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DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY



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OpSour Middle East Studies publishes articles, reports and research on Asian countries' society, politics, government, policy-making, international relations, and foreign policy.



SUMMARY

Iran's role and position in regional issues, especially in recent years, has brought up the issue of how this country's foreign policy is shaped. In this context, the question of how the foreign policy decision-making process works in Iran has gained prominence. This article aims to shed light on research on the subject and interpret Iran's foreign policy. Hence, the paper seeks to explain the foreign policy decision-making process in Iran based on institutions.

Decision-Making Process in Iran's Foreign Policy

Preface

The foreign policy decision-making process includes a scientific dimension because it is the subject of political science and international relations. However, on the other hand, it depends on the unique structure and conditions of each country. A country's socio-cultural structure, political regime, geopolitical position, national interests, and goals play a role as a logic in the foreign policy decision-making process. Of course, to form such a logic, the specified variables must be embodied in institutions. Iran is not an exception from this. After the 1979-Islamic Revolution, Iran started to carry out the foreign policy decision-making process with the new political system and institutions established in parallel with its goals. In addition, Iran's role and position in regional issues, especially in recent years, has brought up the issue of how this country's foreign policy is shaped. In this context, the question of how the foreign policy decision-making process works in Iran has gained prominence. This article aims to shed light on research on the subject and interpret Iran's foreign policy. Hence, the paper seeks to explain the foreign policy decision-making process in Iran based on institutions.

Decision-Making Structure in Iran's Foreign Policy

Foreign policy decision-making has a specific hierarchy and system. According to Article 57 of the Constitution, the Islamic Republic has a system of government based on the separation of powers. The formulation and implementation of foreign policy in Iran are mainly in the field of powers of the Supreme Leader, the legislature, and the executive branch, each of which has limited capabilities in this field.

The Supreme Leadership: An essential part of foreign policy decisions is directly or indirectly on the Leadership hands. According to Article 110 of the Constitution, it is up to the Leadership to determine the system's general policies and decide to declare war and peace. On the other hand, all resolutions of the Supreme National Security Council, an

important part of which are related to foreign policy, must be approved by the Leadership. The leader has the authority to appoint two members to the council.

Presidency: According to Article 113 of the Constitution, the President is responsible for enforcing the law, regulating the relations between the three powers, and presiding over the executive branch. In the foreign policy decision-making structure, the President plays a role in foreign policy by appointing and nominating the Minister of Foreign Affairs, selecting ambassadors and representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and accepting foreign ambassadors residing in Tehran.

Cabinet: Iran's political decision-making mechanism is implemented under the instructions of the Leadership through the cabinet with responsibilities of each ministry. At the beginning of each year, the government submits its annual plan to the parliament. The parliament plays an important role in implementing the foreign policy by approving Iran's program, policy, management, and international relations. Establishing or severance of diplomatic relations and reducing or expanding ties with other countries are also among the executive branch's powers.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly: The Islamic Consultative Assembly is the country's highest legislative body and can legislate in general issues within limits prescribed by the principles of the Constitution and Sharia. The Islamic Consultative Assembly intervenes in foreign policy by ratifying all international treaties, conventions, and agreements. Also, any minor changes in the borderlines, referral to arbitration, receiving or lending, and hiring foreign experts are among the responsibilities of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.

Supreme National Security Council: According to Article 176 of the Constitution, the duties of the Supreme National Security Council are to determine the country's defense and security policies and to coordinate political, intelligence, social, cultural, and economic activities to deal with internal and external threats. Most of the tasks of the Supreme National Security Council are in the field of foreign relationships.

The Guardian Council: According to articles 94 and 96 of the Constitution, the council is responsible for compatibility the laws ratified by the Assembly with the Constitution and Sharia. Therefore, it can play a role in controlling foreign policy through this channel.

The Expediency Discernment Council of the System: Although recognized as an advisory arm of the leadership, it is crucial in formulating the general policies of the system as well as commenting on cases where disagreements or conflicts between the parliament and the Guardian Council.

Judiciary: Although the judiciary is not directly involved in decision-making in Iran's foreign policy, the judiciary is highlighted in these two areas: The first is related to the judicial developments in the country and the obligation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be accountable to human rights institutions such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights or the Geneva-based Human Rights Committee. Second, the judiciary has two oversight arms, namely the Court of Administrative Justice and the General Inspection Organization, to oversee the Ministry of Foreign Affairs activities.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs: According to the Constitution and the Law on the Description of Duties of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved on April 10, 1985, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for foreign policy issues. However, the ministry's role goes beyond its absolute executive duties for two reasons: First, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is a member of many decision-making organizations, such as the Supreme National Security Council and the Cabinet. Also, some authorities such as the Islamic Consultative Assembly or The Expediency Discernment Council of the System are discussed their issues in the presence of a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Secondly, in some instant and unexpected cases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cannot wait for the workflow of the decision-making mechanism. In such cases, the Minister of Foreign Affairs makes the decision and then reports the matter to other officials. Furthermore, other responsibilities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are to control, monitor, liaise, and provide representation and provide and collect information for foreign policymakers and implementers.

In this regard, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs duties are as follows:

- A) To constantly pay attention to international events and the internal situation of countries and prepare reports.
- B) Reviewing, establishing, maintaining, and improving the Iranian government's foreign relations with other governments and international organizations.
- C) Negotiation and correspondence with foreign governments and international organizations.
- D) Management of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs political and consular missions and supervision of government missions abroad.
- E) Accomplishment and providing relationships between different organs of government with foreign governments.¹

The Process of Implementing Foreign Policy Decisions

Generally, several keystone elements determine Iran's foreign policy decision-making process. Any decision is formalized by a sequence of steps such as the problem definition, classification of problems, determining the answers, deciding the right and wrong in Islamic viewpoint, implacable process to reach solutions, and testing the effectiveness of resolutions. Considering the Law of Establishment and Duties of Iran's Foreign Ministry clarifies that even the primary laws concentrate on the broad parameters of Iranian national policy and interests. Still, we don't forget that in cases Foreign Ministry does have enough power to decide, but instead, they have to send a report to the President. Even in some cases, the president does not have enough decision power. He has to hand over the issue to the Cabinet of Ministers or the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). It should not forget that some cases may have various economic, cultural, political, and social

¹. Maleki, Abbas (2003). Process of Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy. *The Scientific Journal of Strategy*, (1)6, 101-104. (Persian)

dimensions. The president decides the issue relates to diplomatic, security, and defense after consulting the relevant ministries. If it is related to defense or security, SNSC decides. It is mentionable that the president is also a member of SNSC. Nevertheless, the final decision is in the hand of the Iranian Supreme Leader, and there is no decision made without the explicit permission of the Supreme Leader. According to the Iranian Constitution, the legitimacy of the elected president is bestowed by the Supreme Leader. This dimension will solve the dilemma of de facto and de jure in Iran's policies.²

In addition to these institutions, it should be noted that military elements are also effective in Iran's foreign policy decision-making and implementation process. In recent years, the influence of the Revolutionary Guards in the shaping of Iran's Middle East policy cannot be denied. The presence of the Quds Force, as a sub-unit of the Revolutionary Guards, on the ground in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon is a distinct proof of this thesis. In an institutional interview, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the former foreign minister of Iran, openly stated this fact. After the audio file of this institutional and secret interview leaked on the internet, there were multifaceted discussions. In this interview, Zarif expressed the dominant influence of military elements in foreign policy with the sentence "the field determines everything". These reproachful and critical statements of the foreign minister have caused criticism among radical groups in the country. As the debate escalated, the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said that the ministry of foreign affairs is the implementer, and foreign policy decisions are made in the Supreme National Security Council. These statements of Ayatollah Khamenei have revealed the weak role of Iran's Foreign Ministry and the dominant position of the military elements in the foreign policy decision-making process. From this point of view, a new picture emerges in the context of institutions that are effective in the decision-making process in Iran's foreign policy. Institutionally, this table can be pictured as follows:

². Maleki, Abbas (2002). Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach. *Journal of Social Affairs*, 39-53, 45.

Decision-Making Institutions	Institutions	Targets	Actions and Achievements	Pathology
Religious Institutions	<i>Velayat-e-Faqih</i> : Expediency Council, Assembly of Experts, Guardian Council, Judiciary, Radio and Television, Imams of Friday Prayer.	<i>Umm al-Qura</i> of the Islamic world, the struggle against oppression and arrogance and the defense of the rights of Muslims, the unity of the Islamic world, “neither East nor West”	Soft power, Shiite influence, the influence of Iranian Islamic ideology	Different religious interpretations, Shiite orientation, and the reaction of Islamic countries, due to the emphasis on Shiite Islam, the marginalization of national identity, lack of planning
Bureaucratic Institutions	Supreme National Security Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Pursuing national interests, constructive interaction with the world, negotiation	Negotiation, contracting, specialization, the priority of national interests, continuity, accumulated experience	Lack of independence, low budget, and human resources, dismissal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his accompanying team with the change of the heads of the executive branch
Democratic Institutions	Islamic Consultative Assembly, Presidential Institution	It varies in different presidential terms. Rafsanjani : Convergence and integration in the international system, a new interpretation of the export of the revolution Khatami : De-escalation, confidence-building and dialogue, multilateralism Ahmadinejad : Return to revolutionary principles, fight against global arrogance Rouhani : moderation, constructive interaction, mutual detente	People's participation, the importance of foreign policy, the rotation of elites, different doctrines of foreign policy	Constantly Changing discourses, discontinuity, populism, interference in specialized affairs, inexperience, interference in the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Military Institutions	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds Force	Ensuring the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran, self-sufficiency of military equipment, preserving the values and ideals of the revolution	Military power, military self-sufficiency, influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, missile capability of the Quds Force	Independent action, media and political influence, the transformation from executive to political ³

³. Eslami R, Akbari Z. (2020). The Islamic Republic of Iran Foreign Policy Pathology in Terms of Institutionalism. *Journal Strategic Studies of Public Policy*, 10(35), 17. (Persian)

Conclusion

The foreign policy decision-making process in the Islamic Republic of Iran has a unique structure. The main reason for this uniqueness is that some of the active institutions in the system have traditional-religious features and some others have modern features. When evaluated in general, the foreign policy decision-making process in the Islamic Republic of Iran has some advantages and disadvantages. These advantages and disadvantages can be listed as follows:

1. Since the decision-making process in the system is long and pluralistic; this minimizes the possibility of making sudden mistakes in macro matters in foreign policy. This can be considered as an advantage.
2. The long decision-making process can turn into a disadvantage in times of crisis when time is short.
3. Parallel action by groups with different agendas and goals in the context of micro-issues can damage national interests. This is a disadvantage.
4. There is a serious institutionalization problem in the foreign policy decision-making process in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This problem makes persons distinctive and determinative and hinders the formation and consistency of macro policies and strategies.

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