

Same Goal, Different Ways: Hegemonic Efforts of Regional Powers Brazil, India and Iran*

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Abstract: *In a contemporary multipolar (or uni-multipolar) world, powerful states in particular regions attempt to take a leading role in the region and sometimes to become a great world power. This is also the case of Brazil, India and Iran — three powerful states attempting to achieve the status of regional hegemony in particular sub-systems (South America, South Asia and the Middle East). Although these powers have some common features, according to which they can be distinguished from other (weaker) states in the region, they differ in their power capabilities, their strategies of gaining more power and of becoming a regional hegemon. These strategies do not only depend on the particular state and its capabilities, but also on the region which a state is part of, and on relations with other countries.*

Keywords: *regional power, regional hegemony, great power, Brazil, India, Iran*

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Introduction

The following text deals with the topic of the hegemonic efforts of three regional powers, namely Brazil, India and Iran. The concept of regional powers has been evolving notably since the end of the Cold-War period that means primarily in the context of contemporary polarity of the world order. Nowadays, when the world is no longer divided between two superpowers and regional affairs are not determined by the will of the United States or the Soviet Union, powerful states in particular regions (generally from the so-called South) attempt to take a leading role in the region and sometimes some of them even have ambitions to become a world power.

This article discusses three particular powers — Brazil, India and Iran — and their ways of gaining more power capabilities compared with their regional neighbours in South America, South Asia and the Middle East respectively. In each region there are more than one powerful state, except for the three states mentioned above, for example Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, Argentina, Mexico, etc. But just one of these states can be a regional *hegemon* in a particular sub-system.

Regional powers have some common features according to which they can be distinguished from other states in the region. But even though Iran, India and Brazil are large powerful states with large populations, comparing all aspects of power of these states, significant differences can be observed. The way of becoming a regional hegemon is not the same in every case — it depends on various economic, political, cultural and geographical factors. Briefly speaking, these powers use different strategies of becoming a regional hegemon. The strategies do not only depend on the particular state and its capabilities, but also on the region which it is part of and on its relations with other states.

Many states all over the world call themselves or are referred to as regional powers. The case studies of Brazil, India and Iran have been chosen for several reasons — they are situated in different regions. In addition, there exists a broad consensus on the international status as a regional power in case of Brazil and India. On the contrary, Iran has got ambitions to become a power hegemon in the Middle Eastern region; however, it is disputable if Iran is really as powerful as regional leaders should be. And what is more — it lacks a recognition of its position in the power hierarchy of the international system on the part of other regional powers and world great powers, which is probably due to more (especially political) reasons than only the problem of insufficient power capabilities.

This contribution intends to demonstrate how strategies and efforts of these three states to reach a hegemonic power status (or to strengthen their relative power in particular regions) differ. They vary according to the regions where they are situated, the relations with near-by countries, their relative power and prevailing power capabilities.

Brazil

Regional Power at First Sight

In comparison to the rest of the South American region, Brazil is obviously eligible to become one of the most influential states on the international scene. As the largest, most populated and economically powerful country in South America with large natural resources, extensive areas of fertile agricultural lands and one of the largest economies in the world, Brazil has always been seen achieving a great-power status as its natural foreign-policy objective. In this context, Alden and Vieira (2005: 1084) speak about a “sense of distinctiveness from the rest of the region.”

The idea of Brazil as a great power has been slowly developing since the first half of the 20th century when the country was economically dependent on the United States. But rise to world power required breaking these ties of dependence. Subsequent economic development forced later military governments (since the 1970s) to think over “the concept of greatness” that represented not only Brazilian national interests and foreign-policy priority, but has been upgraded to the national purpose (Bandeira 2006: 20). Former Brazilian president Luiz Inacio “Lula da Silva (2002–2010) built on previous efforts of its predecessors and openly claimed a leadership position for Brazil not only in South American region, but also in the rest of the world” (Merco-Press 2009).

Although Brazil has always been aware of its prominent position in South America, it never aspired to act as an oppressive regional hegemon. On the contrary, it sought to coexist peacefully with other states in the region (Bandeira 2006: 20–21). Transformation of this approach came with Lula da Silva who (more explicitly than former presidents) asserted Brazil’s hegemonic ambitions in the region. In the past, Brazil’s crucial foreign-policy strategy regarding its closest surroundings was to secure its borders and maintain stable relations with its neighbours, especially within the context of a longstanding geopolitical rivalry with Argentina that has been considered as another candidate for the regional-power status in the South America (Valladão 2006). In the late 1980s Brazil and Argentina settled disputes between them, which created an opportunity for closer economic cooperation within the region. What is even more important, their mutual reconciliation was followed by the formation of *the Southern Common Market* (or *Mercosur*) in 1991. Cooperation within regional organizations notably facilitates the long-standing goal of Brazilian government — to develop peaceful or even friendly relations with neighbouring states and to improve general intraregional ties (Alden and Vieira 2005: 1084).

Regional Integration and Multilateralism

Main Brazil's regional-policy objectives include: first, creating regional (South American) cooperation institutions; second, closer economic ties with neighbouring countries; and third, support for and cooperation with states that — just like Brazil — prefer multilateralism in international relations and multipolar world system, both aimed at balancing and enhancing their bargaining position towards the United States (Vaz 2009: 21).

The aim of building up regional organizations and supporting broader economic cooperation with neighbours relate to several governments' intentions. For such an economically strong country as Brazil, it is highly important to stabilize both the political and security situation in its nearest surroundings in order to secure progressive economic growth (Vaz 2009: 21). The opportunity to mutually cooperate and negotiate at the multilateral level consolidates relations between states and thereby stabilizes the political and socio-economic environment in the region. Currently, there is a strong interdependence between Brazil and its neighbours in such domains as the economy, trade, infrastructure, and also security cooperation (mainly with regard to transnational organized crime) (Valladão 2006).

This interdependence forced Brazil to strive for managing and strengthening its relations with neighbouring states within economic regional integration institutions, particularly Mercosur¹ and UNASUR. Together with associate members², Mercosur covers almost the whole of South America. In 2008, Brazil initiated creation of *the Union of South American Nations* (UNASUR)³ that integrates Mercosur with *the Andean Community of Nations*⁴, Guyana and Suriname with the aim of formation of a South American free trade zone.⁵

Brazil dominates integration within Mercosur that plays an important role in Brazil's regional policy. As the biggest South American economy, Brazil benefits from Mercosur the most from all member states because the gains from this economic integration are distributed unequally (Bandeira 2006: 20–21). This can be one of the reasons why Brazil's foreign-policy number one priority has been to integrate the whole of South America under Brazilian leadership (Valladão 2006). This goal was reached, at least formally, with the constitution of UNASUR. This success in return should both strengthen Brazil's political and economic influence in the region and provide an access to new foreign markets that have become a vital necessity for the Brazilian economy. Because good relations with South American nations constitute a high-priority foreign-policy topic, Brazil seeks to improve the relations with other states not only on a multilateral basis, but also by bilateral cooperation. This effort aims to enlarge the diversity of its political allies and economic ties in order to expand its own zone of influence and to strengthen its bargaining position (Vaz 2009: 20).

The third Brazilian foreign policy objective relating to the South American region refers to a, we can say typical, behaviour of regional powers towards superpower(s).

Regionally powerful nations often define their foreign policies against the strongest and the most influential states in the world, the same way as Brazil has against the United States. On one hand, Brazil's power position benefits from economic integration with smaller South American economies, but, on the other hand, it opposes the wider integration of the whole western hemisphere, because it is afraid of weakening its position due to the larger relative power of the United States. Brazil's economic and political interests are not consistent with the US proposal of creating a *Free Trade Area of the Americas* (FTAA), which would serve US national interests in the first place. In addition, the trade among Mercosur members grew much faster than trade between them and third parties, including the USA (Bandeira 2006: 21).⁶ For these reasons, negotiations over the FTAA deadlocked in the mid-1990s. Lula da Silva (cited in Bandeira 2006: 24) stated that the FTAA "isn't really a free-trade pact. Rather, it's a policy of annexation of Latin America by the United States." Lula's opinion turned out to represent a general view of the Brazilian public. That is why Brazil intends to reinforce a bargaining position of the whole region confronted with the United States by means of strengthening relations between all South American nations.

To make it clear, Brazil has got a correct relation with the USA that is based on mutual respect and perhaps some shared values, as well as economic and political cooperation. But, although Lula da Silva sought a friendly relationship with Washington — according to Alden and Vieira (2005: 1084) as an approach "to overcome its relative weakness within the international system" — there still exist many significant differences between their national interests and foreign-policy goals. Especially Brazil's ambitions to become the next great power in the world system influences the US perception of Brazil and has shaped their mutual relationship for several decades. The main question is whether the United States actually wants to see such a fast-growing power in its vicinity (Bandeira 2006: 21).

Great Power Ambitions

One of Brazil's foreign-policy priorities, as mentioned above, is developing better relations with countries opposing unilateralism and dominance of by the few most powerful (Western) states in the international system. Strengthening economic and political ties with Southern nations is connected with Brazil's great-power ambitions. The so-called South-South cooperation, e.g., within IBSA forum or BRICS, together with demanding a seat as a permanent member at the UN Security Council, constitute the most visible current signs of this aspiration. Apart from this, Brazil has been gradually developing its power capabilities and creating its image as an independent international actor with the view of becoming a great power since the 1960s.

Brazil, as one of the largest economies in the world, plays a significance role in global economics. The ruling elite envisions Brazil as one of the most important ac-

tors at the global level. As Vaz (2009: 20) puts it: “Brazil is a global trader aspiring to become an independent global actor able to exert meaningful influence on the international political debate and decision-making processes.” It intends to influence primarily economic issues but also to become a part of the global governance structure. As a great power, Brazil would be able to secure suitable international conditions for outstanding economic growth, e.g., to transform the structure of the international economic system, as well as for strengthening its political position among other powerful “core” states that take a decision on many international issues.

And this very possibility to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council, moreover with veto privileges, would represent an eligible opportunity to achieve all these objectives. The permanent seat on the UN Security Council would legitimise Brazil’s hegemonic position in the region and its great-power status, which, in addition, would be recognized by other countries in the world, including the most powerful ones. Brazil, the same way as most emerging regional (Southern) powers, seeks to change the current structure of power distribution in the international system, which only few developed Western (or Northern) and most wealthy states benefit from (Bandeira 2006: 21). That is why these most powerful states try to maintain the *status quo* in international relations at the expense of not so powerful states, such as Brazil. Simply said, the contemporary structure of economic and power system is *advantageous* to them.

This is also the reason why it will not be so easy for Brazil to obtain a seat on the UN Security Council — all current permanent members have already been resisting its enlargement, which would obviously causes significant decline in their own power in the global politics. Especially the USA may not be ready to accept Brazil — increasingly powerful and autonomous nation in its neighbourhood — as an equal partner. As Alden and Vieira (2005: 1085) more than aptly note: “Brazil has skilfully employed international law to counter-balance the power politics of core states, all the while actively seeking to be accepted into this special group.”

Regional powers from various (Southern) regions create international organizations in order to mutually strengthen their positions at the global political scene against the United States and other influential Western states. Therefore, in accordance to the classical motto “strength in unity,” the IBSA forum (India, Brazil and South Africa) serves Brazil and also India as a platform for mutual support in their efforts to be the next two permanent members on the UN Security Council. A similar case is BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)⁷ — the group of large and dynamic economies that are expected to become significant players in global economics (Goldman Sachs 2003: 3). At the present time, regional powers’ proactive policy in the international system is increasingly evident and with reference to the general estimation of current global politics, powerful states from the South will be more influential.

First Among Equals

South American countries largely succeeded in overcoming their common history marked by conflicts, wars and mistrust, and therefore, the new millennium is characterized by pursuit of regional integration which makes common interests possible. This, in return, facilitates prevention of conflicts. Thanks to these conditions, military power capabilities do not constitute the basis of Brazil's regional-policy strategy. Although Brazil possesses significant military power, additional armament or nuclear weapons production is not, due to improving intraregional relations, the number one priority.

On the contrary, the main foreign-policy strategy for strengthening Brazil's political and economic power, and thus improving its diplomatic manoeuvrability and bargaining position in the region, has been constituted by development of political and economic cooperation with neighbouring states and especially by the deepening of regional integration. Improving relations with other states within regional organizations seems to be the most suitable and stable way of conflict prevention and thus stabilizing the South American region in order to ensure steady economic growth. Economic power capabilities and resulting political strength constitute the basis for Brazil's current hegemonic position in the South American region and of its soon-to-be great-power status.

In the end, it is necessary to mention that on one hand, Brazil "is clearly taking responsibility to represent the main factor of stability in South America (...) with an intention of maintaining a democratic order" and economic development in the region (Valladão 2006). On the other hand, neighbouring countries follow with doubts Brazil's hegemonic ambitions.⁸ Their growing cautiousness concerning Brazil's regional policy can in the future become an obstacle in achieving Brazil's main foreign-policy goals because Brazil's main instrument of strengthening its power within the scope of the region has been cooperation with its neighbours.

India

Natural Hegemon

India is a large country with significant economic and military potential that occupies a pre-eminent position in the South Asia⁹ and seeks to become a great power. According to Bratersky and Lunyov (1990: 927, 936), India became a regional power in the South Asia in the 1970s and during the next decade, it subsequently developed into a naval power in the Indian Ocean. But Indian elite envision even a more significant role for its country — India, due to its size, military power and economic development should become one of the most important actors in the international system. According to a general estimate, in the following decades or even years, India

will belong to the largest economies in the entire world (Goldman Sachs 2003: 3). But even though practically no one doubts India's hegemonic position in South Asia and its important counterbalancing role in the Asian-Pacific power rivalry, Pant (2007: 57) assumes that India needs more time and more power capabilities to join the elite group of great powers.

South Asian Security Dilemma

India represents the most developed and stable nation in the South Asia, both in economic and political terms, but its nearest surroundings can be best described by instability and insecurity. These, in return, negatively influence the political and security situation in India and in consequence also its economic development. Moreover, cooperation in security issues among South Asian states has been on a low level. Lack of trust and reliance among them leaves no space for reducing mistrust and improving mutual relations. As Bava (2009: 17) concisely points out: "South Asian countries do not accept the 'no war' norm between themselves, which further hinders regional cooperation."

The regional security agenda is formed by the conflict relationship between India and Pakistan. Several political and also armed conflicts took place between them since 1947. The fact that both states are nuclear powers further complicates the security situation in the region. Besides their mutual antagonism, worsening post-conflict conditions in Afghanistan and their destabilizing effects on Pakistan also threaten India. Relations with smaller states in the region are better or even very close, e.g., Bhutan depends on India as its protector in security matters (Bava 2009: 18).

Since the South Asian region constitutes only one part of the whole Asia, its security is necessarily linked to neighbouring sub-systems within the continent. Especially China, as a more powerful state with its ambitions to further expand its power capabilities, is taking advantage of South Asian institutional weakness and poses a potential threat to India. Although both states are presently trade partners and cooperate within BRICS, their growing economic and military power evokes a clash of their strategic interests and influences in Central and South-eastern Asia and especially in the Indian Ocean (Burgess 2004: 32; Pant 2007: 59). India's ambition to become a permanent member in the UN Security Council is in contradiction to China's interest to maintain the power *status quo* within the UN's most important body. Bava (2009: 17) assumes that "China is looking to enhance its presence and be an active player in South Asia by contesting Indian leadership or offering an alternative to it."

The security dilemma in the region further hinders cooperation within the region. Even economic cooperation, e.g., within *the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation* (SAARC), has not been very successful. This is, among others reasons,

due to its heterogeneous membership — the SAARC unifies all South Asian states, including mutual adversaries. This fact restrains further cooperation at the multilateral level. Not to mention that Pakistan¹⁰, Bangladesh, and Nepal are China's allies in the South Asian region (Scott 2009: 113). Except for SAARC, India also plays an important role within *the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation* (BIMSTEC), *the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation* (IOR-ARC), *the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation* (MGC) and *the ASEAN Regional Forum*. But none of these international institutions is solely of South Asian origin — they also include countries from other Asian regions, Africa, Europe, etc. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that India would use these multilateral platforms for improving relations with its immediate neighbours from the South Asia (not to mention that not all South Asian countries are members of these organizations). Rather, Indian authorities would focus on the strengthening of economic and political ties with more developed and powerful states.

In spite of India's efforts to play a unifying role in the region and to increase its credibility among neighbouring states, South Asia still suffers from the lack of deeper regional integration. On the other hand, the more economically powerful India will be, the more it will have to meet expectations associated with its role as a provider of regional public goods and as a stabilizer of the regional political and security environments (Bava 2009: 18).

Securing Interests in an “Extended Neighbourhood”

India's main foreign-policy interests include securing its territorial integrity, stable economic growth (necessary for poverty reduction in Indian society), and achieving a prominent position not only in the region, but also in international politics (Bratersky and Lunyov 1990: 934). The first aim is directly linked to bad historical experiences in relation to Pakistan, the general conflict potential of South Asia and expansionist ambitions of their Chinese neighbour. For economic development, a secure neighbourhood is the fundamental prerequisite. But besides regional security instability, the South Asian region as India's nearest surroundings (and therefore supposed natural trade partners) in reality provide India and its economic ambitions only insignificant business opportunities (Scott 2009: 108). Except for India itself, South Asian states are small and weak economies. That is why New Delhi focuses much more on larger markets and on strengthening economic ties with more developed, and hence more “promising” countries outside the region.

Besides the most important economic interactions, many serious security concerns also go beyond the South Asian region. That is why the Indian government in recent years developed a vision of the so-called extended neighbourhood, stretching from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea (Scott 2009: 108). Because economic

growth is a driver for Indian foreign policy, it is mostly economic factors that affect government's stance toward other regions in Asia, as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh admits (Press Information Bureau 2005).

Trade volume between India and its extended neighbourhood is much higher than within South Asia and has been growing constantly. An increase in trade volume is evident above all with East Asia, China, South East Asian states (ASEAN) and the Middle East (mainly Iran, Saudi Arabia and the small monarchies in the Persian Gulf). By contrast, trade with South Asian countries is at a very low level¹¹ (Scott 2009: 109). India's active policy in the East and Southeast Asia originates in its "Look East" foreign-policy concept (1991). This concept implied wider economic cooperation with ASEAN and East Asian countries both on a bilateral level and within international institutions (BIMSTEC, MGC, ASEAN Regional Forum) and resulted in a growth of trade with them (Pant 2007: 66–67).

Indian strategic interests outside South Asia have generated the need to possess sufficient defence capabilities in order to protect these (mainly economic and security) interests. Therefore New Delhi seeks security and stability also in its extended neighbourhood, including the Indian Ocean (Scott 2009: 112–113). Recently, India strengthened political ties with Japan. Strategic partnership between these economic powers may constitute major a barrier to China's power ambitions throughout the Asian continent. Nevertheless, Pant (2007: 67) declares that ASEAN member states already perceive India as China's main challenger within the framework of an Asian balance of power.¹²

The need to safeguard the Indian Ocean arises from several security reasons, such as protection against potential attack by foreign powers from the ocean, or defence of sea (trade) routes to the Persian Gulf (because of oil and gas supplies) and Southeast Asia against sea pirates. That is why building a large navy capable of protecting ocean waters became a priority. Already a few decades ago, a former Indian government decided to develop the so-called blue water navy (Burgess 2004: 13, 33). Nowadays, one visible sign that India can be ranked among naval powers are, for example, exercises of Indian naval forces (often along with foreign naval units) in the Indian Ocean.

Hard vs. Soft Power

The building-up of the naval forces is related to an overall development of military capabilities. Regarding conflict relations with some neighbouring countries, rivalry with other powers and bad historical experience in regional armed conflicts, strong and modern equipped armed forces are essential for defence against external threats. Besides a large conventional army¹³, India gained the most political credentials and reputation as a military power by possessing nuclear weapons¹⁴ (Perkovich 2003: 137). The Indian government initiated a nuclear weapons program in response to China's

test of a nuclear weapon in 1964 and wars with Pakistan and China. India needed to demonstrate its ability to protect itself against potential aggressors and enhance its political influence in international politics. Bratersky and Lunyov (1990: 931) refer to “the stand supported by many political and public groups in India that world power status involves the possession of nuclear arms.”

India keeps at her disposal one more source of power and that is its soft power capabilities. In this context, India’s democratic political system has been most frequently mentioned. India is often referred to as the largest democracy in the world and that is why it could serve as an example for other South Asian countries. The Indian government would like its country to be surrounded by democracies, which would stabilize the South Asian sub-system and thus decrease the number of conflicts in the region. But according to Scott (2009: 137–138), India has been cautious about excessively enforcing democracy in neighbouring states.

Nevertheless, the fact that India, regardless of its ethnically, religiously and culturally heterogeneous and large population, can maintain a liberal democratic system, political plurality and free elections, it appears to be a model worth following by other South Asian states (Perkovich 2003: 142). Also Joseph Nye (2004: 88), who, as the first, coherently described the soft-power concept, acknowledges credentials India gets from its support and maintenance of democracy and liberalism. Therefore India has a considerable advantage over its Chinese rival. But India’s soft power also results from country’s active participation in UN peacekeeping operations, its fast-growing economy, technological development and, according to some observers, also from its spirituality (Gupta 2008: 63; Hymans 2009: 252).

Soon-to-be Great Power?

As mentioned above, India lies in very unstable region near its long-standing rival Pakistan and the expansive Chinese giant. So far, India has been involved in many armed conflicts in the past and therefore it plays a central role in the regional security agenda. Because of security concerns, India devotes much effort to build up its military power capabilities. In addition, India is ranked among the largest Asian economies. But due to South Asia’s smallness and economic insignificance, India establishes economic relations rather with politically more important and economically stronger countries beyond the region.

Even though rapprochement among South Asian states would be reached more easily within regional organisations than on a bilateral basis, failure of deeper regional integration further hinders this objective. Hence Bava (2009: 19) suggests that the Indian elite should focus more on soft-power, e.g., economic, diplomatic, instruments of projecting its power within the South Asian region in order to improve its relations with neighbouring states.

Considering India's large size, economic and military power and diplomatic manoeuvrability, its status of regional power is unquestionable. Consequently, the international community's interest turns to India's strategy of enhancing its position outside South Asia. An increase in military and economic power capabilities is only one side of the problem — to achieve its goal of becoming a world great power, India needs to have a shot at challenging China's increased power and expanding ambitions (Pant 2007: 60, 68). Indian government's effort to strengthen ties with Japan and the United States at the expense of China's rise may actually enable India to join the group of the most powerful states in the world in the following decade.

Iran

Imperial Past and Islamic Present

The achievement of a prominent position in the Middle East is the most important foreign-policy priority in present-day Iran. This is given by its relatively large territory, geographical position, numerous and increasingly well-educated population, economic, technological and military development, and also by an amount and quality of its natural resources — Iran is the fourth largest oil producer in the world (U. S. Energy Information Administration n.d.). Iran's imperial past is of great significance considering its hegemonic aspirations as well. Iran already thought of itself as a regional power during the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi (1941–1979). Its ambitions to play an important role, both in regional and international politics, were amplified by referring to Iran's imperial greatness and pre-Islamic history (Gonzalez 2007: 15–17).

Iran in its post-revolutionary era, much like during Shah's monarchical regime, emphasizes its extraordinary potential to become a major player not only in the region, but in international politics as well. The Islamic republic as an emerging regional power disposes of the same (or even bigger) material capabilities as Shah's Iran did, but by contrast, it emphasizes the Islamic revolution as the main source of its legitimacy and influence in the region. As Fürtig and Gratius (2010: 170) correctly claim, Iran is not a stable, ever-lasting hegemon in the Middle East; on the contrary, it was recognized as a regional power only at certain times. A large share of Iran's contemporary power position stems from its most influential ideological weapon — the Islamic revolution of 1979 and its legacy.

Unstable Middle East

For decades, the Middle East has been characterized by political and security instability. Iran has a bad or hostile relationship with many states from the region. This

is given by a long history of armed conflicts, political discrepancies, territorial and boundary disputes and clashing national interests. As Bakhash (2004: 256) aptly declares: “Iran with good reason feels it lives in a dangerous neighbourhood.” Iran is surrounded by instability and conflicts — to the east, it borders on Afghanistan, beset by decennary conflict between international forces and the Taliban; to the north, it neighbours on potentially unstable regions of the Caucasus and the Central Asia, and to the west, it has to deal with the post-war conflict situation in Iraq. In the south, on the other side of the Persian Gulf, are to be found small monarchies that feel threatened by Iran’s growing military power; the other way round, Iran worries about the US military bases in the Gulf states. Also massive military assistance from the USA to Egypt, Israel, Gulf monarchies and especially Saudi Arabia, one of Iran’s biggest adversaries in the Middle East, raises concerns on the part of the Islamic republic (Beck 2008: 13).

Apart from the Gulf monarchies, also Egypt, Jordan, Israel (Iran’s main enemy and menace to its security) and other states look upon the Iranian missile arsenal and allegedly peaceful nuclear power program with doubts and fear (Beck 2008: 17, 22–23). In the 1980s, Iran severed official diplomatic relations with several states, namely Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, and waged an eight-year-long war with Iraq. Nevertheless, it has developed close relations with key anti-Western and anti-Israeli players in the Middle East, such as Syria, Hizbullah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas (and earlier with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation), and with other Islamist groups in many states, e.g., Shiite opposition movements in Bahrain and Iraq. Especially Syria and Hizbullah are exceptionally important for Iran since Syria is the “geographic gateway” for Iran to become a crucial player in the Arab-Israeli conflict and Hizbullah has been called Iran’s main instrument in its fight against Israel (Fürtig and Gratius 2010: 188). This strategic cooperation has been known as the “Tehran – Damascus – Hizbullah axis”. Iran also had a friendly relationship with Libya headed by Muammar al-Qaddafi and it supports the radical Islamic Sudanese regime.

In addition, regional instability has been reinforced by the absence of one hegemon, or, in other words, by a multiyear competition among the most powerful states within the Middle East. Several states view themselves as regional powers and strengthen their influence in order to reach this superior position. That is why in the last sixty years Iran has been coping with several challengers — Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel or Turkey (Beck 2008: 6). These states, at different periods of time, have represented the main adversaries of Iran in the region and this rivalry has acted as a trigger for armaments within the scope of regional security dilemma.

At last, Iran’s Persian origin and Shiite Islam still inhibit closer relations with many Arab and Sunni neighbours. An opportunity to improve relations and political and economic cooperation with other Middle Eastern countries is negligible. This is particularly due to a lack of deeper integration in the region, where we can find only

few regional cooperative organisations, such as *the League of Arab States* that unifies only Arab countries and thus Iran is not allowed to join it.¹⁵ Although Iran lies by the Persian Gulf, in the near future it will not be permitted to become a member of *the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf*. This sub-regional organisation was created by Saudi Arabia and the other five Gulf monarchies not only with the aim of economic and political cooperation, but partly because of the common defence against potential threats, including Iran's growing military power. Iran is a member of *the Organisation of the Islamic Conference* but this institution integrates 57 Muslim countries and political entities, most of them from other regions. However, this large number of member states is an obstacle to deeper integration.

Iran's most important trade partners lie outside the Middle East (with an exception of United Arab Emirates and Turkey). Although Iran develops bilateral economic ties with many GCC members, from the perspective of trade volume Gulf states are not its crucial economic partners. Besides Iran, the largest economy in the Middle East is Saudi Arabia, but economic relations between these two states are, due to their political antagonism, on a very low level.

Leader of the Islamic World

Considering the security instability of the region, bad mutual relations with many Middle Eastern governments and regimes, a low level of cooperation between them and Iran's Persian origin, the Islamic republic focuses primarily on strengthening its military power and gathering its ideological capabilities.

Iranian missile defence technology and its nuclear power program (with a possible access to nuclear weapons) are aimed at strengthening its military capabilities not only in the face of the United States, but also with regard to its regional adversaries. Iran uses its military capabilities to shift the balance of power in the region in its own favour and at the expense of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other powerful states (Beck 2008: 26; Moeinaddini and Rezapour 2008: 104, 131). Its large arsenal comprises a whole scale of ballistic missiles, whether short-, medium- and long-range. As John Negroponte (2007: 7), the director of the National Intelligence Agency of the USA, said: "Iran is enhancing its ability to project its military power — primarily with ballistic missiles and naval power — with the goal of dominating the Gulf region and deterring potential adversaries."

Iran's strategy to spread its influence within the region has three important interconnected components: an expansion of the Islamic revolution beyond its borders, engaging in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and criticism of US foreign policy in the Middle East or Western ideology and values in general.

Iran believes that the best way of spreading its influence throughout the region is to become a driving force of the so-called Islamist awakening, i.e., a revival of a

unified Islamic identity. The Islamic revolution from 1979 and Iranian regime in itself has been presented as a source of legitimacy for this objective. According to Khomeini (cited in Armstrong 1993: 193), the Islamic revolution did not come about only for Iranians; on the contrary, Iran seeks to export the revolution abroad. Iran as the first real Islamic state and its successful revolution should inspire other Muslim societies and serve as a model for all oppressed people. Iran called on opposition movements in different Middle Eastern states, e.g., the Palestinians or Lebanese) to overthrow their oppressive regimes and establish Islamic states and thereby just Islamic societies (Panah 2007: 48, 69).

The heads of most Arab and Sunni states fear of the export of Islamic revolution, which they perceive both as an attempt to enforce Shia Islam to their societies and as a way of empowering its position in the region. In consequence, Iran strives for driving a wedge between the ruling elites and the “oppressed masses.” Iranian authorities call governments and regimes in many Arab states as either “un-Islamic” or as followers of the so-called American Islam. That is because of their cooperation with the United States or the West in general (Hunter 2010: 27, 188). These “apostate regimes” or “puppets of external powers” include above all pro-Western Arab republics and also Arab monarchies in the Gulf, because monarchical rule is allegedly incompatible to Islam (Panah 2007: 69, 74, 83). Accusations of collaborating with imperialist superpowers posed a danger of decline in their political and religious legitimacy. Winning this battle for the hearts and minds of the “Arab street” should result in increased political power and diplomatic capabilities. As Wehrey et al. (2009: 129) puts it: “Tehran also views Arab public opinion as an important vector of power projection, one that can be used to exert pressure on unfriendly Arab regimes, as well as their Western allies.”

It is convenient for Iran to speak directly to the Arab street over the heads of local governments. Above all, it can avoid dealing with hostile regimes and it can make the best of important issues of regional politics that are of concern to the Arab and Muslim population. That is why Tehran acts as a protector of the “oppressed” populations who live under the rule of authoritative regimes, e.g., Palestinians or Shiite minorities in Arab states; as a major challenger to Israel, e.g., by means of military and financial support to many anti-Israeli military groups such as Hizbullah; as a heroic opponent of powerful Western states, e.g., in the case of Iran’s nuclear program, and as a main critic of the regional political order and *status quo* — this distinguishes Iran from many Arab states with long-ruling governments. As Green, Wehrey and Wolf (2009: 33) aptly note, Iran is portraying itself as “more Arab than the Arabs.” Tehran’s efforts (or at least rhetoric efforts) to solve all the above-mentioned problems work as a strong driving force to Iran’s soft-power projection (Wehrey et al. 2009: 129, 131).

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been one of the most important issues of regional politics, simply because almost all people in the Middle East are concerned with

the existence of Israel and with the Palestinian question. Iran's increasingly aggressive rhetoric against Israel and in support of Palestinians' rights (and earlier also of Lebanese resistance against Israeli occupation) are positively accepted on the part of Arabs and Muslims (Panah 2007: 73). According to Green, Wehrey and Wolf (2009: 34), "Iran's hyper-activism on pan-Arab issues can be viewed (...) as an effort to overcompensate for its fundamental isolation from the rest of the region." And an anti-Zionist stance can be the right method how to achieve this goal. Hatred for Israel has been one of very few issues in last several decades that has made, often quarrelling, Arab states to unite and come to an agreement (Smith 1968: 14). Therefore, Iran's hard-line stance as regards the Arab-Israeli conflict serves as another foreign-policy instrument for strengthening its position.

The third basic soft-power tool of Iran's foreign-policy approach towards Muslim and the Arab population in the Middle East is often called Third Worldism (anti-imperialist approach) and it stems from the idea of "new bipolarity" (Fürtig and Gratius 2010: 175). The basic principle of this concept, since the beginning of the 1990s, assumed a rise of a new world conflict. This time, Islam (after unsuccessful communism) would become the main global adversary and an alternative approach to the Western decadent values, universal rights and way of life.¹⁶ The Muslim world has "to unite and gird itself for a struggle with the exploitative, threatening West" (Bakhash 2004: 248). Iran's objective has been to lead these unifying efforts — if it succeeds in the uniting of the whole Islamic world, it would obviously become its leader and thus its power position in the Middle Eastern region would be reinforced.

Iran plays the leading role in the Islamic resistance to US policy in the Middle East, western cultural influences and unfavourable impacts of western ideology and values. The incumbent Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad maintains the tradition from the era of the Islamic revolution and describes the United States as the "Great Satan." This is the reason why the West (the United States in particular) is called the main enemies of both Iran and the whole of the Muslim community.

Can Iran become a Regional Hegemon?

The international community speaks of Iran as a rising power with a potential to become a Middle Eastern hegemon. It is much more complicated to predict the development of Iran's position in the region than Brazil's or India's chances to become great powers in the near future. One reason can be instability and inconstancy of the Middle East, of particular regimes, and thus of mutual relations between states. In such an unstable and conflict-ridden region that is characterized more by mistrust, disputes, conflicts, rivalry and even hate, rather than by cooperation and common interests, no state has managed to maintain its power status for more than couple of years. Not to mention that due to the reasons mentioned above, there emerged no

real regional power in the Middle East in the last century. In addition, it is difficult to imagine that Iran's neighbours and the most important world players would recognize its regional-power status. Both their mutually bad relations and existence of Iran's rivals in competition for prominent position in the Middle East would hinder acceptance of Iran's leading role.

A great part of Iran's hegemonic efforts is constituted by armament. But if the military power is not accompanied by sufficient economic power, the regional power would be able to enhance its prominent position in the region only provisionally. Therefore Iran should also focus on sustained economic growth, which would be reinforced, among others, by strengthening of economic ties with neighbouring states. But although this approach would ensure a more stable and durable influence, improving intraregional relations needs more time and effort.

Good relations with other Middle Eastern states are necessary from one more reason: Iran is driving for gaining support from the Arab street but its political power and bargaining position have to be enhanced also through establishing closer political ties with other governments. As Green, Wehrey and Wolf (2009: 34–35) notice, Iran “remains the odd man out” — although nowadays Iran enjoys support from a certain part of the Arab street, this support will not last forever. On the contrary, public opinion changes very frequently and Iran should not ground its hegemonic aspirations on highly fluctuating public support.

Conclusion

Brazil, India and Iran are referred to as regional powers. This article illustrates that even among these states many differences exist, as regards their strategies of gaining more power and enhancing their prominent regional position. This is due to many factors, namely diverse and unequal power capabilities, their relations with other states in particular regions, the level of stability and integration of the region, its (non)conflict-ridden character and existence of regional organisations.

Brazil and India are in a quite different position than Iran. Both states are unambiguously regional powers in South America and South Asia, respectively. Their power capabilities — large economies and steady economic growth, indispensable military power and diplomatic manoeuvrability — foreshadow their efforts to become great powers. Despite this, India, due to an unstable and conflict prone South Asian region and its Chinese rival, places greater emphasis on military power than Brazil that lies in a deeper integrated region and has closer relations with its neighbours.

It cannot be said, that Iran has already achieved a regional-power status. Because of bad relations with neighbouring states, the very unstable nature of the Middle East, lack of regional integration and cooperative institutions; Iran focuses much more on

strengthening its military power capabilities. Improving relations with the rest of the region both on bilateral and multilateral basis is therefore very complicated and Iran seeks to gain support at least from the Arab and Muslim public.

Regional powers need political and security stability in their surroundings to secure economic growth and enforce their dominant position. That is why they often attempt to improve relations with other states in the particular region, mostly through mutual cooperation and integration. But Iran is situated in one of the most conflict-ridden and least integrated regions in the world, with a very low level of economic, political, military or cultural cooperation between states. And this might be, in the future, the main obstacle to Iran's hegemonic efforts.

Notes

- ¹ Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay (in the near future probably also Venezuela).
- ² Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru (Mexico is an observer).
- ³ UNASUR integrates the whole South America except for French Guiana (Mexico and Panama are observers).
- ⁴ Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela.
- ⁵ UNASUR provides its members a platform for cooperation and trade development, but membership of too many states also means more disputes, such as the ideological one between Brazil and Venezuela.
- ⁶ Brazilian businessmen were afraid of government's attempts to strengthen trade ties with Southern countries at the expense of trade with developed industrialized Northern states (the USA, the European Union) which is more important for Brazil's economy (Alden and Vieira 2005: 1086).
- ⁷ But China and Russia as current permanent members in the UN Security Council are not so enthusiastic in their support of Brazil's and India's aspirations, although they all have many same foreign-policy (economic) objectives especially in the face of the Western (G-8) states.
- ⁸ For example Argentina and Mexico – like Brazil – demand the permanent seat in the UN Security Council.
- ⁹ South Asian region includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka and sometimes also Afghanistan.
- ¹⁰ China and Pakistan have been cooperating in the field of conventional and nuclear armament (Pant 2007: 60).
- ¹¹ In 2003–2004, Indian trade with other SAARC states constituted only 3.52 % of its overall trade (Scott 2009: 120).
- ¹² Also the United States see India as a major power capable of balancing China and stabilizing the Asian-Pacific area. Besides mutual cooperation in the field of nuclear energy, they are undergoing joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean. India as an Asian military power and responsibly acting member of international community became a key partner for the USA especially in the era after the September 11 attacks (Burgess 2002: 3; Pant 2007: 62–65).
- ¹³ Indian army has approximately 1,325,000 active personnel (2006), compared to 619,000 Pakistani active personnel (2006) (Cordesman and Kleiber 2006: 24).

- ¹⁴ India tested its nuclear weapon on May 1998, Pakistan few days later (Burgess 2002: 12).
- ¹⁵ This is also the case of other Arab cooperative institutions.
- ¹⁶ According to Khomeini's motto: "Neither East, nor West, Only Islam" (Hunter 2010: 25), Islam was meant to be an alternative model of social arrangement not only to the West, but also to East with its infidel communist ideology. Nevertheless, anti-imperialist element of Iranian ideology was primarily directed against the West and above all the USA (Panah 2007: 48). Unlike the "Great Satan" – the USA –, the Soviet Union was considered to be "Lesser Satan," because it was not so close ally of the Shah's regime as the USA were (Metz et al. 1987).

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