

# Competing Visions for International Order

Challenges for a Shared Direction  
in an Age of Global Contestation

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## Chapter 14

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### A Critical View of Iran's Vision of Global Order

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# 14 A Critical View of Iran's Vision of Global Order

*Majid Imani and Zahra Edalati*

## **Introduction: Iran and Its Regional Significance**

The international order is shifting as China and Russia take on more prominent roles in competition with the United States (Mazarr 2022). This chapter explores how Iran's future path within the global order has been envisioned by different Iranian governments since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Within the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the perspectives of Iranian presidents and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei play a crucial role in shaping Iran's vision of the international order. In line with the conceptual framework of the book, this chapter explains, through the statements of key policymakers, Iran's vision of and desired position in the global order.

Iran has a strategically significant geographical location, serving as a bridge between Africa, Europe, and Asia. It connects India and Russia through the North–South corridor and Asia to Europe through the East–West corridor. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in the “TRACECA Corridor” by joining Central Asia, the Caucasus, Turkey, and Western Europe, and in the South Asian Corridor by linking North-western Europe to Southeast Asia. The Ashgabat agreement further facilitates trade between Central Asia, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf and formalises Iran's role in this region. Initiated in 2011 by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, and Qatar (which later withdrew), the agreement was joined by Kazakhstan and Pakistan in 2016, and India in 2018. The project aims to boost Central Asian connectivity and align trade and transport corridors. Iran sees these agreements as economically advantageous and believes that they can make global compliance with US sanctions against Tehran less likely (Omidi and Noolkar-Oak 2022). As a result, Iran is recognised as one of the world's crucial geographical hubs, integrating geopolitical, geo-economic, and geo-transit functions in Southwest Asia (Noorali and Ahmadi 2023).

Given its extensive geopolitical connections, Iran has developed complex relationships with various regional actors (see Noorali and Ahmadi 2023). While Iran does not provide regional benefits like welfare or security, it offers financial and military support to particular groups in Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon to extend its influence through hard and soft powers. It positions itself as a leading Islamic state in the Middle East and beyond. However, its anti-Western stance acts as both a

disruptive force and a liability, complicating its legitimacy among regional and global powers. Iran is often categorised as a “defective regional power” due to its presence in fragmented subregions, its willingness to assume leadership, and its limited material and ideational capabilities for sustained power projection. Nevertheless, Iran plays a central role, particularly within the “Shi’i axis”, challenging standard definitions of regional power, as it does not conform neatly to traditional power hierarchies. Under the first Trump administration (2017–2021), the United States, along with its regional allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia, sought to curtail Iran’s nuclear and regional ambitions through sanctions and diplomatic isolation. While some states perceive Iran as a disruptor, others, particularly China and Russia, see it as a valuable strategic partner (Fawcett and Jagtiani 2024).

### **Iran’s International Positioning since 1979**

To understand Iran’s vision of the global order, it is essential to consider its international positioning following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The establishment of the IRI was shaped by internal and external dynamics that significantly influenced its engagement with the global order. This section examines how Iranian policymakers have constructed their visions of the (un)desirable future of the global order.

Before 1979, Iran was a pro-Western regional power. After the revolution, it redefined itself as a leading Islamic, revisionist, and anti-imperialist state within both the Middle East and globally (Fawcett and Jagtiani 2024), emphasising a “Neither East, nor West” policy.

The seizure of the US Embassy and the subsequent 444-day hostage crisis (1979–1981) reinforced Iran’s anti-Western and anti-imperialist stance, resulting in sanctions and international isolation. Shortly after, Iran entered the eight-year Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), facing diplomatic and military isolation. While Iraq received Arab and Western support, Iran’s main allies were Libya and Syria. Iran relied on the black market for arms purchases during the war, with the Iran–Contra affair – a covert arms trade with the United States – serving as a rare exception (Tabatabai and Samuel 2017). Some analysts argue that the war reflected an implicit agreement of the superpowers of the time to counter Iran’s revolutionary momentum (Adami and Keshavarzi Moghaddam 2015). These experiences reinforced Iran’s anti-imperialist stance. The post-war period, followed by the death of the IRI’s founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1989, marked a shift from an ideological to pragmatic foreign policy under Supreme Leader and President Rafsanjani (1989–1997) (Ramazani 2004). Rafsanjani sought to reinsert Iran into the international order and prioritised national interests over ideological commitments (Zaccara 2018), advocating a “good neighbour” policy and even considering the normalisation of relations with the United States (Naji and Jawan 2011). Despite the Supreme Leader’s scepticism, Rafsanjani promoted ties with emerging Asian economies, initiating a constructive engagement and prioritising Asian diplomacy and regional cooperation (Adami 2010).

President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) advocated this trajectory with the “Dialogue among Civilisations”, promoting Iran’s inclusion in global discourses.

This concept gained significant international attention, especially after Khatami's speech on 21 September 1998, at the United Nations (UN), which led to the UN declaring 2001 as the "Year of Dialogue among Civilisations" (Holliday and Wastnidge 2023). The initiative sought to transcend the West/non-West divide, proposing a more inclusive and collaborative international framework (Holliday and Wastnidge 2023). As Petit (2007) explains, the Dialogue of Civilisations advocates for a re-examination and reassessment of the Western-centric and liberal foundations that shape the normative framework of contemporary international society. It also serves as a critique of power politics, particularly rejecting Samuel Huntington's thesis on the inevitable "Clash of Civilisations". Simultaneously, it promotes an alternative paradigm for international relations in which morality plays a central role.

Following Khatami's presidency, Iran experienced a shift back to a populist and anti-imperialist approach under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), who actively challenged the unipolar global order and reversed many of Khatami's diplomatic initiatives (Holliday 2023). He emphasised the "Look to the East" strategy, alignment with China and Russia, and a pushback against the West (Fathollah-Nejad 2021). In contrast, President Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021) marked a return to pragmatic diplomacy, prioritising constructive engagement with the international community (Holliday and Wastnidge 2023), and sought a diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue and sanctions relief (Fathollah-Nejad 2021). This pragmatism stood in contrast to Ahmadinejad's ideological and confrontational foreign policy (Čech and Krupová 2020).

President Ebrahim Raisi (2021–2023) reaffirmed an Asia-centric strategy, opposing Western hegemony and strengthening ties with China and Russia (Saraswat 2024b; Tehran Times, 10 April 2023). In 2024, the current president Masoud Pezeshkian called for a "post-polar" global order built on dialogue, peace, and sustainable development. He called for a balanced global order where Iran would engage with both the East and the West for mutual benefit (Pezeshkian 2024).

This position aligned with his frequently repeated campaign position on the necessity of negotiations to lift sanctions. However, his presidency coincided with widespread public mistrust stemming from the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, which emerged in September 2022, and led to significant human rights violations in Iran (see Sigurdardottir, Imani, and Edalati 2024). Protests and the government's violent crackdown on demonstrators further eroded civil society's confidence in the state. This mistrust, however, was not new – it had deep roots dating back to the 2009 Green Movement and had intensified during the 2017 and 2019 uprisings in Iran (Shahi and Abdoh-Tabrizi 2020).

Importantly, despite Pezeshkian's calls for lifting sanctions through negotiations with the United States, the Supreme Leader rejected direct talks with the United States in February 2025, labelling them "neither wise, nor rational, nor honourable". In response, Pezeshkian, addressing Parliament amidst worsening economic conditions, stated that while he supported negotiations, he would adhere to the Supreme Leader's directives. He explained: "My position has been and will remain that I believe in negotiations, but now we have to follow the parameters set by the

Supreme Leader” (Fassihi 2025). Pezeshkian’s deference to the Supreme Leader reaffirms that decision-making in Iran is ultimately dictated by the Supreme Leader, leaving the government with little authority to engage in direct negotiations with the United States, despite the country’s economic and political crisis.

### **The Normative Dimension: Iran Advocating for a Post-Polar Order**

This section explores the normative dimensions of Iran’s approach to the evolving global order by unpacking theories of post-polarity. It examines how Iranian political leaders are beginning to frame their vision of the post-polar world. Former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (2024) argues that this emerging “post-polar” global order is neither unipolar, bipolar nor multipolar; rather, it is a fluid and flexible combination of complex relationships where state and non-state actors engage in cooperation, competition, and networking. In the “post-polar” global order, major powers lose their polar dominance. Power no longer relies on its traditional hard and soft dimensions but increasingly manifests in semantic and ideological forms. He argues that these conditions signify a transition to a new order characterised by decentralisation and diverse influence.

This vision reflects Iran’s evolving perspective, particularly regarding the normative dimension of international relations. Historically, Iran has viewed the unipolar and hegemonic global order as a threat to its revolutionary identity. However, in the post-polar era, Iran no longer perceives the emerging multipolar landscape as a threat. Instead, it sees an opportunity to advance its role and its strategic interests within a more balanced international system. This shift enables Iran to adopt a more flexible and pragmatic approach to navigating global politics.

Zarif and Karimi (2024) argue that a post-polar global order may have already taken shape while the world has remained focused on the emergence of new poles of power. Ultimately, the accumulation of these developments – primarily driven by the breakdown of rigid international structures and the fluid nature of the transitional phase – has placed human agency at the core of global transformations. This shift grants individuals, states, and non-state actors greater influence and responsibility, allowing them to shape the evolving post-polar order. Importantly, this dynamic interaction does not necessarily lead to instability or disorder.

Iranian scholar Tisheyar (2023) highlights that in the post-polar era, shared interests, rather than strict ideological alignments, shape international cooperation. This shift enables powers with different levels of development to engage in a complementary manner. This fluidity in alliances allows nations to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes more flexibly. For example, despite tensions with the United States, Iran actively cooperates with powers like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates through platforms like BRICS+, seeking economic relief from sanctions and stronger ties with non-Western alliances (Tisheyar 2023). Iran’s anti-Western revolutionary identity remains central to its international stance. It perceives Western influence as an external threat and defines anti-Zionist policies, anti-imperialist approaches, responsibility towards the Muslim nations (particularly Palestine), and the promotion of Islamic unity as its ideological duties.

Accordingly, Iran consistently calls for the replacement of the “unjust” international order with a non-hegemonic world order (Mohammad Nia 2012). Moreover, according to Iranian leaders, the existing international order is designed to suppress the Islamic Revolution and the broader Middle East. Iran’s vision of the global order therefore rests upon Shia revolutionary principles, Third World solidarity, and anti-imperialist ideology (Zaccara 2018). Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has ideologically recognised itself as the global centre of Shia Islam, remaining the only Shia-led government in the Muslim world. It claims to represent the nucleus of Umm Al-Quran (“Mother of All Cities”) within the Islamic world, a vision reflected in the title of its Supreme Leader: *Vali Amr-e Muslemin-e Jahan* (“Commander of the affairs of the Muslims of the world”). Khomeini emphasised the unity of the Muslim Ummah both as a strategic resistance to external threats and to enhance the Muslim world’s influence. This principle became central to Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy and is reflected in Article 11 of the 1979 Constitution (Čech and Krupová 2020). Consequently, Iran continues to see itself as a significant player among Islamic nations and the broader Middle East (Naji and Jawan 2011). Its Islamist and revolutionary discourse has consistently advocated for changes to the global order – albeit in different ways across time. Khatami’s (1997) “Dialogue among Civilisations” – based on pluralism and diversity – not only argued that Islam aligns with human rights but also sought to preserve Iran’s Islamic identity. It promoted cooperation among Muslim-majority countries, encouraging political solidarity and active participation in international decision-making (Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023).

However, the conservative establishment backed by the Supreme Leader viewed the Dialogue of Civilisations as incompatible with Iran’s anti-imperialist stance. Ahmadinejad’s populist and revolutionary discourse returned the emphasis on resistance against Western hegemony. In 2012, he addressed the UN General Assembly, advocating for a new world order centred on justice and the empowerment of free nations, while in 2009 he stated that Iran’s partnership with Venezuela exemplified the global anti-imperialist struggle (VOA News, 6 November 2009)

During the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (or Iran nuclear deal) negotiations, Supreme Leader framed Iran’s diplomatic engagement with the West as “heroic flexibility”, emphasising strategic resilience rather than compromise (Khamenei 2013). All of this culminates in Iran’s call for a post-polar global order, while it tries to strengthen its strategic ties with China, Russia, and the Global South. In an article titled “My message to the world”, President Pezeshkian (2024) reinforced this vision, emphasising peace, economic partnership, sustainable development, and resistance to Islamophobia.

### **The Distributional Dimension**

This section examines how Iran perceives global power dynamics and positions itself within the international order. Regarding the principles of power distribution and status hierarchies in the ideal international order, Iranian officials – including the Supreme Leader – rarely acknowledge the West’s military and economic

superiority directly. However, their statements often imply a recognition of it, primarily through a prevailing narrative of Western decline. For instance, the Supreme Leader frequently frames the West as illegitimate and morally corrupt, calling for its replacement with a non-American global system (Khamenei 2022c), and referring to Western powers as operating like a mafia (Khamenei 2022b).

Meanwhile, many Iranians have opposed these viewpoints. During the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, alongside other calls and perspectives that challenged the official stance of IRI – such as “No to compulsory hijab”, “No to execution”, and others – they also rejected the “Look to the East” policy. The Iranian people have repeatedly declared that they seek normal relations with the United States, the West, and the world, and that they oppose any approach that isolates them from the international community. However, the government has suppressed the people and their views. For instance, at the peak of 2022 nationwide protests in Iran – when demonstrators openly challenged the government – the Supreme Leader addressed the evolving global order and Iran’s role within it in response to the domestic crisis. He asserted that the current global order would soon be replaced by one in which the United States is isolated, Asia is becoming increasingly powerful, and the Resistance Front is expanding (Khamenei 2022a). Despite the domestic pushback, Iran continues to portray itself as a major power, emphasising its established position.

Iran’s “Look to the East” policy became more pronounced during the Ukraine War and Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February, 2022. Although Tehran claims to defend the oppressed, and rhetorically supports ending the war, it blames the United States – rather than Russia – as the primary source of instability. The Supreme Leader’s remarks in March 2022 blamed US policies for the Ukraine crisis, casting Ukraine as a victim of Western destabilisation (Khamenei 2022c).

This selective framing reflects Iran’s geopolitical alignment with Russia, while avoiding criticism of Moscow’s violation of international law. This approach raises questions about the consistency of Iran’s foreign policy, particularly when contrasted with its position on Gaza.

While Iran’s support for Russia aligns with its goal of countering Western influence, it reflects pragmatic considerations rather than purely ideological commitments. Strengthening relations with Moscow offers economic and military benefits, particularly in arms cooperation and sanctions evasion. This approach prioritises power dynamics and national interests over ideological principles (Czulda 2025). In contrast, during the 2023 Gaza war, Iran adopted an explicitly ideological stance – positioning itself as the defender of the oppressed, supporting Palestinian groups, and opposing Western-backed forces. This aligns with its Islamic revolutionary ideology, which emphasises solidarity with Muslim nations and resistance against Western influence.

Thus, while Iran appears to pursue a pragmatic strategy in the Ukraine war and an ideological one in Gaza, both approaches ultimately serve the same objective: undermining Western dominance and promoting a shift in global power towards the East.

The duality in Iran’s approach is further revealed in its public discourse. The escalation of tensions between Iran, Israel and the United States has affected the

everyday lives of Iranians. This growing domestic discontent has been reflected in public protests in recent years, in which slogans such as “Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, my life for Iran” have been repeatedly chanted. These slogans reflect the frustration of a segment of Iranian society with the government’s prioritisation of foreign ideological commitments over domestic well-being.

National power in Iran’s strategy is not based on a single factor. Instead, it is collectively supported by military capacity, ideological influence, geopolitics, and economic resistance (Mesbahi 2011).

Since the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), military strength – especially missile development – has been perceived as a fundamental pillar of its power. Following the Iran–Iraq War, Iran has prioritised self-defence and the expansion of missile capabilities, further highlighting the need for militarisation and contributing to the everyday military presence in Iranian society. In 2015, former foreign Minister Zarif (2015) reflected on Iran’s wartime vulnerability, describing how they had to beg for Scud missiles. The Supreme Leader later emphasised that missiles and military power are crucial for national security (Khamenei 2022d). This approach is reflected in Iran’s global military ranking: according to the 2024 Global Firepower military power index (Global Firepower 2024), Iran ranks 14th globally (out of 145 countries), surpassing nations such as Egypt, Turkey, and Germany. It shows that Iran considers defence capabilities key to deterring external threats.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a core principle has shaped Iran’s official discourse, the first leader of the Islamic Republic, famously asserted that maintaining the system is the highest priority, a concept that still guides Iran’s investment in regional resistance movements to counter Western influence (Saraswat 2024a). This concept refers to maintaining the revolutionary principles and Islamic-Shia identity of the state. It continues to shape Iran’s vision of global power distribution by aligning its international positioning with domestic stability and ideological foundations. In addition, Iran consistently emphasises the shift of global power from the West to the East, yet remains reluctant to fully entrust the management of the global order to the East. Neither the West nor the East shares Iran’s Islamic identity and revolutionary ideology, creating limits to strategic trust.

Iran emphasises its geopolitical position, access to open waters, and energy resources as key strengths in global affairs. Its economy relies on oil, gas, and industrial self-sufficiency. Under sanctions, it has adopted an “economic resistance” model, incorporating a “Look to the East” strategy. While pursuing pragmatic diplomacy – such as reducing tensions with Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and engaging with the EU – Iran’s anti-imperialist stance remains central, especially regarding its nuclear programme (Zaccara 2018). This resistance approach has been reinforced by the Supreme Leader’s stance, whose approval has been crucial in shaping Iran’s global positioning (Čech and Krupová 2020). For example, the 2013 nuclear negotiations and subsequent ratification of sanctions relief required his endorsement (Fathollah-Nejad 2021). This illustrates Iran’s strategy of balancing resistance against Western influence with pragmatic engagement to reduce economic constraints (Sheikh Mohammadi and Hashemi 2021). The 2015 JCPOA demonstrates Iran’s intent to negotiate as an equal power. Signed with six global powers, it reflected Iran’s strategy of balancing engagement with world powers while

resisting Western dominance. Additionally, the JCPOA was marked as a significant event in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region (Javed and Ismail 2022), expected to substantially reshape power dynamics and alter the strategy of the United States in the region (Pfeifer 2024). However, the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and reimposition of sanctions under the "maximum pressure" campaign reinforced Iran's belief that the global order is fundamentally unjust and Western-dominated (Fathollah-Nejad 2021). Iran perceives this as an attempt to control the distribution of power and resources, preventing it from achieving a legitimate status as a regional power.

Following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran's distrust of the Western-dominated global order deepened. Trump labelled Iran a "rogue regime", a "threat", "the leading state sponsor of terror", and a destabilising force that fuels sectarianism, justifying efforts to isolate the country (Holliday 2020). Tehran initially hoped that the EU would compensate for the economic losses, but European governments were unwilling to take a risk, as "political Europe" could not convince "economic Europe" to engage with Iran (Fathollah-Nejad 2021). In addition to this, shortly after withdrawing from the JCPOA, the Trump administration opened a new American Embassy in Jerusalem, which further escalated tensions.

In response, Iran focused more on its "Look to the East" strategy, strengthening its ties with Russia and China through economic and military cooperation. A 25-year strategic partnership with Beijing (Fathollah-Nejad 2021), along with increased security and military cooperation with Moscow – particularly in Syria, has strengthened Iran's influence in the Middle East and reflected its evolving strategic approach. In this regard, Iran promoted a "resistance economy" to counter sanctions, demonstrating its ability to sustain itself without reliance on the Western financial system. This strategy aligns with its vision of a multipolar world, where emerging powers – rather than Western hegemony – drive international decision-making. Indeed, Iran has increasingly aligned itself with the Tehran-led "Axis of Resistance" (Fathollah-Nejad 2021).<sup>1</sup> This strategy advocates for a collective approach to security challenges, while preserving Iran's strategic autonomy (Saraswat 2024b).

### **The Institutional Dimension**

For a better understanding of Iran's perspective towards the global order, it is necessary to examine its relationship with international organisations. Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has maintained a paradoxical and fluctuating pattern regarding the institutional basis of the international order, alternating between confrontation and active participation.

In the aftermath of the revolution, Khomeini argued that "these international organisations have been established to favour the West" (Mehr News 2024). As a result, Iran's early foreign policy was driven by revolutionary discourse of "Neither East, nor the West", emphasising detachment from both the communist East and the capitalist West. In this regard, between February 1979 and November 1979, Iran's official relations with international organisations were minimal. This period saw its withdrawal from the Central Treaty Organization, severance of ties with

Egypt following the Camp David agreement, and termination of agreements such as the 1921 Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship and the 1959 Iran–US accord.

Thus, Iran envisions a post-polar global order where it plays a more prominent role and secures a greater share of global power. This ambition drives Iran’s push for structural reforms at the UN, including the abolition of veto power, as it seeks an international system that acknowledges and respects its Shia identity, Islamic principles, and anti-imperialist revolutionary values.

Despite its early confrontational stance, Iran began to selectively engage with international organisations. In 1979, it joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), reflecting a nuanced approach to multilateralism (see Abedi and Aslani 2021). Even during the Iran–Iraq War and the US Embassy hostage crisis, Iran sought some regional cooperation, although it limited its participation in international bodies like the UN General Assembly, the International Labour Organization, and the World Health Organization. In 1985, Iran collaborated with Pakistan and Turkey to enhance the Regional Cooperation for Development, later renamed the Economic Cooperation Organization.

After 1989, especially under President Rafsanjani and President Khatami, Iran shifted towards normalisation with international institutions. Its critical stance towards the UN evolved into one of measured engagement. Iran participated in the UN Office on Drugs and Crimes, reaffirmed its commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and signed the Chemical Weapons Convention. Iran also joined Developing-8 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and advocated for reforming the UN Security Council by eliminating veto power. A symbolic milestone of this period was Khatami’s 1997 proposal for the “Dialogue among Civilisations”, which, while not transformative due to internal constraints, signalled Iran’s willingness to engage with the international community. This, in turn, highlights the inherent uncertainty in Iran’s approach towards the international order.

Following the events of September 11, 2001, the global geopolitical landscape faced significant changes, marked by the rise of American unilateralism and escalating tensions over Iran’s nuclear programme. The situation worsened due to Iran’s contradictory relationship with international institutions, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Although Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear NPT, in 2002, US satellites revealed the existence of active nuclear sites in Iran. In 2005, under populist President Ahmadinejad, Iran announced the resumption of nuclear research activities and removed some of the IAEA seals on its plants. These actions triggered multiple UN Security Council resolutions and sanctions. Between 2005 and 2013, Iran became one of the most sanctioned countries worldwide (see Borszik 2014).

In response to Western sanctions and increasing isolation, Iran gradually adopted a “Look to the East” policy, seeking deeper ties with non-Western powers. As Saraswat (2024b) highlights, in this confrontational approach, the “Look to the East” policy emerged as an alternative strategy towards global order, even as Iran was still engaging with the West to negotiate over its nuclear programme. Based on the South–South Alliances policy, Iran hosted and chaired the 16th Summit of the NAM, which included 120 countries, in Tehran in 2012. At the summit, Iran

advocated for strengthening its role in resolving international disputes and supported reforms to the UN structure (UNIDIR 2012)

Iran's approach gained momentum following internal unrest (e.g. the 2009–2010 Green Movement associated with Iran's post-election uprising) and regional upheavals such as the Arab Spring. It was further strengthened by the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018.

Iran's integration into new geopolitical blocs reflects this shift. In 2022, Iran attained full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and in 2024, its entry into the BRICS+ bloc signified a transformative shift in its international strategy. These memberships have provided Iran with an institutional framework for its Eurasian engagement. Iran also signed a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in December 2023, and participates in China's Belt and Road Initiative and the International North–South Transport Corridor. For Iran, such initiatives represent alternatives to Western-dominated structures and platforms and a way to challenge existing unipolar arrangements (Sheikh Mohammadi and Hashemi 2021).

Iran's regional strategy has been shaped by its revolutionary opposition to the United States and Israel, and its alignment with resistance movements across the Middle East. The formation of the so-called Axis of Resistance has limited Iran's integration into regional institutions like the Gulf Cooperation Council. Regional tensions and Iran's support for non-state actors have led to distrust from Sunni Arab States. As Farazmand (2024) notes, some officials in the Gulf believe that Iran, as a Shia-Persian country, should not intervene in issues concerning the Sunni Arab world.

Matsunaga (2025) notes that, particularly in the aftermath of the Gaza war, resistance groups remain key allies of Iran. This position aligns with Iran's long-standing doctrine, which frames resistance as an ongoing struggle that will persist until its objectives are fully realised (Khamenei 2024).

Since 1979, Iran's interaction with international organisations has evolved from confrontation and limited engagement to selective participation, strategic alignment, and renewed confrontation. This shifting strategy reflects Iran's efforts to avoid complete exclusion from the global order while simultaneously asserting itself as an important regional and, at times, global player. Throughout, Iran has consistently criticised the existing international order, emphasising anti-imperialist policies and revolutionary discourses. However, despite its emphasis on independence from foreign powers, Iran has not hesitated to align itself with Eastern blocs when strategically advantageous. This dual approach illustrates the complexities of maintaining a revolutionary ideological stance while seeking pragmatic integration into global structures.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the embedded contradiction within Iran's vision of the global order by analysing the Iranian official discourse on global power distribution and the future of the international system. It suggests that Iran's vision remains

highly uncertain and largely unrealistic. Although it advocates for a post-polar global order and “Look to the East” strategy, economic vulnerabilities from sanctions significantly constrain its ability to assert itself as a global power. Additionally, Iran’s confrontational rhetoric towards the West and the United States further deepens its international isolation. Moreover, Iran’s reliance on Russia and China does not guarantee strategic success, and more importantly, growing public dissatisfaction, evident in the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, highlights the oppressive values of the Islamic Republic more than ever before, exposing widespread distrust and a widening gap between the state’s geopolitical ambitions and the demands of its people.

Ultimately, Iran’s opposition to the current global order, coupled with its contradictory responses to the Ukraine and Gaza wars, renders its vision for a “post-polar” global order more of an ideological narrative than a practical reality. While it views military strength as central to its power, this emphasis often serves to compensate for deeper structural weaknesses within both its domestic and international positioning.

## Note

- 1 The “Axis of Resistance” concept is associated with the names of state actors and military and paramilitary groups in the region and pursues two common goals: opposing the establishment of a stable Israel and opposing the establishment of an American–Arab–Israeli order in the Middle East. The Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah of Lebanon, resistance groups in Palestine, and others are members of this axis (see Abedi and Aslani 2021).

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