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Iran-Centered Strategy: Transition from the Cycle of Compulsion to Sustainable Security

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In the Name of God

Introduction

At the present juncture, Iran faces one of the most complex periods in its foreign policy. This moment coincides with intensifying global geopolitical competition, the gradual erosion of the structures underpinning the international order, and rising regional instability, while the country's internal capacity is simultaneously strained by unjust sanctions and mounting economic, social, and psychological pressures. In such an environment, the continuation of a reactive approach grounded in 'necessity'—one in which actions merely respond to imposed crises—will not produce sustainable security. On the contrary, it will impose accumulating and escalating costs on the system. Accordingly, this essay argues that breaking this cycle requires a transition to an Iran-centered strategy—one that is not predicated on denying the complex realities of Iran's surrounding environment, but on managing them creatively; and one that is not trapped in a binary of East and West, but instead grounded in intelligent interest-based policymaking and strategic balance. Within this paradigm, sustainable security is achieved not through the elimination of threats—which is often impossible—but through reducing the incentives, legitimacy, and consensus among external actors for undertaking hostile actions against Iran.

This strategic imperative becomes even more evident when one takes into account the shift in the behavioral paradigm of the principal powers within the international system. An analysis of the United States' new National Security Strategy, as a manifestation of this shift, points to a clear turn toward the absolute prioritization of economic interests—even in the short term—and the systematic reduction of security costs. Within this approach, even confrontation with strategic rivals is pursued, as far as possible, through the outsourcing of policy to regional allies, thereby reducing the financial and political burden of direct engagement. This orientation points to the emergence of an international environment in which hard-nosed economic

rationality and the avoidance of protracted, draining conflicts have moved to the center of strategic calculations.

Conceptual Framework: Smart Interest-Orientation and Strategic Balance

An Iran-Centered Strategy rests on two fundamental and complementary principles: First, strategic balance, defined as selective, issue-oriented, and flexible engagement with a diverse array of international actors, without the country falling into the trap of structural dependency on any power bloc. Second, prudent alignment, which enables the leveraging of opportunities for cooperation with international powers and institutions, while consistent criteria and rules are established and observed to safeguard the country's strategic decision-making autonomy. The efficacy of this framework is contingent upon the formulation of a hierarchical and transparent definition of national interest; a definition that can, like a steady compass, guide the orientation of decision-makers in complex and contradictory circumstances and prevent costly fluctuations in policymaking.

The Hierarchical Prioritization of National Interests

Under conditions of resource constraints and multilayered pressures, the absence of clear prioritization in foreign policy quickly leads to fragmented action and diminished effectiveness. Accordingly, the Iran-centric strategy proposes that national interests be defined within a hierarchical framework:

Existential Security and Territorial Integrity: These stand at the apex of the hierarchy of national interests and are regarded as a non-negotiable red line.

National Sovereignty and Strategic Decision-Making Autonomy: Upholding the capacity to choose freely at critical junctures and avoiding any form of structural dependency.

Sustainable Economic Development and Livelihood Security: Not merely as an economic objective, but as a necessary prerequisite for political stability and social cohesion.

Access to Strategic Technologies and a Knowledge-Based Economy: A guarantor of the country's future capabilities and long-term resilience. Achieving this objective requires the maximum attraction and deployment of scientific and academic elites—domestic and international—within the framework of national interests. Leveraging the intellectual and specialized capacities of these groups, unencumbered by ideological or nationality-based constraints, can serve as an accelerator for the acquisition of strategic technologies and the realization of a knowledge-based economy.

Constructive Regional Role: As an instrument for enhancing security and realizing national interests, rather than an independent and costly objective.

This prioritization enables decision-makers, when confronted with short- and long-term trade-offs, to choose options grounded in the logic of strategic cost-benefit analysis.

From Internal Cohesion to Regional Diplomacy: An Institutional and Operational Imperative

The historical experience of Iran's foreign policy demonstrates that even the most precise strategies do not bear fruit without internal cohesion. Multiple decision-making centers, competing interpretations of national interest, and pressure from sectoral stakeholders expose foreign policy to volatility and instability. An Iran-centric strategy requires the formation of a minimum governing consensus prior to any external action.

In this regard, the formulation of a National Charter of Iran's Interests as a strategic covenant, and the establishment of a Supreme Council of National Interests tasked with interinstitutional coordination, can make the decision-making framework more coherent. This council would not replace existing institutions; rather, it would regulate interaction among them and, by institutionalizing systematic cost-benefit assessment, move foreign policy away from a purely reactive logic. In the external arena, regional diplomacy must be elevated to the frontline of safeguarding national security. De-escalation with neighbors, issue-oriented dialogues in the spheres of maritime security, energy, and transit, and the conclusion of minimal

agreements to prevent surprises, can mitigate the risk of unintended conflicts and contain security costs.

Multilayered Diplomacy and Strategic Diversification

In the current multipolar order, exclusive reliance on a single power undermines national sovereignty. The Iran-centric strategy emphasizes purposeful diversification in international partnerships: energy and infrastructure cooperation with China; security–technological cooperation with Russia, while safeguarding strategic autonomy; and the attraction of investment and advanced technologies from Europe and East Asia. Any form of engagement must be project-based, conditional, and limited to a defined time horizon. This diversification should also encompass the attraction of scientific and technological elites from across the world. The establishment of international scientific networks and the utilization of talent irrespective of intellectual or national boundaries can serve as a strategic instrument for strengthening Iran’s innovation capacity and its knowledge-based diplomacy.

In parallel, public diplomacy and domestic persuasion play a complementary and vital role. Redefining Iran’s current image from a problem-creating actor to a constructive actor and producer of shared interests, the targeted mobilization of scientific and cultural capacities, and the relative transparency of the foreign-policy decision-making process for public opinion will strengthen the sustainability of foreign policy. This diversification must also respond intelligently to emerging shifts in the strategies of major powers (Tables 1 and 2). Their growing inclination toward security outsourcing and the delegation of the burden of direct confrontation to regional allies, while potentially conducive to proxy tensions, simultaneously creates an opportunity for de-escalation and direct strategic dialogue with centers of power, as their appetite for protracted and costly engagements has diminished. Accordingly, Iran’s diplomacy is compelled to simultaneously place the management of relations with rival regional allies and direct engagement with major powers on its agenda.

Table 1: The Operational Framework of the Iran-Centric Strategy

Strategic Domain	Logic of Action	Implementation Instruments	The Expected Outcome
Security	Transition from Purely Hard Deterrence to Smart Deterrence	Integration of Military Power, Diplomacy, and Media Narratives	Reduction in the Likelihood of Direct Conflict
Region	Transforming Neighbors into Risk-Management Partners	Issue-Oriented Dialogues and Minimal Agreements	Reduction of Chronic Tensions
Economy	Linking Security to Livelihood Stability	Transit and Energy Projects	Stability of Economic Expectations
Partnerships	Avoidance of Dependency	Conditional and Time-Bound Agreements	Preservation of Strategic Autonomy
Social Capital	Increasing Foreign Policy Sustainability	Public and Domestic Diplomacy	Reduction of Foreign Policy Costs

Table 2: Scenario Matrix of the Iran-Centric Strategy

Scenario	Environmental Context	Iran's Foreign Policy Conduct	Implications
Favorable	De-escalation and Managed Competition	Active Diplomacy and Internal Cohesion	Sustainable Security and Gradual Growth
Middle	Controlled instability	Crisis management and selective engagement	A fragile but sustainable form of stability
Undesirable	Escalation of confrontation and a consensus on pressure	A reactive and uncoordinated policy	Rising security costs and economic recession

Conclusion

An Iran-centered strategy proposes an operational analytical framework demonstrating that the transition from a policy driven by necessity to one based on strategic choice, while accompanied by structural constraints, remains attainable within a rational framework of strategic balance and

carefully calibrated interest-based policymaking. As reflected in the scenario Table, the realization of the desirable scenario—encompassing sustainable security and gradual growth—depends on a transition from purely hard deterrence to smart deterrence, the transformation of neighboring states into partners in risk management, the linkage of security with socioeconomic stability, and the targeted diversification of external partnerships. Within this framework, sustainable security is achieved not through the elimination of others or unilateral dominance, but through the transformation of Iran into a necessary and reliable actor within regional and global networks of cooperation. A position defined by reliance on the hierarchical priorities of national interests—from existential security to constructive international engagement—and one that requires the simultaneous fulfillment of four key preconditions:

1. Consolidating internal cohesion through the institutionalization of decision-making processes based on cost-benefit assessments and the formulation of a national interests document.
2. The application of smart, multi-layered diplomacy capable of simultaneously managing relations with neighboring states and extra-regional powers.
3. Establishing an organic linkage between foreign policy and the processes of national development and social capital, in a manner that strengthens sustainability in the international arena.

The systematic engagement of global scientific and academic elites within the framework of national interests as one of the pillars for strengthening the country's intellectual and technological capital, in pursuit of sustainable security and comprehensive development.

From this perspective, sustainable security is not the result of avoiding confrontation or suspending national interests, but rather the outcome of the intelligent, gradual, and systematic management of competing interests within a complex, competitive, and transitional environment.