

# Iran's National Interests: Khamenei Resets Foreign-Policy Compass

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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*The address by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the annual gathering in Tehran of top foreign ministry officials and envoys in foreign capitals is always a keenly watched event when vital clues to the trajectory of the country's foreign policy and diplomacy could be gleaned. Things said openly are no doubt important, but things unsaid could at times be even more important. Besides, the entire Persian way of saying things obliquely adds to the mystique. All in all, therefore, Khamenei's speech in Tehran on Saturday will be read and reread in chancelleries abroad as far apart as Moscow and Washington or Beijing and Brussels. ([IRNA](#))*

This year's speech assumes particular interest as the Middle East politics is at an inflection point and great issues of war and peace are agitating the mind – and, Iran, of course, happens to be at the epicenter. Khamenei's guidelines contained the following key elements:

- Iran's national interests should be the fundamental principle in foreign policies. The Islamic Revolution's ideological moorings and national interests overlap.
- Iran should network actively with the international community.
- Commitment to the 2015 deal continues; negotiations will also continue with EU+EU3.
- Talks with the US are “useless” so long as American intentions remain hostile and policies are inconsistent. (However, Khamenei didn't slam the door shut and throw away the key, either.)
- Let there be no doubt that Iran will retaliate strongly against any US attempt to physically stop its oil exports, by blocking the flow of all oil from Persian Gulf region to the world market.
- Iranian presence in the region is integral to the country's security interests and regional influence.

Khamenei's speech makes it clear that in the pursuit of national interest, Iran will have to navigate its path on its own steam, as has been the case during its past 4-decade old history. The diplomacy will be supple but purposive (“wise and oriented”).

Khamenei didn't mention the Syrian conflict but hinted that Iran will keep its presence in Syria. The Russian presidential envoy on Syria Alexander Lavrentiev was in Tehran in the weekend to brief the Iranians on Helsinki summit. But he was received only at the level of

Deputy Secretary in Iran's national security council, Amir Saeid Iravani (No. 2 to Ali Shamkhani, who is also concurrently Iran's point person on Syria.) Interestingly, [Iravani criticized Israel's "negative role"](#) in Syria and its attempts to interfere in Iran-Russia relations.

Iran disclosed last week that [Trump made 8 attempts to contact President Hassan Rouhani](#) but Tehran spurned these overtures. The 'red line' for Tehran is the US' espousal of the 'regime change' agenda and renewed ties with the Mujahadeen-e-Khalq (MEK) organization (which used to be in US state department's watch list of terrorist groups.) The present US National Security Advisor John Bolton and [Trump's lawyer Rudy Guiliani have been in MEK's payroll](#).

No doubt, these are early days and Khamenei's speech avoided hard-hitting remarks. It couldn't have escaped Tehran's attention that twice in recent past, White House signaled that it could sense moderation lately in Iran's regional policies. Trump himself mentioned this (twice) during his press conference in Singapore following the summit with Kim Jong Un, while Bolton repeated it after his visit to Moscow two weeks ago in the run-up to the Helsinki summit.

So, could it have been just a coincidence that Iran's official news agency IRNA carried a commentary on Saturday (which was also featured in Tehran Times) analyzing Trump's flexible approach toward the North Korean nuclear issue? The [commentary titled 'US resilience toward North Korea's nuclear program'](#) analyses that Trump "opted to withdraw from his previous hardline stance" once he understood that bullying and pressure tactic wouldn't work with Pyongyang.

The commentary concludes that the US cannot hope to extract "constructive results" by imposing sanctions against North Korea "or any other countries" and such pressure tactic is "not going to help solve critical issues." What it didn't say, but seemed to imply is that Trump is quite capable of pragmatism to engage adversaries in result-oriented negotiations. Curiously, the commentary appeared on the day Khamenei was slated to address Iran's top diplomats.

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