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The corona crisis could trigger a change in Iran's foreign policy

The pandemic appears to have revealed the limits of Iran's 'Look to the East' strategy for preserving its national interests

The coronavirus pandemic has put the whole world into a state of lockdown. Having been in a protracted struggle with the Americans on US sanctions, Iran is experiencing severe difficulties in providing necessary medical items and equipment to combat the virus effectively. Domestic rivalries between the moderate and conservative camps complicate the efforts to mobilise all available resources for tackling the crisis. Meanwhile, public mistrust toward the government's capability in crisis management is growing. However, it's not just domestic politics that are affected by the crisis, but also Iran's foreign policy – in two major ways.

The Islamic Republic has been trying to turn the corona challenge into an opportunity to attract the world's attention to the negative impacts of US sanctions on the lives of the Iranian people. This diplomatic and public relations campaign, led by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, has been successful in garnering political support for halting the sanctions, not only from Washington's Western allies but also inside the United States.

While insisting that sanctions should not impede the delivery of medical and humanitarian supplies to countries struggling with the coronavirus outbreak, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has vowed to send €20 million in humanitarian aid to Iran. The European Union has also supported Iran's request for a USD 5bn emergency funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Meanwhile, eleven Democratic US senators have called for easing the US sanctions against Iran.

Maximum pressure is still on

However, the Trump administration has already made clear that it doesn't see the coronavirus outbreak as a justifiable ground for easing its 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran. Washington has also reportedly decided to block Iran's request for an IMF loan. Washington's hardline stance against Iran has prevented IMF from issuing new Special Drawing Rights (SDRs), which could open a new funding avenue for all countries struggling with the corona crisis. American officials seem to count on the negative economic impacts of the corona crisis for Iran as another factor that would eventually bring the Islamic Republic to the negotiation table and force it to make concessions on a variety of issues, from Iran's nuclear and missile programs to its regional activities. However, Iranian officials are still defiant, showing no sign of a possible change of course regarding the US.

At the same time, Iranian officials also appear to hope that Trump's own growing challenge with the coronavirus, which has raised criticism of how his administration handles the crisis, could lead to his defeat in the upcoming US presidential elections. In fact, with more than 750,000 reported cases of infection and more than 35,800 deaths (as of 21 April), the United States has the worst outbreak in the world. Therefore, Iranian leaders would rather wait for a potential change in US policy than present Trump with a diplomatic achievement that could boost his electoral campaign.

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That being said, the current situation could still lead to a new diplomatic opening between Iran and European countries, creating opportunities for saving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Since the US withdrawal from the deal in May 2018, followed by reimposing American sanctions against Iran, Tehran has been criticising the European parties, namely Britain, France, and Germany, of lacking the political will to withstand US pressures and guarantee the financial benefits Iran was supposed to gain under the deal. As a result, since mid-2019, Iran has gradually reduced its nuclear commitments, raising concerns over an eventual collapse of the nuclear deal.

However, on 31 March 2020, in the midst of the corona crisis, Europe's long-awaited Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) was put into action. The instrument's final aim is to allow the Europeans to

bypass American sanctions and continue trading with Iran. This development, together with the abovementioned moves by the EU in helping Iran combat the coronavirus outbreak, could provide Europe with credible leverage in its attempts to convince Iran to resume its full compliance with the deal.

The perils of 'Look to the East'

As an alternative to its increasingly strained ties with the West, the Islamic Republic first introduced 'Look to the East' as a foreign policy strategy under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The core of this approach is to develop relations with 'non-Western powers,' especially China and Russia, to prevent unfavourable ties with the West from leading toward Iran's international isolation. After being temporarily put aside in favour of a more balanced foreign policy approach during President Hassan Rouhani's first term in office, the strategy came to the forefront once again after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

However, the ongoing corona crisis appears to have revealed the limits of the strategy in preserving Iran's national interests. Indeed, China has been the leading country assisting Iran in fighting the coronavirus, especially by sending medical items and testing kits. Nonetheless, Iranian political elites and public opinion have found ample reasons to criticise Tehran-Beijing relations. Many people believe that the Iranian government's considerable delay in halting passenger flights from China after the outbreak of the coronavirus was the primary reason for the spread into Iran. They refer to Iran's over-reliance on China as the main cause for the delay.

The anti-Chinese sentiments reached its peak in the first week of April, after a Twitter argument between Iranian Health Ministry Spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour and Chinese Ambassador to Tehran Chang Hua. After the Iranian official called China's statistics regarding the coronavirus outbreak 'a bitter joke,' the Chinese diplomat called on him to 'carefully' follow press briefings by China's Health Ministry. In a bid to soothe China, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi called China 'the leading country in fighting the coronavirus,' appreciating Beijing's assistance to Tehran in the current situation. This chain of statements caused a great deal of anger among ordinary Iranians and political activists alike. Even some representatives of the Iranian parliament interpreted the issue as a sign of Iran's growing 'dependence' on a great power – in contrast with the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, especially the famous 'neither East nor West' concept.

In short, the corona crisis appears to be revealing the limits of Iran's uncompromising approach toward the West and its East-oriented strategy to mend the foreign policy gaps. Although the Islamic Republic has proven to be non-responsive toward public opinion pressures on foreign policy issues, the fact that at least part of the political elites shares the same concerns might eventually lead Iranian leaders toward rethinking the priorities of their foreign policy. Meanwhile, as a result of the pandemic, the Islamic Republic has decided to temporarily release thousands of prisoners, including some dual-nationals jailed in Iran. This could also provide a ground for a new diplomatic opening between Iran and Europe.

However, an actual foreign policy change will be highly dependent on the extent to which the European countries could present themselves as having the ability to assume a role independent from the US in dealing with Iran, as well as a possible change in Washington's Iran strategy. The latter could happen either as a result of a policy shift, or a change of administration following the upcoming US presidential elections.



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