



NATIONAL INTEREST AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article examines Iran's foreign policy through a realist analytical framework, focusing on the relationship between national interest, domestic political structure, and strategic alignment in the international system. Departing from normative or ideological explanations, the study situates Iran's external behavior within the constraints of an anarchic international order, where survival, security, and power asymmetries shape state conduct. Drawing on core realist concepts such as anarchy, rational state behavior, alliance formation, and threat perception, the article argues that Iran's persistent strategic isolation cannot be explained solely by external pressures but must also be understood in relation to internal decision-making mechanisms and their interaction with systemic realities. The analysis highlights how misalignment between material capabilities and foreign policy orientation has reinforced security dilemmas and limited Iran's strategic options. By applying realism as an explanatory rather than prescriptive tool, the article contributes to debates on Middle Eastern foreign policy and offers a theoretically grounded reassessment of Iran's position in the regional and global order.

Keywords: Iran's foreign policy; national interest, realism, strategic alignment, regional security

Introduction

Foreign policy analysis in the Middle East has frequently oscillated between ideological interpretations and historically driven narratives. While such approaches provide important contextual insights, they often obscure the structural constraints under which states operate in the international system. This article adopts a realist perspective to analyze Iran's foreign policy behavior, emphasizing systemic pressures, strategic calculation, and the primacy of national interest over normative or ideological considerations.

Realist theory, one of the most enduring traditions in international relations scholarship,



conceptualizes the international system as anarchic, lacking a central authority capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing security (Waltz 1979). Within such a system, states are compelled to prioritize survival, assess threats, and pursue strategies that enhance their relative position. Alliances, rivalries, and patterns of cooperation are therefore understood not as expressions of shared values, but as responses to power distribution and perceived vulnerability.

Iran's foreign policy since the establishment of the Islamic Republic has been marked by recurring tensions with dominant international actors, sustained sanctions, and fluctuating regional alignments. Rather than treating these outcomes as the inevitable result of ideological confrontation alone, this article situates Iran's external behavior within a realist analytical framework that accounts for both systemic constraints and domestic political dynamics. By examining how internal structures of authority interact with the logic of anarchy and power asymmetry, the article seeks to explain why certain strategic choices have persisted despite their apparent costs.

In doing so, the study contributes to a growing body of realist-informed scholarship on Middle Eastern foreign policy, offering a theoretically grounded interpretation of Iran's international conduct that prioritizes explanatory clarity over normative judgment.

Theoretical Framework: Realism, Anarchy, and National Interest

This article adopts a realist framework to analyze Iran's foreign policy behavior within the constraints of the contemporary international system. Realism, as one of the foundational approaches in international relations theory, emphasizes the primacy of states as the principal actors, the absence of a central authority in international politics, and the centrality of national interest and survival in shaping state behavior.

A core assumption of realist theory is that the international system is characterized by **anarchy**, understood not as chaos, but as the lack of an overarching authority capable of enforcing rules and guaranteeing security (Waltz 1979). In such a system, states cannot rely on external actors for protection and must therefore prioritize self-help strategies. Security becomes a primary concern, and the pursuit of national interest is shaped by considerations of power, threat perception, and relative capability rather than moral or ideological commitments.

Within this framework, **national interest** functions as the guiding principle of foreign policy. Classical realists such as Morgenthau (1948) conceptualize national interest in terms of power, while structural realists emphasize how systemic pressures constrain and channel state behavior regardless of internal preferences (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Despite differences among realist strands, there is broad agreement that states seek to preserve their autonomy, minimize vulnerability, and avoid strategic isolation.



Realism also assumes that norms, identities, and ideological orientations play a secondary role when they conflict with core security imperatives. While such factors may shape rhetoric or short-term policy choices, they do not override the structural constraints imposed by the international system. Consequently, sustained foreign policy strategies that ignore shifts in power distribution or misinterpret threat environments risk producing outcomes contrary to a state's long-term interests.

This theoretical framework provides the analytical foundation for examining Iran's foreign policy. Rather than evaluating policy choices in normative or ideological terms, the article situates Iran's external behavior within a realist logic that foregrounds systemic pressures, security dilemmas, and strategic calculation. By doing so, it seeks to explain patterns of confrontation, isolation, and alignment as outcomes of interaction between domestic political structures and the anarchic international environment.

Positioning the Study within Existing Literature

Scholarly analyses of Iran's foreign policy have long been shaped by approaches that emphasize ideology, revolutionary identity, and normative commitments as primary explanatory variables. A significant body of literature interprets the external behavior of the Islamic Republic through the lenses of Shi'i political theology, revolutionary export, anti-imperial discourse, and resistance ideology. Within this framework, Iran is frequently portrayed as an exceptional case whose foreign policy behavior deviates from conventional patterns of state conduct due to its ideological foundations. While these studies offer important insights into Iran's post-revolutionary rhetoric and self-representation, they often overstate the autonomy of ideology and understate the constraining effects of international structure.

Alongside this tradition, constructivist and identity-based approaches have focused on discourse, historical memory, and domestic identity formation in shaping Iran's foreign policy preferences. These works illuminate how narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and historical grievance inform elite perceptions and contribute to the legitimization of foreign policy decisions. However, such approaches tend to privilege ideational continuity at the expense of strategic adaptation. As a result, they encounter difficulty in explaining Iran's repeated episodes of pragmatism, selective cooperation with adversaries, and willingness to recalibrate ideological positions when confronted with acute security or economic pressures.

By contrast, realist interpretations of Iran's foreign policy—though present in the literature—remain comparatively fragmented and underdeveloped. Existing realist-oriented studies often concentrate on specific issues such as deterrence, balance-of-power dynamics, or Iran's rivalry with the United States and its regional allies. While these analyses capture important dimensions of Iran's security environment, they frequently stop short of offering a comprehensive framework that integrates domestic political structure, state rationality, and long-term strategic behavior. Consequently, realism is often treated as a partial or corrective perspective rather than as a central analytical lens.



This article positions itself explicitly within this underexplored realist tradition. Rather than dismissing ideology or identity, it conceptualizes them as instruments that operate within—and are constrained by—the anarchic structure of the international system. From this perspective, ideological discourse does not function as an independent driver of foreign policy but as a flexible resource employed by the state to mobilize domestic support, signal resolve, and legitimize strategies oriented toward regime survival and strategic autonomy. Such an approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and behavior in Iran's foreign policy.

The article further contributes to the literature by emphasizing patterns of continuity across different political administrations in Iran. Despite shifts in leadership, factional competition, and changes in ideological emphasis, Iran's core foreign policy objectives—preserving regime security, countering external threats, and maintaining strategic depth—have remained remarkably consistent. This continuity suggests that structural constraints and national interest calculations exert a stronger influence than is often acknowledged in ideational or norm-driven accounts.

By situating Iran's foreign policy within a realist framework, this study challenges exceptionalist narratives and repositions Iran as a rational actor operating under conditions similar to those faced by other middle powers in a hostile regional and international environment. In doing so, it bridges a gap between Iran-specific scholarship and broader debates in international relations theory. The analysis thus contributes not only to the study of Iranian foreign policy but also to the comparative understanding of how states with ideological identities navigate systemic pressures and pursue strategic alignment in an anarchic world.

National Interest, State Behavior, and Realism

In realist theory, the concept of **national interest** functions as the central analytical category through which state behavior in international politics is understood. Rather than referring to moral preferences or ideological commitments, national interest denotes a set of priorities linked to survival, security, and the preservation of state autonomy under conditions of international anarchy. From this perspective, foreign policy decisions are evaluated primarily in terms of their contribution to maintaining or enhancing a state's strategic position within the international system.

Classical and structural realist scholars converge on the assumption that states are compelled to act rationally in pursuit of their national interest, even when such actions conflict with normative or ideological considerations. The absence of a central authority in the international system obliges states to rely on self-help, making security a precondition for all other political, economic, and social objectives. Consequently, state behavior is shaped less by declared intentions than by systemic pressures and relative power distributions.



Within this framework, **state behavior** emerges as a function of external constraints rather than internal preferences alone. While domestic factors may influence policy formulation, realism emphasizes that the range of viable options available to decision-makers is ultimately limited by the international environment. States that misinterpret these constraints or overestimate their capacity to challenge dominant power structures risk strategic overextension and increased vulnerability.

Applied to the study of foreign policy, realism therefore prioritizes the analysis of how states define threats, identify allies, and allocate resources in response to systemic incentives. National interest is not a fixed or immutable concept; it evolves in relation to changes in the balance of power and the strategic behavior of other states. However, the underlying logic of survival remains constant, providing a stable analytical lens through which continuity and change in foreign policy can be assessed.

This realist understanding of national interest provides a necessary foundation for examining cases in which foreign policy outcomes appear inconsistent with declared strategic goals. When state behavior produces persistent insecurity, isolation, or heightened confrontation, realism directs attention to possible misalignments between policy choices and systemic realities. Such misalignments form a critical entry point for analyzing the interaction between national interest and foreign policy behavior in specific empirical contexts.

Domestic Structure, Foreign Policy Behavior, and National Interest

While realist theory traditionally emphasizes the international system as the primary determinant of state behavior, a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that domestic political structures significantly condition how states perceive threats and pursue national interests. Foreign policy behavior is therefore best understood as the outcome of an interaction between systemic pressures and internal political arrangements.

In the case of Iran, domestic political fragmentation has played a central role in shaping external behavior. Rather than operating as a unified rational actor, the Iranian state exhibits multiple, often competing centers of authority that influence foreign policy decision-making. This internal plurality complicates the formulation of coherent long-term strategies and weakens the state's capacity to respond consistently to external incentives and constraints.

From a realist perspective, rational state behavior presupposes a relatively consolidated decision-making structure capable of translating national interest into policy. Where such consolidation is absent, foreign policy may appear erratic, ideologically driven, or reactive, even when systemic conditions call for strategic adjustment. Iran's foreign policy trajectory illustrates this tension: systemic pressures encourage accommodation and strategic alignment, while domestic political dynamics frequently produce resistance, symbolic confrontation, or policy incoherence.



Domestic institutions also affect how national interest itself is defined. Competing political actors may advance divergent interpretations of security, sovereignty, and strategic priority, each grounded in distinct ideological, institutional, or material interests. As a result, foreign policy behavior may reflect internal power struggles rather than a unified assessment of external threats and opportunities.

In this sense, Iran's international posture cannot be attributed solely to the anarchic structure of the international system. It is equally shaped by domestic political mechanisms that mediate, filter, and at times distort realist imperatives. Understanding this interaction is essential for explaining both the persistence of Iran's foreign policy challenges and the limitations of purely systemic explanations.

Domestic Structure, State Rationality, and Foreign Policy Behavior

A central assumption of realist theory is that states behave as rational actors seeking to maximize their security and national interest within an anarchic international system. However, this assumption does not imply uniformity in state behavior. Domestic political structures play a decisive role in shaping how rationality is defined, interpreted, and operationalized in foreign policy decision-making.

In states where authority is fragmented across multiple institutions and power centers, foreign policy outcomes often reflect internal competition rather than coherent strategic calculation. Under such conditions, external behavior may appear inconsistent or contradictory, not because national interest is absent, but because competing actors define that interest differently. From a realist perspective, this internal fragmentation weakens a state's ability to respond effectively to systemic constraints.

In the case of Iran, foreign policy behavior cannot be fully understood without reference to the complex interaction between formal institutions, informal power networks, and ideological authority. While realism treats the state as the primary unit of analysis, it does not deny the relevance of domestic structures; rather, it assumes that these structures condition how systemic pressures are processed. When internal mechanisms fail to translate external threats into unified strategic responses, the result is often reactive rather than proactive policy behavior.

This dynamic has significant implications for state rationality. Rational action, in realist terms, presupposes a capacity to prioritize long-term survival over short-term ideological or factional gains. When domestic political incentives reward confrontation or symbolic resistance, foreign policy may diverge from what realism would predict as optimal behavior under given power asymmetries. Such divergence increases strategic vulnerability and intensifies external pressure.

Therefore, the relationship between domestic structure and foreign policy behavior is not secondary but constitutive. A realist analysis of Iran's international position must account for how internal political arrangements mediate the pursuit of national interest. Without institutional coherence and



strategic consensus, even materially capable states struggle to convert power potential into effective influence within the international system.

Realism Applied to Iran's Foreign Policy

Applying realist theory to Iran's foreign policy reveals a pattern of strategic behavior that prioritizes regime survival, national interest, and relative power over ideological consistency. While the Islamic Republic frequently articulates its external posture through revolutionary and religious discourse, a closer examination of its actions suggests that such rhetoric operates within the constraints imposed by the international system. From a realist perspective, Iran behaves as a rational actor navigating an anarchic environment marked by persistent security threats, regional rivalries, and systemic power asymmetries.

One of the defining features of Iran's strategic environment has been its long-standing perception of external threat. Since the early years of the Islamic Republic, Iran has faced a hostile regional order, including military confrontation with Iraq, diplomatic isolation by Western powers, and the sustained presence of extra-regional actors—most notably the United States—in the Middle East. Realism posits that under conditions of anarchy, states prioritize survival and security above all other objectives. Iran's foreign policy behavior, when viewed through this lens, reflects consistent efforts to deter adversaries, balance against superior powers, and reduce vulnerability to external intervention.

Iran's regional engagement illustrates this logic clearly. Its involvement in neighboring conflict zones and its support for allied non-state actors are often interpreted as ideologically driven expansionism. However, a realist interpretation reframes these policies as instruments of strategic depth and deterrence. By extending its influence beyond its borders, Iran seeks to create buffer zones, complicate potential military action against it, and enhance its bargaining position vis-à-vis regional and global powers. Such behavior aligns closely with realist expectations regarding asymmetric balancing by relatively weaker states.

Similarly, Iran's approach to international institutions and diplomatic negotiations demonstrates pragmatic adaptation rather than ideological rigidity. Despite rhetorical opposition to Western-dominated global structures, Iran has repeatedly engaged in negotiations, agreements, and multilateral forums when doing so served its national interest. This pattern suggests that ideology functions as a flexible resource rather than a binding constraint. When ideological commitments conflict with survival imperatives or strategic advantage, Iranian policymakers have shown a willingness to recalibrate their positions.

Domestic political structures further mediate, but do not negate, this realist logic. The Islamic Republic's complex institutional landscape—characterized by overlapping authorities and factional competition—shapes how foreign policy decisions are articulated and implemented. Yet these



internal dynamics operate within the boundaries set by external pressures. Strategic continuity across different administrations and leadership changes underscores the primacy of systemic constraints over individual or factional preferences. From a realist standpoint, this continuity is expected: while domestic actors may influence tactics and rhetoric, the core orientation of foreign policy remains anchored in national interest.

Moreover, Iran's strategic behavior demonstrates sensitivity to shifts in the international balance of power. Changes in regional alignments, fluctuations in great power involvement, and evolving security configurations have consistently prompted recalibration in Iran's external conduct. This responsiveness supports the realist claim that state behavior is shaped less by fixed ideological commitments and more by assessments of relative power and opportunity.

Taken together, these patterns challenge interpretations that portray Iran's foreign policy as exceptional or fundamentally irrational. Instead, they suggest that Iran operates as a strategically calculating actor constrained by the same systemic pressures that shape the behavior of other states. Ideological discourse, while highly visible, does not override the underlying logic of survival and power maximization. Rather, it functions as a legitimizing framework that adapts to realist imperatives.

By applying realism to Iran's foreign policy, this segment reinforces the article's broader argument: that the Islamic Republic's external behavior is best understood not as an anomaly within the international system, but as a variation of rational state conduct under conditions of structural constraint. This perspective allows for a more coherent and analytically grounded understanding of Iran's strategic choices, while also situating the case within the mainstream of international relations theory.

Strategic Alignment, Regional Security, and Systemic Constraints

Within the realist framework, regional security dynamics are inseparable from broader systemic constraints. States operating in strategically sensitive regions must continuously balance local imperatives against the pressures exerted by global power structures. The Middle East, characterized by persistent instability, external intervention, and overlapping security dilemmas, presents a particularly demanding environment in this regard.

Iran's regional behavior cannot be adequately understood without reference to the structural conditions shaping security in the Persian Gulf and its surrounding regions. The concentration of vital energy routes, the presence of external military powers, and the fragility of regional state institutions have produced a security environment in which misperception and escalation are constant risks. Under such conditions, actions interpreted domestically as defensive or deterrent may be perceived externally as destabilizing or revisionist.



Realist theory suggests that sustainable security outcomes are more likely to emerge from **strategic alignment** than from unilateral assertion. Alignment, in this sense, does not imply subordination but rather calculated engagement designed to reduce uncertainty and manage threat perceptions. States that fail to situate their regional policies within prevailing systemic expectations risk reinforcing counterbalancing coalitions and intensifying their own strategic isolation.

Iran’s regional posture has frequently been shaped by an emphasis on autonomy and resistance, reflecting both historical experience and domestic political narratives. While such orientations may provide short-term leverage or symbolic capital, they have also contributed to heightened regional polarization. From a realist standpoint, the cumulative effect of this polarization has been to constrain Iran’s strategic flexibility and amplify external pressures on its security environment.

A more adaptive approach would seek to recalibrate Iran’s regional role through selective engagement and confidence-building measures aimed at reducing systemic friction. This would involve recognizing the limits imposed by the regional balance of power and adjusting strategic behavior accordingly. Rather than attempting to redefine the regional order unilaterally, a realist-informed strategy would prioritize stability, predictability, and gradual integration into existing security frameworks.

Such an approach does not require abandoning national interests or strategic depth. Instead, it reflects an understanding that long-term security is best preserved through alignment with prevailing structural realities rather than sustained confrontation with them. In regions marked by dense security interdependence, strategic moderation can function as a source of strength rather than weakness.

Strategic Implications and Policy Reorientation

The analysis developed in this article carries implications that extend beyond the specific case of Iran and speak to broader patterns of strategic behavior among middle powers operating within a competitive international system. From a realist perspective, foreign policy effectiveness depends less on ideological coherence than on the capacity of states to align their external behavior with systemic constraints, regional security environments, and national interest calculations. In this sense, Iran’s foreign policy experience offers lessons not only for itself but also for other states navigating similar structural pressures.

Implications for Regional Order in the Middle East

At the regional level, the Middle East remains characterized by fragmented security architectures, persistent rivalries, and the absence of an inclusive balance-of-power arrangement. In such an environment, strategies that prioritize ideological expansion or symbolic resistance tend to exacerbate insecurity rather than enhance deterrence. Realist theory suggests that regional stability



emerges not from normative convergence but from the management of power asymmetries and threat perceptions. States that fail to calibrate their ambitions to regional realities often provoke counterbalancing coalitions, thereby diminishing their own strategic autonomy.

From this perspective, a foreign policy oriented toward pragmatic engagement and selective alignment may contribute more effectively to regional stability than one driven by ideological commitments. Strategic restraint, confidence-building measures, and issue-based cooperation—particularly in areas such as energy security, maritime stability, and conflict de-escalation—can reduce the incentives for external intervention and mitigate regional polarization. For Iran, this implies that long-term security gains are more likely to result from recalibrated regional engagement than from confrontational posturing that reinforces threat perceptions among neighboring states.

Implications for Middle Powers in a Competitive System

Beyond the Middle East, the findings of this study are relevant to middle powers operating within an increasingly competitive global order. As great-power rivalry intensifies, middle powers face heightened pressure to align with dominant actors while preserving strategic flexibility. Realist theory emphasizes that such states must avoid overcommitment to any single power bloc, as excessive dependence reduces bargaining leverage and increases vulnerability to external shocks.

Iran’s experience illustrates the risks associated with asymmetric partnerships and limited strategic diversification. When alignment choices are driven by short-term tactical considerations rather than long-term interest calculations, states may find themselves constrained by the preferences of more powerful partners. Conversely, a strategy of diversified engagement—anchored in economic pragmatism, diplomatic balance, and threat reduction—can enhance autonomy even under conditions of systemic constraint.

This insight is particularly relevant for middle powers seeking to navigate great-power competition without becoming instruments of broader geopolitical rivalries. By emphasizing national interest over ideological affinity, such states can pursue adaptive strategies that respond to shifts in the international environment while maintaining internal coherence.

Policy Reorientation and Strategic Adaptation

The broader implication of this analysis is that effective foreign policy requires continuous strategic adaptation. Realism does not prescribe a fixed set of alliances or behaviors; rather, it underscores the necessity of aligning policy choices with evolving power structures and security dynamics. For Iran, as for other middle powers, this suggests that foreign policy recalibration should be understood not as concession or retreat but as strategic adjustment aimed at preserving national interests under changing conditions.



A policy reorientation grounded in realist principles would prioritize interest-based diplomacy, regional de-escalation, and selective cooperation over ideological signaling. Such an approach does not preclude resistance or deterrence where necessary but situates these tools within a broader strategy of systemic awareness and cost-benefit calculation. Ultimately, the capacity to adapt strategically—to reassess priorities, recalibrate alignments, and manage external pressures—remains a central determinant of state resilience in an anarchic international system.

Implications for Middle Powers in an Era of Intensifying Great-Power Competition

Beyond its implications for Iran's foreign policy, the analysis presented in this article contributes to a broader understanding of how middle powers navigate an increasingly competitive and fragmented international system. In an era marked by the erosion of unipolarity and the resurgence of great-power rivalry, middle powers face heightened structural constraints while simultaneously possessing greater strategic agency than weaker states. Realist theory suggests that such states must continuously recalibrate their foreign policy behavior in response to shifting distributions of power, evolving threat perceptions, and changing alliance structures.

Middle powers are often characterized by their limited capacity to unilaterally shape the international system, yet they retain the ability to influence regional orders through strategic alignment, hedging strategies, and selective cooperation with dominant powers. From a realist perspective, the pursuit of national interest under conditions of anarchy requires these states to avoid rigid ideological commitments that may undermine flexibility and adaptability. Instead, successful middle powers tend to emphasize pragmatic engagement, issue-based cooperation, and the diversification of external relationships to mitigate vulnerability to systemic shocks.

The Iranian case illustrates the risks associated with foreign policy strategies that prioritize ideological signaling over strategic calculation. While ideological narratives may serve domestic legitimization purposes, they can impose significant costs when they limit diplomatic maneuverability or provoke sustained external balancing by more powerful actors. For middle powers operating in volatile regions such as the Middle East, such costs are particularly acute, given the region's dense security dilemmas, overlapping rivalries, and persistent external interventions.

More broadly, the findings of this study underscore the importance of strategic alignment as a dynamic rather than static process. Middle powers must continuously reassess their external orientations in light of evolving regional and global configurations. This does not imply unconditional alignment with dominant powers, but rather a selective and interest-driven approach that prioritizes long-term security and economic sustainability. In this sense, realism offers a useful analytical framework for understanding not only Iran's foreign policy challenges, but also the strategic dilemmas confronting middle powers across diverse geopolitical contexts in the contemporary international system.



Conclusion

This article has examined Iran's foreign policy behavior through a realist analytical framework, arguing that despite its strong ideological discourse, the Islamic Republic's external conduct is best understood as a form of strategic adaptation shaped by systemic constraints, national interest calculations, and survival imperatives. By situating Iran within the core assumptions of realism—*anarchy, rational state behavior, and the primacy of national interest*—the study demonstrates that ideology functions less as a guiding principle than as an instrument that is selectively employed to legitimize pragmatic strategic choices.

From a theoretical perspective, the article contributes to ongoing debates within international relations by reaffirming the explanatory power of realism in non-Western and ideologically driven political systems. Much of the existing literature either overemphasizes ideological exceptionalism or treats Iran as an anomalous actor whose behavior deviates from conventional IR theory. This study challenges that assumption by showing that Iran's foreign policy displays patterns consistent with realist expectations: threat perception, balancing behavior, alliance formation driven by strategic necessity, and a persistent concern with regime survival. In doing so, the article supports the broader claim that realism remains a flexible and robust framework capable of accounting for diverse political contexts beyond its traditional Western focus.

Empirically, the analysis highlights how Iran's strategic alignment choices—particularly in regional security arrangements and great-power relations—reflect calculated responses to external pressure rather than doctrinal rigidity. Iran's engagement with regional actors, its selective cooperation with global powers, and its cautious avoidance of direct military confrontation with stronger adversaries illustrate a pattern of constrained rationality. These behaviors underscore the extent to which domestic ideological narratives coexist with, and are often subordinated to, material considerations such as economic vulnerability, military asymmetry, and international isolation. The Iranian case thus reinforces the realist proposition that states, regardless of ideological orientation, ultimately operate within the limits imposed by the international system.

The policy implications of this analysis are equally significant. Understanding Iran as a rational actor responding to structural constraints rather than as an irrational or purely ideological state has direct consequences for foreign policy formulation. Policies premised on the assumption of ideological inflexibility risk misinterpreting Iranian behavior and may inadvertently reinforce hardline strategies within the regime. By contrast, approaches that acknowledge Iran's interest-based calculations create greater space for calibrated deterrence, selective engagement, and strategic signaling. This does not imply normatively endorsing Iran's policies, but rather emphasizes the importance of analytical clarity in policy design.

More broadly, the framework developed in this article offers applicability beyond the Iranian case. Other states characterized by strong ideological narratives—particularly in the Middle East and the



Global South—may similarly be analyzed through a realist lens that distinguishes between rhetorical positioning and strategic behavior. In this sense, the study contributes to a growing body of scholarship seeking to bridge theoretical abstraction and empirical specificity, demonstrating how classical IR theories can be productively applied to contemporary regional dynamics.

Finally, while this article has focused on structural and strategic dimensions of foreign policy, future research may build on this framework by incorporating comparative analysis or examining the interaction between domestic political change and external behavior over time. Such extensions would further refine our understanding of how ideology, institutions, and international constraints interact in shaping state conduct.

In conclusion, the findings presented here reaffirm that Iran's foreign policy is neither anomalous nor inexplicable. When examined through the lens of realism, it emerges as a coherent—if often controversial—strategy of adaptation within an anarchic international system. Recognizing this reality is essential not only for scholarly analysis but also for the formulation of informed and effective foreign policy responses.

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