

Article

AMIDST THE STORM: IRAN'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN A TURBULENT REGION

Abbas Mosallanejad

Abstract: The security landscape across Southwest Asia faces persistent challenges and crises stemming from power dynamics and lack of established international/regional structures. These crises are structural, suggesting involved parties benefit from unconventional mechanisms. Post-Cold War, international politics witnessed surges in crises and threats due to structural shifts from the bipolar order's dissolution, leading to fluid global dynamics. This research investigates the behavioral and structural facets of Iran's regional security strategy in West Asia. Since 1991, Iran's security policy, which assumes a central role in orchestrating regional security dynamics, has grappled with challenges emanating from major powers, regional actors, and identity groups. The central contention of the article is that Iran's strategic approach, particularly concerning Syria and Iraq, revolves around a supportive role aimed at counterbalancing destabilizing forces. The analysis is grounded in the "turbulent politics strategy" framework and the "collective action problem" concept, building upon the conceptual foundations laid by James Rosenau as well as the scholarly contributions of Herbert Simon and Elinor Ostrom.

Keywords: Regional Security, Turbulence Environment, Collective Action Problem, Middle East

1. INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War era, the regional security dynamics of West Asia have been predominantly shaped by the non-cooperative interactions of states and identity-based actors. Confronted with such precarious circumstances, countries generally strive to leverage institutions and organizational frameworks grounded in structural precepts aimed at facilitating the pacific resolution of disputes through collective action. A pivotal factor contributing to the proliferation of regional security challenges in West Asia can be attributed to the paucity of institutional architectures conducive to fostering cooperative engagement among countries during crises.

The emergence of turbulent political and security symptoms in regions akin to the Middle East and West Asia has captured the scholarly attention of theorists and

ABBAS MOSALLANEJAD is a distinguished Professor of Public Policy at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran. He specializes in strategic and economic policy and sustainable development. His extensive body of work includes notable contributions such as the *Trilogy of Strategic Policy, State and Economic Development in Iran*, and *The End of Republicanism in Iran*.

researchers. Turbulent security pertains to conditions wherein indications of a transition from the bipolar structural order manifest. The assessment of turbulent security in West Asia is predicated upon the extent of instability in the regional order and the escalation of regional crises. Whenever appropriate institutions for regulating security challenges are lacking, the inevitability of power projection becomes apparent, and consequently, turbulent security reflects the absence of organized security institutions capable of controlling and managing regional crises. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Southwest Asia has grappled with manifestations of crisis, conflict, and geopolitical confrontation among regional states, major powers, and sub-state/non-state actors. Therefore, it is imperative to elucidate the regional security policy of a pivotal actor such as Iran in West Asia through the prism of power-oriented mechanisms. Specifically, in the crisis-afflicted domains of Iraq and Syria, we have witnessed the assertion of conflicting identity groups challenging the geopolitical configurations and Iran's regional role, resorting to violent means. The emergence of these contentious identity-based actors has catalyzed the exacerbation of geopolitical conflicts and confrontations in the relations among regional countries, manifested in proxy wars, ideological clashes, and identity-oriented schisms. Proxy wars have been a principal driver of regional crises in West Asia, rendering the geopolitical confrontation between numerous countries and regional actors with Iran's regional policies and objectives inescapable. The intensification of security conflicts between regional states and Iran has been fomented by actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, each espousing, in certain instances, geopolitical approaches antithetical to those of Iran.

The emergence of novel identity groups precipitated a state of "disequilibrium" in the regional architecture. This geopolitical and structural disequilibrium catalyzed the advent of conditions conducive to the manifestation of "fragile states." Moreover, each of the identity groups garnered support from major powers and regional actors to assume a security role in the Middle East. Such circumstances engendered an environment propitious for the emergence of "hybrid wars." Consequently, Iran's regional security policy was oriented toward assuming a role in this turbulent milieu, predicated upon the orchestration of hybrid warfare.

The hallmark of hybrid wars is the exploitation of maximal structural capacity and tactical maneuverability by each actor to counter emergent threats. Hybrid wars typically materialize in scenarios where a broad spectrum of identity-based, state, sub-state, and supra-state actors are engaged. Discernible indications suggest that in the post-Cold War era, conditions materialized that facilitated the diversification of actors and patterns of action posing threats to Iran's national security. This diversification encompasses the multiplicity of actors embroiled in regional crises, the dearth of an effective security architecture, the manifestation of novel identity and ideological configurations, and the advent of proxy actors.

2. THE COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM AND IRAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY POLICY

Regional security policy finds itself ensnared in the collective action dilemma under conditions where, first, the number of threat-emanating actors is diverse and increasing. Second, an institutional architecture to regulate threats and manage crises is lacking. Third, major powers refrain from employing mechanisms pertaining to “strategic rationality” for conflict resolution. Fourth, an environment conducive to the ascension of centrifugal identity-based and ideological actors in the regional milieu persists.

2.1. SECURITY POLICY, THE COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM, AND FRAGILE STATES

The emergence of fragile states creates a conducive environment for regional crises. As a result, countries like Iran need to utilize mechanisms within their national and regional security policymaking to address the collective action problem. Robert Kagan argues that each regional crisis in the post-Cold War era is shaped by concepts such as historical rivalries, nationalistic tendencies, and the aspirations of authoritarian leaders. In Kagan's view, fragile states are a consequence of regional crises and disordered conditions. In such situations, actors fail to fulfill their responsibilities in accordance with the international system's structural framework. Alliance formation and counter-alliance behavior can be seen as a reflection of actors' efforts to establish regional equilibrium. As structural components diminish, each actor seeks to define its position based on the dynamics of alliance formation and cooperation with other actors (Kagan 2007, 2).

The emergence of fragile states within the regional security environment can lead to an intensification of hybrid and cumulative threats. Hybrid threats can be understood as the underlying forces and enabling factors that contribute to the collective action dilemma. Fragile states, influenced by regional crises and internal structural forces, undergo a partial erosion of their political existence. In these scenarios, the central government is often forced to seek support from regional actors or major powers to restore its structural position (Miller 1981, 16).

2.2. THE PROXY WAR LANDSCAPE

Proxy wars constitute a mechanism for managing regional crises, with a pronounced presence in the Middle East and West Asia. The proxy war landscape fosters an environment conducive to the emergence of actors motivated by the pursuit of common objectives. Identity-based elements and counter-identity actions can be regarded as principal manifestations of contemporary proxy wars. However, proxy wars cannot be considered a novel phenomenon in international relations and politics; traces of proxy warfare can be observed in the conflict between Sparta and Athens. Thucydides endeavored to elucidate proxy wars through the

dialogue between the Melians and Athenians. In the modern era, Richard Nixon employed a similar paradigm, dubbed the Vietnamization of war and regional security, to extricate the United States from the Vietnam War crisis. The emergence and proliferation of proxy wars engender indications of surrogacy in the competition among actors at sub-state, state, regional, and international levels.

In proxy wars, imperatives such as “strategic management,” “logistics,” and “asymmetric threats” assume critical importance. The ascendancy of proxy wars can be elucidated through the lens of logistical organization to counter threats. A considerable portion of contemporary conflicts within regional security planning is directly linked to the mechanisms of asymmetric wars and low-intensity conflicts. Under such circumstances, low-intensity conflict possesses the requisite capability for logistical reconstitution when confronted with collective action dilemmas.

Proxy wars are not merely military in nature but are predicated upon the expansive application of power. Expansive power, as conceptualized by Barry Buzan, encompasses a broad spectrum of cultural, social, economic, structural, and strategic power manifestations. Media outlets, virtual networks, and the leveraging of network societies can play an influential role in instigating novel proxy wars, even within the framework of “colour revolutions.” The diversity inherent in proxy wars underscores the reality that conflicts are not solely waged to kill enemy soldiers but should be understood as the annihilation of the adversary’s courage and will (Hanieh 2019, 540).

2.3. IRAN’S STRATEGY OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION IN COUNTERING THE “AXIS OF EVIL” DOCTRINE

Iran was confronted with the shocks of American military interventions in its peripheral environment in 2001 and 2003. The control of the peripheral milieu is contingent upon actors possessing the requisite motivation to counter military shocks and potential threats. In the early years of the 21st century, Iran had the option to pursue two diametrically opposed mechanisms. The adoption of either mechanism would be predicated upon the structural waves of the international system and the configurations of regional security.

In January 2002, George W. Bush employed the term “Axis of Evil” in reference to Iran. The articulation of such an approach signified the United States’ motivation to employ aggressive mechanisms against Iran. Under such circumstances, Iran could have placed two distinct strategies on its regional security policy agenda, based on different regional security policy paradigms. The first mechanism entailed the adoption of a “passive policy” in response to regional crises emerging from a power vacuum. The second mechanism, which found its way into the agenda of Iran’s defense and security decision makers, was “active engagement,” which can be elucidated through the lens of “rational choice” and “cooperative game” approaches.¹

¹ Here, we are inspired by Ostrom, Walker & Gardner, 1992. See Also Smith and Larimer 2017, 115

Herbert Simon (1997), in expounding the foundations of rational choice, alludes to the calibration of the equilibrium ratio between the benefits and costs of any decision-making process within security policy. Rational choice theory delineates the relationship between power nodes, threats, regional vulnerabilities, and the opportunities available to each country for decision-making and policy formulation. Iran's strategy can be elucidated through such an understanding of rationality.

Regional security policymaking based on rational choice is characterized by the creation of an environment conducive to the adoption of cooperative policies for the collective resolution of crises. The mechanisms of cooperative engagement for countering reflective threats are designed based on the paradigm of reciprocal action and commensurate external sanctions. Iran's cooperation with Russia was a manifestation of the pursuit of such objectives. Turkey, too, had no choice but to accede to Iran's mechanisms of tactical engagement for resolving regional issues in order to safeguard its interests. It was under these circumstances that Iran leveraged active defensive diplomacy to control the turbulent environment.

2.4. IRAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY IN THE 'ONE-SHOT DILEMMA' SCENARIO

Iran's strategy in the 'one-shot dilemma' within the regional security milieu of West Asia necessitated the leveraging of supra-state, sub-state, and regional actors. Iran's tactical cooperation with Turkey, its tactical alliance with Russia, and its strategic partnership with the Resistance Front unfolded in tandem. Iran was cognizant of the burgeoning threats posed by the United States. To counter and circumscribe such threats, Iran employed crisis management and crisis escalation mechanisms instead of adopting a crisis reduction policy.

Iran precipitated a shift in the rules of the security game. This alteration in the rules was intended to engender a novel equilibrium within the regional environment. It was under these circumstances that Iran's extensive engagement in defensive diplomacy engendered the formation of new institutional rules. These institutional rules were predicated upon cooperative engagement within the 'action area.' Controlling the 'action area' necessitated the ascendancy of a larger number of participants and the utilization of information that renders a specific form of multilateral operations and actions feasible within the area and the paradigm of multilateral actor engagement (Ostrom 2007, 28).

Iran's multilateral engagement in regional security policy assumes significance as it facilitated the formation of new alliances during periods of crisis. Had such alliances not materialized, and had Iran lacked the preparedness for multilateral reciprocal action, the environment would have been conducive to the imposition of more pervasive threats against Iran. Iran's operational action area was orchestrated in West Asia and regions afflicted by indications of security turbulence, the intervention of proxy warfare actors, and the crisis-instigating role of major powers such as the United States. Iran's strategy was characterized by a direct, organized, and premeditated

nature, emerging in response to threats and the aggressive behavioral patterns of conservative regional actors.

3. THE TURBULENT MILIEU AND IRAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY POLICY

Regional power and security configurations are inherently structural in nature. During the Cold War era, Cantori and Spiegel elucidated the notion of “regional subordinate systems.” The principal axis of actor engagement within these subordinate systems comprised the ascendancy of central actors in the regional order, the cooperative or competitive participation patterns of peripheral actors, and ultimately, the structural management by intervening actors. Gradually, such a paradigm has ceded its role and position in regional securitization (Cannon and Donelli 2019, 515).

The idea of politics, security, and power in the turbulent world was expounded by James Rosenau. Rosenau (2005) posits that the structural transformations within the bipolar system would not engender a peaceful transition. He further contends that in the post-Cold War years, the regional security architecture assumed a turbulent character. Consequently, countries would be compelled to employ transitional engagement mechanisms. Transitional engagement is predicated upon regional alliances and counter-alliances facing the collective action problems.

Iran's regional security during the bipolar structure was premised on the “two-pillar policy.” The two-pillar policy, also known as the “Nixon Doctrine,” entailed regional security policy based on alliances with major powers and tactical cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The Islamic Revolution can be perceived as the end of organized and structured regional alliances within the two pillar framework. The end of the Cold War was interpreted as the decline of institutionalized configurations in regional security, precipitating the emergence of turbulent politics within Iran's regional milieu.

The bipolar structure facilitated any regional security organization based on “strategic rationality.” Naturally, during the years 1945-1991, the conditions existed for competitive engagement among major powers in regional security dynamics. Within the bipolar structure, the principal actors of the international system and major powers exhibited a disinclination for military confrontation to resolve security challenges. It was through this process that the disintegration of the Soviet Union unfolded gradually, and the bipolar structure lost its functionality without overt military conflict.

It was within such a turbulent environment that Iran primarily shaped its security strategy based on structural and identity-based approaches to regional securitization.

3.1. TURBULENT SECURITY IN THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH

John Lukacs and Zbigniew Brzezinski are regarded as theorists who perceive the post-Cold War world as turbulent. Each of these theorists endeavors to elucidate a novel power and security equation based on structural indices. Lukacs attends to structural institutions, deeming post-Cold War institutions as ineffective. In contrast,

Brzezinski views the rules of engagement during the Cold War as challenging and analyzes actors as centrifugal forces disinclined to accept structural precepts.

John Lukacs sought to explicate the issue of regional securitization based on post-Cold War structural transformations. He conceptualized turbulent security premised on post-Cold War structural evolution processes. He posited that the bipolar system's structure was intertwined with the strategic rationality of modernity, and the transition from such a structure signified the advent of a new era exerting its influence on social life, interpersonal action patterns, and regional security mechanisms (Lukacs 1993, 62).

Brzezinski alludes to the emergence of novel social, political, and identity forces striving to redefine power, security, and geopolitics to regain their position. One of the turbulent forces is the resurgence of diverse forms of ethnonationalism and nationalism across the globe, culminating in a wide spectrum of violence and turmoil. Departing from Cold War approaches, he emphasized the pivotal role of cultural and identity variables in shaping conflicts and political disputes in the post-Cold War era (see Brzezinski 1993, 48). Brzezinski's analysis of the regional transformations in West Asia is elucidated through structural and behavioral clashes. He contends that actors disregard structural action rules, each striving to optimize their regional and structural positioning through mechanisms such as power projection, cooperation with power-generating actors, and resistance against power referents. In Brzezinski's perspective, the transition from the Cold War era cannot occur without regional crises akin to identity clashes in Syria. He perceives the Syrian civil war as a manifestation of latent identities that have reproduced their power through global and regional alliances (Brzezinski 2016, 14).

Identity can be regarded as one of the fundamental elements of turbulent security. Identity-based action intensified in the post-Cold War years due to the action patterns of numerous actors being shaped by ideological cultural frameworks and symbolic signifiers. Under such circumstances and conditions, realist security approaches have significantly lost their functionality. Novel actors are assuming roles in regional domains, defining their actions based on historical disparities and identity schisms. Brzezinski posits that the configurations of international politics in the structural transition phase will lack the requisite controllability (Brzezinski 1993, 45).

3.2. IDENTITY APPROACH TO TURBULENT SECURITY

Manuel Castells (1997) elucidates the power of identity premised on the networked society and the informational economy. Castells alludes to the post-Cold War transition of power from the realm of hardware to the domains of software and networks.

Any actor capable of producing power and information networks will be able to consolidate their position at the structural depth of other actors. In Castells' perspective, power is a dimension of the technological capacity of actors who can reproduce identity.

Castells emphasizes the role of identity forces within the framework of the network society, a society endowed with an effective technological capability to link social groups and potentially generate a new wave of political and social contradictions. Conflicting identities in the modern era have supplanted the national interests of actors in the Westphalian mold. Each identity actor employs mechanisms of conflict, confrontation, and resistance to contend with the other. Castells views any identity-seeking as stemming from an identity crisis and an attempt to respond to it.

The identity crisis will, in turn, emanate from the turbulent process of the world in transition. In Castells' identity and postmodern perspective, humans tend to define the meaning of their existence through affiliating with group identities in conflict with other groups. Castells aimed to demonstrate that social forces can play an effective role in power politics, forces influenced by technological capabilities and gaining broader demands for role enactment in global politics.

3.3. CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TURBULENT SECURITY

Although identity crises have spread across all geographic domains, such trends and their manifestations have found greater resonance and proliferation in the Middle East. Fundamentalism in the Middle East can be viewed as a counter-discourse to the ideologies of the resistance axis, which has thus far impacted the dynamics of the balance of power. A significant portion of the confrontations among Islamic groups in the Middle East can be regarded as a reflection of conflicting and rival identity norms. Huntington has characterized such a process as the bloody borders of the Islamic world and explicates identity politics within the framework of the "clash of civilizations" theory (Huntington 1999, 345).

Huntington has highlighted the issue of political and identity fissures, viewing it as the primary factor behind the new conflicts among actors in the global system. In Huntington's view, many cultural differences transform into identity conflicts, and consequently, each actor strives to pursue its position through power mechanisms and proxy wars. Huntington endeavored to expound the course of history based on historical identity contradictions that have existed in the past and have been reproduced in the modern era (Huntington 1999, 43).

3.4. GEOPOLITICAL APPROACH TO TURBULENT SECURITY

Saul Cohen sought to elucidate the geopolitics of the global system in relation to the configurations of regional security. In Cohen's perspective, West Asia resides within the indicators of a "shatterbelt." The concept of the shatterbelts in Cohen's thought can be elucidated based on cultural, social, geopolitical, identity contradictions, and regional conflicts. Cohen considers West Asia among the regions that have experienced security crises in the post-Cold War years, and consequently, its

security-building mechanisms are achieved through patterns such as collective action, alliance formation, and multilateral engagement (Cohen 2008, 453).

3-5. FAITH AND IDEALISTIC APPROACH TO TURBULENT SECURITY

Bernard Lewis articulates another form of turbulent security and politics in the Middle East. Lewis endeavors to highlight the power of faith. Each of the opposing countries in the regional security environment in the post-Cold War years defined its identity and power politics based on faith. Identity crises are shaped under the influence of religious and historical doctrines. Each religious group possesses distinct behavioral patterns and beliefs from the other. Identity challenges, in tandem with structural components and polarity, can become the seasoning of political, regional, and international developments, giving rise to escalating crises (Cannon and Donelli 2019, 510).

In Bernard Lewis's view, identity politics is considered the primary factor behind the Middle East's unending security struggles; consequently, each actor strives to define its position through competitive and conflictual mechanisms. Competitive configurations leave their imprint on the pattern of alliance-building action. In Lewis's perspective, any alliance must be defined based on the role enactment of the Western world. A condition where structural identity challenges and polarity intertwine, it naturally appears that ending conflict and achieving relative harmony will be an arduous task. Lewis points out that the Middle East is one of the last regions where the struggle between tradition and modernity has remained as the most fundamental active rift, preserving the principal arena for social and political conflicts (Lewis 1999; 2002).

4. MECHANISMS OF A STRONG STATE AND THE DILEMMA OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN IRAN'S SECURITY POLICY

Iran's regional security policy can lead to alliance-building mechanisms if, first, it possesses structural and instrumental capabilities, and second, it can create the grounds for cooperation with great powers.

For Iran to play the role of a strong state, it must employ crisis management mechanisms to enable tactical and gradual cooperation with regional countries. Utilizing power politics will be constructive if it leads to a change in the behavioral patterns of actors and creates the grounds for regional flexibility.

A considerable portion of regional actors face security challenges. The experiences of Iraq, Egypt, and Syria demonstrated that these three major Arab powers encountered security challenges and, in such conditions, failed to ensure their security based on social and structural mechanisms. Each of these three countries exhibited signs of fragile states. Fragile states generally emerge in "fragmented societies." The security crises in West Asia exacerbate the possibility of fragile states.

Countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria have faced increasing security challenges in the 21st century due to "fragile states." Political socialization pertains to

environments where social grounds exist for controlling environmental rifts. Fragile states generally exhibit signs of permeability. Great powers, due to their control mechanisms over global politics from within, could impact the waves of competition among regional actors and create the grounds for the confrontation of rival actors and fragile states. Regional crises and turbulent security can be considered the primary factors behind failed and disintegrated states (Messner et al. 2015, 118).

4.1. ORGANIZING A STRONG STATE IN IRAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY POLICY

Any regional security policy requires the utilization of legal, institutional, instrumental, and geopolitical mobility mechanisms. In a situation where the United States has employed a creative destruction approach in dealing with countries like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, it is natural that the best model in conditions of escalating crises can be considered the application of mechanisms related to a strong state. A strong state possesses capabilities that enable it to maintain the grounds for impermeability in the realm of national sovereignty (Hanieh 2019, 542).

Social rifts and identity contradictions conflict with the realities of the modern state because they are influenced by underlying and expanding contradictions within a limited time frame. The most crucial issue for states can be considered the utilization of tactical power to control the political environment. Identity crises have led to an increase in security contradictions among Middle Eastern countries. The emergence of the fragile state has produced various approaches regarding the process and outcomes of state-building.

The indicators of a strong state can be considered in relation to issues such as social cohesion. Social cohesion can provide the infrastructures for countries' regional power. Iran's pivotal role as a strong state will manifest if it can play a balancing role in crisis situations. A country that lacks the necessary capability for balancing will naturally be unable to navigate escalating crises. Saudi Arabia played the role of a supporter of disruptive groups in 2019-2020. Disruptive identity-based groups generally play a challenging role for regional actors.

The link between identity and technological components can be considered among the factors in Castells' view that makes the emergence and role-playing of conflicting identities inevitable. In such conditions, the grounds for the reproduction of ethnic identity forces and groups with a fundamentalist pattern of action become unavoidable. The identitization of conflicts and the rise of identity-based forces, including ethnic, local, class, and fundamentalist forces in the Middle East in recent years, has had a clear and powerful effect in further weakening the structure of the nation-state and pushing many Islamic countries from a weak state to a failed state.

4.2. REGIONAL ALLIANCES AND COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM IN IRAN'S SECURITY POLICY

The course of regional developments in the Middle East reflects the reality that proxy wars have become intertwined with manifestations of terrorist violence. Groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda are perceived as symbols of asymmetric threats for Iran's strategic, military, and defense agents. Each of these forces will find themselves in a position of proliferation in the future. The transformation in the configuration of sectarian forces does not impact the nature of terrorism in shaping future threats. A significant portion of terrorist groups in the post-Cold War years were formed by Western intelligence services to control and balance the power of actors. The new wars are predominantly identity and religion-based in nature (Cooley 2008, 75).

The expansion of regional conflicts, coupled with identity clashes, has made the escalation of crises and the emergence of geopolitical contradictions in regional security inevitable. In this process, Iran has gained greater incentive for strategic cooperation with Russia to counter fundamentalist terrorist groups. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's inclination towards cooperation with Israel and Western actors has increased. Analysts such as Menashri point out that the primary reason for the new crises and the alliance formed between Israel and the Arab world stems from their fear of occurrence of Islamic revolution and the changing waves of the regional environment (Menashri 2001, 65).

Any alliance-building by Iran in the regional environment will require the utilization of identity mechanisms alongside asymmetric action in the tactical realm. Signs of asymmetric action can be observed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Such conflicts can be considered part of the mechanisms related to the competition among regional actors, identity groups, and great powers in the post-Cold War years. This process indicates that war and peace are a function of the balance and parity of power. In the future era, the grounds for the expansion of asymmetric threats in the domestic, regional, and international spheres will emerge. The necessities of Iran's regional security-building require the use of "asymmetry" mechanisms. Any asymmetry can provide the necessary grounds for reproducing relative advantage. In a situation where Iran faces signs of economic and military sanctions, it is natural that asymmetry will create the greatest desirability. If war and peace are a function of issues such as the "balance and parity of power," then asymmetry will lead to an increase in Iran's desirability in the realm of regional politics. Iran's regional role in countries like Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Yemen is based on signs of asymmetry (Abrams 2019, 15).

Western countries have employed mechanisms such as asymmetric threats and proxy wars to limit Iran's power. Saudi Arabia's pattern of action to limit Iran's power was organized based on idealistic counter-discourses, ideological clashes, sectarian wars, rapid mobility, asymmetric action, and low-intensity conflict. Such a process has created many security risks for Iran and regional countries. Countering ISIS stems from such risks.

The regional balance system is based on the balance of power and the agency of actors seeking to attain surplus power with a superior position in the regional sphere. Countries that employ patterns of direct conflict will inevitably find themselves in confrontational situations, unless they face a common threat or engage in power production to create a balance. Countries seeking regional or international hegemony generally face such risks. The formation of escalating anarchy can be considered in the signs of turbulence in international politics (Kaplan 2000, 48).

The disruption of signs of the balance of power can be regarded as the foundation of actors' asymmetric action. Whenever the signs of the regional environment and the role-playing of great powers change, manifestations of asymmetric action will be inevitable. What is proposed as asymmetric symmetry to counter regional threats can be considered part of the realities of the strategic environment, enabling the unpredictable role-playing of actors.

5. CONCLUSION

In periods of heightened volatility within the realm of international politics, manifestations of crisis invariably emerge. The dynamics of crisis and security are intricately shaped by the behaviors of actors whose roles often transcend structural confines. Within such turbulent contexts, the security landscape is characterized by a proliferation of phenomena such as "uncertainty," "ambiguity," "surprise," and "persistent conflict." Effective strategic decision-making within these uncertain environs necessitates a meticulous observance of trends conducive to the maintenance of regional stability and equilibrium.

When the security environment acquires a turbulent nature, the grounds for the formation of a threat balance emerge. Threat balancing implies tactical and gradual alliances. Just as Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia played a role in the turbulent political sphere to counter Iran and support extremist groups, Iran also sought to orchestrate a new form of alliance in its strategic policy. Alliance-building will be based on signs of cooperation, conflict, participation, and confrontation.

Politics and security in a turbulent environment possess a domino-like characteristic. In times of crisis, the possibility of conflict control exists through power balancing mechanisms. However, turbulence creates signs of an unbalanced and asymmetric sphere of action. Iran and Russia employed an "open arms policy" to support the Syrian government against ISIS and crisis-generating forces. Although Russia's strategic perspective for regional balancing brought its policy closer to Israel.

Any threat balancing mechanism transforms geopolitical boundaries. Many Israel-centric analysts in the field of regional security refer to Iran's geopolitical boundaries as threat boundaries. The increase in Iran's regional role has led to its proximity to the spheres of action and interests of conflicting great powers and threatening regional countries. Such a process has resulted in the enhancement of Iran's geopolitical capability in the regional and international environment. Any

regional and international development can leave its implications on the structure and security processes of Iran.

The Islamic Republic's support for the Syrian government can be regarded as a function of ideological, geopolitical, and strategic necessities. Damascus is Tehran's closest ally in the region and Iran's gateway to its representatives in Hamas and Hezbollah. Overall, Syria's domestic policies will be influenced by regional policies, and on this basis, the fate of Syria's political system will be close to that of Lebanon and Iraq. Any power shift in Syria will impact the regional security equation. Regional security can be viewed as a symbol of the power equation and competition among actors in the regional environment. Such actors strive to create a new balance against the regional strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, Elliott. 2019. "Trump versus the Government Can America Get Its Story Straight?" *Foreign Affairs* 98 (1) January/February 2019.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. 1993. *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century*. Translated by Abdorrahman Navvab Ebrahim. Tehran: Entesharat-e Ettelaat.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. 2016. "Syria in Crisis." *National Security Council Memorandum*, No. 4203. Declassified document.
- Cannon, Brenon, and Federico Donelli. 2019. "Asymmetric Alliances and High Polarity: Evaluating Regional Security Complexes in the Middle East and Horn of Africa." *Third World Quarterly* 41 (3): 505-524.
- Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 2: The Power of Identity*. Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Cohen, Saul B. 2008. *Geopolitics of the World System*. Translated by Abbas Kardan. Tehran: Entesharat-e Abrar-e Moaser.
- Cooley, John K. 2008. *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*. Translated by Mojtaba Najafi and Mehregan Nezamizadeh. Tehran: Entesharat-e Samediyeh.
- Hanieh, Adam. 2019. "New Geographies of Financial Power: Global Islamic Finance and the Gulf." *Third World Quarterly* 41 (3): 525-546.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1999. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Translated by Mohammad Ali Hamid Rafiei. Tehran: Nashr-e Daftar-e Pazhuheshhay-e Farhangi.
- Kagan, Robert. 2007. "Return of History." *Policy Review* 144 (2): 1-17.
- Kaplan, Robert. 2000. *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Cold War*. New York: Random House.
- Lewis, Bernard. 1999. *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Lewis, Bernard. 2002. *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

- Lukacs, John. 1993. *The End of the Modern Age*. New York: Ticknor and Fields Press.
- Menashri, David. 2001. *Post-Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*. London: Frank Cass.
- Messner, J. J., and Nate Haken, Patricia Taft, Kendall Lawrence, Felipe Umana, Sebastian Pavlou, Hannah Blyth. 2015. "Fragile States Index 2015." *The Fund for Peace*.
- Miller, John D. 1981. *The World of States: Connected Essays*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1993. *Pandemonium: Ethnicity in International Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Ostrom, Elinor, James Walker, and Roy Gardner. 1992. "Covenants With and Without a Sword: Self-Governance is Possible." *American Political Science Review* 86 (2): 404-417.
- Ostrom, Elinor. 2007. "Institutional Rational Choice: An Assessment of the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework." In *Theories of the Policy Process*, edited by Paul Sabatier, 21-64. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Rosenau, James N. 2005. *Turbulence in World Politics*. Translated by Alireza Tayyeb. Tehran: Rozneh.
- Simon, Herbert. 1997. *Administrative Behavior*. New York: Free Press.
- Smith, Kevin, and Christopher Larimer. 2017. *Public Policy Theory Primer*. Translated by Behzad Atarzadeh. Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi.
- Weir, Shelagh. 2014. *A Tribal Order: Politics and Law in the Mountains of Yemen*. University of Texas Press.