CHAPTER FIVE

FACTIONAL RIVALRIES AND FOREIGN POLICY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the foreign policy of the IRI since the Islamic revolution of 1979 until 2008. The main questions to be raised in this chapter are: (1) What influence has the Islamic revolution had on foreign policy orientation and formulation of the IRI? (2) What impact have Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1979–1989), and the three presidents Hojjatoleslam Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997), Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–) had on foreign policy? Have there been major shifts in foreign policy orientation during their rule or has the overall foreign policy approach, introduced by Khomeini after the revolution in 1979, remained the same? (3) What is the impact of the Shi’ite ideology as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini on foreign policy formulation in Iran?

As has been explained in Chapter 1, foreign interventions in Iran by France, Russia, Britain, and the US since the 19th century, have had great effects on Iranian foreign policies even until today.

During the reign of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran was a close ally of the US and aimed to achieve a prominent position in the Persian Gulf region. As has been outlined in the earlier chapters, the Islamic revolution meant a total break with the foreign policy of the Shah.

Generally speaking, Iran’s foreign policy approach since the Islamic revolution can be summarized as follows:

1. During the first ten years after the revolution, when Ayatollah Khomeini was the Supreme Leader, it was dominated by two main

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ideological principles, manifested in two slogans: First, “Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic,” away especially from Western (US) influences in Iran; and second, the “Export of the Revolution,” to free Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries from their “oppressive and corrupt rulers.” The latter served as a means of mobilization of the Iranian people to support the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). Thus, the first ten years after the revolution were mainly ideologically driven in foreign policy orientation, inspired by the Shi’ite ideological doctrine as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini;

2. Due to the great economic problems in Iran and because, with the emergence of Hashemi Rafsanjani as President in 1989, a power shift took place from an alliance between the Conservative and the Radical Left factions to cooperation between the Conservative and the Pragmatist faction, a more pragmatic approach prevailed. This approach focused on a post Iran-Iraq war economic reconstruction and the country’s reintegration into the international economy. A priority of President Rafsanjani’s foreign policy was to improve relations with the Persian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, but also with the states of CEA and Russia;

3. During Khatami’s presidency (1997–2005), Rafsanjani’s foreign policy towards Iran’s neighbors was mainly continued, but also relations with the EU and its member countries were improved. However, even during the presidency of Rafsanjani and Khatami, the Islamic ideology, embedded in a nationalist desire to reject any “Westernization” of the country and the Iranian people, still prevailed among some elements of the Iranian political elite.

4. With the election of Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, some shifts in foreign policy orientation can be noted—away from the pragmatic approach under Rafsanjani and Khatami—to a rhetorically more hostile attitude, especially towards the West and Israel. This has led to great irritations not only from the US but also from the EU, the latter of which aims to establish a constructive dialogue with Iran. The situation has even worsened due to the nuclear issue.

This chapter starts with an overview of the formal process of decision-making in the IRI. Then, it analyzes the foreign policy of the IRI under Ayatollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader, during the presidency