially European ones, to develop oil and gas projects in Iran. It also affected U.S.-Iranian relations as USA companies lobbied for access to the Iranian market. However, external factors influenced Khatami's policy, especially around foreign policy, concerning US-Iran relations, and the possibility of establishing a relationship with the USA with the advent of the Karine-A ship became completely impossible. In January 2002, at a conference in Tokyo on Afghanistan's economic recovery, officials from Iran and the United States held direct meetings and wider negotiations were expected to take place elsewhere. But three weeks later, the Karine A ship carrying fifty tonnes of weapons to Gaza was stopped by the Israelis in the Mediterranean and declared its landing on the Iranian coast earlier. A week later, the U.S. President

called Iran the "axis of evil," referring to the pivotal countries of the 1930s and the alliance of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Japan. But this time it focused on key countries including Iraq, North Korea, and Iran.⁵⁴ Khatami's "dialogue of civilisations" contrasted with Bush's "axis of evil" and Huntington's "the clash of civilisations".

As a reformist, Khatami called for repairing mistrust with the U.S. by introducing the policy of Dialogue of Civilisations.⁵⁵ In his public talks, Khatami continued to emphasise Islamic and revolutionary values and promoted "interfaith dialogue" and "faith-based movements."⁵⁶ Although Khatami has opted for cooperation, the "axis of evil" label has raised perceptions of coercion, isolation, and alienation as well as concerns over regime change. To balance against the U.S., Iran started to pursue an opaqueness policy in its nuclear development. While rejecting claims about its nuclear intentions, Iran kept the nature of its nuclear activities ambiguous by not ratifying the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and providing partial access to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. This was a way of challenging the U.S. in non-military ways and indicating the possibility of prospective military action.⁵⁷



During the years 2000 to the end of Khatami's presidency, oil prices rose again, and the instability caused by geopolitical tensions, such as the 9/11 attacks, the Afghanistan war, and the Second Gulf War, ramped the oil prices up. In the year 2000, the average price of WTI crude oil reached about \$27 per barrel, while in 1999 it was around \$1.⁵⁸ Since the beginning of the Second Gulf War in 2003, Iran has seen itself surrounded by U.S.-led military forces. This, along with rising oil prices as global demand increased, helped the neo-conservative wing regain political ground in Iran. Political reform failed, and Khatami's victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections led to a sharp reaction from the neo-conservative faction in the 2004 and then 2005 presidential elections, and this period with sharp contradictions with the next presidential term neo-conservatives replaced.

Interestingly, while the decline in oil revenues has challenged Khatami's domestic policy, it has helped Iran attract the attention of international energy companies as they prefer to invest in areas with lower production costs than, for instance, the North Sea oil fields. Thus, Khatami succeeded in increasing the attraction of foreign direct investment to Iran, which is mainly due to the energy sector.⁵⁹

Neo-conservatism in Power (2005-2013)

Ahmadinejad's presidency since 2005 is a good example of the coincidence of ambiguity and conflict during a presidency. The cornerstone of the election campaign in 2005 was the motto of redistributing oil wealth, combating corruption and the oil sector mafia, and focusing on domestic investment rather than foreign investment. Measures such as raising government spending and increasing subsidies to buy popularity since 2004 have been made easier by rising oil prices as the oil price hit a peak of \$134 a barrel for Iranian light oil in mid-2008. High oil prices also supported Ahmadinejad's nationalist stance against foreign investment, which ultimately led to his rent-seeking system and the favour of powerful companies that supported him. During Ahmadinejad's administration, some scholars argued that Iran was moving away from its Islamic values to revive dormant 'Persian' nationalism. He combined several themes—anti-imperialism (especially anti-Zionism) and anti-capitalism with a Shi'a eschatology and a feeling of national exceptionalism.⁶⁰ His foreign policy was based on finding or creating external threats, such as further isolation and tightening of sanctions against Iran increased the dependence of Iranian society on the state, which in turn reinforced the government's position.⁶¹



The Green Movement and civil protests in opposition to his authoritarian and non-transparent government were suppressed with the support of parallel structures like IRGC that is reinforced by the state power. In 2005, Ahmadinejad's electoral victory placed for the first time all levers of power in the hands of the hardliners especially the rising generation of neoconservatives. Ahmadinejad's government earned more oil revenue in its first two years alone than Rafsanjani's did in eight. From the offset, Ahmadinejad saw the US in terminal decline, a view bolstered by Iran's improving regional strategic position and unprecedented oil revenues.⁶² Ahmadinejad's aggressive rhetoric against the West distressed the nuclear negotiations, and severe sanctions had been imposed on Iran by the US, EU, and the UN.

Moderation (2013-2021)

Rouhani's government, with its slogan of Government of Prudence and Hope, was chosen with three main goals and began its work in 2013: economic reconstruction, solving the nuclear issue, and ending Iran's political isolation. In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Javad Zarif, the Iranian Foreign Minister made this clear.⁶³ However, Zarif and Rouhani were pursuing bigger goals in pursuit of Iran's economic development

and strengthening of its international relations: to restore Iran to its historic status on a global scale. Zarif has referred to Iran as a regional power at least four times in his article, "it is imperative for other states to accept ... reality of Iran's prominent role in the Middle East and beyond and to recognise and respect Iran's legitimate national rights, interests and security concerns".⁶⁴

Rouhani has encountered powerful domestic opponents, particularly among the IRGC, Iran's conservative elites and hardliners in the Parliament. The interaction between Iran's chaotic domestic politics and the changing international environment has undermined Rouhani's diplomatic attempts and has imposed considerable barriers to pursuing his foreign policy agenda. Rouhani's foreign policy agency was further undermined after the rise of jihadists (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. This rise has quickly changed the domestic balance of power in favour of conservatives and hardliners in Iran the IRGC, who were running Iran's Middle East policy and Rouhani's JCPOA nuclear negotiation declined with Trump's Iran deal withdrawal.⁶⁵ Rouhani's administration did not appear to have a clear strategy to alleviate the pervasive concerns over Iran's growing power throughout the neighbouring regions.⁶⁶



In the last months of 2020, the United States and Iran appear to be raising tensions in the Persian Gulf, where a small-scale or accidental military encounter could easily trigger a much wider conflagration, such as the British tanker, *Stena Impero*, detained in the Persian Gulf right after that Iranian oil tanker, *Grace-1*, stopped by Royal Marines in Gibraltar; or Iranians fired at US MQ-9 Reaper drone monitoring the Persian Gulf, then Iran oil tanker attacked in the Red Sea. The Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) initiated by President Hassan Rouhani in the recent United Nations General Assembly 2019 invited all regional countries to that initiative to bring peace and stability to the region.

In 2016, Edward Wastnidge wrote a short essay about Rouhani's government and the problems it has faced both inside and outside the country.⁶⁷ He realised that despite the pressure from sanctions in international relations, the narrowing of the country's economic arteries and Iran's oil exports, as well as domestic pressures from public discontent over economic problems, as well as political opposition from radicals and hardliners, still, the soft power, public diplomacy, and communications in international relations are important policy instruments in narrative strategy and pave the way for his government.

Discussion and Conclusion

Foreign decision-making in Iran involves, as the political structure of the regime suggests, various branches of the government. This includes the president and his government ministers, the council of guardians, the expediency council, and the parliament. State-level analyses have sought to explain Iran's foreign policy decision by considering actors and variables emergent in the domestic setting agenda. In general, if the president is strong in presidential systems, it is because of "executive decrees and the power to make decisions on foreign policy and other matters".⁶⁸ Domestic factors such as the growing authoritarianism of the supreme leader (specifically after 1989), and the role of key economic and political elites (such as IRGC, veto powers, and high councils) have been cited as key drivers (or at least important intervening factors) of Iran's foreign policy. The system of overlapping institutions is intended to ensure that decisions are being made by consensus, but these driving factors increasingly thwart presidential power regarding republic and democracy. In the Iranian political system, the linkages across formal and informal actors, between personalities, networks, and state institutions need to be factored into the foreign policymaking equations.



There are seven institutions involved in Iranian foreign policy decision-making:

1. Office of the Supreme Leader: The Supreme Leader is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and with the power to dismiss the head of the IRGC
2. Head of the Expediency Council
3. Supreme Council for National Security
4. The Strategic Council for Foreign Relations
5. Office of the President
6. Ministry of Foreign Affairs
7. Parliament (through the National Security and Foreign Policy Commissions).

The parliament remains important because it ratifies all international agreements, contracts, and treaties. The guardian council also remains important because it has the power to veto decisions made by the parliament. In cases where disputes arise, the expediency council arbitrates. This simple list of actors and institutions demonstrates the potential competition between energy diplomacy and other foreign policy goals. In addition, decisions on energy projects in Iran typically go through a complex and lengthy process, which often falls victim to internal political rivalries. This intertwined and almost indistinguishable relationship not only makes it hard for foreign actors to understand the system's structure but also limits the ability to apply the concept of checks and balances to the system.

The neoclassical realism theory also suggests a quite simple approach without the need to analyse domestic politics in detail. When changes in decision-making groups or changes of perception in it are found they could be used to explain changes in states' interests in the international system and changes in foreign policy. To have greater possibilities to expand the state's interests abroad, firstly there should be national power that could be extracted by state institutions for its purposes. The Neoclassical Realism (or state-centred realism) approach to state power is rational and objective, as governments, not nations, shape foreign policy, and select (policy) tools for the implementation of politics. Not all economic power of a nation could be transferred to military power, and never can all national economic power be utilised to achieve state goals, as well as energy power or any other type of power. Material resources are not part of foreign policy until it is possible to extract them for state purposes.



Appendix

Figure 01 - Iran political system after 1989

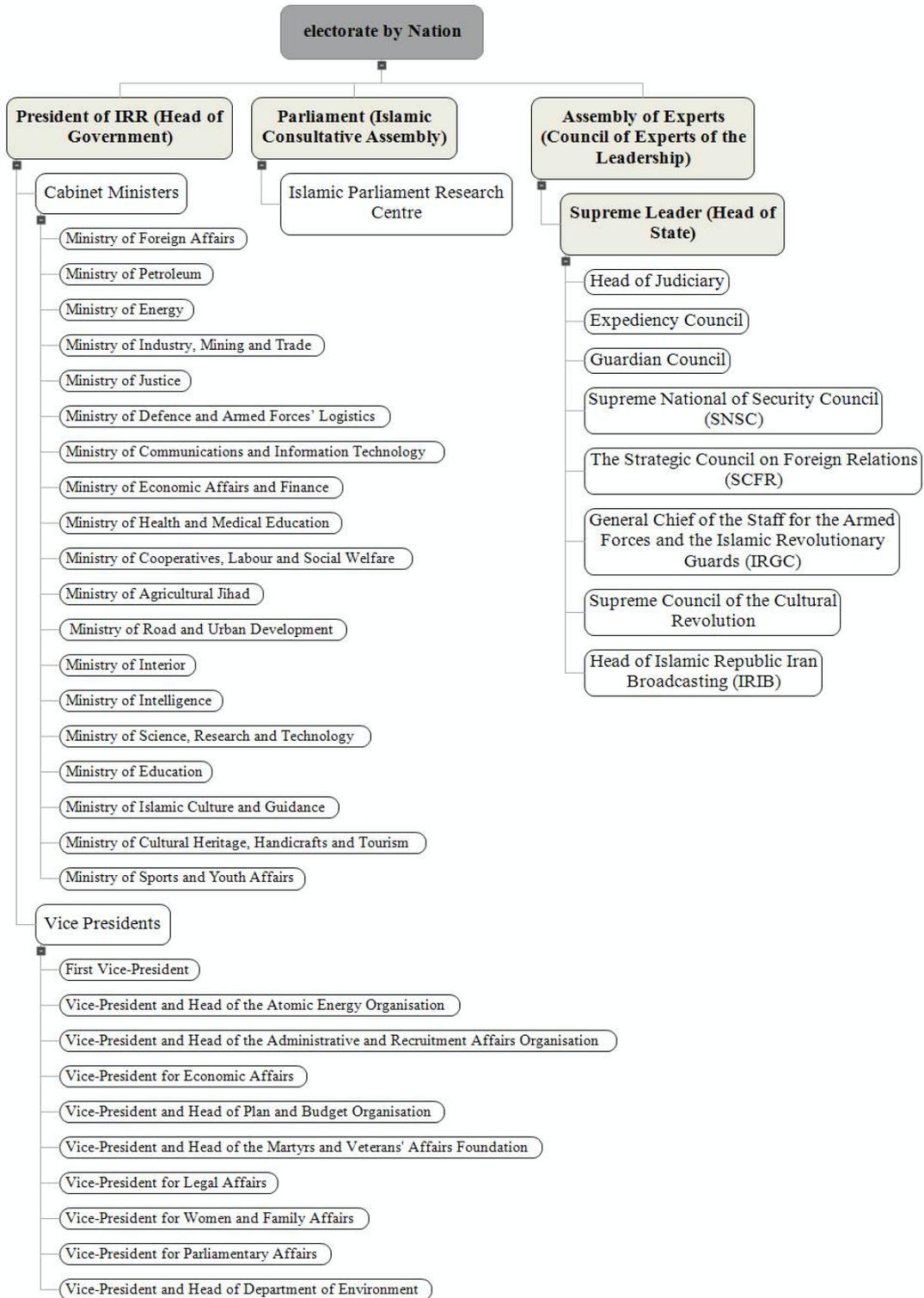


Table 01 - Main historical periods of the Islamic Republic of Iran

| Historical Period | Years | Main Diplomacy and Dominant Events | Presidency ⁶⁹ |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|
| Consolidation and Transition | 1978-1979 | Iranian revolution | President Banisadr (Prime Minister Rajae) President Rajae (Prime Minister Bahonar) President Khamenei (Prime Minister Mousavi) |
| | 1980-1988 | Iraq-Iran war | |
| | 1989 | Death of Ayatollah Khomeini | |
| Reconstruction Period | 1989-1997 | Economically Liberal, Politically Authoritarian, and Philosophically Traditional | President Hashemi Rafsanjani |
| Political Reforms | 1997-2005 | Freedom of Expression, Tolerance, and Civil Society | President Khatami |
| Neo-Conservatism | 2005-2013 | Coalition of Conservative Political Groups | President Ahmadinejad |
| | 2009-2010 | Green Movement | |
| Moderation | 2013-2017, 2017-2021 | Moderate and Pragmatic Diplomacy | President Rouhani |



Notes

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