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THE IMPACT OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FACTORS ON IRAN-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

Dr. Mohamed Shaker Mohamed Hussein

Political science lecturer, Faculty of Politics and Economics,
Suez University

Introduction

The study sheds light on the characteristics, dimensions and prospects of Iran-South Korea relations in light of developments concerning the freezing of Iranian assets in South Korea following the imposition of US sanctions. The study also looks at the significance of both countries in their regional spheres in addition to the impact of international factors on their relations given South Korea's affiliation with the United States that leads the unipolar international system. On the other hand, Iran is affiliated with the anti-US and anti-unipolar countries such as China and Russia as well as other regional and international allies.

The following key questions will be studied: what is the nature of Iran-South Korea relations? What are the internal and external factors impacting their relations? In addition, sub-questions related to the strategies and dimensions of each country will be looked at, particularly at how they impact the nature of relations.

Internal Factors Impacting Iran-South Korea Relations

Political experience teaches that despite ideologies and principles of political systems, political pragmatism often determines relations between countries regardless of their position in the international system. The nature and approaches of the ruling systems in Iran and South Korea offer insights into the patterns and characteristics of relations between both countries:

The Inclusive and Ideological Nature of Iran's Political System

Following the triumph of the Iranian revolution in 1979, an ideological religious system known as Wilayat al-Faqih came into existence and the Wali al-Faqih, known as the "special envoy of divine providence," assumed full control over the entire system and society. This system based on a politicized version of Shiism was projected for all Muslims, and one that would protect the weak and fight against the arrogant. Iran's religious elite presented this revolutionary political system as an alternative to the Western system to counter the world's arrogant powers. Iran's revolutionary ruling system established its foreign policy and relations on a somewhat different footing compared to that of the previous Pahlavi government.

This new direction of foreign policy invoked the ire of world powers, especially of the United States and its allies, as Iran was attempting to present its religious-based system as an alternative to the Western capitalist system led by the United States and its allies. US allies such as South Korea and some of Iran's neighbors were concerned that the Iranian ruling system had successfully presented itself as an ideological alternative by the end of the 20th century; a critical point in history which witnessed the end of the Cold War.

One cannot judge Iran's ruling system only in accordance with its ideology and political principles that are stated to regulate the country's internal and external affairs. Pragmatism has been adopted by Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih system; evident in many aspects of the country's foreign policy. For example, Iran's position on the United States is based on pragmatism and *realpolitik*, despite the fact that it is presented as the country's enemy.⁽¹⁾

Although the Iranian political system depends on revolutionary ideology and has used it to survive over the last 40 years, pragmatism has been utilized when needed to maximize the ruling system's interests. As a result, even though South Korea is an ally of those countries that Iran classes as forces of global arrogance, Tehran based on pragmatic calculations established relations with Seoul.

The Liberal Nature of South Korea's Political System

Unlike the Iranian political system, which is totalitarian in nature, in which one person exercises exclusive power, tilting toward China and Russia, the South Korean political system is pluralistic, democratic, and tilts toward the West.

Since its founding, South Korea has witnessed many political developments that have led to democratic rule being embedded with popular consent in the country. The South Korean Constitution mentions an integrated presidential system with a legislative body, and the president is directly elected for five years to office and his term is non-renewable.⁽²⁾ This system is different from individual-focused systems but is consistent with the US political system on the other hand.

Yoon Suk-yeol of the South Korean conservative People Power Party, who is biased toward the United States, won the 2022 presidential election, with Lee Jae-myung, the liberal candidate, standing against him. South Korea's foreign policy will continue to have an anti-Iran slant and a pro-US one under Suk-yeol's rule.⁽³⁾

Ideology is a significant determinant when analyzing Iran's foreign relations; the Iranian government still runs the country's foreign policy in line with revolutionary principles such as "exporting the 1979 revolution," advancing the country's regional project at the expense of the West and most prominently the United States, developing the country's nuclear capabilities, and promoting nationalistic orientations. Thus, in light of these principles, Iran diverges significantly from the orientations of South Korea, the United States' strategic ally. Despite this divergence, apart from trade relations between South Korea and Iran, both have also pursued other goals.

External Factors Impacting Iran-South Korea Relations

A number of factors have contributed to the failure in the development of Iran-South Korea relations which has impacted the trade dimension between the two countries. These factors are as follows:

The North Korea Factor

The North Korea factor has significantly impacted the nature of Iran-South Korea relations due to the positive relations between Tehran and Pyongyang; Seoul's archenemy; given their joint cooperation in the development of nuclear activities and ballistic missiles. Therefore, the direct threats posed by Pyongyang on Seoul have impacted the latter's relations with Pyongyang's allies in the Middle East, especially with Iran.

Seoul is aware of the nature of relations between Tehran and Pyongyang since the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Pyongyang and Iran after the revolution found common ground because of their anti-Western rhetoric and opposition to the Western political system. Pyongyang's supply of weapons and missile technology in the 1980s to Tehran was the most prominent feature of North Korea's support for Iran's government amid its war with Iraq. North Korea also depended on Iran to obtain hard currency. Since the 1980s, strong

relations between the two countries have developed, especially in the military field.⁽⁴⁾

Both countries are aware of the common need for coordinating against US encirclement policies. They both desire for the United States, an ally of Seoul, to lose its dominant position in the international system. Both Tehran and Pyongyang are under siege, isolated and facing economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies because of their nuclear/missile programs and ambitions. They therefore have a common enemy. Because of US hostility, Iran and North Korea have adopted similar political and military positions which have raised fears among Washington's allies. These positions are seen as an impediment to relations between South Korea and Iran.

The conservative current in Seoul is taking a tougher position on Pyongyang unlike the liberal current, and the latter's relations with Iran are likely to strain further. In an article published by Foreign Affairs magazine in February, President Suk-yeol, when he was a presidential candidate, promised that if he was elected as the country's president, his administration would take a tougher stance against Pyongyang and he also criticized the conciliatory approach of his predecessor Moon Jae-in toward Pyongyang, and called for tougher sanctions on Pyongyang, and he classed North Korea as the "main enemy" of his country.⁽⁵⁾ In reference to the Russia-Ukraine war, during the presidential debate, Suk-yeol said that "the country's national security and peace cannot be protected by paper and ink." On another occasion, he said, "Peace is meaningless unless backed up by force."⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, the tough policies of Suk-yeol toward Pyongyang and his efforts to strengthen military cooperation with Washington in East Asia will have a profound impact on inter-Korean relations and their foreign relations and alliances, especially when it comes to the Middle East.⁽⁷⁾

The China Factor

Beijing leads the international axis against the United States and is an ally of Seoul. In addition, China is one of Seoul's largest trading partners, and the most prominent strategic ally of Tehran. Therefore, Beijing is a major variable in influencing the pattern of relations between Iran and South Korea. Chinese trade with South Korea has become a major pressure card in influencing Seoul's policies toward Beijing's strategic allies. Beijing's close relations and its significant influence in Pyongyang have increased the relevance and impact of its policies on Seoul's foreign and security policies in East Asia.⁽⁸⁾

Iran is a regional power in the Arab Gulf region in particular, and the Middle East in general. Therefore, Iran's relationship with China is an important determinant in the power balance equation within the region. Seoul's foreign policy is closely related to Washington's foreign calculations, and it attempts to embrace positions in line with these calculations, especially when it comes

to Iran. If Seoul continues to pursue unfavorable policies toward Iran, this will only increase Chinese influence in the Middle East in several fields, but it may also risk the political and economic role of Seoul in the Middle East and Iran, threatening its economic interests with Tehran.⁽⁹⁾

Many experts believe that Pyongyang's position has become tougher toward its southern neighbor against the backdrop of US-Chinese escalation in the South China Sea in general and in regard to Taiwan in particular. China, Pyongyang's strategic ally, took escalatory military action following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. China has also expressed its strong objection to the deployment of further THAAD missile systems in Seoul.

The Gulf Factor

The Gulf states are in conflict with Iran due to its recent destructive project in the Arab world. Therefore, the Gulf factor is of great significance because it impacts relations between Tehran and Seoul, especially as the strategic alliance with the United States binds South Korea and the Gulf countries. In addition, economic and commercial factors have a great impact on Gulf-South Korea relations. Seoul has developed bilateral relations with the Gulf countries and attempts to prevent conflicts that could harm its interests in the Gulf. Therefore, South Korea has adopted a bilateral approach toward both its allies and adversaries to secure its interests but at the lowest possible political cost. This includes the separation of security relations from economic and commercial relations, and the adoption of a neutral approach as much as possible when conflicts erupt between its allies and adversaries.⁽¹⁰⁾

Given the nature and resources of the Gulf, developing relations with the Gulf countries is of great importance, especially as they can act as an alternative source for Seoul's energy needs. South Korea ranked eighth in the world in 2018 in terms of consumption and imports of crude oil. Its import of oil from the Gulf stands at 73 percent and 45 percent for liquefied gas. The volume of intra-regional trade between South Korea and the Gulf countries reached its apex in 2014, amounting to \$110 billion, which was more than 10 percent of the combined South Korean trade volume that year. This figure has dropped in subsequent years due to the decline in oil prices.⁽¹¹⁾

Bilateral trade between South Korea and the Gulf is not only limited to oil but also includes the exchange of goods as Seoul has deemed the Gulf markets as important for the sale of its goods. The Gulf, which aspires to move toward a non-oil-based economy, needs new strategic partners. Therefore, to this end, there is significant cooperation with South Korea in the fields of engineering, procurement, construction, smart agriculture, and defense. South Korea deployed its naval forces abroad for the first time to take part in the Joint Task Force (151CTF) and the Alliance to Combat Piracy around the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa.⁽¹²⁾ Seoul places relations with the Gulf countries at the apex

of its strategic priorities, even though some of them are in conflict with Iran because of its expansionist policies in the region. The United States and its European allies foster Gulf-South Korea relations, while Iran resents South Korea's approach toward the Gulf countries.

Therefore, Iran criticizes Seoul's support for the US military presence in the Middle East as it views this presence as a direct threat to its national security.⁽¹³⁾ On the other hand, the United States and the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have welcomed Seoul's approach as it increases international pressure on Tehran and serves the goals of peace and stability in the Middle East, which is home to vital resources and strategic waterways. Seoul also contributed to international security efforts to protect strategic corridors such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab by supplying a military contingent that was stationed off the Omani coast in 2019;⁽¹⁴⁾ it helped in protecting incoming trade and oil tankers. This was undertaken when Iran engaged in the so-called "tankers wars" with it targeting oil tankers in the Arabian Gulf as part of its strategy to counter Trump's maximum pressure strategy. At the beginning of 2020, the South Korean Ministry of Defense expanded its deployment to the waters of the Arabian Gulf. To achieve balance in its relations with Iran, it announced that it would not be part of the US Naval Mission to counter Iranian escalations. Days after Iran's attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019, Riyadh requested help from Seoul to develop its air defense system.⁽¹⁵⁾

Seoul is directly involved in the conflict between the United States and Iran. By making a major change in its security-commercial diplomacy approach, Seoul tilted toward the Arab countries at the expense of Iran while it carefully attempted to avoid risking its trade relations with Iran. The potential commercial, strategic, and diplomatic outcomes because of its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council changed South Korea's orientation toward Iran. The Gulf variable has had a profound impact on South Korea's policies toward Iran and the Gulf countries.

The US Factor

The US factor has a significant impact on South Korea's relations with Iran. This is not only because of the nature of economic and military relations between South Korea and the United States and the nature of the Korean political system that is based on Western capitalist thought, but also because of the fact that Seoul is part of the US-international axis. The South Korean economy rapidly flourished because of US aid and its military presence that protected the South Korean political system.⁽¹⁶⁾ Seoul played a pivotal role in implementing US encirclement policies against the communist camp in East Asia during the Cold War.⁽¹⁷⁾

As part of this US-South Korea partnership, Seoul is committed to embracing US approaches toward the latter's opponents around the world and against Iran.⁽¹⁸⁾ This partnership has significantly impacted Seoul's foreign policy toward Iran. For example, Seoul was forced to join the international economic sanctions against Iran before reaching the 2015 nuclear agreement, and committed to the US unilateral sanctions on Iran when the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. At the beginning of 2022, the South Korean Foreign Ministry announced that the US administration allowed it to compensate \$61 million to the Iranian Diani group to settle a dispute dating back to 2010. This was a rare exemption from the strict US sanctions imposed on Iran. The South Korean Foreign Ministry added, "The license allows using the US financial system to pay compensation to the Iranian private investor."⁽¹⁹⁾ This indicates that Seoul could only provide this compensation with US consent.

As Israel is also a special and strong US ally in the Middle East, South Korea's relationship with Tel Aviv impacts its relationship with Iran, especially amid Seoul's recent bolstering of relations with Tel Aviv.⁽²⁰⁾ The Israeli and South Korean sides signed a free trade agreement in 2021 which reflected a clear shift in the direction of Seoul's diplomatic approach in the region.⁽²¹⁾ South Korea was hesitant to strengthen its relations with Israel, a powerful ally to the United States because Seoul enjoys good relations with the Arab states. However, after some Arab countries signed the Abraham Accords with Israel, and others established diplomatic relations, Seoul no longer feels the need to be careful about advancing its relations with Tel Aviv.

The Nature of Iran-South Korea Relations

Despite the geographical distance between the two countries, Iran and South Korea have regional and international clout. Their interactions in the mentioned arenas have a significant impact on determining the nature of their relations. Historically, Iran was one of the first countries in the Middle East to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul, particularly in 1962. Since then, bilateral relations developed based on trust and diplomatic and commercial cooperation against the backdrop of their affiliation with the United States in the context of the Cold War. Tehran at the time was one of Seoul's most important allies in the United Nations when it came to its key goals: the anti-communist approach and support against North Korea.⁽²²⁾

By 1979, relations between Tehran and Seoul witnessed fundamental transformations because the Iranian revolution impeded political convergence and left relations to be purely commercial in nature. As a result, the two countries struggled to establish an organic trade link, and both were isolated from the wider geopolitical developments in their respective regions.⁽²³⁾

Iran's foreign policy post-1979 created a new framework of relations with Seoul because of its ideological character and anti-US stance. Despite this, Iran sought to boost trade relations with Seoul on the basis of expediency and national interests.

However, trade cooperation between Tehran and Seoul did not develop into strategic economic relations but rather remained commercial in nature. This was due to many factors, mainly internal, regional, and international determinants. Therefore, pragmatism and maintaining national interests characterized Iran-South Korea relations. As for foreign policy, the two countries opted to separate politics from the economy and commerce and focus primarily on trade.

As the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement on May 8, 2018, the volume of trade between the two countries declined in light of the US sanctions on Iran. Before these sanctions, Iran was exporting oil to South Korea and importing industrial equipment, auto parts and household appliances. Tehran's relations with South Korea turned sour because of the dispute over Iranian frozen assets worth \$7 billion. Seoul refused to hand them over to Tehran because of US sanctions. Relations between Tehran and Seoul, which had been friendly throughout history, turned hostile after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement given the strategic nature of US-South Korea relations.

Seoul acts in accordance with US policy toward Iran, thus impacting Iran-South Korea relations. However, Seoul-Washington relations vary between the Korean conservatives and the liberals. Under former South Korean President Moon Jae-in, Seoul tried to balance its relations and seek an independent path in foreign relations without shifting away from the United States. However, under the conservative current, which the current South Korean president adheres to, Seoul has tilted further toward Washington and aligned itself with US policy toward Iran. Hence, Iran-South Korea relations have come under strain and have not expanded into the strategic domains.

The Repercussions of Internal and External Factors on Iran-South Korea Relations

Given the factors impacting Iran-South Korea relations, interactions between Tehran and Seoul have mainly focused on economic and commercial aspects only, and have not taken on strategic dimensions. This lack of development in relations is because of the durability of US-South Korea relations and the US sanctions on Iran.

The Oil Factor in Iran-South Korea Relations

South Korea is the fifth largest oil importer in the world, and was one of the largest and most significant buyers of Iranian oil before the United States

withdrew from the nuclear agreement in 2018. Iran's oil exports constituted the most important source of revenues for the Iranian national budget. Seoul reduced its imports of Iranian oil after 2018 significantly in order to preserve its strategic relations with the United States. Seoul's imports of Iranian oil decreased from 10 percent in 2011 to 5 percent in 2013 after it ceased imports for two months in 2012 due to US sanctions. After receiving a temporary US waiver, Seoul resumed the import of Iranian oil, but at a lower rate than the pre-sanctions period.⁽²⁴⁾

Due to the US sanctions on Iran, Seoul's import of Iranian oil declined in July 2018 by over 40 percent, the lowest level since 2015. It went down further in 2019 because Seoul did not receive a new US waiver to buy Iranian oil, and it froze \$7 billion worth of Iranian assets. Tehran has repeatedly demanded the unfreezing of its assets.

Although US sanctions have contributed to lowering imports in recent years, South Korean refineries and petrochemical companies are seeking to supply markets with Iranian oil in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war and the rising price of oil because of the compatibility of Iran's oil with South Korean refineries, and South Korea's boycotting of Russian oil imports. The inclination to replace Russian oil in South Korea with Iran's has increased since the Russia-Ukraine war.⁽²⁵⁾

Trade Between Tehran and Seoul

Trade relations between Tehran and Seoul have witnessed growth as well as contraction because of the US factor over the past three decades. However, the total trade volume between the two countries indicates undoubtedly that Tehran was the largest and most important trading partner of Seoul in the Middle East. Seoul remained the third largest partner of Iran in terms of imports between 2015-2018. Their trade relations fluctuated depending on US sanctions on Tehran because of its nuclear ambitions. This poses a permanent challenge to the development of Iran-South Korea trade relations.

The trade volume between the two countries reached nearly \$17 million in 2011 and dropped to \$14 million in 2012 due to international sanctions on Iran. South Korea's imports from Iran of non-oil goods and products fell in 2012.⁽²⁶⁾ Bilateral trade increased, except in 2009, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, indicating the impact of the international sanctions on Iran. Bilateral trade went upwards when sanctions were lifted between 2015-2017. During 2017, Seoul ranked Iran as one of its most important and major trading partners. South Korea was Iran's third most important partner. Iran maintained a trade surplus with South Korea between 2008 and 2017.⁽²⁷⁾

During 2019, South Korea's export of orthopedic items, electrical control panels and medical items to Iran reached \$282 million. It imported from Iran crude oil, copper scrap and fruits amounting to \$1.89 billion during the

same year. Due to the conflict between Iran and the West and the sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear ambitions, bilateral trade drastically declined.

In 2019, South Korea exported \$282 million worth of goods to Iran, mainly orthopedic appliances, electrical control boards and medical instruments. In the same year, Iran exported \$1.89 billion worth of goods to South Korea, especially crude petroleum, copper scrap and fruit juice. Such figures indicate that bilateral trade declined due to the sanctions imposed on Tehran by the West to curb its nuclear program. South Korean exports to Iran have decreased at an annualized rate of 0.92 percent, from \$352 million in 1995 to \$282 million in 2019. By contrast, during the same period, Iranian exports to South Korea have increased at an annualized rate of 2.32 percent, from \$1.09 billion in 1995 to \$1.89 billion in 2019.⁽²⁸⁾

After the lifting of sanctions on Iran, Seoul mainly exported cars, spare parts, steel planks, digital/imaging equipment and household appliances such as televisions, refrigerators and freezers. On the other hand, the main component of South Korean imports from Iran was crude oil, 98.3 percent of total imports. Other imports include liquefied natural gas, zinc products, minerals, crustaceans, and jellyfish.⁽²⁹⁾

Level of Investment Between Tehran and Seoul

Iran is an important market for South Korean automobile parts, telecommunications and electronics in the Middle Eastern countries. South Korean companies have implemented several investment projects in Iran such as in the energy sector.⁽³⁰⁾ However, US-Iran tensions escalated under Trump as a result of which major South Korean companies such as Hyundai, Samsung and others sought alternative markets in the region.

As the South Korean conservative president took office, he used more radical language against Pyongyang, thus impacting Seoul's relations with Iran, the most important Middle Eastern ally of North Korea and he has worked to warm relations with the Gulf countries, some of which are in conflict with Iran because of its regional adventurism. The South Korean president will unlikely make significant efforts to encourage South Korean companies to reenter the Iranian market or to enhance bilateral relations.

Conclusion

If the new South Korean president adopted a policy similar to that of the former president, economic relations between Tehran and Seoul could have improved with the latter releasing Iran's frozen assets after it played a positive role in the recent nuclear talks in Vienna. However, Iran-South Korea relations have a new variable which will not help in boosting relations, even if Seoul unfreezes Iran's assets. The new South Korean president adopts a different policy which is more based on tilting toward the West, especially advancing

South Korea's relations with the United States at the expense of its traditional allies in the Middle East.

Seoul is explicitly committed to US policies and approaches, including its anti-Iranian policies. However, the study reveals that Seoul enjoys relative room for maneuver, i.e., to maintain relations with Iran while adhering to US policy. Seoul's relations with Tehran may vary according to the political background of the new leader; some leaders strictly adhere to US policies against its rivals while other leaders adopt a balanced policy toward US rivals without violating US principles.

The conservative trend in Seoul tends to take a more committed stance to US policies and a more hawkish posture toward Pyongyang. The new South Korean president, who is affiliated with the conservative current, takes a more committed stance to the United States, and is more hawkish toward Pyongyang than his predecessor.

Diplomatically, Iran may become an uncomfortable diplomatic partner for Seoul. This is due to fact that Seoul is an ally of the United States and has strategic interests in Central Asia. Iran has sought to exercise influence and strengthen its foreign policy in Central Asia, which may direct Seoul toward the Gulf countries and Israel. Currently, Seoul clearly gives priority to the Gulf countries.

Finally, relations between South Korea and Iran may return to normal, but they will not rise to a strategic level because of US-South Korea relations. In addition, South Korea's inclination toward the Arab Gulf countries and Israel will increase. Some Arab countries will also settle their problems with Israel through their partnership with the Gulf countries that ensure energy security and will enhance their technological cooperation with Israel. Consequently, South Korea's relations with Iran will regress further.

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