

# Iran's Bilateral Relations in the New Eurasian Context



## Editor's Introduction

Iran has traditionally been perceived as a Middle Eastern country enmeshed in a regional security dilemma. But in many respects, this is a 20th century conception of the country and the determinants of its foreign policy, which presupposes a unipolar order and the dominant influence of the United States over the bilateral relations of Middle Eastern states.

As Europe and Asia grow closer and the rapid growth in economic exchanges over the last two decades necessitates the creation of a new, tentative political order, it is no longer sufficient to see Iran as a state in the Middle East. Rather, the drivers of Iran's bilateral relations with European and Asian nations alike are increasingly "Eurasian" in their dimensions, shaped by both emerging economic trends and the political pressures of a multipolar continent.

In October 2019, the Middle East Institute (MEI) at the National University of Singapore and Bourse & Bazaar commissioned this collection of essays aiming to examine Iran's relations in their "Eurasian context". While much has been written in recent years about the ways in which new projects — chief among them China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and the India-backed International North–South Transport Corridor — recall historical models of exchange such as the "Silk Road", the Eurasian context is in fact quite new in several important respects.

During the course of this project, a novel coronavirus swept across the world, emerging in Wuhan, China, and spreading quickly to the Italian region of Lombardy and the Iranian capital of Tehran. Notably, the vectors of the virus were Eurasian. While the essays in this edited volume do not deal with the impact of the virus directly, the analyses they present is all the more timely

as Covid-19 appears to be accelerating the political and economic re-ordering of the international system that was already underway.

The virus has had an enormous impact on global politics and economics, accelerating the nascent processes of “de-globalisation” that were the result of resurgent nationalism and protectionism, particularly in the West.<sup>1</sup> The seemingly inexorable order erected on the foundation of American political, economic and military primacy, and advanced through the twin processes of political liberalisation and economic globalisation is now faltering.

While Eurasian integration will still require a commitment to international co-operation and cross-border flows of goods, people and capital, such activities may continue within the context of a new “regionalisation”, which is presented as an explicit rejection of the globalisation which privileged the transatlantic axis. The new Eurasian context fits comfortably with the outlook of Iranian strategic thinkers, who have long argued that Iran belongs not to the Middle East, but to “West Asia”, a liminal space between Europe and Asia.

As explained in an address by Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Seyed Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, at MEI’s conference on US–Iran tensions held in August 2019, when looking to West Asia, one must “accept” that Iran is a “genuine regional power”.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that the idea for this edited volume was first discussed following the conference, where the focus on US–Iran relations saw eminent speakers struggling to adequately capture the full dynamics of Iran’s outsized role in global politics, amplified as it were by its Eurasian dimensions.

I have been fortunate to commission these essays from among my peers, a generation of young analysts and scholars who are attuned to the recent changes in the syllabus and whose own writings are helping to drive that change. The seminal, if problematic, work of political scientists such as

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, “Will the Coronavirus End Globalization as We Know It?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-16/will-coronavirus-end-globalization-we-know-it>.

<sup>2</sup> Lim Wei Chean, “Iran will use all means to defend itself”: Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister,” Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 15 August 2019, <https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Kazem-Sajjadpour.pdf>.

Anthony Cordesman or historians such as Bernard Lewis principally conceptualised the Middle East as a strategic challenge for the US, and more broadly, the West. Yet, the examination of any country's bilateral relations with the US, once sufficient to understand the place of that country in a whole global order, is each day proving too narrow a lens through which to examine political and economic realities. As Bruno Maçães has argued in his writings on Eurasia, with the erosion of the unipolar order giving way to something messier, more fundamental contexts, underpinned by geography and historical ties, have found new salience.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the examination of Iran in the new Eurasian context presented here.

Taken together, the six essays in this volume communicate three important lessons about Iran's political and economic relations in the new Eurasian context. First, the examination of Iran's bilateral relations through a Eurasian lens makes clear that contrary to the dominant conception of Middle Eastern geopolitics, the US is an increasingly peripheral actor in the region. This realisation is perhaps most clear in **Mehran Haghirián's** contribution to this volume (page 6), which focuses on Iran's relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The essay describes how Iran and the GCC kingdoms have "been in a struggle to achieve some sort of balance of power in the Persian Gulf region" and, in the face of American retrenchment, "must now also take into consideration the web of relations each has with players in Eurasia".

Similarly, **Daniel Amir's** perceptive essay on Iran–Israel relations (page 16) highlights the underappreciated ways in which both countries are emerging from the unipolar order dominated by the US. As Amir writes, Israel and Iran "find themselves sharing ground in an expanding Eurasian arena", adopting surprisingly parallel approaches to balancing in an environment that is "less weighted by American leadership". During his May 2020 visit to Israel, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had two items on his agenda: co-operation with Israel to contain Iran, and American concerns over Chinese investment in Israel. No doubt, greater Chinese influence in Israel will have an increasing bearing on policy towards Iran.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruno Maçães, *Dawn of Eurasia* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

Second, the essays in this volume make clear that the political and economic integration of Eurasia will probably continue even as the world turns away from globalisation. The processes of Eurasian integration are compatible with the conceptualisation of the Eurasian landmass as a series of overlapping “neighbourhoods”. This fact is most clearly understood in two essays which chart Iran’s relations with countries that lie outside of what we traditionally conceive of as the “Middle East”.

**Nicole Grajewski’s** essay (page 27), drawing on her novel research on the place of Iran in Russian conceptions of international relations, challenges the prevailing view of increased Russian involvement in the Middle East as anomalous, and instead contextualises their involvement within a long-established conception of Russia’s neighbourhood — the “near abroad” — that has been revitalised to underpin the Kremlin’s Eurasian ambitions. Moreover, writing on the state of Iran–China relations, **Jacopo Scita** (page 40) describes how Iran’s pivotal role in the “West Asia Economic Corridor” envisioned in China’s Belt and Road Initiative offers the country a “renewed political and economic centrality” following four decades of relative isolation enforced by the US.

Nonetheless, the third lesson is that the old order will not go quietly — the US still looms large in some of the analyses presented here. This is most obvious when looking at the trajectory of Iran’s bilateral relations with two American allies: the European Union and India. **Sumitha Kutty**, an expert on Iran–India relations, describes the troubled development of the port of Chabahar in Iran and the ways in which India’s own Eurasian vision has been hampered by American resistance to any role Iran might play in the port’s development plans (page 50).

Similarly, **Axel Hellman** describes the ways in which Europe’s own belated Eurasian turn has been driven by the increasingly deep divide with the US over Iran policy following the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018 (page 61). Hellman writes: “No experience has been as important in terms of affecting European strategic thinking as the standoff over the international nuclear agreement struck with Iran.” European policymakers increasingly see the underlying political and economic logic of pursuing greater and more functional ties across Eurasia

and have been led to see American policy as a liability in regard to European sovereignty in enacting those plans.

The six essays in this volume are meant to offer a new perspective on Iran, its bilateral relations and its place in the world. They each represent a small glimpse into the scholarly works, policy research, and media commentary of the authors, who are the early chroniclers of the emergence of the new Eurasian context. But we should not expect easy answers from this growing body of work. As Grajewski cautions: “The very notion of ‘Eurasia’ itself is not only geographically porous but also historically, culturally and civilisationally amorphous.” It is precisely this “ambiguity” that offers the “broad political, economic and cultural frame” that not only makes it possible for Iran and other Eurasian states to assert their “centrality” in the emergent order, but also enables studies such as the one presented here.

Ambiguity may make for uncomfortable analysis. Yet, after decades of treating the centrality of the US in the global order as an unambiguous fact, particularly in Middle Eastern policymaking and especially in the misguided efforts to isolate Iran, perhaps it is time to embrace the creative and constructive opportunity presented by the new and ambiguous Eurasian context.

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