


Multilateralism in East Asia and Iran's "Look to the East" Policy

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Abstract

Multilateralism concerns cooperation and coordination among states aimed at achieving common goals. Multilateralism - especially in the East Asian region - plays an important role in facilitating cooperation and coordination among states to confront challenges and seize common opportunities. This policy facilitates the creation of institutions and mechanisms such as unions and regional bodies, promotes trade and investment, supports cultural and educational exchanges, and helps in resolving regional and international disputes. The present article addresses the key question: what effect has the process of multilateralism in East Asia had on Iran's Look-to-the-East policy? In response to this question, and using an analytical-descriptive method, the paper examines the different approaches and strategies of East Asian countries in creating multilateral institutions such as ASEAN+3, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which have contributed to the strengthening of Iran's Look-to-the-East policy. Active participation in East Asian multilateralism brings economic opportunities for Iran, access to new resources and markets, technological advancement, reinforcement of political relations and diplomacy, and engagement with regional actors. These factors can encourage Iran to play a role within East Asian multilateral frameworks and to deepen its relations with countries in the region. Proposed measures include strengthening economic exchanges, establishing political and security cooperation mechanisms, facilitating cultural and educational exchanges, and promoting public diplomacy among the respective states.

Keywords: Iran, East Asia, multilateralism, Look to the East Policy.

Introduction

After the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the end of the bipolar international system, military and security issues somewhat declined in prominence, and the concept of "multilateralism" was reinforced in many world regions, particularly East Asia, with a deeper focus on political, economic, cultural, commercial, and infrastructural matters among states. Multilateralism became one of the most frequently invoked concepts. East and Southeast Asia are regions where regionalism can be traced back to the Cold War era - specifically the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 - but since the 1990s, regional multilateralism has assumed particular importance. This trend is evident in regional arrangements and organizations. For example, following the 1997 financial crisis, efforts began to expand cooperation between ASEAN members and the three Northeast Asian states - China, Japan, and South Korea - resulting in the ASEAN+3 framework (ASEAN together with China, Japan, and South Korea). China's establishment of the ASEAN+3 framework aimed to consolidate its position in East and Southeast Asia. Once the financial crisis receded, cooperation between ASEAN and the three aforementioned states expanded beyond economic and trade areas to include political, cultural, and social spheres. Following this initiative, other proposals, such as ASEAN+6, were advanced by Japan, which would add Australia, New Zealand, and India to ASEAN+3. That initiative sought to extend the strategic scope of East Asia and to create a greater balance vis-à-vis China (Lim et al., 2012, p. 228).

Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the region saw a proliferation of multilateral institutions created for cooperation. However, early hopes were quickly tempered by criticism of the weak performance of these institutions. Multilateral cooperation was often unable to produce concrete results. Broadly speaking, these institutions failed to consolidate around the strong legal and institutional foundations that are characteristic of some Western multilateral bodies. Nevertheless, there were promising aspects: some institutions achieved notable advances in economic cooperation, and in less tangible domains - such as confidence-building, cooperative habits, and the formation of shared identities - there were even more striking developments.

Alongside global transformations, Iran has experienced substantial changes over recent decades. The primary slogans of the 1979 Revolution included "Neither East nor West" alongside

“Independence, Freedom, [and] Islamic Republic,” which together formed the intellectual and ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The principle “Neither East nor West” was enshrined in practice via Article 152 of the Constitution and accepted as a guide in foreign policy. Historically, this discourse emerged during a time of bipolarity, when most states faced a stark choice of alignment with one of the two blocs. Iranian revolutionary leaders viewed that order as unjust and representative of global imperialism that exploited subordinated peoples. Thus, Iranian authorities rejected closeness to either superpower. Over time, however, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the post-bipolar era, the Islamic Republic's stance has gradually relaxed somewhat.

In recent years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to consolidate and expand its national interests by adopting a Look-to-the-East strategy that emphasizes broad cooperation with states in the Indo-Pacific strategic area. Under the pressure of unprecedented Western sanctions led by the United States, and given the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific in post-Cold War geopolitics, Iranian diplomacy has shifted toward pursuing more active membership and presence in regional multilateral organizations and toward increasing its political-economic interactions with East Asian powers such as the People's Republic of China. Thus, Iran has oriented its foreign policy toward regions beyond its eastern borders.

1. Literature review

Hunter (2010), in *Iran's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, argues that Iran's adoption of a Look-to-the-East policy stems not only from economic needs and an attempt to escape global isolation but also from rejection of the post-bipolar order, the desire for a multipolar world, and from regional isolation due to religious and ethnic differences with its primarily Arab (Sunni) neighbors and with Central Asia - as a response to shifts in great-power influence and the rise of pan-Turkism.

Baizidi (2022) in the article *Look to the East Strategy in Iran's Foreign Policy; Strategic Components and Future Developments* examines recent decades' transformations in the international system that have renewed the salience of the Look-to-the-East policy. He analyzes the strategy's strategic components, its consonance with the “Neither East nor West” principle, and its place within Iran's foreign policy. The central hypothesis of that research is that the Look-to-the-East approach is less a discretionary choice and more a strategic necessity for confronting multidimensional economic,

political, military, and security pressures (Baizidi, 2022).

Shafiei and Sadeghi (2009) conclude in *Iran's Options in Foreign Relations Based on the Look-to-the-East Policy* that the goal of Iran's Look-to-the-East policy is to balance political and economic relations with Western countries and to capitalize on the advantages and capacities of Eastern states.

Soltani Nejad (2015), in an article on Iran–Southeast Asia relations (2002–2013), finds that the heightened importance of the Look-to-the-East policy in that period led to marked growth in Iran's economic and political cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. Iran sought alternatives to the West in its diplomacy, though this trend did not remain stable because mounting Western pressure, led by the U.S., on Southeast Asian countries altered the equation. In addition, the growing importance of China in Iranian policymakers' thinking relative to Southeast Asian states is notable.

Akhavan (2012) argues in his thesis *The Impact of the Look-to-the-East Policy on the National Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran* that both domestic and international factors shaped the emergence of the Look-to-the-East policy. Domestically, the author highlights the role of Iran's ninth government, which shifted the policy's orientation compared with previous governments. Internationally, he points to the rise of Asia. He divides the policy into economic (energy) and political domains, arguing that it has been relatively successful economically (energy) but less so politically because East Asian countries maintain broad relations with the West.

Sazmand (2019) maintains that the Look-to-the-East policy has not been a strategic centrepiece of Iran's foreign policy historically; its prominence at specific times resulted from external pressures stemming from the structure of the international system and actions by great powers related to the nuclear issue. He believes the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA has once again brought the policy to the fore.

Ehteshami and Bahgat (2019) argue that Iran - as one of the region's most populous states with a large educated middle class and abundant hydrocarbon reserves, and with a relatively stable and predictable government - enjoys many advantages. Given the four-decade confrontation with the U.S., Iran has pursued a two-track diplomacy of de-Americanization and Look-to-the-East to safeguard its future vitality in the international system.

Vafaei (2020) regards China-led multilateralism in East Asia as a key regional strategy rooted in the Chinese Communist Party's foreign policy and scholarly output in China, often described as

"multilateral diplomacy." Vafaei examines four phases of Chinese multilateralism across history and foreign policy, analyzes the main features of multilateralism as seen by Chinese decision-makers, and identifies pathologies.

2. Theoretical-conceptual framework: Functionalism and Multilateralism

This paper adopts a combined theoretical–conceptual framework, composed of the functionalist theoretical approach together with the conceptual foundations of multilateralism within liberal international relations theory. Liberalism is one of the main paradigms in IR studies (Baizidi, 2014); a core liberal concept is the promotion of international cooperation. Under this paradigm and its derivatives, international cooperation and non-state interactions are defined as means for achieving common goals, ultimately aimed at establishing peace and preventing war and international tensions (Moravcsik, 1997, pp. 513–555). Functionalism and multilateralism are key concepts within this liberal paradigm.

2-1. Functionalism

Functionalism is a theoretical approach in IR that focuses on how organizations and international regimes facilitate cooperation and coordination among states. According to functionalist theory, states are more inclined toward cooperation and convergence when they have shared interests and when institutions and rules exist to facilitate collaboration. The intellectual origins of functionalism are commonly attributed to David Mitrany (1888–1975) (Snidal, 2013, p. 579).

Functionalists argue that international organizations and regimes play a pivotal role in promoting cooperation and conflict resolution among states. They maintain that these institutions can reduce uncertainty, manage potential conflicts, and create a sense of common identity and purpose among states. Functionalism contrasts with more traditional approaches, such as realism, which emphasizes power and material capabilities; functionalists assert that cooperation and interdependence can meaningfully shape international relations and that international organizations can mitigate the adverse effects of power politics (Taylor, 1968, pp. 393–400).

Within functionalist and convergence theories, technical cooperation is considered a principal domain for collaboration. Emphasizing technical and non-political issues encourages states to

advance cooperative processes because such cooperation commonly yields mutual gains and therefore has higher prospects for success. Functional tasks provide international actors with opportunities for successful non-political collaboration that might otherwise be difficult to achieve in a political arena (Checkel, 2001, pp. 553–576).

A starting point in Mitrany's logic is that the nation-state increasingly loses efficacy in satisfying human needs because it is confined territorially while human needs transcend boundaries. Functionalism is not merely a theory but a philosophy seeking to remove frictions inherent in interstate relations - including war - by (1) relying on economic and social welfare that transcends national borders and (2) establishing international organizations with various functions to meet socio-economic needs (Checkel, 2012, p. 802).

Mitrany posited that politics rests on a socio-economic base: when the international community organizes functionally through a network of institutions to provide diverse needs, the propensity for war diminishes and humanity moves toward sustained peace. Another assumption is that functional processes are cumulative: functional development in one area spurs similar cooperative developments in other areas. This "functional spillover" is not limited in scope and can affect state sovereignty (Wendt, 2015, pp. 183–202).

Functionalists contend that new organizations, by satisfying needs that states cannot meet (including development, poverty, and inequality), gradually reveal their value to the public, prompting people to transfer allegiance and creating a new "functional" international society, in which the primary units are organized by function rather than territory. Thus, functionalism envisions political boundaries overlaid by a broad network of international institutions such that the interests and lives of all peoples become increasingly intertwined (Wendt, 2015, pp. 183–202).

A central question for functionalists is whether economic and social convergence necessarily leads to political unity. This question bridges functionalism and theories of integration.

2-2. Multilateralism

The concept of multilateralism emerged in the twentieth century as a diplomatic pattern complementary to bilateral diplomacy (Wiseman, 2011). Simply defined, multilateralism means collective action by three or more states on a particular issue. Multilateralism can be both an alternative to and a complement of bilateral relations. One influential definition by Robert Keohane (cited in Schachter,

1999) describes multilateralism as the practice of coordinating national policies among three or more states via temporary arrangements or international institutions. Other scholars examining widely accepted cases of multilateralism conclude that a common feature of multilateral arrangements is the existence of a set of rules that regulate relations among a group of three or more states according to general principles of conduct (Griffiths, 1388).

A comprehensive definition: multilateralism is the institutionalization of international cooperation (as a goal) through terms and principles (as normative requirements) among three or more voluntary actors (as a principle), governed by rules that apply equally to all.

Multilateralism has three core characteristics: indivisibility, general principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. These principles form the basis for understanding multilateralism today (Caporaso, 1993, p. 53).

- **Indivisibility:** In multilateralism, the principle of indivisibility primarily concerns peace and security. Indivisibility is integral to collective security systems (Ruggie, 1992, p. 569). According to this principle, communities of states committed to respond to threats or aggression do so first by diplomatic measures, then by economic sanctions, and ultimately - if necessary - by collective force. The prospect of facing such a large coalition deters potential aggressors rationally. Therefore, the core of collective security is the indivisibility of peace and the tendency to reduce aggression. Although this principle initially applied mainly to responses against aggression after World War II, it can be extended, at least indirectly, to other types of threats, such as environmental, social, or economic dangers (Kingsley, 2009, p. 36).
- **General principles of conduct:** These are norms and commonly accepted terms (not universal) that govern relations according to agreed standards, rather than ad hoc priorities tied to ideology, religion, or particular circumstances. This principle is fundamental to the coordination and adjustment of state behavior. Multilateralism becomes institutionalized international life when states manage their relations according to commonly accepted criteria (Ruggie, 1993, p. 11). It emphasizes the equal participation of member states under multilateral institutions (Caporaso, 1993, p. 54).
- **Diffuse reciprocity:** This principle concerns arrangements by which member states of a collective-security system respond to aggression. Benefits from pursuing shared goals do not accrue

immediately but accumulate over time through active participation by all members. Diffuse reciprocity entails trading short-term interests for long-term collective gains (Caporaso, 1993, p. 54).

3. Multilateralism in East Asia

The East Asian economic crisis was a major shock that exposed the region's dependency on large economies and caused significant losses. After the 1997 crisis, the United States, China, and other regional powers competed to shape the region's arrangements and to gain economic and political influence (Baizidi, 2021).

Peripheral multilateralism and soft balancing appear, among types of multilateralism, to hold a higher priority for East Asian policymakers - especially China. The security needs of China and Japan as regional powers, and their acceptance of regional and international responsibilities, reflect a desire to expand both regional and global influence. In this environment, East Asian powers, led by China and Japan, have initiated a new phase of multilateral activity, characterized by central roles in creating new multilateral structures with an emphasis on regional concerns (Sazmand & Baizidi, 2013). The term ASEAN+3 gained wide usage after the ASEAN+3 finance ministers' meeting in 1999 (Sudo, 2014). ASEAN+6, or the East Asia Summit, proposed by Japan, is a distinct model that includes ASEAN+3 plus Australia, New Zealand, and India, and was presented as a means for Japan to balance China and to offer a broader conception of the East Asian region (Lewis, 2012, p. 228).

Significant initiatives by East Asian governments - particularly China - include BRICS expansion, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS New Development Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), among others. Accordingly, China is expected to pursue the creation of additional multilateral structures in the short term (Vafaei, 2020, p. 100).

Over recent decades, China has been the primary regional order-maker in East Asia, and most multilateral initiatives have been centered on Beijing. Avoiding a direct challenge to the existing global order is a notable feature of East Asian multilateralism. The creation of regional frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and initiatives like the Belt and Road are efforts to build new spaces based on internationally accepted principles and existing global structures. It appears that, at least in the medium

term, Beijing does not seek to monopolize primacy in the international system nor to establish unilateral dominance (Vafaei, 2020, pp. 97–111).

From a critical perspective, East Asian multilateralism has not yet achieved comparable success to Western initiatives, such as NATO or the European Union. One major obstacle is geopolitical rivalry among regional states and the lack of a dominant Asian discourse within the international order. Thus, despite proposing various ideas and initiatives that sometimes attract broad support, these states - and China in particular - often fail to operationalize their concepts for the international environment due to weaknesses in public diplomacy.

Economic competition is another significant issue. For instance, one obstacle to an East Asian free trade area is the differing stances between the region's two rival economies, China and Japan. Creating a free trade area requires strong leadership and management by the major regional economies. Some states may oppose such a free trade area if they perceive it as undermining their interests. External opposition - notably from the United States - must also be considered, as Washington fears an East Asian free trade area could become a competitor to U.S. hegemony, similar to the EU (Terada, 2003; Tang, 2006, pp. 271–272).

If an East Asian economic community were to be created, the region would need to become a single market. The starting point is establishing a free trade area that forms a customs union and common market. However, as noted, establishing such an East Asian free trade area is difficult because other narrower partnership arrangements and bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements already exist, each with its distinct rules and tariff regimes. Harmonization would require standardizing external tariffs, lists of excluded goods, standards, procedures, and rules - converging toward uniform rules, tariff rates, and common regulations and standards (Suzuki, 2004, p. 42).

Another issue is exchange-rate arrangements: diverse exchange-rate regimes exist in East Asia, and coherent regional actions to harmonize them have not been implemented. Given increasing economic interdependence in the region through trade, investment, and financial flows, maintaining exchange-rate stability is crucial and requires coordinated policies among the region's monetary and fiscal authorities, which is a difficult task.

4. The Look-to-the-East Strategy in Iran's Foreign Policy

A central question in analyzing the Look-to-the-East strategy concerns its geographic scope. Thus, the first step is to define the geographic domain of Iran's Look-to-the-East strategy. This domain can be interpreted in three ways:

- **Minimal interpretation:** Under this view, the Look-to-the-East policy is confined to a small set of East Asian countries - China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan. "East" here means East Asia or the Far East. This narrow interpretation figured prominently in some analyses and policies such as the U.S. "pivot to Asia," which focused mainly on China, Taiwan, South Korea, North Korea, and Japan.
- **Intermediate interpretation:** Here, the Look-to-the-East policy covers countries starting from Iran's eastern neighbors and extending to East Asia. This definition encompasses East, South, Southeast, and Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, China, Japan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, North Korea, South Korea, Brunei, Thailand, Taiwan, and others. In this framing, Iran is the reference point and "looking to the east" naturally focuses on Iran's eastern horizon.
- **Maximalist interpretation:** Under this widest reading, Iran's Look-to-the-East policy is not limited to immediate eastern neighbors and East Asia but includes a vast swath of countries located in the eastern parts of the world. According to this maximalist view, the policy's reach extends from China and Japan in East Asia to India and Pakistan in the subcontinent, Russia and Central Asia to the north, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia in the South Caucasus, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar in West Asia, and even some African states. Given these conceptualizations, the third interpretation appears closest to official and political declarations of Iranian authorities.

With this preliminary definition of Iran's geographic understanding of "east," we can examine the policy against the background of multilateralism in East Asia. Generally, Iran's Look-to-the-East policy is both discursive and operational; its objectives are to reduce strategic reliance on the West, strengthen political and military deterrence (Baizidi, 2025), expand political-economic ties with Asian actors (especially China and Russia), and leverage regional multilateral structures to reduce sanctions costs and increase trade. (Baizidi, 2024b) The policy pursues three categories of aims: security-political objectives, economic-commercial

objectives, and institutional–diplomatic objectives (membership in organizations, multilateral agreements). The primary motive is to more effectively confront Western pressures and sanctions, which intensified particularly from 2018 onward. Other drivers include Iran's need for oil markets, capital, and emerging technologies (such as artificial intelligence) (Majidi & Baizidi, 2024), addressing emerging issues (e.g., pollution and environmental challenges) (Baizidi & Abbasi Khoshkar, 2022), and shifts in the global balance of power. Accordingly, Iran has sought not only to deepen bilateral relations with Eastern countries but also to join regional and extra-regional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.

One of Iran's most important goals in this policy is the institutional access that East Asian multilateral mechanisms afford. Membership in organizations such as the SCO and BRICS opens previously closed political and security pathways to Tehran. Such membership enables Iran to counteract U.S. and European efforts at isolation and to strengthen its political and military deterrence networks (Baizidi, 2024a). Institutional access can also enhance Iran's security and economic cooperation networks. Alongside institutional access, access to large Asian markets and energy buyers is vital. China is the largest purchaser of Iranian oil, and deepening energy relations can generate substantial revenue under sanctions (Baizidi & Mirtorabi, 2024). A non-Western multilateral environment also creates opportunities for bilateral or multilateral financial and trade agreements that allow Iran to pursue development along alternative tracks.

Pursuing this policy faces several challenges and constraints. One challenge is the asymmetry of power between Iran and stronger actors, such as China and Russia, or large economies like Japan. For example, in the economic sphere, China's substantial share of global trade and the requirement for Iran to maintain links under sanctions could skew the bilateral relationship toward imbalance. Another challenge is the attitude of advanced East Asian economies - Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and even some ASEAN states - toward Western sanctions on Iran. Many of these states, because of their dependence on Western markets and adherence to international banking standards, exercise maximum caution in interacting with Iran, limiting Iran's ability to leverage regional capacities. Another limitation is Iran's absence from key East Asian economic mechanisms. Even if Iran gains membership, the region's multilateral economic frameworks are often based on trade

regulations and technical standards that would be difficult for Iran to join without institutional reforms and alignment.

Conclusion

Eastern powers, each according to their capacities and strengths, are pursuing the strengthening of international cooperation across economic and commercial domains, engaging in bilateral and multilateral institution-building, participating in international policymaking, and promoting sustainable development in developing countries through infrastructure investment and expanded economic exchanges. Many of these rising powers' approaches align with Iran's positions and national interests. This situation, together with increasing Western political, economic, and military pressure, has made the Look-to-the-East policy a serious strategic option for Iran.

However, it is evident that in diplomacy and foreign policy, Iran should exploit the comparative advantages of all global powers, as is emphasized in the global economy. Any shift in Iran's foreign policy - and particularly the Look-to-the-East policy - requires balanced and diversified relations; otherwise, one-sided dependence on Eastern partners could limit Iran's foreign-policy choices. The Look-to-the-East policy offers advantages in confronting external pressures and securing needed goods, but if Iran aspires to long-term regional and global order-making, it must expand its relations and interests beyond a single region.

Despite its challenges and limitations, Iran's Look-to-the-East strategy has been an effective response to external pressures and sanctions and has succeeded in opening important political, economic, and diplomatic channels with China, Russia, and other Eastern countries, facilitated by the growth of multilateralism in Asia. Success requires Iran to balance its relations in the region - chiefly by diversifying its political and economic partners. While China can act as Iran's main political and economic partner in East Asia, achieving desired political and economic objectives will require broader cooperation with other actors, such as Japan, India, Turkey, ASEAN members, and Eurasian states. Iran has also sought to leverage membership in BRICS and the SCO to generate new political and economic opportunities rooted in multilateralism. One of Iran's significant ongoing challenges is misalignment with international banking and trade standards; this misalignment increases the cost of integrating Iran into global value chains.

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