



Poland-Iran relations during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani: An analysis of selected external determinants

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of external determinants on Poland-Iran political relations during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani between 2013-2021. The analysis is based on a set of external conditions that determine their bilateral relations. These include the nuclear agreement concluded with Iran in 2015, the policy of the United States with particular emphasis on the extended sanctions imposed on Iran, the European Union's policy toward Iran, as well as Iran's rivalry with some states of the Middle East region. The author has applied qualitative content analysis as the main research technique. The main hypothesis is as follows: external factors determine Polish foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran due to Poland's membership in the UN, EU and NATO, as well as economic ties with the Arab states in the Persian Gulf and close relations with the USA.

Keywords

Iran, Poland, Rouhani, External determinants, Foreign policy

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Introduction

Poland has a special diplomatic relationship with Iran, known as Persia until the 1930s, dating back to the fifteenth century. A cursory analysis of historical ties shows that Poland-Iran relations remained good or very good regardless of internal and external conditions. However, this was mainly due to the significant geographic remoteness, and thus the lack of major discrepancies and issues. Yet this factor has ceased to be of key importance in the era of globalization and the growing interdependence of all countries in the world, regardless of their distances and various political and social differences.

The main aim of this article is to analyze the impact of external determinants on Poland-Iran political relations during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani between 2013-2021. The work will define a set of external conditions that determine the shape of Poland-Iran relations and their impact on them. These include (1) the nuclear agreement concluded with Iran in 2015, (2) the policy of the United States with particular emphasis on the extended sanctions imposed on Iran, (3) the European Union's policy towards Iran, as well as (4) Iran's rivalry with some countries of the Middle East region, especially with those who maintain close and good relations with Poland, such as, for example, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The end of the second and last term of the Rouhani presidency allows us to analyze the role of the above-mentioned variables in the bilateral relations between Poland and Iran.

The author has applied qualitative content analysis as the main research technique. The main sources are official documents, selected monographs, academic articles, and analytical reports.

Theoretical background: determinants of foreign policy

Foreign policy is a unique state policy. As in the case of other policies, its main goals are determined by internal political processes and the clash of different concepts and visions, but at the same time these goals relate to the external environment of the state. Thus, it can be said that it is a policy formulated inside the state, but implemented outside its borders. Of course, such a statement is only a simplification. In fact, it is a very complex and dynamic process. The foreign policy of states is shaped by a number of internal and external determinants (Schmidt, 2017; Souva, 2005). These conditions can be further divided into subjective ones, i.e. those that are influenced by a given state, and objective ones, i.e. those that do not depend on it. In this context, it should be noted that external conditions are usually objective in nature and are the result of various events and processes that take place in the international environment. In this case, the countries of medium and low role do not have much influence on the development of the situation, and their decisions and maneuver possibilities are largely limited, for example, by global policies of the great powers. Both Poland and Iran are middle-class countries. They play significant roles in their regions, but have almost no influence on processes of global importance due to objective constraints.

The role of external determinants in foreign policy making is significant. Other nation's foreign policy and actions affect a state actor which formulates its own foreign policy (DeHaven, 1991: 91). Thus, the goals and activities undertaken in this area are the result of the influence of the external environment on a set of internal determinants such

as location, political establishment, society, culture, linkages, and economic potential. The set of external determinants, in turn, can include power structure, international organizations, reactions of other states, world public opinion, alliances and international treaties (Gimba, Ibrahim, 2018: 126-128).

This article is an attempt to determine the impact of selected external determinants on bilateral relations between Iran and Poland. These determinants are international organizations, reactions of other state actors, and alliances. Global actors such as the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and selected regional actors are included. The hypothesis is as follows: external factors determine Polish foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran due to Poland's membership in the UN, EU and NATO, as well as economic ties with the Arab states in the Persian Gulf and close allied relations with the USA. Based on the analysis of empirical factors, can the above hypothesis be confirmed or denied?

Poland-Iran relations: A brief overview

The beginning of Poland-Iran relations dates back to the 16th century, when the then king of Poland, Stefan Batory, sought to form an alliance with Persia against the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, the alliance was never concluded, but in the following centuries, both countries had a lot in common, including trade relations. However, the formal establishment of diplomatic relations took place only after World War I when Poland regained independence. Persia was one of the first countries to formally recognize the Polish state. In 1927, both parties signed the Treaty of Friendship between the Republic of Poland and the Persian Empire. This document was ratified a year later (*Ustawa*, 1929). The symbol of very good relations was the help and shelter that the Iranian authorities offered to thousands of Polish refugees, especially orphans, released from camps on the territory of the Soviet Union during World War II (Surdykowska, 2014).

In the following years, Iran and Poland had very good relations regardless of historical circumstances, especially during the Cold War rivalry. The Polish People's Republic, dependent on the Soviet Union, maintained close relations with the Imperial State of Iran, despite its close ties with the United States. Even after Iran's revolution and its transformation into a theocratic state, the situation did not change (Maj, 2021). The Polish authorities, both during and after the Cold War, maintained friendly relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The situation did not change even when Poland started negotiating NATO membership and was then admitted to this organization in 1999. Diplomatic relations did not deteriorate even during the tensions over the development of the Iranian nuclear program at the beginning of the 21st century. They also remained good after the US left the JCPOA in 2018, despite Poland's alliance and close cooperation with the Americans in the field of security and defense. During this period, at least with regard to the pursued foreign policy, President Hassan Rouhani was the main Iranian politician exposed in external relations.

In 2019, during his meeting with a new Polish ambassador to Tehran, President Rouhani declared as follows: "Iran has always shown its respect towards the people of Poland at critical junctures in history. The two nations have had close and amicable relations with each other for centuries and we are willing to develop these ties in all fields" (President

Rouhani, 2019). Polish Ambassador Maciej Falkowski hailed “Iran’s effective role in establishing peace and security in the region and called for closer cooperation with Tehran and the international community in this regard” (President Rouhani, 2019). This does not mean, of course, that the Polish authorities are uncritical about various activities undertaken by Iran in the region, but at the same time they never criticize the Iranian authorities openly and as strongly as, for example, the USA or some EU countries.

Thus, such a cursory analysis of mutual relations shows that they remained good regardless of changes in internal and external determinants, what is extremely rare in contemporary international relations. Can a similar regularity be noticed today, in the post-Cold War period? Does Poland, a NATO member state and a close ally of the United States, still maintain good relations with the Islamic People’s Republic, a country defined as the American enemy not only in the Middle East region?

In order to determine the impact of external factors on the current state of Poland-Iran relations, it is worth analyzing a set of external determinants that take into account negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program and compliance with the JCPOA agreement, the U.S. policy towards Iran, especially the so-called extended sanctions; the European Union’s attitude towards Iran, and the Middle Eastern rivalry, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as between Iran and Israel.

The article is dedicated to political relations. However, for a complete picture of the situation, it is worth mentioning that good diplomatic relations do not go hand in hand with economic cooperation. And in this case, the importance of external conditions is much greater and noticeable than in the case of political relations. After 2018, both due to the existing extended sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, trade between Poland and Iran has become minimal. According to official data published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, the value of trade exchange was about 218 million euros in 2018. For comparison, in 2019, this value dropped to 39 million euros. As a consequence, the ratio of the share of trade between Iran and Poland amounted to only 0,02 % of total Polish exports and 0,01 % of total imports (Iran, 2021). It is difficult to imagine any improvement in this state of affairs without a clear political impulse.

External determinant 1: The nuclear agreement

Poland did not participate directly in the negotiations of the Iranian nuclear program, but was indirectly represented at them thanks to the participation of the European Union. The signing of the JCPOA in 2015 was very well received in Warsaw. Moreover, the Polish authorities had high hopes for the lifting of economic sanctions imposed by the EU, as it opened the way for Polish entrepreneurs to invest and conclude commercial contracts with companies in Iran and allowed the country to be considered as another oil supplier. It was particularly important from the point of view of energy security and efforts to diversify the sources of this raw material. Each action of this type made it possible to become more independent from oil supplies from the Russian Federation. Until 2018, economic cooperation with Iran was possible for Poland. However, the situation changed dramatically with the suspension of extended sanctions by the US administration. As a result, Polish companies, fearing being blacklisted in the US, withdrew from contracts

and from the implementation of orders placed by Iranian recipients. An important factor was also the allied loyalty to the USA, which became even more important from the point of view of Poland's security after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

At the same time, however, it can be emphasized that, like other EU countries, Poland supported the need for the continued compliance of the parties to the JCPOA deal with the provisions contained therein. Even when in response to the American withdrawal from the treaty, Iran began to unilaterally withdraw from compliance with individual provisions, this fact did not affect the diplomatic relations between Poland and Iran. The Polish authorities consistently support the maintenance of the nuclear deal, but at the same time have never taken any action that could be perceived as an attempt to put pressure on Tehran. Currently, after Joe Biden was elected president of the United States, the situation may improve, and Poland may benefit from this change, as it did after 2016. In 2021, Poland supports the negotiation process for the US's return to the JCPOA agreement and for Iran to fully comply with its provisions again. During the bilateral meeting with Javad Zarif in June 2021, the Polish minister of foreign affairs declared as follows: "We are convinced that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which is a nuclear agreement with Iran, can have a positive impact on developments in the Middle East. It is a core element of the global non-proliferation architecture and a point of reference in a debate on this issue" (Minister Zbigniew Rau, 2021). Javad Zarif, in turn, "referred to the long-standing relations between the two countries of Iran and Poland and emphasized the continuation of fully-fledged economic, cultural and political relations between the two countries" (Zarif meets, 2021).

However, the state of diplomatic relations between Poland and Iran will not depend on the outcome of the talks in Vienna. The change can only be noticeable in trade if the US agrees to lift the sanctions.

In the case of the Iranian nuclear program and international negotiations, this external determinant does not affect the state of political relations between Iran and Poland. Polish authorities consistently support the maintenance of the provisions and full implementation of the 2015 deal.

External determinant 2: The U.S. policy toward Iran

One might assume that since the USA does not maintain diplomatic relations with Iran and there are sharp tensions in relations between these countries from time to time, their allies cannot maintain good relations with both the USA and Iran. Meanwhile, many countries manage to pursue such a policy. One of them is Poland.

One of the events that put the good relations of Poland and Iran to a serious test was the Middle East summit organized in Warsaw in February 2019. The event, which is often referred to as the US-led Middle East conference in Warsaw, took place without the invitation of the Iranian delegation, although it would certainly have been advisable given the role and influence the country has in the region. As a result, the most important problems, conflicts and threats in the Middle East were analyzed by representatives of the countries favoring the then administration of President Donald Trump. Already during the conference, it became clear that many of the statements were overtly anti-Iranian, which led analysts and observers to describe the real agenda of the meeting as an attempt

to contain the growing Iranian influence in the region (Tibon, 2019; US backtracks, 2019). This was not the intention of the Polish authorities, but was the result of the actions of American diplomacy, the main goal of which was to bring about diplomatic rapprochement between the State of Israel and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. This peculiar alliance was intended to block Iran's growing influence and to be a response to proxy conflicts between primarily Iran and Israel, and Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, despite the lack of such anti-Iranian actions and intentions on the part of Polish diplomacy, the very fact of allowing the organization of the summit on Polish territory was very badly received by the Iranian authorities and led to a brief tension. One of its signs was the temporary suspension of issuing visas to Polish citizens by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran *zawiesza*, 2019).

Despite Poland's close cooperation and alliance with the United States, the Polish authorities still maintain close diplomatic relations with Tehran. Proof of this was the bilateral meeting of the head of Polish diplomacy Zbigniew Rau with Javad Zarif during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Turkey in June 2021 (Minister Zbigniew Rau, 2021). The uncertainty as to whether the United States will return to the nuclear deal and lift the extended sanctions does not stop the Polish authorities from developing diplomatic contacts with Iran. It can even be said that, unlike in 2015, Poland wants to be better prepared for the possible lifting of sanctions and to facilitate Polish companies in establishing trade contacts with Iranian contractors, as well as investing in Iran. Critical voices on the US return to the treaty with Iran are not lacking in the Democratic Party itself and in the closest circle of President Joe Biden (Desiderio, 2021), yet the Polish government is already taking action after several years of break, and its representatives are taking part in high-level meetings. Such a policy is certainly favored by the rapprochement between Poland and selected states of the Black Sea basin, such as Turkey, Ukraine and Romania. All these states have many issues and interests in common, including a skeptical or even critical assessment of the activities undertaken by the Russian Federation on the international arena. Including Iran in this process may become more and more important for Americans in the context of the geopolitical rivalry with Russia over time. For this reason, American diplomacy does not refer to closer meetings between Polish and Iranian diplomats because, at least for now, it does not perceive them as a threat. On the contrary, attracting major players such as Turkey and Iran may, over time, be a decisive factor in the global rivalry between the US and the People's Republic of China or the Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, the Polish authorities give the highest priority to relations with the Americans, and if they had to choose which side to support, they would certainly choose the US, not Iran. For this reason, further progress in the US-Iran negotiations or the lack of it will affect the possibilities of Polish diplomacy to act in relation to Iranians.

External determinant 3: The EU's attitude toward Iran

Poland takes advantage of the possibility of undertaking various diplomatic activities within the European Union, especially in areas where it does not want to become involved as a nation state. This was the case, for example, after the restoration of sanctions extended by the United States in 2018. Polish enterprises, like many other European

concerns, lost the most on the decision of the Donald Trump administration. However, Polish diplomacy, at least directly, did not try to undertake any diplomatic actions that could expose it to open conflict with the American side. Cooperation with the United States has become particularly important for Poland after 2014 due to the growing threat posed by the Russian Federation. At the same time, Poland was monitoring the progress of works undertaken by some other EU member states, including in particular France and Germany, in order to introduce a mechanism that would allow the US to bypass the sanctions and allow the continuation of trade with Iran.

When the introduction of the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges, INSTEX, was announced in 2019, the news was seen in many EU countries as an incentive to re-establish economic relations with Iran. This instrument is a European special-purpose vehicle (SPV) established to facilitate non-USD and non-SWIFT transactions with Iran to avoid breaking the U.S. sanctions (Instex, 2021). Thanks to this solution, the European enterprises would operate under the EU banner and would not be exposed to a firm response from the US. Some of the member states joined INSTEX, but Poland did not make such a decision. The main reason was the apprehension that if Polish companies were blacklisted in the United States, they would not count on an effective intervention from the EU. Poland certainly has much more to lose by risking tensions in diplomatic relations with the US and deciding to try to support the circumvention of US sanctions on Iran. The aforementioned very low level of trade exchange and the low prospects of increasing it thanks to participation in INSTEX, would make such attempts by Poland unjustified and irrational. At the same time, it should be pointed out that the very introduction of this mechanism turned out to be a very ineffective project. For the time being, it serves only humanitarian purposes.

It can therefore be stated again that the external factor having a real impact on Poland's policy towards Iran is the fear of a reaction from the United States. This is also the case with regard to the official EU policy towards Iran. Although the EU strongly criticized the US waiver of compliance with the provisions of the JCPOA agreement and took steps to circumvent US sanctions, Poland was not directly involved in such activities. It adopted the attitude of a passive observer, while at the same time assigning primacy to transatlantic relations, which can be considered justified and rational, taking into account the primacy of issues related to Poland's national security. Thus, the Polish authorities support the official position adopted by individual institutions of the European Union, but at the same time try not to initiate the development of common positions.

External determinant 4: The Middle Eastern rivalry

Poland is not involved in the rivalry of individual countries in the Middle East region. On the contrary, it tries to maintain the best possible relations with all states or parties to regional conflicts. For this reason, it has, for example, very good relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The same is true for Palestine and Israel. This does not mean, however, that the Polish authorities always manage to avoid being caught up in Middle Eastern tensions.

The aforementioned organization of the Middle East Summit in Warsaw 2019 could be interpreted as Poland's unequivocal support for Iran's main rivals in the region, i.e., Israel

and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, however, it should be emphasized that Poland does not engage in disputes and conflicts in the Middle East region in such a way as to support one side against the other. Since the end of the Cold War, Polish diplomacy has been trying to remain a rather impartial observer. This is particularly evident in the Middle East conflict, in which Poland maintains close and good relations with both Israel and Palestine. The same is true of Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry. Both these countries cooperate with the Polish side. In practice, the only example of a regional conflict in which the Polish authorities have taken a firm stance and clearly support one of the parties is support for the Syrian opposition and criticism of the actions taken by President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian government. However, also in this case, the official position of Poland is much more balanced than that of some other EU countries, for example France.

According to the current Polish strategy of foreign policy, “Political problems in the Middle East and Africa – brought about by economic stagnation, demographic shifts, and climate change – will doubtless gain strength over time. As such, they will increasingly sap the strength of European states and confront the continent with tough challenges. Poland is not immune to such developments: its citizens have fallen victim to multiple acts of terror and our country, in keeping with the spirit of allied solidarity, participates in NATO and EU operations in the Mediterranean. But we must bear in mind that the diverse challenges originating from the South and from the East each require a tailored response” (Polish foreign policy strategy, 2017). Thus, the declaration of the Polish government is clear. The authorities of the Middle East countries, including Iran, can count on cooperation with Poland, especially in the context of the challenges of the migration policy, the effects of climate change and conflicts in the region. At the same time, however, the Polish authorities do not support either side in ongoing regional rivalries or armed conflicts. The only exception is the war in Syria, in which the position of Poland is consistent with the position of the European Union. Polish authorities are very critical of President Bashar Assad and support the search for a peace agreement under the so-called Geneva process. This distinguishes Poland from Iran, which supports both the Assad regime and the so-called Astana peace process (Astana trio ready, 2021). However, it is worth noting that the criticism of Assad did not and still does not translate into any criticism of Iran’s military involvement in the Syrian conflict by the Polish authorities.

Conclusion

The above analysis indicates that the three out of four selected external determinants do not have a decisive impact on bilateral relations between Iran and Poland. Such a clear influence of the external factor on the official position and actions taken by Poland towards Iran is visible only in the case of the Polish position with regard to the actions taken by the United States.

In this context, the primacy of this determinant is noticeable even in the case of official EU policy. Poland officially supports the EU’s actions towards Iran, but at the same time acts very cautiously and only to the extent that it does not expose it to a confrontation with the US. At the same time, however, it can be noticed that despite such close relations and cooperation between the US and Poland, Iran maintains friendly political relations with Poland. The Iranian side certainly understands the difficult geopolitical position of Poland

and the primacy of security policy. The military cooperation between Poland and the US is not directed in any way against Iran, but is a response to a potential threat to national security posed by the Russian Federation. This alliance gained special importance after 2014 when the Russians violated the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Political relations between Poland and Iran are independent even of those events that, in the case of other countries, could lead to tensions or even a reduction in the level of diplomatic cooperation. One example of this was the relatively soft response of Tehran to the organization of the 2019 Middle East Summit in Warsaw. One of the reasons for this was the centuries-old and friendly cooperation. Regardless of the geopolitical circumstances and the current international situation, the authorities of both countries do not perceive themselves as a potential threat.

Poland has its own policy towards Iran and maintains diplomatic relations with it. The best example is the recent bilateral meeting of Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau with his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum in June 2021. For Poland, this cooperation is important especially because of its potential anti-Russian character in the future. The rapprochement of the US and Iran's positions with regard to the JCPOA agreement and the lifting of sanctions will help to pull Tehran away from Russian influence. Together with the Black Sea countries such as Ukraine, Romania and Turkey, Poland and Iran could create a strong system that would block Russia's expansion in this part of the world. If such a scenario turned out to be realistic, it is difficult to assume that it would not receive support from the USA as well. Nevertheless, in this case a lot will depend on the progress of the US-Iran negotiations. This additionally confirms the importance of this external determinant in the case of diplomatic relations between Poland and Iran.

All in all, despite Poland's strong foreign policy ties with NATO and the EU, and very close relations with the United States, the Polish authorities have successfully maintained friendly relations with Iran. Similarly, the Iranian authorities, despite Poland's strong anchoring in Euro-Atlantic structures, do not treat it as a potential enemy. It can even be noted that they apply a different measure to Poland. On this basis, it can be concluded that the hypothesis formulated in the theoretical part of this article has been denied.

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