

## **Iran's Alternative Allies**

### **Steven Heydemann**

- Iran has aggressively pursued diplomatic, economic and strategic relations with an eclectic array of non-Western states. It also expanded activity within regional and international organizations for developing countries.
- Iran's alliance strategy is intended to undermine international sanctions, sustain its nuclear program and thwart Western efforts to isolate Tehran.
- Iran's cultivation of "alternative allies" reflects deep pragmatism. It has cultivated ties with regimes that share an anti-Western or non-aligned perspective, without regard for their political or ideological orientation.
- But Iran's alliance strategy is anchored in a distinct vision of global governance, in which a coalition of non-Western states is needed as a counterweight to Western power.

### **Overview**

Iran has developed close ties with a wide range of alternative allies in Latin America and Africa. These relationships serve several purposes. They impede U.S. and European efforts to maintain effective sanctions. They provide Iran with material to sustain its nuclear enrichment program. They bolster markets for Iranian oil. They also weaken U.S. efforts to isolate Iran in international institutions.

Non-Western powers such as Russia and China figure prominently in Iran's alliance strategy. Yet, Iran has also increasingly sought close ties with regional powers such as Brazil and Nigeria and non-democratic governments, including the regimes of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. Tehran has become increasingly active in regional and international organizations that represent the economic and political interests of non-Western states, including the Non-Aligned Movement, which will hold its 2012 Annual Summit in Tehran, as well as organizations of oil and gas producers, Central Asian and Asian countries and the Muslim world.

### **Alliance strategy**

Iran's alliance strategy reflects a deep pragmatism. Its leadership has sought closer ties with governments without regard for their political or ideological orientation. Iran's Islamic regime has little in common with the populist authoritarianism of Hugo Chavez. Nonetheless, Venezuela is among Iran's closest partners in its new network of alternative allies.

Iran's alliance strategy also expresses a clear and distinctively anti-Western vision of global governance. It is rooted in the views of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who defined Tehran's foreign policy as "neither East nor West."

Yet the new alliance strategy today goes well beyond Khomeini's go-it-alone version of non-alignment. It is anchored in the conviction that non-Western states share an interest in balancing U.S. and Western power in the international system. Only by coordinating policies and acting collectively can non-Western states defend their sovereignty, security and international interests. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, "We [non-Western nations] have to develop a proper coordination...to wriggle ourselves from the domination of Western powers."

### **Global goals**

Iran's leaders have adroitly exploited concerns among developing nations about U.S. dominance. They have tried to enhance Iran's influence by advocating a more just distribution of power and resources in the international system. They accuse the United States and its allies of using globalization as an instrument of Western power and to impose their will on non-Western states. Ahmedinejad calls it "forced globalization."

Ahmadinejad defends Iran's alliance strategy as a means to reclaim globalization from the West. In August 2010, Ahmedinejad told students that the "real battlefield in the world is over global supremacy and globalization. Today, Iran supports globalization more strongly than Westerners." This view has been echoed by many of Iran's alternative allies, including Chavez, Mugabe and also Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Iran's alliance strategy includes economic, strategic and diplomatic elements. In each, Iran has tried to establish organizations, bi-lateral agreements, and formal economic arrangements as a way to institutionalize alternative networks of power in the international system.

Short-term, the Iranian regime has effectively utilized a global network of alternative allies to expand its diplomatic room for maneuver, impede U.S. and European efforts to tighten international sanctions, and sustain its enrichment program. Longer term, its aim is to establish alternative frameworks of global governance that will permit non-Western nations to trade, invest, borrow, and provide for their sovereignty and national security without recourse to the West.

### **Iran-Venezuela alliance**

The massive expansion of Iranian-Venezuelan ties since 2000 is an extreme but representative case of how Iran's alliance strategy has unfolded. Before 2000, bilateral exchanges were sporadic. President Khatami's visit to Caracas in 2000 was the first by

an Iranian head-of-state in 23 years. Over the next seven years Iranian and Venezuelan heads of state visited one another no less than 14 times.

In 2002, Iranian-Venezuelan trade was trivial, only \$1.5 million annually. Between 2001 and 2007, Venezuela and Iran signed more than 181 trade agreements worth at least \$20 billion. The agreements covered cooperation in steel and oil production, automobile production, manufacturing ammunition and oil exploration. The two countries have jointly lobbied OPEC members to price oil in Euros instead of U.S. dollars. A few weeks after the United Nations approved sanctions on Iran, Tehran and Caracas called for a cut in oil production by OPEC members.

In 2007, Iran and Venezuela announced they would establish a \$2 billion fund aimed at financing projects in the developing world “to help thwart U.S. domination.” Chavez described the fund as, “a mechanism for liberation.” Ahmadinejad said the fund would promote cooperation in third world countries, especially in Latin America and Africa. In 2009, they agreed to establish an Iranian-Venezuelan Development Bank funded at \$200 million.

The theme of building international support against American power recurs frequently in official Iranian-Venezuelan exchanges. During a 2007 visit, Chavez held up Ahmadinejad’s hand and said that the two nations would “unite and create a multi-polar world...United, we are going to help defeat U.S. imperialism, and that’s why...they get worried in Washington when they see the two of us shaking hands.”

Chavez is an ardent supporter of Iran’s nuclear enrichment program. Venezuela was one of only three countries at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to vote against referring the Iranian nuclear file to the U.N. Security Council. Chavez has threatened to suspend crude oil exports to the United States if it attacks Iran, and has offered to supply Iran with F-16 fighter jets. Security cooperation extends well beyond the nuclear issue. Venezuela has reportedly entered into military projects with Iran, and they are seeking to jointly produce an unmanned aircraft similar to the U.S. Predator. Reports indicate Iran’s Revolutionary Guards are training Venezuelan police and secret services.

### **Latin American allies**

Iran has used its alliance strategy across Latin America over the past decade. After the Security Council approved sanctions against Iran in 2006, Ahmadinejad embarked on a tour of Latin American countries critical of U.S. policies, including Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador. He attended the swearing-in of President Rafael Correa, who had pledged during his campaign not to renew a lease for a U.S. air base in Ecuador. In 2006, Bolivian President Evo Morales announced plans to establish diplomatic ties and forge energy cooperation with Iran – on Chavez’s advice. A high-level Bolivian official told the press, “Iran is seeking to gain geopolitical control in the

Western Hemisphere with the aid of Venezuela. They will eventually be able to place and replace governments.”

The deepening of Iranian-Brazilian ties followed a similar pattern, absent vitriolic anti-Americanism. Bilateral relations date to the early days of the Islamic Republic, but have expanded significantly since 2000. In 2010, Brazil was Iran’s largest trade partner in Latin America, hitting \$1.3 billion in 2008 – an increase of over 80 percent in one year. In 2010, Lula da Silva took more than 300 political and business leaders to Tehran. He and Ahmadinejad agreed to expand bilateral trade to \$10 billion and signed 11 economic cooperation agreements.

In 2010, Brazil had a central role in international efforts to assure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapons capability. With Turkey, Brazil won Iranian support for a deal to swap low enriched uranium for more highly enriched uranium intended for use in a nuclear medical facility. The deal complicated but did not derail U.S. efforts to secure new U.N. sanctions against Iran. Brazil voted against the sanctions, but agreed to abide by them, reflecting the limits of Iran’s strategy with governments that are nonaligned, rather than anti-American.

### **African connections**

Iran has worked assiduously to expand its influence in Africa. Sudan and Zimbabwe share Iran’s anti-Western orientation and its critique of the international system. Iran was among the few states to oppose sending U.N. peacekeepers to Darfur. It has supported Mugabe’s regime in Zimbabwe with technical and humanitarian aid following the collapse of its economy in 2008 and the 2009 imposition of economic sanctions. Heads of government have visited one another’s capitals. They have also signed several economic agreements since 2005.

During a visit to Tehran in November 2006, Mugabe echoed Ahmadinejad and Chavez in calling for radical change in an “evil” international system. “Countries who think alike must come together and work out mechanisms to defend ourselves,” he told a press conference. In 2007, Iran and Zimbabwe created an international “coalition for peace in response to the aggression of global bullies” after President George W. Bush criticized both governments.

In the absence of political and ideological compatibility, Iran has strengthened economic ties, increasing investments and facilitating trade, aid and humanitarian support. South Africa is among Iran’s largest trading partners, to the tune of \$20 billion annually in recent years. Iran supplied some 40 percent of South Africa’s oil. In the late 1990s, South Africa offered to sell Iran nuclear technology for the purpose of developing a nuclear energy capacity. It strongly supports Iran’s right to enrichment, even while opposing nuclear proliferation.

Economic ties with West African states have expanded enormously in recent years, although they remain far lower than Iran-South African trade. A 2010 study from the American Enterprise Institute noted that 2009 exports to Cote d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal was roughly 2,700, 2,800 and 3,600 percent higher (respectively) than 2000 exports.

### **Limits of alliances**

Tehran has also faced setbacks reflecting the limits of its policy. In 2010, Russia and China agreed to support a fourth round of U.N. sanctions after trying to water them down. Nigeria voted for sanctions. Brazil voted against, but said it would comply with the new restrictions.

In Latin America, some governments allied with the United States have expressed suspicion, if not alarm, about Iran's intentions in the region. In North Africa, Morocco broke off diplomatic relations with Iran in 2009 over charges of Iranian interference in its religious affairs. In West Africa, a number of states that have benefited from increasing trade with the United States continue to participate in American counterterrorism programs.

Iran has played a weak hand effectively to strengthen its international influence. Yet its track record reflects only partial success. Its vision of a radical restructuring of the international system has limited appeal. And its economic influence is constrained by the growing reach of U.N., U.S., and EU sanctions.

### **The future**

- Iran's alliance strategy will remain a tool in its diplomatic and economic arsenal to gain leverage internationally.
- Iran's leaders articulate a vision of the international system that will continue to resonate with many non-Western nations. These relationships help insulate Tehran from the full impact of harsh economic sanctions.
- Iran's ambitious diplomacy will continue to pose a major challenge to the United States and its Western allies in their efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.
- But Iran's efforts to cultivate alternative allies are not always successful. And economic aid or ties are not always sufficient to generate political support from developing nations.

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