



Possibilities Architects:
Inspiring Ascending Beyond

Policy Report

Authenticity and Necessity in Foreign Relations

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Policy Issue

One of the fundamental challenges facing the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the predominance of a “logic of necessity” over a “logic of authenticity” in defining and sustaining its external relationships. In practice, a significant portion of Iran’s foreign relations—including those with neighbors, Eastern powers, and even certain regional actors—is neither perceived nor framed as an authentic, strategic choice, but rather as a consequence of compulsion, systemic deadlock, or an absence of viable alternatives. This perception is observable not only within public opinion but also among a segment of the elite, and it manifests, furthermore, in the operational behavior of policymaking institutions.

A foreign policy driven by necessity, rather than generating bargaining power, gradually transmits a “signal of desperation” to the counterpart—a signal that increases transaction costs, facilitates the imposition of unequal terms, and diminishes the counterpart’s incentive to invest in the relationship over the long term. Under these conditions, even countries that possess the potential to be Iran’s strategic partners view it not as a reliable ally, but rather as a client of necessity and a low-cost partner.

The Strategic Significance and Implications of the Issue

The persistence of this pattern traps Iran’s foreign policy in a vicious cycle: as the range of foreign policy options narrows, remaining relationships are increasingly defined by the “logic of necessity.” Consequently, the more necessity-driven these relations become, the greater the costs imposed by counterpart states, which in turn further restricts Iran’s strategic alternatives. This cycle not only erodes Iran’s economic interests but also depletes its political credibility and strategic capacity, ultimately precluding the possibility of rebalancing its foreign relations. In this regard, and from a long-term perspective, the following options emerge as distinct macro-strategic alternatives:

Policy Scenarios

Scenario I: The Continuity of a Necessity-Driven, Reactive Foreign Policy

In this scenario, the existing pattern persists, with Iran’s foreign relations defined primarily in reaction to sanctions, external pressures, or the impasse of alternative avenues. Engagement with China, Russia, neighboring states, or regional markets is perceived not as a strategic choice, but as a “compelled alternative” to lost relations with the West or lucrative global markets. The natural consequence of this approach is increased asymmetry in bilateral relations, the imposition of price discounts and unilateral payment

terms, and a diminished incentive for counterparts to provide technology transfers, capital investment, or long-term partnerships. While this scenario may address immediate needs in the short term, it ultimately leads to the structural lock-in of foreign policy and the intensification of asymmetric dependencies in the medium term.

This scenario appears to be the least costly option in the short term; however, it imposes the most significant reputational and strategic costs in the long term. The primary motivation of this scenario, in the short term, is to secure the bare minimum of the country's immediate needs—ranging from oil exports and the import of essential goods to the circumvention of financial and banking restrictions. This approach does not necessitate difficult strategic decisions and entails lower domestic political costs, as it does not challenge existing structures. Nevertheless, the costs of this scenario are substantially higher and cumulative. Within this framework, Iran's foreign relations transform into an asymmetrical dynamic wherein counterparts, recognizing Iran's lack of alternatives, impose unilateral terms such as steep price discounts, inequitable payment structures, a refusal to transfer technology, and an avoidance of long-term investment. Furthermore, this pattern erodes Iran's international credibility, reducing the country in the eyes of partners to a "choice-less actor," a "low-cost partner," and an unreliable, unpredictable player—a predicament from which exit gradually becomes more difficult and costly.

Scenario II: Selective and Episodic Pivoting Between East and West

In this scenario, rather than reforming its foundational logic, Iran's foreign policy merely shifts its geographical orientation, utilizing engagement with either the East or the West as "leverage" against the other. Although this approach superficially resembles diversification, in practice it reproduces the same logic of necessity, as each side recognizes that Iran's relationship with the other lacks authenticity and is purely instrumental. Consequently, this dynamic breeds chronic mistrust, a refusal to undertake long-term commitments, and the reduction of Iran in the eyes of potential partners to an unpredictable actor. This scenario yields neither balance nor credibility.

This scenario carries greater reputational costs and instability, effectively neutralizing the benefits of diversification. The apparent utility of this scenario lies in enhancing tactical flexibility and creating episodic leverage. In the short term, Iran can exploit the competition among major powers to extract limited concessions, fostering the illusion that it possesses multiple options. However, the costs of this approach are structural and long-term. Potential partners quickly discern that engagement with Iran lacks authenticity and serves merely as leverage against third parties. Consequently, this leads to diminished trust, extreme caution in commitments, and a refusal to participate in strategic projects.

Instead of establishing stable balance, this scenario generates chronic instability and transforms Iran into an unpredictable actor for whom no party is willing to incur long-term costs. Ultimately, rather than enhancing bargaining power, this approach erodes it.

Scenario III: Recasting Foreign Policy on the Basis of Authenticity in Relations

This scenario is predicated on a paradigm shift: defining foreign relations not out of necessity, but as a conscious, sustainable, and independent choice, immune to episodic pressures. Within this framework, engagements with China, Russia, neighboring states, and even the West are each deemed to possess inherent authenticity rather than serving as substitutes for one another. This approach dictates that even in the event of an opening with the West, Iran must maintain and deepen its relations with the East and its neighbors, and vice versa. Such a policy signals to counterparts that Iran is a permanent, predictable, and long-term partner—a signal that paves the way for concessions, flexibility, investment, and genuine partnership.

The primary benefit of this scenario is the gradual yet sustainable enhancement of Iran's bargaining power in foreign relations. By defining its ties as authentic and long-term choices, Iran signals to its partners that engagement with it is predictable, stable, and non-instrumental. This approach paves the way for reducing asymmetry, improving economic terms, increasing investment willingness, and fostering genuine technological and security cooperation. However, the costs of this scenario are predominantly transition costs: the necessity of shifting the elite mindset, reforming institutional practices, enduring certain short-term pressures, and abstaining from emotional reactions to episodic developments. Furthermore, this approach requires Iran to remain committed to its obligations under both opening and pressure scenarios—a demand that necessitates high strategic discipline. Nonetheless, the aggregate costs remain limited and transient, whereas the benefits are structural and long-term.

This option requires a shift in strategic mindset, the reform of institutional practices, and the acceptance of the potential costs associated with a change in approach. Nevertheless, it is the only option capable of enabling a durable balance, enhancing Iran's bargaining power, and breaking the cycle of desperation.

Policy Recommendation

The recommended scenario is the strategic recalibration of Iran's foreign policy based on authenticity in relations and the genuine diversification of ties. This implies that Iran must define its relations with China, Russia, neighboring states, and the West not as transient instruments or unwanted substitutes, but as integral components of a balanced strategy

whose complementarity is indispensable. Such an approach necessitates consistency in messaging, stability in commitments, and the avoidance of signaling desperation in both official discourse and conduct.

Conclusion

A successful foreign policy emerges not from necessity, but from conscious and authentic choice. So long as others perceive Iran as compelled to maintain ties with them, they will seek to exploit that necessity. However, if Iran can redefine itself as a partner that *chooses* to engage rather than one that is merely *forced* to do so, those same actors will be compelled to reassess their own conduct. This transformation requires, before anything else, a change in perspective rather than an expansion of instruments.