

IRAN'S LOOK EAST POLICY: A STEP TOWARDS COUNTERING WESTERN PRESSURES

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Abstract

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, relations between Iran, the US, and its allies have deteriorated. The US and the West pressurised Iran by imposing sanctions, especially after the Iranian hostage crisis and the development of its nuclear programme. Iran wanted to counter Israeli nuclear ambitions by developing its programme but had to face sanctions. Due to these sanctions, Iran's economy suffered severely. Despite having vast energy resources in the form of oil and gas, it could not achieve its full economic potential. During Hassan Rouhani's presidency, Iran signed a nuclear deal (JCPOA) with the US-led Western alliance. Still, the unilateral withdrawal of the US under Donald Trump proved that compromise between Iran and the US is almost impossible from their present standpoints. In this situation, Iran had to find other partners to help it counter the Western pressures for its economic survival. The Oriental powers like Russia and China provided a good opportunity for Iran to counter sanctions. Therefore, Iran also began to focus on other Eurasian and Southeast Asian economies. This research analyses Iran's Look East Policy, especially under President Ibrahim Raisi. It critically examines how Iran can implement its Look East Policy under ongoing regional and international scenarios, what the hurdles will be in implementing this policy, and what the prospects will be. To answer these questions, Realism can be a most relevant theoretical perspective. According to Morgenthau's six principles of Realism, international politics are shaped by a state's interests, especially regarding power.

Keywords: Look East Policy, Sanctions, Islamic Revolution, Oriental Powers, Realism.

Introduction

The state-to-state relations between Iran and US (West) worsened after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. However, Iranian society resented Western foreign influence in Iran even before that, mainly due to the famous 1953 US-led regime change coup. Since 1979, the Iranian economy has suffered due to sanctions from international bodies and Western countries. After the revolution, Iran faced international isolation because its leader Ayatollah Khomeini raised the slogan *Na*

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Shargh, Na Gharb (Neither East nor West). However, in the face of the increasing pressures from the West, Iran began to open toward the East to escape its isolation. The nuclear development caused the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran. In different eras, efforts for a nuclear agreement were made by both Iran and the West. West was making continuous efforts to engage Iran. However, an agreeable compromise could not be reached until the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed in 2015. This agreement also failed after the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018. Since then, the tensions between Iran and the West entered a new phase of hostility and confrontation. Instead of lifting sanctions on Iran, even more sanctions were imposed, which crippled the Iranian economy.

The trade activities were severely affected, and the currency was devalued more. In this situation of maximum pressure from the West, Iran increasingly looked towards the East for its security and survival, which Realism can explain as a theoretical framework. Realism is a view of international politics that stresses its competitive and conflictual side. Jack Snyder defines Realism as a model of international relations in which "self-interested states compete for power and security."¹ This paper concedes at the beginning that Iran's foreign policy during Pre- and Post-1979 Islamic revolution has been formulated based on the legacy of 2500 years old great Persian empire. Iran's regional and global ambitions caused serious competition and confrontations with other powers like the US and the West, particularly under Islamic revolutionary ideology. Iran's Look East policy can be analysed under such competition for management and security.

Having familiar competitors in the form of the US, China and Russia welcomed Iran's extended hand of friendship. As a result, Iran now sees China as an essential economic partner, while its strategic ties with Russia are growing with each passing day. This research analyses Iran's Look East policy background, its present implementation, and prospects.

Tensions between Iran and the West

Before 1953, the relations between Iran and US were quite different from today. Iran considered the US its distant ally against its rivals, Britain and Russia. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Russia (former Soviet Union) influenced the northern provinces and Britain in the southern and western parts of Iran.² The international system dynamics immensely changed at the end of World War II. A power struggle began in Iran between the Soviet Union and Great Britain because of its important geostrategic location in the Middle East. Neither country wanted to withdraw troops from Iran because of its central position in the region. In this situation, US President Franklin Roosevelt held a meeting in Tehran where he

met with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin and convinced them to respect Iran's territorial integrity by withdrawing their troops. As a result, the US, Britain and the Soviets withdrew their troops. Due to the US efforts, many Iranians began to view it as their protector at the international level.³ British had removed their troops from Iran, but their economic influence remained firm on the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran had given rights to the British to develop Iran's vast oil resources.⁴ The agreement terms between Iran and Britain were not as equitable as between other Western powers and Middle Eastern oil-rich countries. The discriminatory economic treatment combined with Mohammad Reza Shah's totalitarian abuse of power created resentment among Iranians and led to the rise of the National Front Movement in October 1949.⁵

The National Front was a political party led by Mohammad Mussadegh, who became famous for his nationalistic anti-British stance. It started with a protest against the parliamentary election, which Mohammad Reza Shah rigged.⁶ New free and fair elections were held in which Mussadegh and six other National Front members were elected to the Parliament. The organisation's primary objective was to renegotiate the terms of AIOC's oil concessions, but Britain was not ready to compromise. The movement grew as Mussadegh became popular, and on April 28, 1951, he became Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister.⁷ He nationalised the Iranian oil company, which complicated the situation for Britain because Mussadegh was popular among the Iranian population. Britain appealed to the UN for the resolution of the issue. Mussadegh went to New York to present Iran's case to the UN. Iran was victorious at the UN when it also made Iran the victim of British colonialism. After attending sessions at the UN, he met with the Secretary of State and President Truman and left the country confident in friendly relations with the US.⁸ Truman stated that he sympathised with the people of Iran but was concerned that the Soviet Union could use the conflict between Iran and Britain for its benefit.⁹ It became one of the primary reasons for the fall of Mussadegh. Churchill's victory as the Prime Minister of Britain and the election of anti-communist Eisenhower as the US President began the end of Mussadegh. Both Presidents did not sympathise with Iran as the predecessor of Eisenhower. The relations between Iran and the US, which warmed when Mussadegh went for the UN session, now cooled down under Eisenhower's administration as he was concerned about the possible occupation of Iran by the Soviets.¹⁰ It eventually led to the CIA covert operation, *Operation Ajax*, aimed at overthrowing Mussadegh. Brutal Shah was reinstated in his position, a gesture not welcomed by most Iranians to date. It was the gesture which instigated the anti-West narrative in Iran. They saw Mussadegh as their chance at democracy and freedom from Shah and foreign interference. The once friendly alliance with the US perished forever.

Shah's time in power was not easy. There were Arab uprisings throughout the region against Israel which made him nervous. So he reached out to the US and Israel to consolidate his power as all three had a rivalry with Arabs and Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a real threat to Iran because of its anti-communist and pro-American stance. With the help of the CIA, Shah formed SAVAK, a secret security force to intimidate Shah's opponents. It was known for its brutal methods to consolidate Shah's power.¹¹ The US also signed bilateral defence agreements with Iran, making it militarily dependent on the US.

On the other hand, anti-American sentiments had been brewing since the 1953 regime change coup against Mussadegh, and people were fed up with the brutal policies of the Shah. In this situation, vigorous opposition came from a religious faction in Iran led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, who began to oppose Shah's regime openly.¹² Shah arrested Ayatollah Khomeini, which triggered mass protests as Khomeini had become immensely popular. Shah's force brutally killed hundreds of Ayatollah's supporters.¹³ Ayatollah was sent to exile, and the US stood firmly behind Shah, who continued to expand his wealth at the cost of Iranian people facing economic disparity.

Ayatollah Khomeini led the movement from exile. However, his followers faced greater repression. Eventually, in 1979, there was Islamic Revolution in Iran, Shah fled the country, and Ayatollah Khomeini returned. This revolution was aimed at ending Western imperialism in Iran and the region, and it was loaded with anti-US and anti-Israel narratives. Rivalry with the US grew after the process but peaked because of the 1979 Hostage Crisis. Several Iranian students broke into the US embassy in Tehran, declaring it a *Nest of Spies*, and took American diplomats hostage, proclaiming them spies for 444 days. Following this incident, there are no diplomatic ties between Iran and the US.

Since then, other issues have combined, leading to further deterioration of relations between the two countries. One of the issues was Iran's opposition to Israel, a US ally. Iran has openly stated that it wants to wipe it out of the world, declaring Israel a cancerous tumour.¹⁴ Iran was also blamed for going for nuclear proliferation and acquiring nuclear capabilities. As a result, Iran faced international sanctions, which negatively impacted the country's economy. The sanctions are continuing to date and are still growing. Iran and the US have tried to agree on the nuclear question under which Iran will stop further uranium enrichment, and the US and other Western countries will end sanctions on Iran. One major success achieved in this context was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015. However, it also failed after US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from this deal and used the policy of maximum pressure against Iran. As a result, more

sanctions and restrictions were imposed on Iran, which further crippled its economy.¹⁵

New talks for nuclear negotiations began in 2021 after new President Ibrahim Raisi was elected.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the talks did not result in any favourable agreement. Iran wants a deal on the revival of JCPOA, as it was signed in 2015, while the US is seeking different interests by adding more conditions. One of these conditions is the restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile programme. The US and other countries party to the agreement want Iran to stop its ballistic missile programme, but Iran disagrees, considering it vital for its defence.

Similarly, another issue is the Iranian support for different groups in the Middle East region. Iran supports these groups fighting against Israeli and US interference, like Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, pro-Bashar groups in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and other regional movements like Yemen and Bahrain.¹⁷ The US even designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) external operations branch, Quds Force, as a terrorist organisation. Moreover, in 2020, the assassination of its popular commander-in-chief, General Qasem Soleimani, was assumed to violate international law by experts.¹⁸ It further heightened tensions between the US and Iran. All these issues hindered the negotiation process between the two countries, and each side blamed the other for not being serious about getting an agreement.

The state of nuclear negotiation is appalling, especially after Russia's war in Ukraine. Iran has sided with Russia in this conflict, and the defence ties between the two countries are growing with each passing day. China has also pledged to invest \$400 billion in Iran and other economic relations. Since 2021, under President Ibrahim Raisi, Iran has adopted a Look East policy as an alternative to Western pressures. The West tried to isolate Iran, but their efforts were unsuccessful. However, Iran's influence in the region the soft power is still there. There was a need to engage Iran in mainstream regional and international affairs to maintain peace and stability, but instead of it, the US further attempted to isolate Iran. Consequently, Iran became utterly disappointed by the West, particularly the US, after the failure of the JCPOA and is now focused on the Look East policy.

Origins of the Concept of Look East Policy

The term 'Look East Policy' has been used by different Eastern countries such as India, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Iran. The common tenet of this concept by all these countries is to develop and strengthen ties with Eastern economies like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, China, Russia, etc. Prime Minister Mahathir of

Malaysia famously used this concept. He was publicly critical of the US, UK and other Western countries and emphasised the Look East policy.¹⁹ Prime Minister Narasimha Rao devised India's Look East Policy from 1991 to 1996, which was later pursued by Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) and Manmohan Singh (2004–2014). India's Look East policy focuses on economic ties with Southeast Asian economies to counter China's economic expansion.²⁰ Bangladesh also adopted this policy under the administration of Khaleda Zia, which aimed at developing relations with Southeast Asian economies. Under this policy, Bangladesh even signed bilateral agreements with Japan and China.²¹ Iran developed its Look East policy during the administration of President Ahmadinejad, but its proper implementation came after Ibrahim Raisi became the President. Iran's Look East policy aimed to counter Western influence and achieve self-sufficiency.

Iran's Look East Policy: Continuation of Self-sufficiency Goals

Over the past few years, Iran has been inching closer to Eastern powers like China and Russia. This Look East policy is driven by anti-Western sentiments and a way to counter Western pressures. After the Revolution, Iran adopted the 'neither East nor West' stance. Iran had adopted a staunchly anti-imperialist policy against the US and Israel but also against the Soviet Union and the spreading ideology of communism and intervention in Afghanistan. However, the relations between Iran and Russia began to develop after the fall of the Soviet Union and Moscow's help in developing the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran.²² The turning point of relations between Iran and Russia came after President Ahmadinejad called for the Look East doctrine. Ali Larijani, the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, developed and formulated this doctrine to pave the way for increased cooperation with China and Russia in the military, technology, and economic sectors.²³ After the administration of Hassan Rouhani, Iran signed JCPOA, Iran was tilting more toward the West, but this was not a total shift away from the East.

On the contrary, the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the JCPOA and the adoption of policies of 'maximum pressure' against Iran encouraged Iran to look towards the East. When Ibrahim Raisi was elected as the President of Iran in 2021, he reaffirmed the pertinence of the Look East policy. His stance was not mere rhetoric; he took practical steps to implement this policy in 2021.

The manifestation of Iran's pivot to the East came with the development of bilateral relations with Russia and China. In 2021, Iran and China signed the 25 years strategic partnership in the fields of economy, military and technology, and China also pledged to invest \$400 billion in the economic development of Iran. China also

considers Iran as its most important partner in the Middle East.²⁴ In January 2022, Iranian President Raisi visited China, further strengthening relations between the two countries. Iran is also further formalising its relations with the SCO countries and, in September 2022, became its permanent member after being an observer state for almost 17 years.²⁵ If China is important to Iran regarding economic cooperation, then Russia is pivotal for defence ties. Defence cooperation has always existed between Iran and Russia. Still, especially after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the West predicts a further increase in collaboration in terms of providing military equipment and weapons. Iran is also building relations with other Eastern powers, like countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia, and it already has considerable military and ideological influence in the Middle East. Iran's Look East policy is synchronised with its policy of attaining self-sufficiency, relying less on Western countries' mercy in removing sanctions and finding alternatives for its economic development. Iran considers itself as successful in defeating Obama's crippling sanctions and Trump's maximum pressure.²⁶

Iran-China Economic Ties

Two factors triggered Iran's Look East policy. First is the continuous imposition of sanctions by the West, and second is the rise of Asian powers, especially China, which has become economically influential worldwide. For Iran, the East is the future as many, even in the West, believe wealth is shifting towards the East. So, the global pivot to the East has also triggered Iranians to look for other alternatives to the West. China provides one of the best alternatives to European countries regarding economic partnership. The European countries have been an important financial partner of Iran but have also gone on a back foot with the US and other international sanctions. Therefore, China has become the main economic target of Iran's Look East policy.

Moreover, Iran occupies a significant position in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to its geostrategic position and influence in the Middle East.²⁷ In this way, Iran and China can establish a strategic economic alliance. The 25-year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, announced in June 2020 and signed in March 2021, is one of the results of the Look East policy. Unfortunately, the full text of the agreement remains a secret. Still, it is expected to expand the partnership between the two countries in the sectors of the economy, oil and gas, banking, telecommunications and port infrastructure.

Iran is necessary to China's BRI because it seeks to establish land and maritime routes connecting China with the Middle East. China might also receive discounts on Iranian oil required for Chinese industries, which boosts its economic

position worldwide. There is a deal of almost \$400 billion of Chinese investments in Iran, which is a game changer for the economy of Iran. An essential aspect of this partnership is military and strategic cooperation. Some leaked documents and statements by officials have shown that there will be enhanced military cooperation through military training, naval drills, intelligence sharing, and research and development. It could significantly boost Iran's efforts to establish its regional hegemony in the Middle East.²⁸ Despite the possible partnership's positive aspects, some issues have created hurdles in reaching the agreement's full potential. First, Iran wants to become self-sufficient and not dependent on China. It does not want to replace the dependence on the West with reliance on the East. Therefore, it is cautious about maintaining its independence when dealing with Eastern power.²⁹ Secondly, on China's end, it refrains from choosing sides and focuses on the business. It does not want to engage in conflicts by aggravating the concerns of the US and its allies in the region. China has not only signed agreements with Iran but its competitors, such as Arabs and Israel. Although Iran possesses the world's fourth-largest crude oil reserves, China is currently importing most of the oil from Arab countries, and the trade ratio with them is higher than with Iran.³⁰ Although the Iran-China partnership could benefit both, there are concerns on both sides that refrain from benefitting from the partnership's full potential. Chinese cooperation with Iran is also suitable for regional peace and stability. Chinese investments in the Middle East can bring peace because China would want to protect its assets and stress ease in the region. It can act as a balancer in the area because it does not wish to disturb its investments.

Iran-Russia Growing Defence Ties

From the Islamic Revolution till the fall of the Soviet Union, there was mistrust between the two countries. The leader of the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, raised the slogan of neither East nor West. Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, the relations between Iran and Russia can grow in different dimensions. The ever-increasing Iran-Russia ties are based on overlapping and common bilateral, regional and international interests. Iran's regional policy aligns with Russian interests, especially in Syria, Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Both countries claim their alliance is directed toward fighting terrorism and extremism in the Middle East, especially in defeating ISIS. The situation in the Caspian Sea and its division is also subject to cooperation.³¹ Iran has adopted the idea of Realpolitik in its foreign policy, whereby it has allied with Russia to relieve US pressure. In this way, Tehran is seeking to preserve its central ideological norms. The relations with Russia were not as stable as they became after the election of President Ibrahim Raisi. It is because the reformist administration of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign

Minister Javad Zarif was seeking rapprochement with the US by signing JCPOA. However, IRGC and conservatives had different opinions. They still wanted to strengthen their ties with Russia and other Asian powers. IRGC's Quds Force Commander General Qasem Soleimani even met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in December 2015 to discuss strategic cooperation, including the Syrian conflict, a few months after the signing of the JCPOA.³² The Iranian military's relations with Russia were significant due to their collaboration in the Middle East, especially in Syria.

Iran's conservative leadership mistrusted the West, and their fear proved true when the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement unilaterally. Rouhani's administration faced much criticism at home for adopting a soft stance towards the West. However, Iran-Russia relations saw a new light after President Raisi was elected in August 2021, bringing changes in Iranian diplomacy and foreign policy. One of the first changes was increased securitisation with a more significant role of the military, especially IRGC. It is a prudent step for Iran because the US withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, and the conflict in Syria began to settle in favour of President Bashar. The second most crucial change seen in the Iranian policy after the failure of JCPOA and due to no further progress for a new nuclear agreement expected during the Biden period, which made Iran look towards the East and establish economic links with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. According to Ibrahim Raisi's vision, Iran has de-prioritised trade with European countries favouring Russia and Eurasian economies. The third factor impacting Iranian foreign policy is the great power rivalry, especially the economic competition between China and the US and the military tensions between Russia and the US, especially after the start of Ukraine war.

Finally, Iran's outlook on the changes at the regional level also defines the nature of its relations with Russia. Iran-Russia bilateral ties, especially in the military domain, are growing more than ever. After Ukraine war started, the Western media claimed that Russia had used Iranian drones in Ukraine. The Iranians also later accepted that they had provided drones to Russia but one month before the war had started. Since then, many bilateral defence agreements have been signed, and there have been high-level visits from both sides. It has also been agreed that Iran will receive Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia spring of 2023.³³ Iran and Russia face the same kind of pressure from the West, bringing them together and contributing to Iran's Look East Policy.

Iran's Look East Policy: Impacts on Nuclear Deal

For years, the West tried to engage Iran by reaching a compromise on its nuclear programme. JCPOA was one of the significant successes of the West in this

regard. Iran had agreed to cap its nuclear programme and reduce uranium enrichment, and in return, the US and other Western countries lifted their sanctions on Iran. This settlement was reached during the administration of President Obama, but when President Trump was elected, he unilaterally withdrew from the agreement making Arabs and Israel happy. Since the beginning of the nuclear negotiations, Arabs and Israel did not want the US to sign a deal with Iran. It was because Iran had already developed its economic base domestically; therefore, if sanctions had been lifted, Iran would have faced an economic boost of an unprecedented level. It has enormous reserves for oil and gas, which alone are significant financial assets for Iran. The Arab and Israeli pressure against Iran's nuclear deal continued even under the Biden administration. After Biden was elected as the President of the US, he stated that he wanted to revive the Iran nuclear deal, but no success has been achieved.

JCPOA was a success of the West in engaging Iran, and there was hope that peace could be restored in the Middle East. However, all these efforts were tarnished when the US withdrew from the agreement unilaterally. After retiring from the agreement, the US imposed more sanctions on Iran and adopted the maximum pressure policy. In response, Iran also stopped following the terms of the contract. Tehran was no longer bound to fulfil its moral obligations as the US had first violated the international norms of the agreement and international commitments. Iran began to increase its uranium enrichment to military grade. Iran had also shut down the surveillance cameras installed by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and stopped sharing further information about its nuclear programme. It raised concerns, especially among European countries. New nuclear negotiations started after Ibrahim Raisi became the President in 2021. However, these were indirect talks in which the US and Iran were not discussing matters directly but through other European countries, parties to the agreement. However, the new negotiations did not yield any benefits. Russia and China had sided with Iran when the US withdrew from JCPOA and called for the unconditional removal of the sanctions. However, the new nuclear negotiations have failed to produce any constructive results. With the start of Ukraine war and Iran's tilt towards Russia, the West has again adopted a harsh stance against Iran. More sanctions have been imposed on both Russia and Iran.

Russia favoured lifting sanctions on Iran, but geo-political situations could not make it happen. The problem was that European countries imported oil from Russia. The oil sector could not be left unsanctioned if sanctions were imposed because Russia generates enormous revenue from oil export. This situation made the Iran nuclear deal more urgent because if sanctions were removed over Iran, then the

West could meet its oil requirements. It would have also lowered the oil prices in the global market, which increased after Ukraine war. However, Russia added a new complication by raising the concern that European countries will be free to trade if sanctions are removed on Iran. However, sanctions on Russia will still be in place, and it will not be able to deal with Russia. In this way, the West would find an alternative to Russian oil in the form of oil from Iran. In this situation, the sanctions on Russia would remain intact, and Russia would not be able to benefit from lifting sanctions from Iran. Therefore, along with other issues, the complication created by Russia has created hurdles for the conclusion of the nuclear deal. The Russians want that there should be equal rights for all the participants of the nuclear agreement and cooperation in all sectors.³⁴ Iran can increase its atomic capabilities now as the nuclear deal is becoming a lost cause. If Iran successfully develops nuclear weapons, it will be disastrous for regional peace and security. Due to constant pressures from the West, the only way left for Iran will be to move closer to Eastern powers.

Outcome of Iran's Look East Policy

One of the significant outcomes of Iran's Look East policy is that the Western policy of isolating Iran by imposing sanctions on it has been unsuccessful to the full extent. Iran has found a way out of the maximum pressures by establishing closer ties with Asian powers like China, Russia and other Eurasian economies. It is trying to engage with regional countries economically and strategically. One of the manifestations of this policy is that Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2022. Iran is also developing relations with other countries, such as North Korea, India, and Malaysia. It also raises concerns in the West, especially the US. The strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran holds negative consequences for the West. The collaboration is not only limited to Syria but also to Ukraine war. The Russians used Iranian drones in Ukraine, further aggravating the US and European countries. Russia can also learn from Iran the ways to counter Western sanctions. If the West continues its policy of isolating Iran internationally, it will further tilt towards the East. It is because Iran will become more active regionally and feel no more obligated to follow the nuclear deal. Although Iran's Look East policy can bring positive outcomes for its overall development, Eastern countries are careful while dealing with Iran. It is because of the fear of secondary US sanctions. These countries know that they can benefit from Iran's energy resources. Still, they remain cautious due to the fear of US sanctions, Western dominance on international institutions like the IMF and World Bank, and their misgivings about Iran's nuclear programme. These are some hurdles Iran faces while implementing its Look East Policy.

Conclusion

According to Realism, states are rational actors acting under their national interests, and the state's primary goal is its national security and survival. Therefore, national power and capabilities are the primary criteria for state relationships. Iran possesses the necessary assets to place itself as one of the Middle East's most powerful and influential states because of its geography, natural resources and population. However, despite these favourable features, Iran failed to convince US-led Western countries and their regional allies about its regional and trans-regional ambitions, which led to competition and confrontation between Iran with these countries. As a result, Iran ultimately adopted the Look East policy to cope with threats posed by the US and its allies for its security and survival.

Under President Ibrahim Raisi, Iran has adopted a Look East policy to counter US pressures. Iran's economy has been affected by the economic sanctions imposed by international organisations and the US-led Western countries. To meet its requirements for economic survival, Iran has started looking towards Asian powers like China and Russia. This policy was devised under the administration of President Ahmadinejad, but it was genuinely implemented under President Ibrahim Raisi. US withdrawal from JCPOA, the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani and rising tensions between the US and Iran has made the Look East Policy a need for Iranian foreign policy. Iran sees China as its economic partner, while Russia is its strategic ally. Iran and China have signed a 25-year strategic partnership under which China has pledged to invest \$400 billion in different projects. Once this partnership is implemented, it will significantly impact Iran's economy. With abundant oil and gas, Iran could become an economic power. On the other hand, Russia and Iran are cooperating in defence and strategic domains as both countries have signed bilateral agreements to provide each other with military equipment, drones and aircraft. However, Iran is cautious while extending relations with these countries because it does not aim to become dependent on them; instead, it wants to become self-sufficient through cooperation.

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