



Despite its radical rhetoric, Tehran is a practitioner of Realpolitik, says Joe Fallon. Not unlike North Korea, its foreign policy centres on two fundamental pillars: preservation of the regime and preservation of the state. Because of its experience with the West, these two goals define Iran's actions, past, present, and future, writes Joe Fallon.

Iran and Turkey were the only two major Islamic States that preserved their political independence in the "Age of European Imperialism" (1870-1914). Three times Iran had to defend its independence and territorial integrity in the 20 th Century from foreign powers seeking to partition the country. In 1907, Russia and the United Kingdom sought to carve out "spheres of influence". The Russians occupied the north, Azerbaijan, while the British occupied the south, Baluchistan.

In 1941, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom invaded a neutral Iran, overthrowing the government and dividing the country into "spheres of influence" - the Soviets in the north, the British in the west - to facilitate the transportation of war material to Stalin. In 1946, Soviet troops withdrew from Iran, but in its wake left behind independent, pro-Soviet Azeri and Kurdish (Mahabad) republics.

The Cold War did not begin with the Berlin Airlift (1948-1949), but with Stalin's attempt to partition Iran (1945-1946). In 2006, Colonel Ralph Peters writing in Armed Forces Journal proposed redrawing the map of the Middle East, with Iran partitioned along ethnic lines, as a U.S. foreign policy objective. In his article, "Blood Borders" , he takes Stalin's policy toward Iran

and makes it America's. I wrote the rebuttal in Armed Forces Journal.

But the impact of "Blood Borders" was to convince many in Iran that Colonel Peter's article reflected the official thinking of Washington. It inflamed Iran's already heightened suspicion and mistrust of the U.S. Tehran actions in the Middle East to preserve regime and state seek to do so either by strengthening Iran or weakening her enemies. To that end, Iran has been successful. As Nadim Shehadi of Chatham House's Middle East Programme observed: "While the U.S. has been playing poker in the region, Iran has been playing chess."ÂÂÂÂ

One example of Tehran playing chess is the dispute between Christian Armenia and Shia (former Soviet Republic) Azerbaijan. Tehran supports Armenia. Despite the fact Azerbaijan is a fellow Shia country and even though Azeris are the second largest ethnic group in Iran, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is, himself, an ethnic Azeri, national security, not religious affiliation, determines Tehran's policy. Azerbaijan is considered a potential threat to Iran because of its extensive military cooperation with the U.S. including permitting the U.S. use of its military bases. Tehran believes a victory by pro-US Azerbaijan over Armenia could lead Washington and Baku to foment secession in Iranian Azerbaijan.. As in chess, Tehran is thinking several moves ahead. By supporting Armenia, Tehran is also courting the Armenian Diaspora, especially the Armenian population in the U.S.

Another example is Afghanistan. To insure Iran's national security, Tehran discarded past policies and embraced past enemies. The rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan is perceived by Tehran as a greater threat than the Taliban. So despite decades of Tehran and the Taliban being sworn enemies, "daggers drawn", Tehran has been working with the Taliban to secure the 572 mile Afghan-Iran border from infiltration by Islamic State militants. Iran is "going even further, and enlisting elements of the Taliban to slow the Islamic State's expansion inside Afghanistan".ÂÂÂÂ At the same time and for the same reason, insuring Iran's national security, and thinking several moves ahead, Tehran's policy change to work with the Taliban also seeks to undo the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

To preserve regime and state, Tehran has changed its foreign policy at other times when faced with external pressures or changing political landscapes. Initially, in the wake of the success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran now lead by Ayatollah Khomeini, sought to export the revolution. Khomeini sought a Sunni-Shia alliance to expel Western influences from the region. Sunni governments rejected the offer and supported Iraq's invasion of Iran. Tehran changed policy. Khomeini called upon Muslims to overthrow the Sunni rulers of the oil rich Gulf States who were funding Iraq – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

Years later, to weaken Saudi Arabia, its principle regional adversary, and the United Arab Emirates, Tehran changed policy once more by establishing de facto "alliances" with the Gulf States of Qatar and Oman. For Tehran, current national security needs takes precedence over religious affiliation or past policy.

In the 1980s, Tehran, in an attempt to break out of the international isolation imposed on Iran by the world's reaction to the excesses of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, focused on the oppression of fellow Shias in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, a Shia uprising encouraged by Iran was suppressed by Riyadh. But as victims of official discrimination, if not persecution, the Shia unrest in Saudi Arabia simmers and can be exploited by Iran at a time of Tehran's choosing.

In Lebanon, on the other hand, Tehran succeeded in creating Hizbullah as a rival to the existing, conventional Lebanese Shia party, Amal. The goal of Hizbullah was to transform Lebanon into an Islamic state modeled on Iran., to be Iran's proxy in Lebanon and Tehran's window to the world. In its 1985 manifesto, known as the "open letter", Hizbullah declared "We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and faqih (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!"

Lebanese elements including many local Shia objected to Iran's interference in Lebanon's domestic affairs. In 1943, Lebanon had achieved independence from France under the terms of the National Pact. By this agreement, the various religious denominations inhabiting Lebanon agreed to Lebanon as a confessional republic. This is "a form of consociationalism in which the highest offices are proportionately reserved for representatives from certain religious communities." However, the system had flaws. The Lebanese Shia were often the victims of discrimination and government neglect. But there was no unanimity with the Shia community to support Hizbullah.

Fearing a civil war within in the Shia, as well as war with Lebanon's other religious denominations, and their foreign supporters, Hizbullah and Iran became "flexible". For the present, Hizbullah would work within the confessional system. Tehran had changed policy in face of significant opposition. But more importantly, Tehran views Hizbullah as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the West on normalization of relations.

To that end, "On 4 May 2003, the Iranian government sent a proposal to Washington, in which Tehran offered the Bush administration direct talks over a wide range of issues. This proposal, which later became known as the Iranian "grand bargain", offered negotiations over Iran's support for groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah, stabilising Iraq, and Iran's nuclear programme. Feeling emboldened by its recent victory in Iraq, the Bush administration ignored the offer. "We don't talk to evil," was the reply from vice-president Cheney who, according to some reports, had Iran in its sights as the next target for regime change."

Relying on military power alone has been counter-productive. The Bush Administration's military action in Iraq and Afghanistan opened the door to Tehran's influence spreading through the region. Instead of Iran being surrounded by armed, hostile, Sunni powers – Saddam Hussein's Iraq to the west, the Taliban's Afghanistan to the east, and Saudi Arabia to the south - Iranian influence now extends virtually unchecked from the Mediterranean Sea to the Hindu Kush Mountains. Any military action undertaken by the U.S. directly against Iran would only further destabilise the region and endanger the world economy by making the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world's oil is shipped, a war zone.

Iran's economy is suffering. Tehran desperately wants existing sanctions lifted. Increase sanctions with the offer to negotiate an end to all sanctions in a "grand bargain" as Tehran once proposed. Iran may very well accept. To preserve regime and state, Tehran has repeatedly shown it will change policy even to agreeing to work with its former enemies. The U.S. talked and negotiated with Stalin. The U.S. talked and negotiated with Mao Zedong. The U.S. can talk and negotiate with Tehran. This was advocated by Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski and General William Odom. Writing in an Op-Ed piece in the Washington Post, May 27, 2008, entitled "A Sensible Path on Iran", Dr. Brzezinski and General Odom stated "A successful approach to Iran has to accommodate its security interests and ours...there is no credible reason to assume that the traditional policy of strategic deterrence, which worked so well in U.S. relations with the Soviet Union and with China and which has helped to stabilize India-Pakistan hostility, would not work in the case of Iran."

Joe Fallon is a Senior Research Associate with the U K Defence Forum.