Iran as a Middle Power Balancer:
(Time for a Paradigm Shift in Iranian Foreign Policy)[*]

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Abstract

The international order is undergoing profound transformations, ushering in a transitional period marked by instability and redefined power structure. This global transition has created a power vacuum in the Middle East, where regional actors, including Iran, Turkey and Israel, are pursuing unilateral strategies to establish dominance. However, these efforts have intensified rivalries and instability, while events such as the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict, escalating tensions in Syria, and the eventual fall of Bashar al-Assad have further exacerbated regional instability. This study explores a pivotal question: What strategy can safeguard Iran's national interests amidst the dynamic transitions in the international and regional order? The research posits that Iran, as a pivot state, should adopt a paradigm shift to an issue-based foreign policy. This strategic shift enables Iran to move beyond a security-driven, survival-focused paradigm toward becoming a constructive middle power balancer. By prioritizing multilateral cooperation, addressing critical regional issues, and fostering diplomatic engagement, this approach enhances Iran's ability to manage tensions, strengthen its influence, and promote stability. Ultimately, this redefined role aligns Iran's national interests with broader regional and global frameworks, ensuring a more resilient and impactful foreign policy stance.

Keywords: International Order, Issue-based Foreign Policy, Middle Power, Regional Order, Pivot State

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1. Introduction

The world is currently undergoing a prolonged period of transition, unable to establish a stable and enduring order (Bazgard et al., 1398 [2019 A.D.], p. 474). Simultaneously, the international system is experiencing profound transformations. As Mearsheimer aptly highlights, its foundational principles are eroding, making the prospect of restoration increasingly unlikely (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 1). Given these significant changes, this period can be described as a "transition period in the international order" (Creutz, 2019, p. 15). The state-centric global order, originally built on the principle of balance of power, served as the cornerstone of international relations until the end of World War II. Following the war, a bipolar system emerged, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world has yet to witness the establishment of a clear and cohesive global order (Salehi & Mousavi Shafaee, 1402 [2023 A.D.], p. 17). However, as the international system evolves toward multipolarity or nonpolarity at the macro level, regional actors at the regional level are gaining greater autonomy to develop their own strategies. These changes present opportunities for cooperation, but also introduce challenges, particularly in regions where competition is intense.

A notable example is the Middle East, where key actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel have not moved toward collective security, but have instead engaged in rivalries that have exacerbated regional tensions. Each of these states seeks to unilaterally dominate the region, resulting in destructive deterrence and a deadlock of power rivalry (Del Sarto et al., 2019, p. 10). Iran appears to be pursuing this policy without a realistic assessment of the conditions and requirements for becoming a regional hegemon. This is because Iran does not provide a comprehensive definition of

power or effectively treats power as a one-dimensional concept focused solely on hard power or military strength. Additionally, another fundamental requirement of regional hegemony—recognition by third states—has been overlooked, resulting in negative reactions from regional and trans-regional actors. Many thinkers believe that the new order that the US has sought to establish in the international arena over the past decades is based on two pillars: identifying and controlling the US's enemies on the one hand and building coalitions and cooperating with allies on the other (Haji Yousefi, 1383 [2014 A.D.], p. 619). This policy toward Iran has been consistently pursued since the Islamic Revolution. It can be divided into two major axes: 1) forming bilateral, multilateral, regional, and trans-regional alliances against Iran, and 2) applying maximum pressure on Iran through measures such as comprehensive economic sanctions.

Furthermore, various units in the region are posing significant challenges to Iran's leadership. These include Israel (as an unyielding foe in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy), Saudi Arabia (by pursuing a post-Arab Spring extraversion policy and attempting to balance Iran as a rival), and Turkey (by shifting its focus to the Middle East after the failure of its convergence policies with Europe) (Indyk, 2019, pp. 10-15). Each of these actors is attempting to outmaneuver the others, resulting in the region remaining in a state of chaos. Instead of perpetuating endless regional rivalries, Iran can draw lessons from its historical experiences and, alongside its military capabilities, assume a mediator and balancer role. Such an approach, rather than relying solely on military competition, would emphasize economic and diplomatic cooperation, allowing Iran to break free from the cycle of instability.

The interplay of these rivalries, along with internal and regional dynamics, has led to critical developments, such as the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict, escalating tensions in Syria, and ultimately the fall of Bashar al-Assad. Under these circumstances, the pursuit of a regional hegemony policy appears not only impractical, but also detrimental, as it risks exhausting resources and undermining the country's ability to strengthen its national security.

However, the main research question addressed in this paper is as follows: What type of strategy can secure the national interests of Iran in the Middle East considering the transitional situation of the international and regional order? Based on the findings of this research, given the increasing regional instability resulting from the transition in the international and regional order, Iran, as a pivot state, could shift from a deterrent power to a constructive one by adopting an issue-based foreign policy strategy. This approach would secure its national interests and embed its regional status as a middle power balancer.

Although this article provides a conceptual framework for Iran's foreign policy based on middle power diplomacy with an emphasis on issue-based foreign policy, this does not imply denying the importance of deterrent or military power. The following steps will be taken in this study to develop the main argument: 1) introducing key concepts with a focus on middle power diplomacy and issue-based foreign policy and their application in the international order's transition period, 2) assessing the international liberal order and its fundamental challenges, 3) explaining the interconnectedness of global and regional orders and their effects on turmoil in Iran's surrounding environment, 4) analyzing Iranian foreign policy and its entanglement in the regional power trap in

the Middle East, 5) describing the requirements and priorities for implementing middle power diplomacy, and 6) discussing Iran's issue-based foreign policy.

2. Concepts: Middle Power Balancer and Issue-Based Foreign Policy

Because international order has always been a contentious concept, different thinkers have offered a variety of perspectives based on varying theoretical paradigms about the international order. To comprehend the transition period, we must first define international order broadly. Order, according to Kissinger, consists of a set of widely accepted rules that specify the scope of illicit actions, along with a balance of power that enforces restrictions in the event of a breach of law and prevents one state from subjugating others. In other words, the two main features of international order are institutions and the balance of power. Along with these two, legitimacy constitutes the third and most fundamental pillar of order, which is based on institutional arrangements. Consensus on existing arrangements does not diminish the ability to compete with the opposition, but it does ensure that they occur as a correction or modification to the existing order, rather than as a fundamental challenge to it (Kissinger, 2014, p. 9). Thus, the three important characteristics of the order whose changes can initiate a transition phase are as follows: 1. Distribution of power, 2. Institutional arrangements, and 3. Legitimacy and value factors (He, 2018, p. 6).

Meanwhile, there are states in various regions whose orientation in this period can considerably affect the region's stability or instability. These states with unique characteristics are known as pivot states. First proposed by Mackinder in 1904, this concept

refers to regional heavyweights who have the flexibility and ability to exert pressure to change their position in the current international system's hierarchy (Mackinder, 1904, p. 36). The important factor about these states is that they are no longer in the shadow of the great powers, but instead, can act effectively. As a result, the following is the definition of a pivot state in this article: "The pivot state possesses the strategic, economic, and military capabilities that large governments seek". These states are within the great powers' sphere of influence and are measured by the economic, military, and cultural ties they have, as well as the trade, the discourse, and the armament relations they pursue. Changing the orientations of these states can significantly impact regional and global order and security (Sweijs, 2014, pp. 7-8). The two basic characteristics of pivot states are critical for identifying them: 1. strategic assets, including military, economic, and cultural; and 2. the ability to influence other countries, regions, and events, such that if a country experiences positive developments, it will usually have a positive impact on its surrounding environment. In contrast, if such a state experiences negative domestic developments, these developments will harm the entire region.

Pivot states can take on and express different behavioral roles and models based on their strategic assets, which are as follows: 1. Challenger of order, 2. Mediator, 3. Passive role, 4. Follower, and 5. The Middle power. The term "middle power" here does not refer to a specific position in the world power hierarchy (somewhere between a great power and a small power), but rather to a type of behavior. We will discuss the characteristics of this behavioral role, while presenting this definition and explaining how it differs from others. Accordingly, the middle power role exhibits the following characteristics and behavioral principles:

1. Effective and constructive activism in the international system
2. Multilateralism and participation in multilateral activities
3. Crisis management and acting as a mediator in international conflicts
4. Rational and effective management
5. Coalition with like-minded countries (Robertson, 2017, pp. 5-9).

Adopting an issue-based foreign policy is one of the most important indicators of a middle-power role. This entails concentrating and deploying resources in specific areas, rather than attempting to cover a broad range of issues in a way that allows for optimal performance and feedback. The concept of issue-based foreign policy must be redefined to include more than just an elective engagement policy, in order to include the following two dimensions:

1. The issue-based foreign policy cannot be restricted to a single domain but must include different domains in multilateralism.
2. It should include critical, not peripheral, areas of global governance (Cooper, 2016, pp. 4-5).

Such an issue-based foreign policy necessitates the engagement of the middle powers in multiple issues and requires a re-evaluation of their choices and options at critical junctures. As a result, the middle power should offer improved solutions to complex international issues. The issue-orientation can thus be used in multilateral regimes for a long time, but it is insufficient to lead a structure dominated by the great powers. In addition, existing literature on middle powers has predominantly focused on Western countries such as Canada, Australia, and South Korea (Robertson, 2017). However, this paper seeks to redefine the middle power framework within the unique geopolitical context of Iran. This

redefinition not only addresses gaps in current middle power studies, but also provides a strategic model for similarly positioned countries in the Middle East.

3. International Liberal Order and Its Fundamental Challenges

The international order has evolved through various historical epochs. Generally, the order that emerged after WWII consisted of two parallel structures. One arose from the heart of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, when a strong balance of power prevailed in Europe and Asia, supported by nuclear deterrence. The US-centered liberal order was another order that coexisted with the Cold War (Haass, 2019, p. 26). Following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US emerged as the most powerful country globally. The unipolar moment had arrived, and expectations were high that many of the issues arising from superpower rivalry would be resolved. Moreover, the order established by the US to counter the Soviet Union remained intact, while the Soviet Union disintegrated. As anticipated, US policymakers sought to transform the Western liberal order and its principles into a global order. International relations scholars have proposed several principles and foundations that shape the liberal order, which can be summarized as follows: 1. Globalization, 2. Institutionalism and Multilateralism, 3. Relationship with a Liberal Economic System, 4. Governance as Multi-Actor and Multi-Level Management, and 5. Democracy (Glaser, 2019, pp. 58-64).

It is important to note that no order is eternal. More significantly, any order requires the support of power to endure. When this support is lost, or when a power emerges that lacks a

significant stake in the order's institutions, the order begins to decline and transitions into another phase. The modern international order is undergoing profound transformations, the consequences of which remain unclear. The US-led era of liberal internationalism has been destabilized by two distinct but interconnected developments: (1) shifts within the Western world and (2) the rise of non-Western powers (Öniş, 2017, p. 20). Consequently, emerging flaws now threaten the stability of the order. Below are the most significant challenges driving the transition in the modern international order:

3. 1. Discontinuation in the Ideas of the International Liberal Order

Today, the liberal order does not face a competing ideology in the same manner as communism did during the Cold War. However, some of its most fundamental ideas are increasingly being questioned. Nationalism has reemerged in global politics in various forms. While this trend has not yet reached the extent of Samuel Huntington's "reverse wave" (a term he coined to describe the collapse of democracies prior to World War II), it is dangerously close, and some democracies are losing their liberal characteristics.

3. 2. Power Collision: The Ambition of Emerging Powers

Alongside the relative decline of the US power, emerging powers have risen, achieving significant growth in several areas, including the economy, over recent decades. Dissatisfied with the current state of the international system, the emerging powers share a revisionist view regarding the distribution of power, influence, and roles within the international order. Over time, with some

fluctuations**,** they have sought to assume roles commensurate with their economic weight and geopolitical influence. This has led to a rethinking of the global economic order (Soleymanpoor & Molaee, 1391[2013 A.D.], p. 29). Furthermore, the traditional functions of power have faded, with power increasingly fragmenting from states to international organizations, local authorities, non-state actors, and transnational entities (Mousavi Shafaee & Shapouri, 1394 [2016 A.D.], p. 158).

3. 3. Disadvantages of Globalization

The liberal economic order initially fostered steady financial and economic growth, driven by principles such as free trade and market-oriented policies. However, the Western middle class has come under severe strain due to unexpected financial shocks and the ongoing deterioration of living standards, exemplified by the 2007-2008 financial crisis, which began in the United States and rapidly spread globally (Karimi et al., 1398 [2019 A.D.], p. 376). Additionally, China has taken steps to reduce the dominance of the US dollar and substitute American economic institutions with alternatives that challenge US economic hegemony (Salehi & Mousavi Shafaee, 1402 [2023 A.D.], p. 18). The rapid expansion of economic exchanges, exemplified by the liberal international order, has contributed to significant economic issues in liberal countries, resulting in substantial political opposition to the order. When this occurs in democracies, they are more likely to abandon liberal elites and elect leaders who oppose liberal values (Alcaro, 2018, p. 8).

3. 4. Regionalism and Regional Disintegration

On the one hand, regional instabilities have increased as state

power has crumbled, leading to crises that challenge regional orders. Local conflicts spread easily to neighboring countries, destabilizing entire regions, as seen in the Middle East. Displaced persons from these countries become refugees, further challenging the sociopolitical order of host countries. Extremist groups and non-state actors also train individuals to carry out attacks both within and outside their borders (Alcaro, 2018, p. 8).

As illustrated, the declining relative power of the US and the erosion of support for its core principles are contributing to the emergence of flaws in the international order, significantly impacting subsystems and less integrated regions.

4. Interconnectedness of Global and Regional Order: Turmoil in Iran's Surrounding Environment

The state of order at the global level will have a significant impact on regional order and, as a result, on the role and behavior of regional actors. Consequently, hegemonic systems impose subordinate orders on less cohesive regions. The farther these systems deviate from hegemonic dominance, the greater the opportunities for regional actors to assert their influence. The interconnectedness of global and regional orders in such a situation can be described as follows:

1. Growing insecurity in the global system.
2. Polarization and intensified extremes within the global order.
3. Disintegration of old regional orders and formation of new orders.
4. Increasing militarization of regional dynamics (Ghasemi, 1401 [2023 A.D.], p. 466).

The Middle East is one of the areas in which macro-level developments and internal trends have profoundly influenced regional order. Among the significant developments over the last two decades are the fall of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq, the beginning of a wave of socio-political discontent, revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, civil wars in Libya and Syria, the emergence of the ISIS terrorist group in the region's geopolitical area, and the collapse of Afghanistan's central government and Taliban's seizing power (Karimi et al., 1400 [2022 A.D.], p. 66). These developments, while creating a highly ambiguous, complex, and chaotic environment, have posed numerous challenges for foreign policy decision-makers in formulating strategies.

Furthermore, beyond diplomatic maneuvers, the dangerous pattern of new and profound structural threats that have converged in the realms of politics and human security is likely to further destabilize the region and push it to the brink of collapse in the coming decades. These threats exacerbate regional tensions and armed conflicts, increase social tensions, and ultimately disrupt order, both within countries and at the regional level, where commonalities and integration have existed for at least a century.

These threats include environmental and food security issues, such as the scarcity of water, food, and energy; socioeconomic security challenges, including permanent poverty and ethnic, racial, and religious tensions; and political security issues, such as political repression and human rights violations. Increased vulnerability will erode citizens' trust in government institutions, leading to increased tensions. Although some states have implemented reforms and measures in certain areas, the majority of these initiatives have been superficial, ineffective, and limited.

Instead of confronting and resolving these early warning signs,

Middle Eastern states have resorted to military action and repression. Instead of addressing threats to social cohesion and national welfare, these clashes have exacerbated them, resulting in migration and, most importantly, the formation of extremist sectarian groups and militias that have imposed far greater costs on the region and obscured the future of regional order.

5. Iran: A Pivot State

It is evident that countries may adopt diverse roles depending on the specific context. For instance, during the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union assumed roles such as promoters of global values, defenders of freedom, and drivers of progress, among others (Ahmadipour et al., 1398 [2019 A.D.], p. 94). Similarly, Iran is recognized as a pivot state, characterized by its strategic assets—military, economic, and semantic capabilities—and its ability to influence the surrounding environment. Pivot states can assume various roles, shaped by their unique characteristics and the geopolitical landscape. However, two critical strategic miscalculations can render their foreign policy ineffective: 1) a miscalculation of national power, and 2) a misalignment between the role a state aims to play and its actual power. This dynamic is crucial in understanding how pivot states, like Iran, must carefully navigate their strategic choices to maintain influence in the global arena.

It is noteworthy that when calculating national power, one should consider more than just the algebraic sum of capabilities; what is more important is the ability to use these resources and possibilities to achieve national interest. The ability to use these resources effectively, on the other hand, necessitates special

consideration of two factors: 1) the political, economic, and cultural system; and 2) the conditions and rules that govern the international system and its surroundings. In this sense, no country can advance its foreign policy strategy without taking into account the structure of the international order and the needs of its surroundings. This does not imply unconditional acceptance of the rules of the international order; experiences of some emerging powers have shown that one can more effectively challenge the international order by engaging with it.

Certainly, in addition to internal factors such as the nature of the political structure and the views of the ruling elites, structural and systemic factors at the international and regional levels play a significant role in Iran's foreign policy and its status as a regional power. The ideological dominance of political Islam has elevated the Middle East and Islamic world to the top of Iran's foreign policy priorities. Despite Iran's success in finding ideological allies after the 1979 revolution, the US and regional Middle Eastern actors emerged as major rivals of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The defeat of the Taliban in 2001, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the regional Arab revolutions, and the shift in the US role in the Middle East toward offshore balancing and non-direct intervention in the region provided Iran with unprecedented opportunities. These circumstances fueled the desire of the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran to become a regional hegemon as soon as possible.

In this regard, developments in the Arab world over the last two decades have strengthened Iran's influence in the region, and with the region's rifts, it has attempted to consolidate its position as a key actor by supporting its allied groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. After the fall of Saddam Hussein, an

ideological and strategic enemy of Iran, and the rise of Shiite forces in 2003, the balance shifted in Iran's favor, and as it gained influence among the new regimes in Iraq, it demonstrated its power to GCC neighbors. This caused serious concerns among the region's rulers. By implementing this strategy, Iran attempted to reestablish a hegemonic order in the region by strengthening Shiites while weakening rivals such as Saudi Arabia. The key question remains how well this strategy serves national interests.

Indeed, by expanding its regional influence, Iran was limiting the sphere of influence of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other regional actors. This prompted these countries to retaliate and form broad alliances against Iran on a regional and global scale, as well as to strengthen ties with Israel. This further engulfed the regional situation in a security quandary.

As a result, the continuation of this situation, even if it provides concessions in the short term, can undermine Iran's legitimacy in the region and the Islamic world in the long run. Second, this type of behavior can lead to the erosion and depletion of Iran's and other regional actors' power resources, without having a meaningful positive effect on Iran's internal welfare, external position, or overall national security. This has been occurred in practice, and Iran and other regional actors have been engaged in unstable coalitions and counterbalancing over the years. The following have been the main axes of Iran's macro-foreign policy strategy in the Middle East:

Efforts to strengthen regional influence through alliances with countries such as Syria and non-state actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Ḥashd ash-Shaʿbī, Yemeni Houthis, etc.

Enhancing the country's military capabilities: Iran possesses a

substantial missile and drone arsenal. Iran has the largest missile stockpile in the Middle East and is progressing toward becoming a regional and intercontinental ballistic missile power (Salehi et al., 1402 [2023 A.D.], p. 151). High-level uranium enrichment significantly affects the strategic calculations of regional and global powers, as well.

The importance of deterrence in Middle Eastern foreign policy cannot be ignored, but stagnation in this classical security view, which understands national power in terms of hard power and classic deterrence, cannot provide the means to flourish and move beyond a survival situation in the regional and global order. If these conditions continue, Iran's foreign policy remains trapped in the 'survival' phase at a significant cost. The October 2023 war between Hamas and Israel, along with its consequences for Hezbollah and Syria, which recently led to the collapse of Assad's regime, clearly demonstrates the necessity of a paradigm shift in Iran's foreign policy. To better illustrate the effectiveness of the proposed strategies, it is useful to consider Iran's regional cooperation efforts through economic initiatives. For example, Iran's gas trade agreements with Turkey and Iraq highlight the way in which issue-based policies can serve as a viable alternative to military deterrence in securing national interests.

6. The Middle Power Balancer: A Constructive Role for Iran

The region's conditions and realities have constrained Iran's foreign policy to a security-focused approach, limiting its progression beyond basic survival strategies. Iran, as a pivotal state, has the potential to assume diverse roles in both regional and global contexts. This section explores the principles, requirements, and

priorities for implementing middle-power diplomacy in Iran's foreign policy, transitioning from destructive deterrence to an issue- based approach.

6.1. Prioritizing Multilateral Ties at the Regional and Global Levels

Multilateralism should be the primary strategic goal for a middle power. A middle power's role can be realized through multilateral mechanisms, serving as a bridge to unify stakeholders and mitigate tensions (Efstathopoulos, 2017, p. 9). When it comes to maritime security, for example, the region lacks a comprehensive and multilateral regime. Thus, Iran has significant opportunities to engage in middle-power diplomacy to establish a regional maritime order. Iran can act as a bridge between global and national regimes by establishing a regional maritime regime to supplement the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Similarly, it is critical to understand the significance of multilateralism in trade. Given the region's complex geopolitical rivalries, acting as a middle power necessitates trade diplomacy that demonstrates an understanding of the complexities of trade issues as well as a balanced approach to regional turbulence.

6. 2. Pursuing and Strengthening International Norms

Iran should aim to become a 'value-oriented state' rather than a 'hegemonic state' to fulfill this objective. Given Iran's limited military and economic power at the systemic level, value-oriented diplomacy becomes both crucial and impactful; diplomatic initiatives that align with international norms will gain support from other countries (Jordaan, 2017, p. 9). For example, acting as a

middle power in the south of Iran and the Strait of Hormuz would imply that, rather than engaging in arms races, Iran should focus on its role and capacity as a "regime designer and supplier", creating acceptable legal bases for all parties involved. This goes beyond simply pursuing national interests and requires the development of an effective mechanism for resolving disputes tailored to specific subject areas. To create and achieve such a position—namely acting as the regime's agent and provider—it is necessary to go beyond traditional definitions of national interests and work to promote global norms and values.

6. 3. Untying Issues and Prioritizing Them in a Chain Process

A cursory glance at Iran's foreign policy reveals its confrontation with a wide range of challenges at both regional and global levels. This necessitates that the issues be addressed one at a time. Given the distinct material and symbolic value of each issue, they can be prioritized and addressed in a logical sequence. We can propose a new roadmap for resolving issues and regulating the region in relation to other beneficiaries after differentiating the issues. Because each subject has distinct material and symbolic values, we can arrange them in a logical chain of priorities. In this regard, foreign policy should employ one of the three following approaches:

- Comprehensive minimalism of principles and regulations: that is, preparing and implementing the most widely agreed-upon principles and laws.
- Issue analysis and chain linkage: Following issue decomposition, it should connect the issues in order to minimize dispersed and distributed disputes between the parties.

- Finally, it should help to revitalize diplomacy, set the agenda, develop a common idea, and strengthen political networks in order to solve problems (Lee, 2015).

6. 4. Improving Relations with World Powers to Participate in the Global/Regional Order

To achieve middle-power status, Iran's diplomacy must reflect and adapt to global power transitions. In this regard, Iran must reconsider its relations with major and emerging powers to deal with the changing regional conditions and an uncertain global future. Policies must be crafted with consideration for emerging powers like China to address shifting regional and global dynamics.

6. 5. Redefining Commitments by Using Institutional Power

Active participation in international institutions enhances Iran's capacity to navigate and influence the policies of major powers. Iran must promote and strengthen its reputation as a normative power committed to the common good. In terms of security, Iran must actively participate in regional and global security to contribute to collective security.

6. 6. Creating a Multilateral Network Through Knowledge and Skills Sharing

As previously stated, because Iran has less military, economic, and political power than the great powers, it is necessary to strengthen its ability to form coalitions and resolve issues. This network will eventually lead to the development of a local community as well as regional knowledge. Given the long-term advantages of

multilateralism, establishing a coalition of like-minded nations is imperative. Instead of focusing on short-term profits, such a network would prioritize shared political objectives and sustainable long-term strategies. By presenting itself as a "policy opener," Iran can compensate for its lack of power in some areas, while remaining at the center of institutional cooperation. To establish such a network, the state must first communicate with others regularly through officials and ministers, share information with researchers, professors, and experts, and provide insights into other states' policies gained from intergovernmental negotiations. Researchers can generate new ideas and discuss them at the regional and trans-regional levels through a variety of academic exchanges, including formal and informal meetings.

7. Issue-Based Foreign Policy of Iran

Issue-based foreign policy is a novel approach that, in addition to being a hallmark of middle-power behavior, enables states to act beyond their traditional capacities. Although this type of politics is associated with middle-power foreign policy, it was developed by states that can play a significant role in the international arena, but lack the capability to unilaterally impose their will or solutions. It is hence necessary to identify the pivotal points and areas to focus on. This paper discusses Iran's proposed roles and strategies within the framework of an issue-based foreign policy, considering its capabilities and regional dynamics.

7. 1. Security and High Politics: Constructive, Peace-builder and Mediator Role

Middle-power diplomacy requires the strategic use of constructive

influence. In foreign policy, the constructive strategies pursue a variety of objectives. In the realms of security and high politics, we can refer to the peaceful and cooperative resolution of conflicts, as well as influence based on diplomacy rather than military power. Over the years, one of the most important aspects of Iran's foreign policy has been its involvement in various military conflicts in the region, including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. However, this involvement has often been framed within a broader diplomatic and constructive power strategy. As part of its diplomacy and constructive power strategy, Iran can play a mediating role in a variety of disputes. This has a historical context in Iran's foreign policy. Iran's mediation efforts have proven successful in the past, as seen in the 1992 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Representatives from both countries signed a declaration and agreed to a cease-fire in Tehran. The UN special envoy made preparations for fact-finding with the help of Iran. Following this, the then-United Nations Secretary General, Petros Ghali, sent a message thanking Iran for mediating the conflict and expressing hope that Iran would continue to mediate (Ramezani, 1395 [2016 A.D.], pp. 102-102). Accordingly, we can use the region's historical background and influence as a starting point for recognizing Iran as a constructive power that focuses not only on military power, but also on diplomacy. In the long run, this can improve Iran's image, while maintaining regional influence and serving national interests, as well as increasing international credibility and recognition as a good international citizen.

An overview of regional developments over the past two decades shows that, despite their devastating impact, the wars in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have the potential to foster international cooperation and strengthen domestic institutions,

depending on the policies pursued by key stakeholders. It is noteworthy that the wars in the region over the last decade have been markedly different from previous conflicts. In contrast to earlier conflicts, where governments used wars to consolidate power and build large armies, modern wars have given rise to new challenges. Many governments used wars in the twentieth century to build large armies and control the national economy, but recent developments have reversed this trend. States no longer have this option, and instead, these wars have given rise to new forms of sovereignty known as combined security sovereignty. Motivated by economic interests and ties to foreign supporters, armed non-state actors are competing with and collaborating with the shaky central government. The traditional approach to dealing with such internal disorder is state-building. This centralized motivation, however, is thwarted by combined security, and these wars are on the verge of becoming inflexible challenges (Ahram, 2020, p. 10).

Therefore, Iran holds substantial influence over regional conflicts, particularly among militant groups. This position enables it to play a key role in promoting stability or contributing to instability within the region. Given the nature of the war and the threats to the country's borders, it was necessary to provide comprehensive assistance, including armament support, to some of these groups in the immediate vicinity, including Iraq. However, in the post-war situation, in order to stabilize and be recognized as a constructive power, it is necessary to provide the conditions for their construction by going beyond the simple military power and armament of such groups. Rather than focusing solely on the elimination or disarmament of these groups, the government should try to negotiate with local governments to provide conditions for non-state actors to take on more responsibilities for governance and

stability, as well as integrate them into the political structure and practice as pressure groups and political lobbies.

7. 2. Human Security and Low Politics: Designer and Innovator

As discussed earlier, the turmoil and complexity of the Middle East have caused states to overlook critical issues that could precipitate the region's collapse. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for Iran to not only consolidate its role as a middle power through its initiatives, but also to best serve its national interests. These issues are most visible in the areas of water, food, energy, and transportation. Despite being home to 6% of the global population, the Middle East possesses only 1% of the world's freshwater resources. The region's 17 countries are classified as having water scarcity by the UN. The region is characterized by rapid population growth (about 2% per year) and an increasing urban population, which is projected to double to 400 million by 2050. Water access has been affected throughout the region as a result of the region's high population growth rate, rapid urbanization, the impact of severe climate change, and stresses associated with sharing transboundary water resources. Consequently, several countries in the region have turned to seawater desalination to address the crisis. These developments have turned water scarcity into a serious political issue in the Middle East.

Water scarcity, which causes food shortages and price inflation, is a major contributor to the region's economic instability. Water scarcity can exacerbate instability and lead to unrest. According to the World Bank, water-stressed areas are home to 60% of the region's population and generate 70% of the region's GDP. Water security in the region extends beyond societies' capacity to address

shortages; it also encompasses the efficient and equitable delivery of quality water to citizens. This strengthens the relationship between service providers (governments) and consumers (citizens), necessitating the renewal of the social contract and fostering greater transparency and accountability from governments within the framework of social capital. In terms of the region's challenges, governments are only shakily prepared to meet them (World Bank, 2017).

Despite the widespread food crisis, there is a high rate of food waste in the region. Estimates indicate that over 30% of all food consumed in the region is either wasted or lost. Food waste can occur at any point along the supply chain, from production to consumption. In the Middle East, 68% of food waste occurs before it even reaches the final consumer. The main causes of such high levels of food waste in the region are a lack of adequate harvesting, storage, and transportation equipment, as well as poor marketing and distribution systems. According to the FAO, the resources used in the production of wasted food amount to 42 million cubic meters of water and 360 million hectares of land, which is extremely concerning given the scarcity of resources.

High energy consumption is also one of the region's major socioeconomic challenges. The Middle East is the world's largest producer of oil. The region accounts for 34% of global oil production, approximately half of crude oil exports, and 30% of global natural gas production. This region also has one of the highest levels of energy consumption globally. The region's annual consumption growth rate in 2017 was 3.4%, which was higher than in Europe (2.1%), North America (0.7%), and Africa as a whole (2.9%). The primary cause of such an increase in total energy consumption is high power consumption. Electricity demand in the

region is projected to triple by 2050, while primary energy consumption is expected to rise by 36% during the same timeframe. In some areas, this has resulted in increased investment in renewable energy. Considering a projected increase of 40% in population by 2050, the region urgently needs to find alternative ways to meet rising energy demand (FAO, 2019). According to Energy Intelligence Agency reports, coal-fired power generation capacity is increasing in countries such as Iran and the United Arab Emirates (EIA, 2019).

As a result, with careful planning for regional convergence, Iran can take advantage of upcoming investment opportunities by developing joint environmental projects, plans for water control structures, access roads, and developing suitable routes that serve the interests of Iran and its neighboring countries in the north, south, east, and west. On the other hand, Iran has the potential to create geopolitical balance in the region while taking into account its own and the neighbors' national interests. Furthermore, Iran has a high potential to become an energy hub, particularly in the fields of gas, electricity, and transit.

Possessing the world's second-largest gas reserves and strategically located with access to eastern and western markets, Iran is well-positioned to achieve this goal. However, becoming an energy hub does not necessarily imply becoming the largest producer; the hub can also provide an energy crossroad and transit network. This means that it can transfer energy from source to destination or swap energy properly, as is possible in the case of Central Asian electricity or gas. The Islamic Republic, striving for economic development within a dynamic and diverse framework, is likely to adopt a flexible strategy that aligns domestic priorities with international standards, thereby enhancing its influence and

reinforcing its regional power (Naghdi et al., 1398 [2020 A.D.], p. 28).

7. 3. Emerging Issues: Pioneer and Leader

Another aspect of issue-based foreign policy is addressing challenges in alignment with international norms. Examples include climate change, demographic shifts, and immigration. In many of these areas, the middle powers in the UN Convention on Climate Change have the status of a developing nation and thus do not have the necessary obligations. Iran can take meaningful steps toward proactive leadership, moving beyond the passive role of a non-committed developing country. This role entails identifying areas of expertise and recommending them to the international community.

Aside from climate debates, one of the most pressing issues in the region, which threatens trans-regional security, is demographic and immigration issues. Due to insecurity, civil wars, and other factors, population displacement and migration trends in the Middle East region have been alarming in the last two decades. According to a 2016 United Nations report, the aftermath of the Arab revolutions resulted in an estimated cost of $614 billion for the affected countries. Another consequence of these changes is an increase in population displacement and the desire to migrate. This trend intensified following the Arab revolutions and civil wars, reaching a tipping point in 2016. According to a 2010 survey, approximately 27% of educated Arabs were willing to leave their home countries. This trend accelerated in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions and civil wars. By 2016, 80% of young people with an MSc degree applied to continue their studies abroad, and 54% of them did not return to their home countries. Moreover, 70% of

graduate students sought work abroad. According to the findings of a group study, the Middle East has experienced an unprecedented wave of migration of educated and skilled people, depriving the region's countries of skilled labor.

Health and medical care are two of the most important emerging issues in the region. As reported by Iraqi humanitarian aid statistics in 2019, an estimated 5.5 million people required medical assistance. Furthermore, according to documents released in 2019, 2.1 million Syrians required health care (Kazemi & Nezami, 1399 [2020 A.D.], pp. 105-130). The outbreak of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19 in 2020, further exacerbated the regional crisis. Health maintenance has traditionally been the responsibility of governments; however, with fundamental developments in cross-national exchanges and interdependence, it has become evident that governments cannot take appropriate and timely action against infectious and contagious diseases. As a result, cooperation among actors is unavoidable (Ramezani Qavamabadi, 1398 [2020 A.D.], p. 182).

Given the status quo of the international system and the region, it appears that a strategy of convergence with others for responding appropriately to these emerging issues can be a critical step toward securing multilateral interests, given the many commonalities. Iran can adopt regime-building as an operational strategy to secure national interests and establish itself as a constructive player in addressing key regional issues through convergence, crisis management, and the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and resources.

8. Conclusion

Changes in the international order at the macro and regional levels present foreign policymakers with a plethora of opportunities and challenges. Policymakers must determine what behaviors are most appropriate within the international system under such conditions. Iran, as a pivot state, can play a variety of roles in its surrounding environment, as previously analyzed throughout the article. The research findings explain an issue-based foreign policy strategy within the framework of a middle power balancer role, which represents a proper role for Iran.

The role of the middle power balancer provides a set of recommendations for formulating Iran's issue-based foreign policy as it transitions from a survival-oriented phase to a more constructive one; the initial effects and outcomes of this transition are expected to materialize within the surrounding region, aligning with Iran's interests. These findings are summarized as follows: (1) transitioning from a one-dimensional power to a multidimensional power; (2) becoming a legitimate leader rather than a hegemonic force; (3) adjusting the regional security framework; (4) promoting regional convergence by acknowledging and incorporating the contributions of other actors.

As a result, the proposed strategy has the potential for significant long-term effects on a global/regional scale. These include: (1) transforming Iran from a destructive to a constructive power; (2) recognizing Iran as a normal global citizen with a rational approach; and (3) laying the groundwork for Iran to play an active role in the international order.

Implementing an issue-based foreign policy and assuming a middle power balancer role comes with certain challenges. These

include regional distrust toward Iran due to historical geopolitical rivalries, potential resistance from global powers such as the United States and China, and the risk of diminishing Iran's military deterrence effectiveness in the face of emerging threats. Therefore, a gradual adaptation and a smart diplomatic approach will be essential for the successful realization of this strategy. However, it is noteworthy that pursuing a middle power balancer role through issue-based foreign policy does not imply abandoning its deterrent dimensions; rather, it complements them and, over time, can support the achievement of national goals and interests.

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226

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