

Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's foreign policy has been shifting to meet its regional and global environment, as well as domestic dynamics. In the past, ideology played a significant role as a driver of foreign policy. For instance, the idea that Iran had a global responsibility toward Muslims, and that faith would bring victory, was based on Islam as its main resource. This helped push a strategy of "exporting revolution" after 1979, despite some strategic constraints when implemented at states' relations. Iran faced some regional and global challenges, especially during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013), leading Iranian political elites to be more conservative about the risks of ideological policies. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei recommending that Ahmadinejad not participate in the 2017 presidential elections, mainly for avoiding the polarization of domestic politics and thus foreign policy, is a clear example of how Iranian political elites are becoming more conservative about such rhetorical and idealistic approaches.¹

These political elites have begun to blend ideological policies with more strategic and pragmatic goals, leading to such things as Hezbollah's presence in Syria, which is a much more geopolitical concern, or Iran's low-profile involvement in Yemen in order to avoid direct conflict with Saudi Arabia. In particular, the inefficiency of Ahmadinejad's government in dealing with economic sanctions, as a result of the nuclear stalemate between Iran and world powers, brought that issue further into domestic political debates.

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During the 2013 Iranian presidential campaign, Hassan Rouhani took advantage of this situation to introduce a win-win slogan: “centrifuges should spin, but so should people’s lives.”² By this approach, he convinced the Iranian voters of the necessity to balance strategy and resources in order to make Iran’s foreign policy more rational. Indeed, pragmatic views are increasingly gaining support among the Iranian public. This is partially due to rapid demographic changes, new developmental demands, and widespread global communication networks shaping a new national character. At the same time, the global environment is changing, and security threats against Iran in the Middle East, including extremism and instability along with regional rivalry, are growing.

The immediate consequence of this new pattern has been the necessity to move toward a more balanced foreign policy, whose main characteristic is the rational assessment of resources and strategic limits, in contrast to previous approaches that only considered ideological resources. Hence, the new era of Iran’s foreign policy seeks to bring a balance with foreign policy resources and strategic limits in order to optimize Iranian power.

Iran’s Foreign Policy Resources

Foreign policy resources come from national resources, which can convert to tangible power depending on the way that a state deploys them.³ Iran has three main spheres where its national resources transform into foreign policy ones. The first is Iran’s social and cultural resources. These are important on individual, national, and institutional levels.⁴ Together they are undergoing a slow yet strategic transformation that could result in a series of shifts in foreign policy. The swing of Iranian society between modernity and tradition as well as the profound developing nature of society make Iran a transitional society. Developmental approaches make policies more pragmatic and realistic,⁵ while traditional forces make policies more idealistic and ideological. As the developmental nature of Iranian society improves, the more pragmatic trend will likely become more pronounced.

Meanwhile, social groups are becoming the most prominent single social resource of Iranian foreign policy. The middle class, Shia clerics, and militias known as Basij are the three most influential groups right now, which have a certain influence over policymaking. The middle class’s power comes from its growing population, comprising 34 percent of Iran’s total population.⁶ The Shia clerics’ power is from their traditional position after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and their tight relations with more conservative segments of society. The Basij’s growing power is due to its tight relationship with traditional forces and the abundant resources it controls. But today’s Iranian foreign policy is generally more affected by the middle class, due to that group’s pressure on the government to

meet its demands and its increasing population—the middle class will further drive foreign policy to become more moderate and rational.

Iran's second critical resource for foreign policy is its emerging economy. In a time when emerging economies are not performing as anticipated, Iran's economy has the potential to experience significant growth. This situation has profound effects on Iran's foreign policy choices. Due to the lifting of sanctions, a more business-oriented environment, higher oil production and export, lower costs for trade and financial transactions, and restored access to foreign assets, Iran's real GDP growth is projected to reach 4.2 percent and 4.8 percent in 2016 and 2017, respectively.⁷ In this case, it is estimated that Iran's full return to the global oil market and its further integration into the global economy will lift global GDP growth by about 0.25 percent over the medium term.⁸ This is a major opportunity for Iranians to incorporate their economic resources into foreign policy options, such as an ability to provide transit and communication services, high human capital, and a large consumer market.

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Iran's third resource is its military. With its unconventional and coercive strategy, Iranian military power combines geography with highly trained fighters and asymmetric technologies to create an ability to survive a first strike, potentially deterring technologically superior adversaries. As the Iranian Defense Minister, Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan, maintains, military power is marked as the fastest evolving and growing foreign policy resource with the highest objective strategic effects.⁹

The integration of Iran's military power into foreign policy, however, is lagging somewhat due to challenging civil-military relations. Military power is not under the full control of the government, which is responsible for foreign policy; instead, the military is under command and control of the Supreme Leader, not the president. This diminishes the ability of the president to adapt grand strategies that include military power.¹⁰ Although this divide will hinder efforts to use military power with its full capacity as a viable resource, military power still provides the most formidable resource in executing foreign policy.

Iran's Strategic Limits

Strategic limits are sets of internal and external characteristics and conditions which constrain foreign policy choices and decrease freedom of action. Strategic limits affect resources: they block the full application of resources or decrease

their effectiveness. These limits are mainly outcomes of policies adopted by external powers or the natural characteristics of security environments, but they also can have roots in internal social and political conditions.

Alliances and Rivalries

Iran's alliance network is a unique complex of partners mainly relied upon for their operational collaboration on regional issues including states such as Iraq and Syria, non-state partners like Hezbollah and Hamas, and global partners like Russia and China who Iran seeks to attract for their support on strategic global issues (like Syria). Although Iran is engaged in diplomatic relations with major global powers in Europe, Asia, and even the United States, none of these offer reliable regional or global allies.

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years and the fact that Iran is deeply embroiled in a sectarian civil war in Syria it had no intention in fighting.¹¹ While Iran's regional alliances can still project hard power, they are limited in helping Iran achieve foreign policy objectives. This is because, first, some of its state and non-state allies suffer from the challenge of global incredibility, making extracting soft power from them controversial. Second, they are all deeply dependent on Iran's aid, either financially or militarily; it is not really clear what might happen to their operational

capability if Iran disrupts the aid stream. Third, some of Iran's active allies suffer from serious internal divisions that reduce their efficiency for Iran. For example, the Iraqi Shia factions, or Hezbollah and Syria's involvement in constant wars, diminish their potential for Tehran, and reduce their strategic effects.

On the other hand, Iran faces difficulties in defining strategic initiatives with its global allies, especially Russia and China. They have different global objectives and a much wider environment in which to operate. The Russia-U.S. security dialogue on Syria and the prospect of their close cooperation is an example of how the Iranian alliance network could be compromised. This has become more evident after the fall of Aleppo in December 2016, as well as the prospect of close cooperation between Presidents Putin and Trump in Syria.

While the management of alliances offers one challenge, balancing rival alignments provides another. A shared threat assessment about Iran's growing regional influence, especially after the nuclear deal, has led to a common

containment policy against Iran by competing regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It is rather difficult to talk about any strategic Saudi–Turkey alliance to form a block against Iran,¹² but strategic capabilities of both Saudis and Turks are posing vital limits to Iran’s expanding power. The fact is that both countries compromised on their differences regarding Iran in order to take a joint approach to counter and balance it. The Saudis have rather shaped the opinion of most Persian Gulf Sunni states and also the Arab people against Iran, establishing the so-called “Islamic coalition” to battle the Islamic State mostly as a counter-balance to Iran’s coalition against the terrorist group. Reaching consensus against Iran’s policies and its regional allies like Hezbollah in the GCC summit (March 2016) and later in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul (April 2016) to renounce Iran as a common threat are the most important outcomes of this alliance, since they provide the basic understanding to form a security alliance against Iran. The Saudis’ efforts against Iran, especially when it comes to security issues and public diplomacy, pose a serious limit on Iran’s foreign policy.

The nature of Turkish policy toward Iran is very different from that of Saudi Arabia, since despite major disputes over Syria both countries have commonalities like security concerns, economic interests, and cultural integrities. The security and economic cost for Turkey of distancing itself from Iran could be considerable as it has common interests with Iran in battling terrorism, preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, the fight against the Kurdish separatist movements, energy cooperation, etc. Therefore, Turkey’s foreign policy is gradually, especially after the country’s 2016 attempted coup, forming a more moderate approach toward Iran, transforming Turkey to act as a balancing power between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although this looks to be good news for Iran—since it stops Turkey from being Saudi Arabia’s total ally—it still imposes certain strategic limits and reduces Iranian freedom of action, especially in regional cases such as Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the current equation might confuse major external players such as Russia and the United States, who may see the regional powers as being in complete disharmony and rivalry.

Dispersed Internal Power

An additional challenge for Iran is the dispersed nature of power in its own strategy making. A lack of synergy among the various bodies responsible for planning and executing foreign policy pose a self-made strategic limit to Iran. Although officially the president is in control of major diplomatic institutions, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (and his affiliated bodies) has the final say in major foreign policy issues. Other institutes—such as the Supreme National Security

Council, Strategic Council of Foreign Policy, and the Expediency Council—all have their own various roles in the strategic planning process, which makes the task broader and often more complex. This situation has prevented Iran from successfully introducing grand strategy concepts that could provide immediate solutions for foreign policy problems. Although in some cases, such as Ahmadinejad's presidency, this equation acted as a check-and-balance mechanism, preventing the country from implementing adventurous policies at the regional and global levels.

Wrapped into this institutional dilemma lays a contradiction between cultural geography and the current world order. Iranian scholars Afshin Motaghi and Hamidreza Allahyari define cultural geography as a product of Iranians' spatial interactions with their land, which results in the creation of three worldviews: Iran-centric, Islamism, and anti-colonial.¹³ Each of these are complex and unique, but all suffer from a misalignment with the current logic of world order, which is directly reflected in foreign policy. This misalignment is due to the fact

There are three different worldviews within Iran, producing a continuous ideational rivalry.

that these worldviews are almost one-dimensional, not including global perspectives and requirements. Compounding the problem, there is less homogeneous synthesis between these worldviews, and as a result each one shapes its own specific stream of followers and respectively reproduces its own representatives in foreign policy. These representatives follow different mixes of those three worldviews, reside in various centers of gravities, and thus produce a continuous ideational rivalry that extends to foreign policy. This is the core weakness

in establishing viable strategic planning in Iranian foreign policy.

The Economy

The single largest source of Iran's strategic limits is that the country's economy is not as big as its foreign policy ambitions. While Iran is acting as a major regional power and is competing with other regional and international powers, its foreign policy apparatus receives less support from the economy than it should. In fact, the country's financial muscle is not as mature as its foreign policy, which translates to an imbalance between economic power and foreign policy objectives.

Iran has three options to address this situation. First, it can reduce its foreign policy ambitions to a level comparable with its economic power. Second, it can speed up its economic growth to reach the point where it could establish a proper balance with foreign policy objectives. And third, it can draw shortcut

solutions that could cut foreign policy costs to a level that the economy could support. However, idealistic and nationalistic aspects of Iranian foreign policy do not allow for aggressive cuts in foreign policy objectives. Similarly, improving economic growth is a long-term plan that faces considerable challenges. Therefore, the third option is the most viable solution.

Iranians are bound to come up with policy solutions that enable them to meet their objectives with less money and expect minimum support from the economy. This is the point where the equilibrium between resources and objectives takes place, and the main reason why the United States' coercion strategy and sanctions on Iran did not work as expected in curtailing Iran's foreign policy objectives. As sanctions strengthened, the cheaper foreign policy options became more favorable to policymakers, while no real changes to policy objectives took place. Iran chose to curtail its economic activity rather than curtail its foreign policy objectives.

However, it should be noted that even finding a cheaper solution to meet foreign policy goals, such as activating proxies, does not guarantee the complete lifting of constraints posed by the Iranian economy. And in the case of Iran, less powerful financial diplomacy translates to a more powerful militaristic approach.

Optimizing Power

Iranian policymakers increasingly believe that the country is living in a hostile environment where the only key to survival is to generate more power.¹⁴ The basic step in the "strategy of generating power" is to have a rather precise power estimate of major regional and global players in order to rate your own power. This was the subject of serious debate and research in Iran during the last decade,¹⁵ a strategic rational discussion not seen in recent Iranian history. The consensus is that although Iran has potential resources to improve its position, it also faces certain strategic limits. The very notion of strategic limits is new to Iranian planning, since it is a policy shift toward a more realistic approach from what was previously more ideological.

As scholar Ashley Tellis suggests, the country needs to pursue mechanisms that enable it to convert building blocks or resources which represent latent power to tangible forms of usable power.¹⁶ Iran is accomplishing this by doing four main things: transforming into a "responsible power," exercising strategic patience, engaging in low-cost engagements, and reducing rivals' margin to maneuver.

Responsible Power

The changing Iranian foreign policy orientation under Hassan Rouhani's administration is marked with the clear objective of transforming Iran into a more

Rouhani's objective is to transform Iran into a more "responsible power."

"responsible power" willing to cooperate to shape the region's order and inspire stability.¹⁷

Although post-revolutionary Iran is often called a revisionist state, one could argue that the scale and scope of revision Iran seeks today is more bound by its interests and security concerns. Internal public demands, as well as the high costs of any possible confrontations, were effective in solidifying this pattern.¹⁸

This includes Iran-U.S. (even indirect)

relations where mandated cooperation in common problems, such as battling al-Qaeda in Afghanistan or the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, paved the way for improving security in the region.

The definition of a "responsible power" shifts in line with the capacity of Iranian resources. There is a consensus among Iranian policymakers that with the country's latent resources—such as unique geography, population and social capacity, soft power, natural resources, and cultural heritage—Iran deserves to be the region's most powerful country.¹⁹ While the available resources may support such a goal, past experience shows that regional security and political dynamics will constrain that strategy.

As such, the issue of "responsibility" in power emerges as a new concept in Iranian security debates,²⁰ since it is an effective tool to manage strategic limits, which are constantly pushing back resources. Iran's way of conducting battle against the Islamic State in Iraq is a case in point. Iran showed a great deal of responsibility in allocating its military resources through the Iraqi state in the battles of Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah, restraining its Shia militia sympathizers from acting beyond the state's authority, which would have only furthered divisions in the country.

Strategic Patience

Strategic patience could be defined as a rational, deliberate postponing of decisions on critical national security issues, while tolerating the consequences of this delay. Such understanding needs a mental ability both in state and society to accept the harsh conditions that might follow, without making emotional, reactionary decisions. This was a serious requirement for ancient Iranians, who lived under constant insecurity.²¹ The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, maintains that the concept is now a fixed part of Iran's security and foreign policy strategy.²²

Strategic patience gives Iran an opportunity to buy time in order to change its rivals' courses of action without spending too much of its own resources. This works well in situations where serious strategic limits exist and available resources are not able to counter them. Today, some analysts believe that Iran's behavior toward Saudi Arabia's aggressive policies in the region can be defined in the context of strategic patience: Iran hopes Saudi Arabia will eventually back down in its regional involvement because the Saudis are acting beyond their state's strategic limits.²³ Another example is how Iran treats former allies that have distanced themselves from Iran because of Syria, such as Hamas and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood; these organizations are themselves now isolated and in need of support.²⁴

Low-Cost Engagements

Iran currently faces economic challenges which generally correspond to late development such as low economic growth, economic depression, unemployment, etc. As a result, the country is not in a position to heavily engage in costly conventional operations and confrontations. Yet, due to its enormous unconventional military capability and powerful security apparatus, it has enough capacity to project its forces in rather low-cost environments. The combination of military power as a foreign policy resource and the strategic limits of a developing economy lead Iran to favor engagements with the lowest possible costs.

Hybrid warfare suits these conditions best. Iran's political-security strategy in Syria is an example, where it has created a network of foreign fighters, military advisers, local regime irregulars, and Syrian minority communities under Iranian advisory commands. This shaped the backbone of Iran's asymmetric engagement model, which it has also used in Iraq. (And which stands in contrast to Saudi Arabia's bombardment of Yemen, which has been less productive yet much more costly.)

Relying on allied forces is another aspect of this low-cost engagement strategy, which can materialize if Iranian allies gain enough operational flexibility to react in various theaters. Some scholars tend to believe that Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war limits Iran's regional agenda.²⁵ Hezbollah and Iran's relations have traditionally aimed at mutual deterrence and strategic partnership to tackle adversaries' threats. Yet, Hezbollah's new role is part of a greater Iranian strategy in which its sub-state allies are given enough maneuverability and flexibility to engage in various theaters, which reduces Iran's risk of direct engagements. The effective operations under Iranian command show Hezbollah's applicability as a deterrent force wherever needed throughout the region. Not only that, it sends the message that Iran has the potential to operate in the Middle East in order to defend its interests, even with a sanctioned economy. In other words, it

shows how Iran is competent at allocating scarce resources flexibly, while supporting its interests and recognizing its strategic limits.

Reducing Rivals' Margin to Maneuver

At a time when Iran faces certain strategic limits in implementing preemptive strategies around the region, a defensive strategy—which is instead based on blockades and limiting adversaries' choices—seems more suitable. This strategy aims to prevent rival states from shaping the regional environment to suit their

Iran uses three main ways to reduce its adversaries' margin of maneuverability.

own interests. While it does not directly increase Iran's freedom of action, it does constrain that of adversaries.²⁶ There are three main ways in which Iran can reduce its adversaries' margin of maneuverability: the concept of "all-around defense," "strategic depth," and A2/AD capabilities.

All-around defense is the core of Iranian deterrence doctrine. The policy brings together all state, non-state, and private actors to orchestrate their efforts in confrontation against

threats, including in military defense, social defense, economic defense, civil defense, and psychological defense.²⁷ The strategy intends to harden national power elements by reducing their vulnerability and improving their survivability so that, in case of war, they could withstand a first strike and retain an ability to deliver a second strike. As an annual Pentagon report on the military power of Iran puts it, the strategy is designed to deter an attack, survive an initial strike, and retaliate against an aggressor to force a diplomatic solution to hostilities, while avoiding any consequences that could challenge Iran's core interests.²⁸ The strategy resembles the Cold War nuclear deterrence strategy, but the difference is that it uses conventional asymmetric offensive technologies instead of nuclear means, strengthened by passive defense, and is adjusted to Iran's available resources.

Creating strategic depth, or security buffer zones, comes from the idea of stretching the frontlines of conflict outward from Iranian borders to reduce rivals' options for attacking Iranian territory directly. Places of strategic depth include hotspots and proxies where Iran can inflict damage on its adversaries in the wake of hostilities without fighting inside its own territory. As former chairman of the Iranian Parliament Defense Committee Reza Talaei Nik asserts, national interests, national security, and geopolitics determine Iran's strategic depth; this has increased in recent years, pushing threats further from Iran's mainland.²⁹ Similarly, General Rahim Safavi, the former IRGC Commander in Chief, defines Iran's strategic depth as stretching to the Mediterranean Sea and south Lebanon, which now

creates Iran's first line of defense.³⁰ These hotspots are selected in a way that could inflict damage on critical interests of enemies around the region in order to strategically affect an adversary's decision-making and force them to seek political solutions. Hezbollah, Palestinian groups, the Syrian and Iraqi governments, plus other low-profile anti-Western and anti-Israeli groups are parts of this grand strategy. Building a secure defensive line far from Iran's border, and respectively creating a more secure homeland, is the objective of this strategy.

A2/AD—anti-access, area-denial—capabilities are the final sets of military, informational, economic, and political measures used to disrupt adversaries' interests and reduce their choices, thereby increasing the cost of any hostilities against Iran. Examples are disrupting the free flow of energy from the Hormuz Strait, disrupting U.S. logistical movements in the region (and those of its allies), and denying operational access to bases in the Persian Gulf and through the region. The Pentagon reports that Iran is quietly fielding increasingly lethal weapon systems, including more advanced naval mines, small but capable submarines, armed UAVs, coastal defense cruise missile batteries, attack crafts, and anti-ship capabilities.³¹

As the Nuclear Threat Initiative concludes, Tehran indisputably possesses a formidable weapons delivery capability,³² one that is mostly operating under an anti-access concept. But the Iranian A2/AD approach involves a web of tactical capabilities, of which weapons delivery is just one part. Lieutenant General George J. Flynn, the U.S. Joint Staff's director of joint force development, makes this argument, "Whereas lethal A2 challenges are virtually always the product of deliberate enemy design, AD challenges don't have to be. They can be 'structured' or 'unstructured.' Iran's hybrid 'mosaic defense,' for example, is structured. Though highly unconventional, it is part of a coherent cost-imposing strategy. Its combination of ballistic and cruise missiles, unconventional naval forces, and hybrid ground defenses—matched with tight Persian Gulf geography, Iran's physical depth, and its deep ties to regional proxies—offer a complex structured AD challenge that strategic and operational planners would have to account for in the event of hostilities."³³

Putting Iranian Pragmatism into Practice

Idealistic and ideological stances in the early revolutionary era led to policies that were less in accord with Iran's actual power and available resources. The shifting nature of power resources, along with new regional and international realities felt by more pragmatic Iranian political-security elites, has directed the country to seek a balance between its available power resources and strategic limitations. This new trajectory is already evident in several different areas such as the conclusion of the

nuclear deal with world powers, the patient strategy toward Saudi Arabia's current offensive policy in the region, and increased relations with Russia in light of the Syrian crisis and the battle against the Islamic State.

The case of Iran's nuclear deal shows Tehran's attempt to convert resources to tangible power. For Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, represents a compromise that enabled the country to participate in supporting regional and global security by easing concerns about its nuclear program while also decreasing pressure on its economic resources. This shows Iran's rationality: it noted economic constraints as a major strategic limit, while its foreign policy resource was its mastering of independent uranium enrichment. The same rationality may be true on the other side: the West (especially the United States) came to the conclusion that there are some limits for tackling Iran's nuclear ambitions through military or economic means, yet Iran has become a significant regional power without whose participation no regional problems can be solved. This situation required a settlement between Iran and world powers to pave the way for integrating Iran in regional issues.

Iran-Saudi relations are also evolving along the same path, with the difference being that rationality on the Iranian side is more mature, especially when coupled with strategic patience. From Iran's perspective, Saudi Arabia is currently acting beyond its strategic capability and national strength. This policy cannot last

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long, and sooner or later Saudi Arabia will adjust its regional policies to the region's political-security and societal realities. Meanwhile, Iran's main concern is that the Saudis will try to involve or commit the United States militarily in the region. After the Iran nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia began an aggressive policy—such as bombing Yemen and supporting opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in the form of a Sunni bloc—mainly to contain

Iran's growing regional role. To counter this situation, Iran has adopted a two-pronged policy—mainly to balance its resources and strategic limits. On one hand, it has helped to strengthen inclusive national governments in friendly states such as Iraq and Syria by focusing on a political solution in peace talks, as well as mobilizing local forces to battle terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. On the other hand, Iran has attempted to expand regional cooperation, especially with key players such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, with the aim of solving regional issues. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif even suggested the creation of a regional dialogue forum for solving the region's problems.³⁴

The case of Iran and Russia is rather different since the two sides are mobilizing their resources—Russian air superiority and Iranian ground capabilities—to meet a common objective in Syria. This is an example of compromise and rationality: Iran realized it could not unilaterally save the Syrian regime, so it reached an understanding with Russia—the first political-security partnership of post-revolutionary Iran with another world power that was only possible due to the new understanding in Tehran about the nation’s power dynamics and limitations. The case of Russian-Iranian cooperation shows that Iran is ready to redefine its ideological objectives if necessary,³⁵ and is flexible enough to take pragmatic positions to meet its objectives.

Improved political rationality, power calculations, and an ongoing quest to balance resources and limits are signs of restructuring the Iranian foreign policy decision-making model. Iran is learning that it cannot set goals beyond its available resources, while at the same time it faces sets of strategic limits. Acting as a responsible but unavoidable power, sticking to strategic patience, utilizing low-cost engagements, and reducing rivals’ margins of maneuver are four essential strategies adapted by Iran to cope with the reality of its current equilibrium of resources and strategic limits.

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