

Iran's Strategic Responses to Pressure from the United States and Israel in Contemporary Conflict

Muhammad Husein Maruahey¹, Rajab Lestaluhu², Mulyadi³

^{1,3} Universitas Djuanda, Bogor

² Universitas Muhammadiyah Sorong

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Husein Maruahey

Muhammadhusein1@unida.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Iran's strategic responses to pressure from the United States and Israel in the context of contemporary conflict through a multidimensional analytical approach. It integrates defensive realism, asymmetric warfare theory, forward defense doctrine, strategic culture, and national dignity to explain the logic behind Iran's security behavior. Using a qualitative method, this study relies on document analysis of academic literature, policy reports, and recent international publications. The findings show that Iran's strategic behavior should not be understood merely as military aggression, but rather as a survival strategy within an anarchic international system shaped by persistent external threats. Iran has developed an asymmetric approach through missiles, drones, and proxy networks to confront adversaries with superior conventional capabilities. The forward defense doctrine also enables Iran to manage threats beyond its core territory and build strategic depth. In addition, strategic culture and revolutionary identity provide legitimacy and continuity to this defensive orientation. National dignity plays an important role in sustaining these policies despite severe economic, political, and diplomatic pressures. The article argues that Iran's strategic response emerges from the interaction between threat structures, strategic adaptation, and identity construction. Therefore, this study contributes to Middle Eastern security studies by bridging material and ideational approaches in explaining Iran's contemporary strategic behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Iran's strategic behavior in contemporary geopolitics cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the long historical trajectory that has shaped how the state perceives threats, formulates its foreign policy, and manages its security interests. One of the most pivotal historical events was the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Abrahamian (2013), in *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations*, demonstrates that the intervention supported by the United States and the United Kingdom not only overthrew a legitimate government but also left a profound psychological and political imprint regarding the fragility of national sovereignty when confronted with external intervention.

Since then, this experience has become embedded in Iran's collective memory, reinforcing the perception that threats to the state do not always manifest in the form of armed invasion, but may also arise through political infiltration and foreign influence capable of reshaping domestic governance.

This historical experience gained renewed intensity following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which transformed Iran from a Western-oriented monarchy into an Islamic republic founded upon an ideological rejection of external domination. Since that period, Iran's relationship with the United States and its allies has no longer been understood merely as interstate rivalry, but rather as a broader contestation over sovereignty, political identity, and national civilizational orientation.

Nasr (2025), in *Iran's Grand Strategy: A Political History*, emphasizes that Iran's grand strategy has been shaped by a combination of foreign intervention, war, isolation, and the imperative to ensure state survival within a strategic environment perceived as threatening. Accordingly, Iran's security policy does not emerge from simple expansionist ambitions, but rather from a continuous pursuit of security, strategic autonomy, and political dignity.



Figure: *Iran's Territory Amid the Geopolitical Pressure of Surrounding Arab States.*"

From the perspective of international relations, this situation places Iran within an anarchic international system. Waltz (1979), in *Theory of International Politics*, explains that under conditions of anarchy, states cannot rely on a higher

authority to guarantee their security and must therefore depend on the logic of self-help. From this standpoint, Iran's security policy can be understood as a typical response of a state operating in a high-threat environment. States seek to build defensive capabilities deemed sufficient to withstand external pressure, coercion, and intervention. Accordingly, the enhancement of Iran's military capabilities should not be directly interpreted as aggressive expansion, but rather as part of a survival logic within an international system that lacks security guarantees.

The burden of anarchy for Iran is further intensified by layered external pressures. Economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, threats of military attack, restrictions on technological access, and pressures on regime stability constitute a threat environment that shapes Iran's strategic behavior. Under such conditions, the state seeks not only to preserve its territorial integrity, but also to maintain regime stability, political legitimacy, and ideological continuity. Glaser (2010), in *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*, argues that states do not always strive to maximize power, but rather pursue a level of capability considered sufficient to ensure security and mitigate threats. In Iran's case, this logic helps explain why the accumulation of capabilities—through missiles, drones, defense infrastructure, and regional networks—is more appropriately understood as an effort to reduce vulnerability rather than a classical domination project.

Interpretations of Iran's policies must also be situated within the long-term perspective of its foreign policy orientation. Juneau and Razavi (2013), in *Iranian Foreign Policy Since 2001: Alone in the World*, emphasize that Iran's policy orientation is shaped by a combination of perceived encirclement, the need for strategic autonomy, and efforts to maintain regional influence. Within this framework, Iran's regional networks should not be understood solely as instruments of expansion, but also as additional layers of defense designed to contain threats as far as possible from the state's core territory.

Among the most prominent issues in this conflict dynamic is Iran's nuclear program. Monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) indicates that Iran's nuclear issue is no longer merely technical, but has evolved into a nexus of international verification, political dispute, and claims of national sovereignty. Eslami (2024), in *Exploring the Driving Forces Behind Iran's Nuclear Decision-Making: Why Tehran Remains Below the Weapons Threshold*, shows that Iran's nuclear decisions are shaped by a combination of security considerations, political legitimacy, and strategic caution. Thus, Iran's nuclear issue lies at the intersection between deterrence needs and the preservation of sovereign claims.

The IAEA report *Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)* dated May 31, 2025 (GOV/2025/24) affirms that monitoring Iran's nuclear commitments remains a central issue in its relations with the international community. A subsequent IAEA document dated September 3, 2025 (GOV/2025/50) further indicates that nuclear verification issues cannot be separated from broader political and security developments. From Iran's perspective, the nuclear program is officially framed as a legitimate right within the context of peaceful nuclear energy use and

state sovereignty. Therefore, the nuclear issue in Tehran concerns not only technology, but also status, autonomy, and national dignity.

In recent developments, the conflict between Iran, the United States, and Israel has reached an increasingly complex level. Iran does not adopt direct conventional military confrontation as its primary strategy, but instead employs flexible, gradual, and adaptive response patterns. Nasr (2025) emphasizes that Iran's strategy combines domestic defense with the projection of strategic depth in the region. In other words, Iran not only builds resilience internally, but also shifts its defensive line outward through regional networks considered essential for national security. This approach is reinforced by policy analyses indicating that Iran tends to manage escalation through indirect instruments, layered responses, and the avoidance of full-scale open warfare as long as deterrence and survival can be maintained.

This pattern demonstrates that Iran does not seek to compete with the United States and Israel on the same battlefield, such as air superiority, technological dominance, or global alliance capacity. Instead, Iran adopts a strategy emphasizing flexibility, low cost, dispersion of pressure instruments, and the maintenance of political maneuvering space. In this context, asymmetric warfare theory becomes highly relevant. Arreguín-Toft (2005), in *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, explains that weaker actors can increase their chances of survival by adopting strategies that are not symmetrical with their opponents' operational patterns. Similarly, Eisenstadt (2020), in *Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War*, argues that Iran consistently develops a mode of warfare based on a combination of limited military instruments, non-state networks, and operational ambiguity to generate strategic effects disproportionate to the resources employed. Therefore, the use of drones, missiles, and proxy networks by Iran is not merely a tactical choice, but part of a broader security design aimed at increasing the cost of conflict for stronger adversaries.

Furthermore, Iran's strategy must also be interpreted through the concept of forward defense. Nasr (2025) shows that Iran seeks to manage threats as far as possible from its core territory in order to create strategic depth. Within this framework, Iran's security is not narrowly defined as formal territorial protection, but also as the management of a regional environment that functions as a strategic buffer. Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid (2025), in their Chatham House report *The Shape-Shifting "Axis of Resistance": How Iran and Its Networks Adapt to External Pressures*, emphasize that Iran's regional networks are adaptive and function not only as instruments of influence but also as part of an expanded defense architecture. Thus, forward defense enables Iran to confront threats beyond its domestic territory while reducing the likelihood of conflict concentration within the state's core.

There remains a significant gap in the existing literature. Most studies on Iran tend to emphasize material aspects, such as military capabilities, weapons technology, or the effectiveness of proxy networks. While these approaches are undoubtedly important, they do not fully explain why Iran's strategy continues

to be sustained over the long term, even when it generates substantial economic pressure and international isolation.

Asymmetric warfare theory explains how weaker actors confront stronger ones, but it does not fully account for the legitimacy and symbolic dimensions that enable such strategies to persist. Similarly, defensive realism explains the survival motives of the state, yet it remains insufficient in capturing the ideational dimensions that embed defense policy within the framework of national political identity.

In this context, the concept of **national dignity** becomes essential to integrate. Anderson (1983), in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, argues that nations are imagined communities constructed through narratives, symbols, and collective solidarity. Likewise, Gellner (1983), in *Nations and Nationalism*, emphasizes that nationalism serves to align collective identity with the political project of the state.

In the case of Iran, national dignity can be understood as the interpretation that national defense is not merely a matter of material security, but also a defense of collective honor, political independence, and the right to self-determination free from external domination. Consequently, symbols such as missile programs, the insistence on the right to peaceful nuclear technology, and narratives of resistance against external pressure acquire meanings that extend far beyond their technical functions.

On this basis, the novelty of this article lies in its attempt to integrate material and ideational approaches into a unified analytical framework. This study does not merely view Iran as a state responding to threats through security calculations, but also as an actor that sustains its defense strategy because it is deeply connected to historical memory, strategic culture, revolutionary identity, and national dignity. By integrating defensive realism, asymmetric warfare theory, forward defense doctrine, strategic culture, and national dignity, this article offers a more comprehensive interpretation of Iran's strategic responses in contemporary conflict. This article fills the gap between materialist and ideational explanations of Iran's strategic behavior by integrating defensive realism with national dignity as a legitimizing variable. Accordingly, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's strategic responses to pressure from the United States and Israel in contemporary conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework to explain Iran's strategic responses to pressure from the United States and Israel. Defensive realism serves as the primary analytical foundation, while asymmetric warfare, forward defense doctrine, strategic culture, and hybrid warfare/gray-zone conflict function as complementary perspectives. This combined framework is necessary because Iran's strategic behavior cannot be sufficiently explained by a single theory. Iran is not merely responding to external military threats, but is also managing structural constraints, indirect conflict arenas, and policy orientations shaped by historical experience and revolutionary identity. In this framework, Waltz (1979) and Glaser (2010) help explain why Iran acts to preserve

security and survival, whereas Arreguín-Toft (2005), Nasr (2025), Zimmt (2024; 2025), Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid (2025), Ostovar (2016), Divsallar and Azizi (2024), Eisenstadt (2020), Rouhi (2025), and Şimşek (2025) explain how these responses are operationalized and sustained.

From the perspective of defensive realism, Iran's strategic behavior can be understood as a survival-oriented response within an anarchic international system. Waltz (1979) argues that because no higher authority can guarantee state security, states must rely on self-help to maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity. This argument is reinforced by Glaser (2010), who emphasizes that states do not necessarily maximize power indefinitely, but rather seek a sufficient level of capability to reduce threats and avoid insecurity. In Iran's case, the sustained rivalry with the United States and Israel, economic sanctions, technological restrictions, military pressure, and threats to regime stability have reinforced the need for a defensive posture. Accordingly, Iran's development of missiles, drones, underground defense facilities, and military infrastructure is better understood as a strategy of survival and vulnerability reduction rather than aggressive expansion. Thus, defensive realism, as developed by Waltz (1979) and Glaser (2010), remains the core theory for explaining the fundamental motive behind Iran's strategic behavior.

While defensive realism explains the underlying rationale, asymmetric warfare theory clarifies the form of strategy Iran adopts in confronting conventionally superior adversaries. Arreguín-Toft (2005) argues that weaker actors enhance their prospects of survival by avoiding symmetrical confrontation and exploiting the vulnerabilities of stronger opponents through unconventional and lower-cost strategies. This is particularly relevant to Iran, which does not seek conventional superiority in air power or advanced military technology. Instead, Iran relies on ballistic missiles, drones, cyber capabilities, and networks of non-state actors to generate cost asymmetry. As Eisenstadt (2020) observes, Iran's warfare approach is designed to impose sustained strategic pressure at lower cost, thereby increasing the burden borne by stronger adversaries. In this sense, asymmetric warfare constitutes the operational instrument through which the survival logic identified by Waltz (1979) and Glaser (2010) is translated into practice.

The concept of forward defense doctrine further explains the spatial dimension of Iran's strategy. According to Nasr (2025), Iran's grand strategy is oriented toward building strategic depth by addressing threats before they reach national territory. This perspective is supported by Zimmt (2024), who argues that Iran perceives Israel not only as a geopolitical rival but also as a long-term ideological threat. Moreover, Zimmt (2025) shows that the Gaza conflict has influenced how Iran recalibrates risks and engagement within its regional networks. Similarly, Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid (2025) emphasize that Iran's regional networks should not be seen merely as expansionist tools, but as components of an external defense architecture that disperses conflict pressures away from Iran's domestic core. Therefore, forward defense can be understood as the geographical extension of Iran's fundamentally defensive strategy.

However, material explanations alone are insufficient to explain the continuity of Iran's strategy. The concept of strategic culture helps explain why Iranian policies endure despite substantial economic and political pressure. Ostovar (2016) demonstrates that Iran's security policy is deeply shaped by the revolutionary identity formed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and reinforced by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In this framework, threats are not understood solely as material dangers, but also as challenges to political legitimacy, revolutionary values, and national identity. As a result, Iran's responses to external pressure become more enduring, symbolic, and ideologically charged than a purely utilitarian interpretation would suggest. By incorporating Ostovar (2016), this study shows that Iran's survival objective is not only physical survival, but also the preservation of its political and ideological identity.

In addition, the concepts of hybrid warfare and gray-zone conflict explain the operational patterns through which Iran applies pressure without entering full-scale conventional war. Divsallar and Azizi (2024) argue that Iran increasingly operates in the space between war and peace by combining military and non-military instruments and involving both state and non-state actors. This interpretation aligns with Eisenstadt (2020), who highlights Iran's use of indirect operations, proxy actors, limited strikes, and strategic ambiguity to generate disproportionate effects. Thus, gray-zone warfare helps explain why Iran's strategy is not only asymmetric, but also gradual, adaptive, and ambiguous.

Overall, this literature review maintains that defensive realism remains the principal theoretical lens, because Waltz (1979) and Glaser (2010) most directly explain Iran's core objective of survival in an anarchic international system. Nevertheless, the complexity of Iran's strategic behavior requires theoretical integration. Arreguín-Toft (2005) explains the choice of asymmetric instruments, Nasr (2025) and Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid (2025) clarify the logic of forward defense, Ostovar (2016) explains policy continuity through strategic culture, and Divsallar and Azizi (2024) together with Eisenstadt (2020) illuminate gray-zone operational patterns. Recent analyses by Rouhi (2025) and Şimşek (2025) further confirm that Iran's strategy is situated at a strategic crossroads, where proxy networks offer both advantages and constraints. Taken together, these perspectives provide a more coherent and comprehensive explanation of Iran's responses to external pressure in contemporary conflict.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **qualitative approach** using **document analysis** as its primary method. The selection of a qualitative approach is grounded in the research objective, which is to examine in depth the meanings, policy logic, and strategic patterns that shape Iran's response to pressure from the United States and Israel. This approach is considered appropriate in international relations studies, particularly when the object of analysis involves political and security phenomena that are complex, contextual, and rich in interpretative dimensions. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meanings constructed by individuals or groups regarding a

social phenomenon. In this context, the qualitative approach enables the researcher to analyze not only the material aspects of Iran's policies, but also the underlying strategic and ideational dimensions.

Document analysis is selected as the main technique because this study relies on various written sources that record Iran's policies, strategies, and security narratives. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic qualitative research procedure involving the review, evaluation, and interpretation of documents to derive meaning, develop empirical understanding, and strengthen analytical foundations. In this study, documents are not treated merely as supplementary data, but as primary sources that represent the dynamics of state strategy, institutional positioning, and policy construction over time. As highlighted by Bowen (2009), the strength of document analysis lies in its stable, non-reactive nature, allowing repeated examination to enhance interpretive rigor.

The data sources are categorized into three groups. First, **academic literature**, including books and journal articles on international relations theory, asymmetric warfare, and security strategy. Second, **reports from international organizations and policy institutions**, such as IAEA, CSIS, RAND, IISS, and Chatham House, which provide empirical data and contemporary policy analysis. Third, **policy publications and recent analytical outputs**, including policy briefs and analytical articles relevant to the dynamics of conflict involving Iran, the United States, and Israel.

The selection of data sources is conducted through **purposive sampling**, whereby data are chosen based on topic relevance, source credibility, and their contribution to the research focus. Patton (2002) explains that purposive sampling in qualitative research aims to select the most information-rich sources that best serve the analytical needs, rather than achieving statistical representativeness.

Data collection is carried out in a systematic and sequential manner. The first stage involves **document identification**, which consists of locating sources relevant to the research topic. The second stage is **intensive reading**, where documents are evaluated based on context, credibility, and relevance to the research questions. The third stage is **data classification**, which involves organizing information according to key issues emerging from the documents. This process aligns with Bowen's (2009) stages of document analysis: skimming, reading, and interpretation. Through these stages, the analytical process becomes more transparent and systematically traceable.

For data analysis, this study employs **thematic analysis**, which is chosen for its ability to systematically identify, organize, and interpret patterns of meaning within textual data. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a flexible method for identifying key themes through coding and categorization. In this study, the analysis follows six stages: (1) data familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme identification, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and naming, and (6) the development of analytical narratives. This procedure ensures that empirical data are consistently linked to the theoretical framework employed in the study.

The themes identified in this research include threat perception, survival strategy, the use of asymmetric instruments, the implementation of forward defense, the role of strategic culture, and national dignity as an ideational variable. These themes are subsequently integrated with the study's theoretical framework—defensive realism, asymmetric warfare, forward defense doctrine, strategic culture, and gray zone warfare—resulting in a more comprehensive and multidimensional interpretation of Iran's strategic behavior.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the research, several strategies are employed. First, **source triangulation** is conducted by comparing different types of documents to ensure consistency of information. Denzin (1978) identifies triangulation as a key technique in qualitative research to enhance validity through the use of multiple data sources. Second, a **critical evaluation of documents** is undertaken, taking into account institutional background, purpose of publication, and potential biases of each source. Third, **theoretical coherence** is maintained to ensure that data interpretation remains aligned with the conceptual framework used. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize that credibility in qualitative research is determined by the consistency between data, interpretation, and theoretical framework.

In conclusion, this research methodology is designed to produce an in-depth, systematic, and academically rigorous analysis. The integration of document analysis and thematic analysis enables the study not only to map Iran's strategic patterns but also to explain the underlying meanings across structural, operational, and ideational dimensions. Therefore, this approach is considered highly relevant for understanding Iran's response not merely as a military phenomenon, but also as a political, historical, and identity-driven phenomenon.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Iran's strategic response to pressure from the United States and Israel is not directed toward achieving conventional military superiority, but rather toward constructing a **defensive-oriented strategy** that combines defensive orientation, asymmetric innovation, and the expansion of threat space beyond its core territory. Within this framework, Iran does not seek to directly match its adversaries in terms of air superiority, layered defense systems, or the breadth of military alliances.

Instead, Iran develops capabilities designed to **increase the cost of conflict** for its adversaries through the use of missiles, drones, indirect operations, and support for regional allied networks. This finding is consistent with Arreguín-Toft (2005), who argues that relatively weaker actors tend to adopt asymmetric strategies to avoid rapid defeat while simultaneously increasing the burden imposed on stronger opponents. In a similar vein, Eisenstadt (2020) observes that Iran has consistently developed patterns of warfare within the **gray zone**, the space between peace and open warfare, in order to generate strategic effects disproportionate to the resources it employs.

At the operational level, Iran's strategy functions through a mechanism of **cost imposition**, namely a systematic effort to ensure that any form of pressure exerted by its adversaries becomes financially, militarily, and politically

expensive. In practice, the use of low-cost drones, ballistic missiles, and proxy networks enables Iran to exert pressure without bearing the consequences of full-scale conventional warfare.

Contemporary policy analyses further reinforce these findings. Yacoubian (2026a) demonstrates that the impact of U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran extends beyond the tactical level, producing broader regional consequences. Furthermore, Yacoubian (2026b) argues that Iran's response patterns reflect a logic of **calibrated escalation** rather than a move toward total confrontation. Meanwhile, Yacoubian (2026c) highlights that Iran's escalation strategy is **tiered and deliberately structured** to maintain deterrence capacity despite significant external pressure.

Thus, the effectiveness of Iran's strategy does not lie in achieving absolute victory, but in its ability to sustain retaliatory capabilities, increase uncertainty for its adversaries, and compel them to allocate significantly greater resources for interception and defense. In this regard, Eisenstadt (2020) emphasizes that Iran's advantage lies in its capacity to combine limited military instruments, non-state actors, and operational ambiguity into a sustained pattern of strategic pressure.



The findings of this study further indicate that Iran's strategy is supported by the **forward defense doctrine**. This doctrine enables Iran to manage threats beyond its domestic territory through regional networks often referred to as the *axis of resistance*. In strategic terms, Iran seeks to ensure that confrontation with its adversaries does not occur entirely within its core territory, but is instead dispersed across a broader strategic space.

Nasr (2025) emphasizes that Iran's grand strategy has been shaped by historical imperatives to prevent isolation, build strategic depth, and confront threats before they reach the state's core. Similar assessments are reflected in policy analyses. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2025) notes that limitations in Iran's missile strategy have led the country to increasingly rely on a combination of indirect instruments and regional networks. Meanwhile, The RAND Corporation (2025a, 2025b) highlights that the logic of limited warfare and cost-benefit calculation remains central to Iran's strategic behavior, particularly when confronting conventionally superior adversaries.

This argument is reinforced by Mansour, Al-Shakeri, and Haid (2025), who demonstrate that Iran's regional networks cannot be understood merely as linear proxy structures, but rather as adaptive, dynamic, and resilient loose coalitions capable of enduring significant pressure. These findings suggest that forward defense is not simply a policy of influence expansion, but rather a component of an extended defense architecture. By shifting part of the threat management arena beyond its domestic territory, Iran gains greater maneuvering space to maintain internal stability while preserving strategic flexibility. Accordingly, forward defense in the Iranian case is more appropriately understood as a geographical extension of a defensive strategy rather than as evidence of offensive expansionism.

From the perspective of **strategic culture**, this study shows that Iran's response to external pressure is shaped not only by rational security calculations, but also by historical perceptions, collective memory of foreign intervention, and the state's revolutionary identity. Ostovar (2016) argues that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) functions not only as a military institution but also as a guardian of the revolution and its ideological orientation. This implies that Iran's security policies are closely linked to the protection of the regime, the revolution, and the state's image as an actor resisting external domination.

Nasr (2025) further emphasizes that Iran's strategy cannot be reduced to cold geostrategic calculations alone, as it also contains layers of historical memory, experiences of intervention, and efforts to preserve political dignity under external pressure. Therefore, from Iran's perspective, pressure from the United States and Israel is not merely perceived as a military threat, but also as a threat to sovereignty, political identity, and the continuity of the revolution.

Another key finding confirms that **national dignity** plays a crucial role in sustaining this strategy. In the Iranian context, national dignity is not merely a political slogan, but a source of legitimacy for defense policy. Missile programs, insistence on the right to develop peaceful nuclear technology, and narratives of resistance against foreign hegemony are framed as part of defending national honor.

From a broader regional perspective, the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (2024) notes that Iran occupies a dual and competing image in the Middle East: on one hand as a bridge-building actor, and on the other as a state expanding its strategic influence. This ambivalence helps explain why Iran's defense policy is simultaneously interpreted as a security strategy, a symbol of resistance, and an instrument of regional legitimacy.

In this context, the perspective of **nationalism** becomes highly relevant. Anderson (1983) conceptualizes the nation as an imagined community constructed through memory, symbols, and collective solidarity, while Gellner (1983) argues that nationalism aligns collective identity with the political project of the state. In Iran's case, external pressure reinforces the perception that national defense constitutes a defense of collective dignity. Consequently, Iran's strategic decisions are not always economically efficient, but are often rational in terms of identity, symbolism, and political legitimacy.

These findings are also supported by various observers, both within and outside the region. Mansour (2024) argues that many Western analyses tend to underestimate Iran's resilience and that of its allies due to an excessive focus on short-term material losses, whereas the true strength of these networks lies in their adaptability. Similarly, Mansour et al. (2025) show that although the axis of resistance experienced setbacks and lost key figures in 2024, it did not collapse. Instead, it adapted through changes in organizational structure, resource allocation, and mechanisms of influence. This demonstrates that Iran's resilience does not depend on a single command node, but rather on its ability to maintain network connectivity and sustain narratives of resistance.

From the perspective of Indonesian scholarship, these findings are consistent with Nashir (2023), who shows that Iran's foreign policy in the Syrian conflict tends to be confrontational due to security considerations and the need to protect its strategic position in the region. Although Nashir's study focuses on Syria, it remains relevant as it highlights that Iran's regional behavior cannot be separated from threat perception and broadly defined national interests, including the protection of allied regimes, influence corridors, and regional balance. Thus, Iran's forward defense can be understood as a combination of realist rationality and identity-driven orientation.

Overall, these findings confirm that Iran's strategy is **defensive in objective, asymmetric in instruments, forward-oriented in spatial deployment, and symbolic in political meaning**. Iran does not pursue conventional victory in the classical sense, but rather seeks to ensure that its adversaries cannot impose their will at low cost. Within this framework, defensive realism explains the survival motive, asymmetric warfare explains the form of response, forward defense explains the spatial dimension of threat management, strategic culture explains policy continuity, and national dignity explains the legitimizing resilience of the strategy.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, this article demonstrates that Iran's strategic response to pressure from the United States and Israel cannot be adequately explained merely as a conventional military reaction or as an expression of state aggression. Rather, it represents the result of a complex interaction between external threat structures, asymmetric strategic choices, forward defense doctrine, strategic culture, and national dignity as an ideational dimension.

In other words, Iran's defense policy is shaped not only by the need to ensure physical security, but also by the imperative to preserve political identity, regime legitimacy, and national dignity within a strategically constrained environment.

Within the framework of **defensive realism**, Iran can be understood as a state seeking to ensure its survival in an anarchic international system. However, given that Iran faces conventionally superior adversaries, it does not pursue direct power balancing, but instead develops flexible, relatively low-cost instruments that increase the cost of conflict for its opponents. Thus, the use of missiles, drones, and regional networks reflects not merely military tactics, but elements of a broader defense design aimed at reducing strategic vulnerability.

In this regard, Iran acts defensively at the level of objectives, but adaptively and asymmetrically at the level of instruments.

Furthermore, the article demonstrates that the **forward defense doctrine** enables Iran to manage threats beyond its domestic territory, thereby preventing pressure from concentrating on the state's core. At the same time, strategic culture and revolutionary identity explain the continuity and legitimacy of these policy choices. For Iran, external threats are not only perceived as threats to territory or regime survival, but also as challenges to sovereignty, revolutionary values, and national dignity. Consequently, Iran's defense strategy acquires broader symbolic meaning – it functions both as a security instrument and as an expression of national honor.

The main contribution of this article lies in demonstrating that Iran's strategic behavior must be understood through an integrated approach that combines **material and ideational dimensions**. The material approach explains threats, power distribution, and military instruments, while the ideational approach explains legitimacy, continuity, and symbolic meaning. Without integrating both, analyses of Iran risk becoming reductionist – either overly focused on security calculations or excessively centered on ideology – whereas Iran's strategic reality lies at the intersection of both dimensions.

Ultimately, this article shows that Iran's strategic response constitutes a **multidimensional survival strategy**. Iran does not seek to win conflicts in a conventional sense, but rather to ensure that its adversaries cannot impose their will at low cost. In this context, Iran's defense policy can be understood as a strategy to simultaneously preserve state survival, regime stability, regional strategic depth, and national dignity. This perspective is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's strategy – not merely as a matter of military capability, but as a reflection of how a state interprets threats, constructs defense, and sustains its dignity within a competitive international system.

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