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Iran in an Emerging New World Order

From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani

Ali Fathollah-Nejad



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*Dedicated to
my most beloved parents
Ana and Ata
for their unconditional love and their invaluable
moral and intellectual guidance*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study covers the period until the end of 2014, when Iran was witnessing the early years of the Hassan Rouhani administration. It is based upon my PhD dissertation submitted in January 2015 to the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London. I have decided to refrain from any update or significant editing of the text. An exception, however, is the discussion on the impact of sanctions on Iran's foreign-policy behaviour. This book is published precisely at a time when the new Joe Biden administration in the USA is about to re-engage with Iran where President Rouhani's second term is nearing its end. I hope that the theoretical and empirical insights presented in this book can be useful for scholars and analysts alike.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my principal PhD supervisor Prof. Gilbert Achcar for his guidance, wisdom and not least his *esprit humain* and patience. I have learned a great deal from his scholarship, especially the rejection of dogma and the concise language, which I still continue to admire. I also wish to thank my second supervisor Prof. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam—a fellow “German–Iranian”—for the many hours of formidably stimulating discussions. I will be eternally grateful to both of them. I have indeed been privileged to have such outstanding academics as supervisors from whose work I have immensely benefitted and whose divergent theoretical approaches, which enabled me to continually rethink my own, I have tried to infuse into this study. Last but not least, I am very grateful to my examiners, Prof. Ali M. Ansari and Dr. Gholam Khiabany, for their invaluable comments which immensely helped me improve the thesis.

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This work would not have been possible without the support of my parents, to whom this book is dedicated, as well as many dear friends. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude especially to Kaveh Yazdani and Ibrahim E. Şahin, who have provided crucial moral support throughout the final stages of my PhD project. Also, many thanks are due to Janina Mitwalli, Dr. Jens Wagner, Maryam Ommy and Vassilios Miaris. Kamuran Sezer has provided me with indispensable moral and logistical support during difficult times, and many thanks are also due to his adorable team at his Futureorg Institute, namely Dr. Nilgün Dağlar-Sezer and Gizem Demirtaş. *Çok teşekkür ederim, Kamuran abi!*

I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love and support without whom all of this would have not been possible.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the team at Palgrave Macmillan and especially the series editor Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh for their support and tremendous patience.

Needless to say, all shortcomings are solely mine.

Berlin, winter 2020/2021

AFN

Praise for *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*

“Forged in the fires and intense deliberations of a PhD, undertaken at a most unique institution of higher learning in the world, Ali Fathollah-Nejad has produced one of the most informative and evocative studies of Iran’s foreign policy and international relations to date. Framed in a highly original theoretical approach, Ali’s nuanced analysis, drawing on a lorry load of primary and secondary sources, details the process and context of policy in the Islamic Republic, thus producing an unrivalled and lasting account of modern Iran’s worldview and the behaviour of this revolutionary state in a fast-changing world.”

—Anoush Ehteshami, *Professor of International Relations & Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University (UK)*

“Empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated, *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* flashes out the key drivers behind Iran’s international relations since the mid-2000s. Providing evidence for the material and geopolitical significance of Iran’s identity constructions, the book enriches the debate on the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and bridges the divide between the discipline of IR and area studies.”

—Fawaz A. Gerges, *Professor of International Relations & inaugural Director, LSE Middle East Centre (2010–13), London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); author of the forthcoming The 100 Years’ War for Control of the Middle East (Princeton University Press, 2021)*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad has established himself as one of the most insightful observers of Iranian politics. Providing the analytical background to his assessments of Tehran’s foreign policy in the 21st century, this book comes out opportunistically at a time when a new U.S. administration is about to re-engage with Iran.”

—Gilbert Achcar, *Professor of Development Studies and International Relations, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) University of London*

“A wide-ranging interrogation of Iran’s international politics which acutely dissects and interrogates the complex dynamics informing Iranian politics and its wider international relations. An important contribution to the debate, which deserves to be widely read.”

—Ali Ansari, *Professor of Iranian History & Founding Director, Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews, Scotland*

“A decisive contribution to two avant-gardist fields of knowledge: Critical geopolitics and Iranian foreign relations. Anyone interested in cutting-edge research that brings together International Relations and Iranian Studies will revel in this important book.”

—Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, Department of Politics and International Studies & former Chair (2012–18), Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS University of London*

“One of the few to have a thorough, beyond-the-headlines and forward-looking grasp of Iran, Ali Fathollah-Nejad offers a brilliant analysis of what is in store for Iran. A must-read for anybody interested in geopolitics.”

—Florence Gaub, *Deputy Director & Director of Research, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Paris*

“It is no longer possible to think of any nation-state without simultaneously seeing the reflection of an entire changing world in it. Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s prose and politics in *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is the state-of-the-art mapping of the epistemic shift that seeks to understand the global in the local, and the domestic in the foreign. The result is a mode of supple and symbiotic thinking that reveals the way transnational politics dwells on the borderline where the fate of nations unravels into the fold of a dysfunctional disorder that has become the fact of our fragile world.”

—Hamid Dabashi, *Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University*

“Iranian politics, outside of a small group of specialists, remains poorly understood. *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* helps demystify this subject. Thoroughly researched, very accessible and packed with insights, this book, focusing on the Ahmadinejad period, is highly recommended. It makes an important contribution to the study of internal Iranian politics, Iran’s foreign policy orientation and the international relations of the Middle East.”

—Nader Hashemi, *Director, Center for Middle East Studies & Associate Professor, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad has produced an academic work that is, from my viewpoint, so far the most comprehensive one concerning Iranian standing in regional and international politics, its new political élite and their attitude towards the West and the world order.”

—Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran & Director of Studies at EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales), the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, France*

“Iranian foreign policy is a central subject in contemporary international affairs, but is usually approached in glib and propagandistic ways, with an implicit great man theory of history. Fathollah-Nejad delineates a far more complex scene of changing domestic constituencies and rival elite factions, as well as reactions to an erratic, adventurous and arguably declining United States in the region. This book is a must read for anyone concerned with foreign policy.”

—Juan Cole, Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate,
Professor of History, University of Michigan

“Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic’s initial foreign policy was based on the rejection of the bipolar international order under the banner of a “neither East nor West” policy. By the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar order, the Islamic Republic tried to adjust its approach to deal with the United States as a hegemonic power. Iran shifted its foreign policy toward the East as soon as the international order moved from unipolarity in the early 2000s. Why did Iran turn its foreign policy, and what were the consequences and ramifications of this shift? *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* dives deep to answer these questions. *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is a comprehensive and critical review of Iran’s foreign policy in post-unipolar world. As a delightful read full of important information and analyses, the book explores the domestic, regional, and international dimensions and ideational and material factors that shape and impact the Islamic Republic’s geopolitical imaginations and foreign policy controversies. Fathollah-Nejad explores Iran’s foreign-policy transformation from a unipolar to a (what he cautions as an increasingly but not fully-fledged) multipolar order, and its relations with non-Western great-powers in the 21st century. Written with clarity, *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is a must-read primer for anyone interested in Iranian politics in particular and Middle East politics in general.”

—Saeid Golkar, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga*; *Senior Fellow on Iran Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs* & author, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Post-Revolutionary Iran (Columbia University Press, 2015)*

“A competent, engaged and impressive study of Iran’s foreign policy and its place in the world. Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s most important quality is that he looks with a wide lens and sees not just Iranian politics and foreign policy (in which he is clearly an expert) but the dynamics of the broader world and changes in the international system. This book is thus a must-read for those interested in Iranian foreign policy but also in shifts and changes of the international system into the second decade of the 21st century.”

—Arash Azizi, *New York University*; author of *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran’s Global Ambitions (Oneworld Publications, 2020)*

“In presenting Iran as sets of complexities – within and how it acts externally; how it represents itself and is represented by others; its myriad political and religious cultures, and how these shape the state and its international relations – and locating those within a constantly-changing global environment, Fathollah-Nejad provides us with unique and alternative assessments of how Iran’s foreign policy is shaped within the context of what he calls “Imperial Interpolarity”. The creative interplay of these various factors makes this an indispensable text for anyone wishing to understand Iran and its international relations within the current global political environment.”

—Na’eem Jeenah, *Executive Director, Afro–Middle East Centre (AMEC), Johannesburg & advisory board member, World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES)*

“A magnificent and conceptually powerful book; an eye opener for those who essentialize the role of Iran in contemporary International Relations. This landmark study covers the complexity of Iran’s cultural geopolitics and the diversity of its interlocutors in 21st-century world politics. The book is useful for delving into the internal dynamics of Iranian politics and its connection with the spheres of power in international relations. It is a very methodical book. Theoretically flawless. A deep, brilliant and enlightening academic text.”

—Moisés Garduño García, *Professor in the Center for International Relations, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)*

“In this book, Ali Fathollah-Nejad goes beyond the usual one-dimensional view that dominates the study of Iran’s foreign policy and presents a comprehensive framework explaining the interrelated role of socio-cultural, economic and geopolitical elements in shaping the Islamic Republic’s foreign-policy orientation. The book also focuses on a crucial period involving two critical transitions: a systemic transition from the unipolar to the post-unipolar world order and a domestic one from a hardline to a more moderate worldview. All this makes the book a valuable contribution to the field.”

—Hamidreza Azizi, *Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Middle East and Africa Research Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) & former Assistant Professor of Regional Studies, Shahid Beheshti University, Tebran (2016–20)*

“*Iran in an Emerging New World Order* provides a timely and original account of foreign-policy making in the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially the turbulent first decade of the new millennium.”

—Kamran Matin, *Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Sussex University & Associate Research Fellow, Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI)*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* builds on a reliable scientific approach and an informed overview of Iranian foreign policy. It identifies and examines the different factors which orientate it, such as its various schools of thought and their debates, the élites’ role, the interplay between structure and culture, and the one between internal and external realms. Furthermore, it casts light on the evolution of Tehran’s choices, including its “look to the East”. In this new book, Fathollah-Nejad has provided a challenging study which demonstrates the need to go beyond conventional framings, to include political culture, and provides a new evaluation of Iran’s international relations. This is an original and significant contribution to the literature on international relations, the workings of the Islamic Republic, and the understanding of the latter’s regional and global actions.”

—Firouzeh Nahavandi, *Professor of Sociology of Development and Political Science & Director, Institute of Sociology & Director, CECID (Center for International Cooperation and Development Studies), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), as well as President, Graduate School of Development Studies of French Community of Belgium*

“Through its careful analysis of a modern political culture in Iran gestated in the context of an encounter with European colonial modernity and evolved in correspondence with a catalogue of internal and external others, Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s timely book places contemporary geopolitical concerns against a much-needed backdrop of colonial and anti-colonial histories.”

—Siavash Saffari, *Associate Professor of West Asian Studies, Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations, Seoul National University*

“If you really want to dive deep into Iran and understand the reasons why its leaders are operating in the current crisis, this is the book you should read. It teaches analysts and policy-makers to understand the past to act wisely in the future.”

—Susanne Koelbl, *award-winning Foreign Correspondent, Der Spiegel*

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Ali Fathollah-Nejad is a German–Iranian political scientist focusing on Iran, the Middle East and the post-unipolar world order. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, and was the winner of the 2016/17 post-doctoral fellowship of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Iran Project. He is an affiliated researcher with the Centre d’Études de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement (CECID) at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Freie Universität (FU) Berlin’s Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics as well as the Afro–Middle East Centre (AMEC), South Africa’s think-tank specialized on the Middle East. Most recently, he was Senior Lecturer in Middle East and Comparative Politics at the University of Tübingen and adjunct Assistant Professor in the PhD programme of Qatar University’s Gulf Studies Center. Fathollah-Nejad is also the former Iran expert of the Brookings Institution in Doha (BDC, 2017–20) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP, 2015–18). In 2020, he published two monographs: *The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis* and *The Politics of Culture in Times of Rapprochement: European Cultural and Academic Exchange with Iran (2015–16)*.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AEOI	Atomic Energy Organization of Iran
BRIC(S)	Brazil, Russia, India, China (and South Africa)
Centcom	US Central Command
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, an inter-governmental and ‘multi-national forum for enhancing cooperation towards promoting peace, security and stability in Asia. It is a forum based on the recognition that there is close link between peace, security and stability in Asia and in the rest of the world.’ (http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?lang=1)
CISAD	The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010
D-8	The D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8, is an organization for development of cooperation among Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey. Its objectives are to improve member-states’ position in the global economy, diversify and create new opportunities in trade relations, enhance participation in decision-making at the international level and improve standards of living. (http://www.developing8.org/About.aspx)
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization, an inter-governmental regional organization established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey for the purpose of promoting economic, technical and cultural cooperation among the member-states. Successor organization of Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) that existed from 1964 to 1979
EU	European Union

G2	Group of Two, a proposed informal special relationship between the US and China
G20/G8	Group of 20/8
GCC	The Gulf Cooperation Council, originally called the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG), is a political and economic union of the Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf and constituting the Arabian Peninsula, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE). On 10 May 2011, a request by Jordan to join the GCC was formally being considered and Morocco was invited to join the GCC. (http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/)
GDP (PPP)	Gross domestic product in purchasing power parity (PPP). GDP refers to the market value of all officially recognized final goods and services produced within a country in a given period. PPP signals the amount of money needed to purchase the same goods and services in two countries, and uses that to calculate an implicit foreign exchange rate
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
GWOT	The Global War on Terror, proclaimed by the Bush/Cheney administration
Hamas	<i>Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah</i> , ‘Islamic Resistance Movement’
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAG	Iranian Association of Geopolitics (<i>Anjoman-e Géopolitique-e Irán</i>)
IFIs	International financial institutions
ILSA	The Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (see http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:H.R.3107.ENR:)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IORA	Indian-Ocean Rim Association, initially known as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), is ‘an International/Diplomatic Organization with 20 Member States namely Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, UAE and Yemen’. (http://www.iora.net/about-us/membership.aspx)
IPI	Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI), a projected 2700-km pipeline aimed at transferring gas from Iran’s South Pars fields to Karachi and Multan (Pakistan) and then further to New Delhi
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—Qods (Jerusalem) Force

IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Iran's state TV station broadcast outside the country
IRISL	Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Iran's national maritime carrier
IS(IL)	Islamic State (of Iraq and the Levant); alternatively ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and <i>al-Sham</i>)
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MP	Member of Parliament (or <i>Majles</i>)
NOC	National oil company
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
OGEC	Organization of Gas Exporting Countries
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
P5+1	The permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany who have negotiated with Iran over its nuclear programme
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCIRI	Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (later renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq)
TNCs	Transnational corporations
UNSC(R)	United Nations Security Council (Resolution)
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
WANA	West Asia and North Africa
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Introduction

(A) STUDYING IRAN'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AMID CHANGING INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC POWER RELATIONS

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed momentous changes in the distribution of power in West Asia as well as within the international system. Given those shifting power relations, a fresh evaluation of Iran's international relations during the 2000s imposes itself.

As a starting point for a “critical geopolitics” of Iran's international relations, I would like to take Arshin Adib-Moghaddam's overture to Critical Iranian Studies (CIS). The aim of CIS is to ‘capture the plurality of meanings attached to Iran's Islamic project from within the country and without’ with its methodical concern lying in the ‘ambition to put contemporary Iran in context, to provide alternative paths of explanation’.¹ The objective of pluralizing the ways in which we comprehend Iran is built upon the following inquiries: ‘on the one side, how Iran “enacts” itself domestically and in world politics (internal dialectic); and, on the other side, how Iran is “enacted” from without (external dialectic).’² The external dialectic consists in critically assessing those ‘discourses

¹ Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 28.

² Ibid.: 29.

enveloping Iran [that] tend to reduce rather than extend the meanings of the country, singularize rather than pluralize Iran's identities'.³ An inherent task would be to dispense with 'one-dimensional verities about Iran in general and the Islamic Republic in particular',⁴ by highlighting how ideas and schools of thought evolve in the context of historical developments:

The horizon of critical Iranian studies is not science *per se*. Rather, its purpose is to engender dialectical analysis that divides up the diversity of contemporary Iran, and to invalidate movement towards positivistic unification. So it defines limited spaces where we can engage Iran theoretically, ontologically and empirically. [CIS shall be] designed to ask "how" rather than "what", to present alternatives rather than imperatives, to diversify rather than unify, to explore the making of politics, culture, norms, institutions rather than getting engaged in the grand project of reifying them.⁵

The present study thus wishes to pluralize the way in which "Iran's Islamic project" can be comprehended, by delving into Iran's diverse political and geopolitical cultures. By so doing, the way in which Iran is "enacted" domestically and internationally shall be critically scrutinized, by questioning the respective dominant explanations so as to move towards "pluralizing Iran's identities" domestically and internationally. Yet, the study does not claim to present an exhaustive account of Iranian political or geopolitical culture(s). Rather, in the spirit of Critical Geopolitics (to be laid out in Chap. 2), its initial part (Chaps. 3 and 4) attempts to critically examine the rationale offered behind geopolitical representations.

The study's latter part (Chaps. 6 and 7) primarily focuses on the shifting world-order configurations and their ramifications for Iran and its international relations. Here, the common view that the world order after the brief period of unipolarity has entered an era of multipolarity shall be critically scrutinized. Such an examination shall likewise serve the purpose

³ Ibid.: 188. Against this backdrop, Adib-Moghaddam (2007: 188–189) argues that 'the question of the Islamic Republic can only be posed and answered in the plural, that Iran in fact cannot be captured because Iranians number over seventy million, because life and culture in Lorestan are not the same as in Sistan-Baluchestan, because I don't know of any effective methodology that could capture Iranians in their entirety, from the Iranian-Jew in Boroujerd to the Iranian-Baha'i in exile. In short, [...] any reduction of Iran along a set of easily digestible propositions has a political purpose, typically carried by a myth making apparatus.'

⁴ Ibid.: 25.

⁵ Ibid.: 194.

of offering “alternative ways of explanation” for Iran’s international relations beyond those conventionally diagnosed. Therefore, the present study with its own set of foci hopes to make a contribution to this overall project of pluralization and diversification.

Hence, the following elements of investigation can be formulated in the attempt to respond to our key research endeavour:

Internal dialectic: Exploring political and geopolitical cultures, the domestic power structure, the foreign-policy schools of thought and their controversies

How have Iran’s political cultures (or politico-ideological formations) as well as geopolitical cultures affected its worldview and grand-strategic preferences? How can we comprehend the process whereby the diversity of a country’s political and geopolitical cultures is transformed into a prevalent state-sanctioned political and geopolitical culture?

How is the power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) constituted and what are its relevant components? And how does the domestic realm affect Iran’s international relations and vice versa?

What have been the areas of convergence and divergence among the IRI’s foreign-policy schools of thought? How have they perceived the changing international geography of power, particularly the global power capabilities held by the U.S. and by non-Western great-powers? And in how far has that reading shaped its foreign-policy ambitions and conduct? How have shifts in the domestic power structure affected the way in which Iran has perceived the world order? And, what are the ramifications of those issues for the future of Iran?

The internal dialectic indispensably requires defining Iranian grand-strategic preferences, self-conception(s) and outlook(s) towards the outside world, since the country’s *Selbstverortung* (self-locating or -positioning) impacts the nature and scale of its global interactions. To do so, an examination of the geopolitical imaginations, narrations and rationales being produced can provide useful insights. The theoretical rationale for this is rooted in the suggestion that ideational patterns can have important consequences for the shape of international structures. In that vein, investigating the Arab world, Michael Barnett demonstrated that changing and contested notions of Arab national identity help define security threats and shape the dynamics of alliance formation.⁶ Yet, distancing ourselves from a

⁶ See Barnett 1996.

purely Constructivist approach, we shall also be asking for potential material underpinnings of ideational stances.

*External Dialectic: Exploring the International Geography
of Power (World Order)*

The international system has been undergoing significant changes due to the (re-)emergence of non-Western great-powers, a process driven by the world's economic centre of gravity unmistakably heading eastwards. But has the redistribution of economic power already translated into that of political power as well? What are the ramifications of the shifting international geography of power and its inherent (inter-)dependencies for Iran's international relations? What consequences do those bear in terms of fulfilling Iran's "national interests", its grand-strategic preferences and its place in the evolving hierarchy of international order?

How have non-Western great-powers (most notably the BRIC countries) acted towards Iran, taking into consideration their own ambitions and interests in an emerging new world order? Given Iran's key role for peace and stability in West Asia, whose unrivalled energy resources are crucial for the development of those rising economies, have the latter embraced Iran geo-economically or geopolitically also as an indispensable part in forging a "post-Western" world order; or have they conversely not acted according to this widely held assumption of a mutual interest in the forming of an "anti-hegemonic" alliance against the U.S. superpower—and if so, why? Put differently, what have been the differences (isolation vs. integration) and convergences (e.g. the containment of Iran) between established and aspiring great-powers when it came to dealing with Iran?

The external dialectic thus necessitates the exploration of the evolving international system at the outset of the twenty-first century (that has moved from unipolarity to post-unipolarity) and its ramifications for Iran's international relations and the pursuit of its grand-strategic preferences. In that context, some relevant questions follow: How is Iran's foreign-policy goal of "independence" to be assessed in light of different circumstances at the global (considering varieties of polarity and an increasingly interdependent world) and regional levels (considering Iranian self-conception and ambitions)? What does this hold for the issue of alignment? Moreover, what interactions or interrelatedness can one decipher when dealing with Iranian and Western strategies towards each other?

The study's empirical focus will be accompanied by two theoretical queries as derived from our upcoming discussion in Chap. 2: on one side, the interplay between the outside and the inside realms in shaping the trajectories of Iran's domestic and international politics; on the other, the role of ideational and material factors in the agent's behaviour towards the outside world.

Brief Account of International, Domestic and Regional Arenas

On the international level, the decade following the U.S. "unipolar moment" of the early 1990s has been marked by the U.S.-led "global war on terror" in the "Greater Middle East", fuelled by neoconservative aspirations to initiate a "New American Century", as well as by significant transformations in international power relations. For both phenomena, Iran has occupied a particular place. On the one hand, Iran lies at the very core of the U.S.-designated battlefield, and on the other, being at the very centre of West Asia, it is crucial in Eurasian geopolitics, which involves almost all of today's relevant great-powers.

The events between "9/11" and the occupation of Iraq one-and-a-half years later laid the ground for landmark developments in regional and global geopolitics. In 2002, the U.S. superpower set the modus for its global strategy. In January, it designated an "axis of evil" composed of the formerly coined "rogue states" of North Korea, Iraq and Iran. In the summer of 2002, the "Iran nuclear crisis" took its course, powerfully overshadowing the question of Iran in world politics. In September, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) proclaimed a "global war on terror" with preventive wars being an integral part thereof and thus sought to parlay the U.S. post-Cold War "unipolar moment" into an "American twenty-first century", thereby seeking pre-eminence over potential great-power rivals. Then, by the mid-2000s, tensions between the U.S. and Iran peaked. At the height of the "nuclear crisis" and the threat of war against Iran, the 2006 NSS bluntly stated that the U.S. 'may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran',⁷ after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had radically altered regional geopolitics in favour of Tehran.

On the domestic level, the 2000s also experienced two equally divergent administrations displaying very different worldviews in both Iran and the U.S. While in Washington the neoconservative-minded Bush/Cheney

⁷The White House 2006: 20.

administration held office for almost the entire decade (January 2001–January 2009), by the decade’s midway (in August 2005) Iran’s reformist administration headed by President Mohammad Khatami was replaced by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s “principalist”, or neoconservative, faction. At the end of the decade, in 2009, a centrist administration under President Barack Obama took office in Washington, while in Tehran President Ahmadinejad and allies succeeded in preserving power. Finally, in August 2013, with the election of an equally centrist administration in Iran led by President Hassan Rouhani, the stars over the decades-old inimical (non-) relationship between Iran and the U.S. seemed to finally align, paving the way for a new chapter in bilateral relations (which, however, is not the focus of the present book). Arguably, in the same way that the nature of each of these administrations shaped their international politics as well as their counterparts’ perceptions of Iranian foreign policy,⁸ the realities in regional and global politics also did shape their very nature.

On the *regional level*, the 2000s were marked by an extraordinary degree of geopolitical tumult as a result of two U.S.-led military occupations in conjunction with aggressive Israeli foreign-policy behaviour, whose stage was set before 11 September 2001 when the most hardline factions in both Washington (with President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney) and Tel Aviv (with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon) assumed power. This was followed by two U.S. military occupations (in October 2001 in Afghanistan and in March 2003 in Iraq) and various Israeli military operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. While Iran sought to accommodate its interests with the U.S. “regime change” operations targeting two of its regional foes (the Iraq of Saddam Hussein and Afghanistan under the Taliban), it provided support to its two main non-state regional allies (i.e. Hamas throughout the decade and Hezbollah most notably in the 33-Day War in the summer of 2006), which added the dimension of an Israeli–Iranian proxy war to Israeli–Arab confrontations.

A turning point occurred by the mid-2000s when mounting resistance in Iraq and Afghanistan produced serious challenges to the U.S.

⁸ On the latter aspect, Ansari (2006: 233) observes: ‘Students of international relations have a tendency to look at state as actors—rational or otherwise—with an occasional foray into the domestic political context of their foreign policy making. Rarely do we look at the ways in which these actors relate and communicate with each other or the ways in which they have influenced the behavior and perceptions of the other. When we do, more often than not any assessment of influence tends to be one way.’

occupations there, ultimately prompting a change in the U.S. posture with the second term of the Bush/Cheney administration (2005–2009). Given these increasing problems accompanied by rising Iranian influence in both U.S.-occupied countries, Washington decided to hold talks with Iranian officials on security in Iraq; in May 2007 the first official talks between the two countries in almost 30 years took place. Given the U.S. neoconservatives' mantra of not talking to "rogue states" such as Iran, those talks were a considerable step, signalling a shift from a neoconservative to a pragmatic foreign policy. Despite these U.S. difficulties in managing its occupations, Washington had already managed to build permanent military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, thus establishing a firm military presence all around Iran. Tehran's sense of vulnerability had thus been immensely boosted by U.S. threats of "regime change" directed at it from 2002 onwards. In sum, the "geopolitical revolution" (to borrow Volker Perthes' notion)⁹ brought about by the war on Iraq led to Iran turning into the indispensable geopolitical power of the region.

Discussing these features at the global and domestic levels in relation to each other, by paying special attention to the global position occupied by the U.S. and the (re-)appearance of various non-Western great-powers onto the main stage of world politics, this book thus aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature devoted to explore Iran's international relations.

*Discussing Iran's International Relations Beyond
the Iran–U.S. Stand-off*

On these regional and international levels the U.S. and Iran have appeared most prominently. For the last three decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has assumed a permanent place in the headlines of world politics. This is perhaps primarily due to the fact that no other state in the post-Cold War international system has found itself in such jangly juxtaposition to the world's most powerful state, the U.S., in the way post-revolutionary Iran has. No other regional state has proclaimed active non-compliance to U.S. hegemony over the "Middle East", with the scope of this decision being boosted by it being arguably the geostrategically central country in that crucial part of the world. Also, no other country than Iran has in such a dramatic way undergone a change from the global superpower's most trusted regional ally, deemed the central pillar for U.S. "vital interests", to

⁹Perthes 2004b.

the most contested one challenging even those. Indeed, the Iranian revolution of 1979 not only revolutionized Iran's relations with the U.S. but in the same token radically transformed the geopolitics of the region and also impacted global power politics, above all by catapulting so-called political Islam onto the stage of world politics.

However, with the transition to the twenty-first century, the story of Iran's international relations cannot be reduced to its enmity vis-à-vis the U.S., or "the West" in general, as it is the case in the vast bulk of the literature. Although the impacts of that relationship remain far-reaching and thus indispensable in any discussion of Iran's international relations, it is no more sufficient to solely focus on them. In fact, the ongoing redistribution of global economic, and potentially geopolitical, power eastwards—from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific—increasingly influences the Iranian–U.S. relationship, but also the one between each one of them and the non-Western (re-)emerging great-powers.

The ways in which Tehran and Washington—but also Moscow or Beijing—see the world necessarily impacts their foreign-policy decisions. They all harbour different views about the world and international relations. The U.S., which emerged as the globe's "sole superpower" after the implosion of the Soviet Union, has the unrelenting ambition to keep occupying the premier seat in international politics—a global hegemonic project also aimed at keeping potential global competitors at bay (be they partners such as the EU or contenders such as Russia and China).

The Islamic Republic, on its part, has in 1979 entered the international system with a markedly anti-imperial posture, very much directed against the U.S. dubbed as "global arrogance", all the while its pan-Islamic ideological pedigree can in itself reveal a hegemonic pretence. Thus, since the start of this century, both sides have asserted the claim to shape a "new world order" while their respective strategic goals appear to be diametrically opposed to each other.

(B) STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework by delineating my account of a Critical Geopolitics for the study of international relations (Critical Geopolitics of International Relations, CGIR), which combines ideational and material accounts within the agent–system arrangement. *Chapter 3* investigates on a more conceptual level the spectrum of dominant political and geopolitical cultures to be found in modern Iran. This will be done

against the backdrop of our approach that is informed by CIS and Critical Geopolitics, which necessitates that we pluralize as well as critically scrutinize our understanding of political or geopolitical cultures. There, we propose a critical account of Iranian geopolitical imaginations as derived from its various political cultures (or politico-ideological formations). Given the importance we attribute to the domestic realm when analysing foreign policy, *Chap. 4* examines the IRI's state–society complex, that is, the military–clerical–commercial complex, as well as the state's prevalent political and geopolitical culture as constructed by the political élite. After delineating the institutional arrangement for foreign-policy in the IRI, *Chap. 5* introduces the variety of foreign-policy schools of thought in contemporary Iran and then brings them into conversation with each other over important foreign-policy controversies of the 2000s. Opening the discussion on Iran's international relations during that decade, *Chap. 6* is devoted to an examination of the period between “9/11” and the initial phase of the Iraq War (–2004) with its implications for Iran's foreign policy and its state–society complex. *Chapter 7* discusses the period after the mid-2000s until when Iran had emerged as the region's indispensable power through a combination of U.S. occupation “quagmires” and Iran's successful Offensive Realist regional strategy. In a next step, it scrutinizes the rationale and outcome of Iran's “Look to the East” policy in the context of the specific world-order configuration that I propose to call “Imperial Interpolarity”. The multifaceted ramifications of the Iran sanctions regime are also accounted for. Finally, the *Conclusion* evaluates prospects for Iran's international relations to escape the strategic trap posed by Imperial Interpolarity in view of its grand-strategic goals enshrined in the so-called 20-Year Outlook document and its salient desire to safeguard independence. It therefore asks whether a “developmentalist foreign policy”, espoused by Iran's Defensive Realists who inform the grand-strategic preferences of the Hassan Rouhani administration, can present an adequate response to those challenges.