

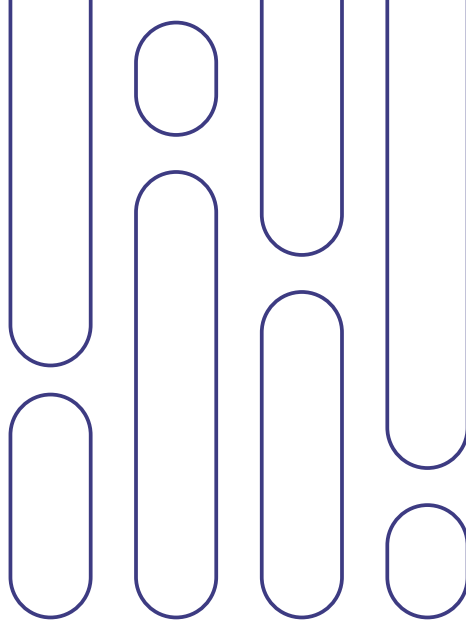
REPORT

Features of Iranian Foreign Policy: A Reading of Khamenei's Speech

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During his latest meeting with the staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 20, 2023, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei outlined the features of Iran's relations with the outside world in the forthcoming period: Iran's effective involvement in all key international economic and political developments and the employment of political and economic approaches. In addition, Iran must clearly identify the approaches of other countries toward it, influence policies and decisions that pose threats to it, weaken threats targeting it, and comprehend the hidden regional and global agendas against it. Finally, Iran must strengthen governments and pro-Iranian groups to expand its strategic depth.

The features of Iranian foreign policy mainly focus on the implementation of two key goals: the removal of pressures on Iran and the preservation of the Iranian expansionist project. This report highlights Khamenei's new determinants for Iranian foreign policy as well as its features by addressing the following aspects: the features and constants of Iranian foreign policy, a reading of Khamenei's speech and its implications, and the impact of his speech on Iranian foreign policy.

The Features and Constants of Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's foreign policy is committed to and based on a set of constants and the comprehensive rules that govern the country's political system. These constants are closely related to the survival of the system and its continuity. They are as follows:

The Centrality of Ideology and National Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy

Iranian foreign policy is based on the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih and its sectarian principles that govern Iran's political system. It is also based on the principle of Persian national identity. The

theory of Wilayat al-Faqih and national identity are also manifested in the religious identity of the Iranian state and the nature of the ruling system that is overwhelmingly dominated by the clerics. They set the course of Iranian foreign policy in accordance with the principles of the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih and national identity.

Ideology and national identity are central to Iranian politics. Thus, Iranian foreign policy pivots on several principles: pan-Islamism as the guardian jurist is the guardian of all Muslims, the creation of a Persian identity that preserves the internal supremacy of the Persian race in the face of non-Persian identities, and the rejection of dependency on the West and its model. A different model and identity must be established by launching the so-called “Universal Islamic government.” As such, Iran has divided the world into the “forces of arrogance” (the United States and its allies) and the oppressed (Iran and its allies).

Iran’s ideological and national dimensions are closely related to the system’s longevity, as its validity and legitimacy are based on the mentioned dimensions. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the system, which is closely related to its longevity and survival, is exporting the 1979 revolution and propagating Shiism abroad. Iran’s ruling establishment claims that this is a necessity to emancipate peoples and support the oppressed all over the world.

The Constitutional Basis of Iran’s Sectarian, National and Revolutionary Character

The sectarian, national, revolutionary and interventionist Iranian character is not limited to the mindset of the clerics who dominate the system in Iran, and the theoretical texts of Wilayat al-Faqih. This character is embedded in the Iranian Constitution. This document includes many clear and explicit provisions regarding the sectarianism, ideological and revolutionary character of Iran to champion the voice of the oppressed. In line with this character, Iran’s foreign policy was fashioned, and its tools,

spheres of influence and approaches to the world identified.

Constitutionally, the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih expresses a global Shiite order led by the Iranian guardian jurist. The Iranian Constitution grants Iran the right to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign countries, violate the territorial integrity of countries, and ride roughshod over the principle of good neighborliness. The Constitution and its many provisions stipulate the principle of exporting the revolution and also grant the Iranian political system great power. This is because they call on Shiites to support the system and defend its principles, and even encourage them to sacrifice themselves to protect the system, if the need arises. The Constitution also turned Iran into a hotspot for Shiites whether in the Middle East or beyond, providing the system with additional support.

Not to Overlook the Pragmatic Nature of Iranian Foreign Policy

The revolutionary and interventionist ideology is embedded in Iranian foreign policy under the pretext of championing the oppressed and protecting Shiite shrines abroad. However, pragmatism is evident in Iranian foreign policy whether in the context of managing events and transformations or establishing relations and alliances. Therefore, if the revolutionary and ideological principles conflict with the higher interests of the Iranian state, the political system often pursues the latter; referred to as “heroic flexibility” by the supreme leader. If the higher interests of the Iranian state necessitate dialogue with those that Iran describes as the “forces of arrogance,” it will be ready for dialogue with the United States, in any place as mentioned by Mohammad Javad Larijani. This was illustrated by the Iran-Contra affair, and the sale of oil to European countries to buy weapons from Russia, China and North Korea.

Iran also has close relations with Sunni movements like Hamas and Jihad to satisfy its interests. Meanwhile, its relations with

Azerbaijan, a Shiite majority, are weak, while it has good relations with Armenia, a Christian country that is hostile to Azerbaijan. Nothing is more expressive of this pragmatism than Khamenei's previous remarks when he said, "when we look at the countries with which we have relations, we look at our interests."

Iran's Revolutionary Character: Crises at Home and Isolation Abroad

Iran's revolutionary, sectarian, nationalistic and interventionist policies have put the country in a very complex situation, with the system facing massive popular unrest. Iranians have been on the streets shaking the system's pillars and demanding major amendments and changes in both Iran's internal and external policies because they have created very difficult realities at home: deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, rising unemployment, inflation and crime rates as well as a plummeting currency. The successive massive popular protests have exhausted the system and exposed the domestic crises including the tussle with the "reformists" who want to make constitutional amendments. In addition, the ethnic and religious equations have come to the fore because of Iran's prioritization of Persian nationalism at the expense of other ethnicities and religious groupings.

Regionally and internationally, Iran faces isolation and is under siege. Its policies influence the existing governments in the region and fuel political conflicts and sectarian strife and it supports non-state actors that pledge loyalty to the Iranian system. It violates all international agreements and covenants related to respecting international borders, sovereignty of nation-states, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and the principle of good neighborliness. It adopts a foreign policy that intersects and collides strategically and ideologically with the interests of what Iran calls the "forces of arrogance," and it

frames the arms race in the context of defending Iranian interests. This isolation and siege have put immense pressure on the Iranian system, forcing it to seek regional reconciliation, and adjust, albeit tactically, its foreign policy.

A Reading of Khamenei's Speech and Its Implications

The speech of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei directed to the Iranian diplomatic corps, conveyed several messages, with implications ranging from reassurances to threats. Given the overlapping nature of regional and international files, the speech needs to be carefully dissected to determine its impact and implications.

Adherence to the Principles of Iranian Foreign Policy

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reiterated that Iran must adhere to the principles of Iranian foreign policy and show wisdom as well as prudence and deliberation when implementing them. One of the manifestations of this wisdom is the need to be flexible to overcome difficult obstacles and continue to pursue the higher interests of the Iranian state. This flexibility is not at odds with its foreign policy principles, in fact, it means finding ways to reach the end goal. He mentioned the misunderstandings which emerged about the term “heroic flexibility” that he coined before the 2015 nuclear deal.

Strengthening Ties With Allies

Khamenei's emphasis on adhering to the principles of Iranian foreign policy was understood by Iran's allies, particularly by pro-Iranian non-state actors and militias, in a positive light, meaning that Tehran will not break its ties with them because they manifest and embody the principles of Iranian foreign policy. Khamenei explicitly referred to this when he mentioned, “strengthening and developing governments and pro-Iran groups, and expanding the strategic depth of the country.” This

speech was clear and direct, Iran will continue to support its proxies through which it has managed to extend its influence in many Arab countries. These proxies have provided Iran with strategic depth. On the other hand, it can be understood from Khamenei's speech that Iran abandoning its proxies will result in the loss of its strategic depth. Khamenei called on Iran's diplomats to extend the country's strategic depth.

Reassuring the Region of Good Neighborliness

In his speech, Khamenei also referred to Iran's relationship with neighboring countries. He described the current Iranian government's approach to them as important and very correct. He believes that the policies of the major powers in the region are subversive, and they are intent on driving a wedge and creating problems between Iran and its neighbors, and their policies should be thwarted. In this context, some points from Khamenei's speech reflected Tehran's implicit recognition of its role in straining relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He warned that every step of Iranian foreign policy must be logical and deliberate. In addition, he mentioned that the reckless and unaccountable decisions and actions had harmed the country on some occasions. In relation to this point, Khamenei did not provide examples, as he did when clarifying misunderstandings of the term "heroic flexibility." It is a fact that Iran's specific reckless actions have harmed the country. For example, the targeting of diplomatic missions of countries is a violation of international law and norms.

Khamenei talked about the relationship between domestic and foreign policy. He emphasized the significance of the latter in managing and strengthening the country. Turmoil and problems in foreign policy will cause the general situation of the country to suffer. It is possible to conclude that Tehran will be careful not to strain its relations with neighboring countries to preserve and increase the economic opportunities, which in

turn will help in impeding domestic unrest that is threatening to the survival of the system.

Messages to the Great Powers: Pride, Not Begging

Khamenei's speech was dominated by the language of threat and aggression when it came to Iran's relations with the major powers. He urged the diplomatic corps to act proudly, and to rely on Iran's principles in words and deeds, and to confront the actions of other countries. Honor, according to the supreme leader, means the avoidance of begging. He is convinced that transformations in the international system will be the outcome of a long-term process, with a lot of fluctuations and unexpected events in the process. He called on the diplomats to strengthen Iran's relationship with Russia and China, with the need to cooperate and find common ground regarding some current international issues.

The Impact of Khamenei's Speech on Iranian Foreign Policy

Several observations can be made in this context:

- **The first note:** A directive speech: the speech was directed to all the decision-making institutions involved in Iranian foreign policy. In fact, the content of the speech reflected an internal consensus that had been achieved over the past months in relation to Iran's foreign policy and its position on many regional and international issues. This consensus was reflected in Khamenei's speech.
- **The second note:** a general and vague discourse: although Khamenei made many references to events, he did not explicitly state his position on any issue. Hence, Khamenei can change his positions in the future on any foreign policy issue without ramifications for him. This is in line with the policy of "taqiyya," which is still present in Iranian foreign policy.

• **The third note:** an apologetic and manipulative discourse: Khamenei's speech reflected an apologetic tone. Khamenei emphasized one of the most important principles of Iranian foreign policy, the adherence to the ideological character and the priority of preserving the "Islamic" Republic. He also addressed the concept of "heroic flexibility," which he defined as pursuing the country's higher interests. This means showing flexibility in necessary cases to overcome difficult and solid obstacles. Khamenei via his speech prepared the ground for making concessions in the international arena; he said, "preserving the principles does not contradict the interests." Such remarks reflect Iran's future options and potential behaviour. Sometimes, the political system must show some flexibility; according to Khamenei this flexibility is not deemed a concession but a bedrock of the political system's ideology and policy.

After separating the foreign policy making institutions, especially the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Security Council, Khamenei unified them. Both are competent authorities to implement Iran's foreign policy. His speech will guide the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his team in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Khamenei's speech will impact many issues, the prominent ones include the following:

• **Flexibility on the nuclear file:** The Iranian foreign minister will be more flexible on many issues in accordance with the higher interests of the Iranian state and the challenges that Iran faces, even if this flexibility contradicts with some ideological orientations. Regarding the nuclear file, Khamenei's speech has given the green light to Raisi's government, and the nuclear negotiating delegation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by the chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri, to move forward with the negotiations again, and to perhaps reach understandings with the United States on the revival of the nuclear deal. Therefore, it seems like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has more pow-

er over the nuclear file after Shamkhani was ousted from the secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council.

- **Maintaining hostility against the United States:** The revival of the nuclear deal does not mean changing Iran's approach to the United States. Khamenei stressed the distrust in the other parties, perhaps in reference to the United States. This reflected Khamenei's preservation of Iran's anti-US position. His speech recalled what happened after the signing of the 2015 nuclear deal. Iran attempted to benefit from the deal to the maximum extent, but it still failed to establish cordial relations with the United States. Khamenei later denied the deal itself. This allowed the IRGC to continue with its hostility and to ruin the opportunities to settle the differences with the United States.

- **Closer cooperation with China and Russia and more alliances with anti-hegemonic powers:** Khamenei stressed Iran's policy of looking toward the East, meaning further rapprochement with China and cooperation with Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war. This is consistent with the overall orientation of strengthening Iran's alliances with anti-US forces. They seek to undermine US unilateralism on the international level, thwart its tools of influence, and clout including the imposition of sanctions, and control of international financial transactions. In its trajectory of hostility, Khamenei spoke about Iran's cooperation with Islamic countries, and anti-hegemonic forces. This trajectory will be reflected in Iran turning completely away from the West and the United States. Iran may establish more relations with neighboring countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and also with some African countries.

- **Continuing to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia while maintaining influence and ties with its allies:** Khamenei has abandoned his hostile rhetoric toward the Gulf states and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We should not forget that the decision to normalize relations with the kingdom, and the Chi-

na-brokered Saudi-Iran agreement, were in response to a green light from Khamenei, who is the main reference point for Iran's foreign policy. This suggests that Khamenei is in favor of the agreement and improving relations with the kingdom, in fact, he considers this as a regional priority for Iran. Nevertheless, there are some signs in the speech that are reflective of contradictions between the purported trajectory of normalizing relations and calming tensions, and Iran's regional behavior. In spite of his apparent commitment to the trajectory of normalization with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Khamenei is still supportive of Iran's allies in the region. This of course means that Iran may not be ready to make concessions to ensure that the agreement with the kingdom is successful. Therefore, agreement is more tactical than strategic, according to Iranian calculations which deem the agreement to be of significance at this moment to overcome internal pressures and the country's isolation.

Conclusion

Khamenei's speech does not constitute a departure from his deep-rooted positions on foreign policy. It considered Iran's internal and external conditions and is reflective of an internal consensus that has been established since Raisi's election on many foreign policy issues. The speech is indicative of more realistic Iranian behavior to international issues, without causing serious disruptions that harm the political system, its regional influence, or ties with anti-hegemonic parties. According to Khamenei, the expected calm on the nuclear file and the trajectory of rapprochement with the kingdom and neighboring countries, are important for the sake of Iranian interests and he has justified these trends in the context of "heroic flexibility." Therefore, one should not be overly optimistic, and wait for whether this flexibility is evident on the ground in the future. It is a possibility that Khamenei, after the system overcomes its crises, will resume Iran's traditional policies that are hostile and

interventionist similar to what was evident after the 2015 nuclear deal; Khamenei eventually denied the deal. Iran's current behavior confirms that a real shift in its behavior and approach is still far off.

