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Author(s): Mohammad Javad Zarif

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What Iran Really Wants

Iranian Foreign Policy in the Rouhani Era

Mohammad Javad Zarif

Foreign policy is a critical component in the lives, conduct, and governance of all nation-states. But it has become even more significant in recent years as interstate relations have grown ever more complex. The inexorable rise in the number of international players—including multilateral organizations, nonstate actors, and even individuals—has further complicated policymaking. Meanwhile, the ongoing process of globalization—however conceived and defined, whether lauded or despised—has brought its inescapable weight to bear on the foreign policies of all states, whether large or small, developed or developing.

Since its establishment by a popular revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has grappled with these challenges. The post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran has been based on a number of cherished ideals and objectives embedded in the country's constitution. These include the preservation of Iran's independence, territorial integrity, and national security and the achievement of long-term, sustainable national development. Beyond its borders, Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals, including Islamic democracy; to expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighboring Muslim-majority countries and nonaligned states; to reduce tensions and manage disagreements with other states; to foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement; and to promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction.

MOHAMMAD JAVAD ZARIF is Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This essay is adapted from the policy paper he submitted in August 2013 to the Islamic Consultative Assembly, Iran's parliament, during his confirmation process. Follow him on Twitter @JZarif.

IRAN IN THE MULTILATERAL ERA

Since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the bipolar world in the early 1990s, the global order has undergone a major structural transformation. But a firm new order has not yet emerged. As was the case during other transitions in the past, the fluid, complex, and uncertain state of international affairs today is extremely perilous and challenging. Previous transitions were usually complicated by military rivalries and even outright war among the dominant powers of the time. Today's rivalries are similarly quite intense. However, due to a number of factors—the substantially changed global environment, changes in the nature of power, and the diversity and multiplicity of state and nonstate actors—competition these days mostly takes a nonmilitary form.

The concept of power itself, traditionally measured in terms of military might, has changed substantially. New forms of influence—economic, technological, and cultural—have emerged. Concurrently, changes at the conceptual level have brought the cultural, normative, and ideational components of power to the fore, making power more accessible to a larger pool of actors. Moreover, the gradual rise of multilateralism in the wake of World War II has elevated the importance of international norms and consensus.

Despite such substantial changes in the architecture of the world order, remnants and beneficiaries of the old order have tried to salvage the wreckage of the past. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the emergence in the United States of apocalyptic theories declaring “the end of history” or a “clash of civilizations” represented a hasty reaction to the enemy vacuum created by the end of the Cold War and to the rising status of Muslims on the global stage. Through a series of subsequent Islamophobic campaigns—sometimes promoted as official state policy and perpetuated systematically in various forms and guises—some in the West tried to depict the Islamic community as a new ideological enemy on a global scale.

But rather than experiencing a divergence, the world is now moving toward a state of mutual interdependence. Contrary to the situation in the past, the pursuit of go-it-alone policies by former hegemon or current powers has led to a state of impasse and paralysis. Today, most nation-states, regardless of their size, power, influence, or other attributes, have come to realize that isolationism, whether voluntary or imposed, is neither a virtue nor an advantage. Collective action and cooperation have become the hallmarks of the era.

Multilateralism, the collective search for common solutions to common problems, has proved its desirability and practical efficacy at both the regional and the global levels. Even major world powers have learned the hard way that they can no longer pursue their interests or achieve their particular goals unilaterally. The gradual yet growing trend of coalition-making, at the regional and global levels, both for short-term purposes and for more enduring enterprises, bears witness to the inescapability of collective action. Willful cooperation has gradually developed as a new working pattern of interaction among states; it has come to replace the once predominant and now discredited pattern of confrontation, unconditional subservience, and perpetual rivalry.

In Iran's view, the nuclear crisis is wholly manufactured and therefore reversible.

As an inevitable consequence of globalization and the ensuing rise of collective action and cooperative approaches, the idea of seeking or imposing zero-sum games has lost its luster. Still, some actors cling to their old habits and habitually pursue their own interests at the expense of others. The insistence of some major powers on playing zero-sum games with win-lose outcomes has usually led to lose-lose outcomes for all the players involved.

The much-challenged position of the United States in the world today, notwithstanding its preponderance of military power, is a glaring case in point. The actual situation in various parts of the world where the United States is directly involved, most notably in the greater Middle East and in Iran's immediate neighborhood, points to Washington's reluctant but unmistakable turn to the path of coalition building with other global powers and even regional actors. China, India, and Russia are engaged in intense competition, primarily with the Western bloc, in a concerted effort to secure more prominent global roles. However, major powers and emerging powers alike are now loath to use military means to resolve rivalries, differences, or even disputes.

This has led to the gradual rise of a revisionist approach to foreign policy. Nation-states, regardless of their current position and power, now seek to enhance their stature and achieve their goals through a carefully balanced combination of cooperation and competition. The deadly rivalries of the past, a function of brute force and hard power,

have gradually given way to cultural, normative, and ideational forms of competition. The uncertainty produced by the current transition in global norms and behavior also has a downside. If states miscalculate their own power or misperceive the capabilities and intentions of others, it could prove extremely costly to all involved. The intrinsic riskiness of this state of affairs calls for governments to rely on more objective analysis and to make careful assessments of their own positions and capabilities as well as of the intentions and possible conduct of others.

All states can take advantage of this transitional stage to advance their positions and further their interests. Governments must make realistic calculations about their own relative advantages and vulnerabilities and, most important, articulate clear sets of objectives and plans. Over the past few decades, especially since the end of the Cold War, states that have pursued clearly articulated foreign policies have been the most successful in advancing their regional and global positions; those that have lacked an understanding of the global environment and pursued policies based on miscalculations and misjudgments have either lost their previous positions or become marginalized.

FULFILLING IRAN'S POTENTIAL

As a solid regional power in this era of intense transition in global politics, Iran stands in a unique position. Given its large landmass and unique geographic position along the east–west transit route, Iran, since antiquity, has enjoyed a preeminent position in its region and beyond. Although Iran's civilization and cultural heritage have remained intact, its political and economic fortunes have fluctuated periodically, depending on, among other things, its governance at home and its relations with the outside world. The victory of the 1979 revolution, a popular, nationwide, antimonarchical uprising with a mixture of republican and Islamic traits, contributed to the establishment of a new revolutionary order in the country. The repercussions were drastic, and the revolution deeply affected the country's foreign relations, not only in its immediate neighborhood but also throughout the greater Middle East and in the rest of the world.

Any objective analysis of Iran's unique attributes within the larger context of its tumultuous region would reveal the country's significant potential for a prominent regional and global role. The Islamic Republic can actively contribute to the restoration of regional peace, security,



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the author in Davos, Switzerland, January 2014

and stability and play a catalytic role during this current transitional stage in international relations. In light of the increasing importance of normative and ideational factors in global politics, the Islamic Republic is well suited to draw on the rich millennial heritage of Iranian society and culture and the significant heritage of the Islamic Revolution, particularly its indigenously derived and sustained participatory model of governance. Iran can use such strengths to help realize the deeply cherished national aspirations of the Iranian people, including the achievement of long-term development and regional ascendance commensurate with the country's inherent capacities and stature.

Iran also benefits from a number of historical characteristics that could be considered unique sources of opportunity, many of which have not been properly or fully leveraged in the past. For example, Iran has remained independent from outside powers and practiced genuine nonalignment, lending it a particular freedom of action within the existing global order. Iran can also leverage its political traditions. It has successfully established an indigenous democratic model of governance, developing and maintaining a rare religious democracy in the modern world. It has an unmatched cultural identity emanating

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from its dynamic blend of Iranian and Islamic culture, which it can use to promote its mission and message throughout the entire Islamic world. As an ancient society with a plurality of ethnic, religious, and

Rouhani's platform offered a wise critique of the previous administration's conduct of foreign relations.

linguistic minorities, Iran also offers a model for political inclusion. And the country has achieved all of this at the center of a vital geostrategic region that has witnessed a long history of major-power rivalries, interventions of all sorts, and protracted military conflicts. Finally, Iran has also demon-

strated its potent ideational capabilities and universal reach through such initiatives as President Muhammad Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilizations" and President Hassan Rouhani's recent proposal for a "world against violence and extremism," which was adopted as a resolution by the UN General Assembly last December.

Governance in the modern world is challenging for every state, regardless of its size, demographics, form of government, geographic position, level of development, or relations with the world. Iran has been an organized state since antiquity, albeit with some periods of interruption. It has thus had extensive relations throughout history, in war and in peace, with its numerous neighbors and with other contending powers. It has accumulated a rich, layered collective memory and a deep reservoir of experiences. Iran borders seven countries and shares access to either the Caspian Sea or the Persian Gulf with 11 countries; both bodies of water are of interest to the littoral states as well as to a host of outside powers. Thus, Iran inevitably has a full plate to deal with when it comes to its national security and foreign relations.

Iran also finds itself in a fundamentally crisis-ridden region. The decades-long occupation of Palestine and the ongoing conflict there has taken a destructive toll on the well-being and development of the entire Middle East. The chronic turmoil, instability, and violence in the region have grown worse in recent years due to a series of protracted external military interventions, most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since early 2011, political upheavals in the Arab world and their generally bloody aftermaths—dubbed by some during their initial stages as "the Arab Spring" and by others as "the Islamic Awakening"—have introduced another destabilizing factor to the region. The trend appears likely to

continue for quite some time, even though the direction of the process remains extremely uncertain.

Given this overall regional picture and the dynamics at work between local and external players—most prominently the United States—Iran today has to grapple with a number of major challenges in its external relations. Needless to say, the long shadow of the decades-old and still ongoing tussle between Iran and the United States, which has been much exacerbated as a result of the nuclear imbroglio, has further complicated the state of relations between Iran and a host of its neighbors. Meanwhile, there has been a recent surge in the activities of extremist and violent nonstate actors in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, with a clear and unmistakable anti-Iran, anti-Shiite platform. A well-orchestrated campaign has promoted Islamophobia, Iranophobia, and Shiite-phobia and depicted Iran as a threat to regional peace and security; extended support to anti-Iran claimants in the region; tarnished Iran's global image and undermined its stature; armed Iran's regional rivals; actively supported anti-Iran forces, including the Taliban and other extremist groups; and fomented disagreements between Iran and its neighbors.

MODERATION AND HOPE

It was within this international context that Rouhani won a decisive victory in the heavily contested Iranian presidential election in June 2013. He won 51 percent of all the votes cast in the first round against five conservative rivals. His political platform of prudent moderation and hope represented a significant turning point in Iranian politics. The fact that voter turnout reached 73 percent suggests that the public had moved past the lingering divisions of the June 2009 election.

Rouhani's pragmatic positions on foreign and domestic issues proved reassuring to the Iranian electorate. Rouhani distinguished his campaign from the murky platforms of his rivals in several key respects: his clear analysis of Iran's current situation, his lucid and unambiguous articulation of the major challenges facing society and the state, and his honest and straightforward approach to problems and possible solutions. In this way, Rouhani managed to mobilize the disenchanting segments of the population to take an active interest in the final days of the campaign and to participate in the national vote.

Rouhani's foreign policy platform was based on a principled, sober, and wise critique of the conduct of foreign relations during the

preceding eight years under the previous administration. Rouhani promised to remedy the unacceptable state of affairs through a major overhaul of the country's foreign policy. The changes he proposed demonstrated a realistic understanding of the contemporary

Israel and the United States seek to delegitimize Iran by portraying it as a threat to the global order.

international order, the current external challenges facing the Islamic Republic, and what it will take to restore Iran's relations with the world to a state of normalcy. Rouhani also called for a discourse of "prudent moderation." This vision aims to move Iran away from confrontation and toward

dialogue, constructive interaction, and understanding, all with an eye to safeguarding national security, elevating the stature of Iran, and achieving long-term comprehensive development.

Prudent moderation is an approach based on realism, self-confidence, realistic idealism, and constructive engagement. Realism requires an understanding of the nature, structure, mechanisms, and power dynamics of the international system and of the potential and limits of its institutions. Rouhani's moderation brings together a profound conviction in the cherished ideals of the Islamic Revolution with an objective evaluation of Iran's actual capacities, capabilities, and constraints. It demands a deliberate aversion to actions that are insulting, condescending, or self-aggrandizing. It promotes self-confidence based on an understanding of Iran's material and moral resources, including the collective wisdom of its citizenry. It values accountability, transparency, and honesty in dealing with the populace and implies a willingness to reform and improve existing policies. Rouhani's approach entails a delicate balancing act: between national, regional, and global needs, on the one hand, and the available means, instruments, and policies, on the other; between persistence and flexibility in foreign policy; between goals and means; and among various instruments of power in a dynamically changing world. Finally, Rouhani's commitment to constructive engagement requires dialogue and interaction with other nations on an equal footing, with mutual respect, and in the service of shared interests. It requires that all participants make serious efforts to reduce tensions, build confidence, and achieve détente.

A WAY FORWARD

Guided by this conceptual framework, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic under the current administration will be based on achieving understanding and consensus at the national level and constructive engagement and effective cooperation with the outside world. Iran's policies will be guided by the principles of dignity, rationality, and prudence. This overall strategy aims to safeguard and strengthen Iran's national security, diffuse or eliminate external threats, combat Islamophobia and Iranophobia, elevate the country's stature, and achieve comprehensive development.

With the Ministry of Foreign Affairs serving as the central organ for planning and executing Iran's foreign policy, in close coordination with other government bodies, the Islamic Republic will pursue several key goals moving forward. First, Iran will expand and deepen its bilateral and multilateral relations through meaningful engagement with a wide range of states and organizations, including international economic institutions. Multilateralism will play a central role in Iran's external relations. That will involve active contributions to global norm-setting and assertive participation in coalitions of like-minded states to promote peace and stability. A second priority will be to defend the individual and collective rights of Iranian nationals everywhere and to promote Iranian-Islamic culture, the Persian language, Islamic values, and Islamic democracy as a form of governance. Third, Iran will continue to support the cause of oppressed people across the world, especially in Palestine, and will continue its principled rejection of Zionist encroachments in the Muslim world.

Given the pressing challenges that it faces today, Iran will also focus on a number of more urgent aims. The top priority is to diffuse and ultimately defeat the international anti-Iranian campaign, spearheaded by Israel and its American benefactors, who seek to "securitize" Iran—that is, to delegitimize the Islamic Republic by portraying it as a threat to the global order. The main vehicle for this campaign is the "crisis" over Iran's peaceful nuclear program—a crisis that, in Iran's view, is wholly manufactured and therefore reversible. That is why Rouhani wasted no time in breaking the impasse and engaging in negotiations with the so-called P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany) to find common ground and reach an agreement that will ensure nonproliferation, preserve Iran's scientific accomplishments, honor Iran's inalienable national rights

under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and end the unjust sanctions that have been imposed by outside powers.

Iran has no interest in nuclear weapons and is convinced that such weapons would not enhance its security. Iran does not have the means to engage in nuclear deterrence—directly or through proxies—against its adversaries. Furthermore, the Iranian government believes that even a perception that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons is detrimental to the country's security and to its regional role, since attempts by Iran to gain strategic superiority in the Persian Gulf would inevitably provoke responses that would diminish Iran's conventional military advantage.

Therefore, the ongoing negotiations over the nuclear issue face no insurmountable barriers. The only requirements are political will and good faith for the negotiators to “get to yes” and achieve the objective established by the Joint Plan of Action adopted in Geneva last November, which states, “The goal for these negotiations is to reach a mutually-agreed long-term comprehensive solution that would ensure Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful.” The unexpectedly fast pace of progress in the negotiations so far augurs well for a speedy resolution of this unnecessary crisis and for the opening up of new diplomatic horizons.

Iran will also endeavor to diffuse external threats by resolving outstanding issues with the rest of the world, in particular with its immediate neighbors. Confidence building and cooperation will be the cornerstones of Iran's regional policy. That is why last year, Iran proposed the creation of a security and cooperation arrangement in the Persian Gulf area. As a responsible regional power, Iran will actively participate in combating and containing extremism and violence through bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation with countries in the region and beyond.

Moreover, Iran will prudently manage its relations with the United States by containing existing disagreements and preventing further tensions from emerging unnecessarily, thereby gradually easing tensions. Iran will also engage with European countries and other Western states with the goal of reinvigorating and further expanding relations. This normalization process must be based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual interest, and it must address issues of legitimate concern to both sides. Iran will also expand and consolidate its amicable ties with other major powers, such as China, India, and

Russia. As the chair of the Non-Aligned Movement until 2015, Iran will reach out to emerging powers of the “global South” and will try to responsibly mobilize their enormous potential for contributing to global peace and prosperity.

The Iranian people, with their massive turnout in last year’s presidential election and their decisive choice of assertive engagement, have provided a unique window of opportunity for the new Iranian government and for the world to chart a different and much more promising course in our bilateral and multilateral relations. The Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to vigorously honor its citizens’ choice, which will undoubtedly have a tremendous impact on world affairs.

For this endeavor to succeed, it is imperative for other states to accept the reality of Iran’s prominent role in the Middle East and beyond and to recognize and respect Iran’s legitimate national rights, interests, and security concerns. It is equally important for other states to scrupulously observe the sensitivities of the Iranian nation, particularly regarding its national dignity, independence, and achievements. Westerners, especially Americans, need to modify their understandings of Iran and the Middle East and develop a better grasp of the region’s realities, avoiding the analytic and practical mistakes of the past. Courage and leadership are required to seize this historic opportunity, which might not come again. The opportunity must not be lost. 🌐