ISSLP
Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law and Politics

Original Research

The Eleventh Government and the Structure of the International System from the Perspective of Discourse Analysis

Asghar. Ebrahimzadeh[1] , Mehdi. Motaharnia[2]* , Reza. Parizad[2]

1 Phd Student of International Relations, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran
2 Assistant Professor, Political Science Department, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: dmotaharnia@gmail.com

The transformations of past centuries and the dominance of various forms of international order over the global community indicate that the structure of the international system is constantly subject to change and evolution. Each type of international system can create specific opportunities, threats, or behavioral patterns for the foreign policies of states, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, the structure of the international system is one of the most significant factors influencing foreign policy, and an accurate understanding of the current and future structure of the international system can play a crucial role in policymaking and achieving foreign policy objectives. This article seeks to employ the discourse analysis theory of Laclau and Mouffe to identify the semantic system, existing signifiers, and articulated elements regarding the structure of the international system in the foreign policy discourse of the Eleventh Government (2013–2017). This discourse, named "Moderation," presented a distinct semantic system compared to the previous administrations (the Ninth and Tenth Governments). Identifying the semantic system and analyzing discourses is a practical and important issue in foreign policy because each discourse contains specific principles and rules, reflecting the signifiers and signifieds that determine the country's national interests, values, and objectives, thereby indicating the overall orientation of foreign policy.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, structure of the international system, moderation discourse, foreign policy, Eleventh Government.

1. Introduction

With the eleventh presidential election held in 2013, the discourse of moderation emerged victorious over competing discourses and established the administration known as the Government of Prudence and Hope. The central signifier of this discourse is interaction and balance. This administration adopted a distinct semantic system and foreign policy approach concerning the structure of the international system compared to its predecessor, namely the justice-oriented principlist discourse (Ninth and Tenth Governments). Analyzing the foreign policy of the Eleventh Government indicates that the country's foreign policymaking apparatus sought to adopt an interactive approach toward the international system, based on its semantic system (Blouki et al., 2018). In doing so, it aimed to reconstruct a different image of the Islamic Republic of Iran as an active and responsible actor in global peace and security, altering its previously constructed image and disrupting international threats and restrictions against the country, such as United Nations Security Council resolutions and the resulting unilateral and multilateral international sanctions

(Mahmoudikia, 2018). Despite its criticisms of the structure of the international system, this administration sought to establish a realistic approach to Iran's diplomacy and introduce the country as a rational and wise actor in international relations (Blouki et al., 2023). Recognizing Iran's status within the existing order, the Eleventh Government concluded that, to enhance its regional and international position while preserving its principles, it was necessary to reconstruct Iran's diplomatic language in foreign policy (Ajili & Afsharian, 2016). In this regard, the international order was one of the areas in which the discourse of moderation sought to introduce and emphasize its own signifiers while establishing opposition and differentiation from the justice-oriented principlist discourse (Ninth and Tenth Governments). This is because challenging the established international system was a core characteristic of the justice-oriented principlist discourse (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015a). According to this discourse, the international system possesses a unilateral structure that serves the interests of dominant global powers (Ataei & Ghasemi, 2016). It argued that the Islamic Republic of Iran should adopt strategies based on justice, peace, and dignity to combat unilateralism (as the primary feature of the international system) and the machinations of the global hegemonic system. Furthermore, it proposed that, by expanding cooperation with Islamic and non-aligned countries, Iran should seek to reform or, if necessary, dismantle the existing international system (Mansouri Moghadam & Esmaeili, 2011). From the perspective of the principlist discourse, the existing international order and system are entirely unjust, illegitimate, and undesirable, representing a concrete manifestation of injustice, inequality, discrimination, and dominance (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015a). President Ahmadinejad (who led the Ninth and Tenth Governments) and his colleagues believed in creating a utopian society in Iran and the world and, based on this belief, sought justice and an equitable international system, striving to change the existing order (Haji-Yousefi, 2010).

Given the semantic shift in the Eleventh Government's perception of the structure of the international system compared to the Ninth and Tenth Governments (principlist discourse), this study seeks to analyze the semantic system and perspective of the discourse of moderation concerning the structure of the international system using discourse analysis theory. This is significant because the structure of the international system is a fundamental determinant of foreign policy, capable of creating opportunities or constraints for policymakers and influencing foreign policy objectives and actions (Ataei & Ghasemi, 2016).

Furthermore, examining the impact of the international system on foreign policy through a discourse analysis approach highlights the articulation of discourse elements and signs that define the country's national interests, values, and objectives, shaping the overall direction of foreign policy (Javdani Moghadam, 2014). Therefore, analyzing foreign policy issues through discourse analysis provides a deeper understanding of different approaches and the positions of states in the international arena.

The research question posed in this study is: What was the Eleventh Government's discourse on the structure of the international system, considering its semantic shift from the Ninth and Tenth Governments? The research hypothesis suggests that the semantic shift in the discourse of moderation (Eleventh Government), compared to the justice-oriented principlist discourse (Ninth and Tenth Governments), led to a transformation in its perspective on the international system and, consequently, in the formulation and implementation of Iran's foreign policy.

To examine the semantic order and discourse analysis of the Eleventh Government's approach to the international system, the speeches of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, as the key figures of the Eleventh Government's diplomatic apparatus, have been analyzed.

2. Concepts

International System: The international system is considered an environment where multiple states, as well as international and regional organizations, operate, influencing the behaviors, orientations, and demands of these states (Mohammadi, 2010, p. 14). In the field of international relations, the international system has both an objective and an abstract meaning. In its objective sense, it refers to a set of states and international actors that interact regularly and, consequently, have a degree of interdependence. In its abstract sense, the system comprises patterns of

relations among a network of interwoven actors (Haji-Yousefi, 2005).

Discourse Analysis: Various definitions have been proposed for discourse analysis, one of which describes it as a set of methodological tools for analyzing speeches, texts, interviews, discussions, and other forms of communication. Discourse theory deals with the meaningful role of behaviors and social ideas in political life. It examines how systems of meaning, or discourses, shape people's understanding of their roles in society and influence their political activities (Marsh et al., 1999).

Moderation Discourse: With the victory of Hassan Rouhani in the eleventh presidential election in June 2013, a new sub-discourse emerged within the broader framework of Islamic-oriented foreign policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This sub-discourse, based on the government's general discourse, was termed "moderation." The central signifier of the moderation discourse is balance and equilibrium (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015b).

The proponents of this discourse argue that moderation can mark the beginning of a new chapter in active and interactive diplomacy, aimed at resolving misunderstandings and creating new opportunities. Through this approach, Iran sought to break out of political deadlocks, project a new image in international relations, and optimize national interests by reducing costs (Ajili & Afsharian, 2016, p. 64). Hassan Rouhani's victory in this election led to a transformation in the government's discourse and semantic system. The Government of Prudence and Hope, by adopting the discourse of moderation, introduced fundamental and substantial changes in various areas compared to Ahmadinejad's administration (Ninth and Tenth Governments), significantly impacting the foundations and structure of the Islamic Republic's power system. Generally, a change in government is always accompanied by shifts in political, cultural, and economic discourses (Blouki et al., 2023).

Eleventh Government: The eleventh presidential election was held on June 14, 2013, in which Hassan Rouhani secured the majority of votes, subsequently forming the Eleventh Government. With Rouhani assuming office, a new discourse emerged in the government's semantic structure (Blouki et al., 2023). During his electoral campaign, Rouhani focused extensively on scientific and meticulous critiques of the foreign policy of the previous administration, attributing a significant portion of the country's issues—particularly in economic affairs—to the confrontational and aggressive foreign policy of the preceding government (Rezaei & Torabi, 2013).

3. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Analysis

Examining the semantic shift in the foreign policy of the Eleventh Government concerning the structure of the international system is possible within a theoretical framework that emphasizes structures and semantic systems. Therefore, discourse analysis has been adopted as the theoretical framework of this study.

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research method that refers to the examination of speech, discourse, and text analysis (Qajari & Nazari, 2013). It analyzes the ways in which systems of meaning, or discourses, shape people's understanding of their role in society and influence their political activities (Marsh et al., 1999). Various interpretations of discourse theory exist across different fields of the humanities, but in political science, Laclau and Mouffe have introduced one of the most significant discourse theories (Hosseinizadeh, 2004). These scholars employ numerous and sometimes complex concepts with multiple dimensions in their theoretical framework, necessitating an understanding of these concepts for proper application (Kasraei & Poozesh Shirazi, 2009).

Articulation: A discourse emerges from the articulation of related elements and concepts (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This concept refers to the gathering of various elements and their combination into a new identity (Howarth & Soltani, 1998).

Signifier and Signified: Signifiers are abstract or concrete persons, concepts, phrases, and symbols that, within specific discursive frameworks, point to particular meanings. The meaning and referent to which a signifier points is called the signified (Kasraei & Poozesh Shirazi, 2009). The central signifier is the key sign around which other signs are structured. In essence, through the articulation of signifiers around the central signifier, semantic coherence is achieved (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Floating Signifiers: Floating signifiers are signs that different discourses attempt to define in their own way (Jørgensen et al., 2018).

Antagonism and Otherness: Discourses essentially emerge in opposition and differentiation from one another. Consequently, every discourse constructs an "other" against which it defines itself (Kasraei & Poozesh Shirazi, 2009). This is because every discourse necessarily requires a rival discourse to establish its identity (Soltani, 2005).

Elements and Moments: Elements are signs whose meaning has not yet been stabilized, meaning they hold multiple interpretations. Moments, on the other hand, are elements whose meaning has been fixed within a discourse through articulation (Qajri & Nazari, 2013, p. 54). In other words, moments exist within a discourse, whereas before articulation, they remain in the domain of discursivity and are referred to as elements (Haqiqat, 2006, p. 516).

Chain of Equivalence and Difference: In the process of articulation, the main signifiers are linked together in a chain of equivalence. These signifiers are empty signs, meaning they hold no inherent meaning until they are filled with meaning through the chain of equivalence, linking them with other signs that provide meaning. Discourses use the chain of equivalence to obscure differences (Haqiqat et al., 2014).

4. Historical Transformations of the International System

Since the Treaty of Westphalia, the international system has undergone different phases, shaped by global and international developments. These include the Westphalian system, the bipolar system, and the post-Cold War system.

4.1. The Westphalian International System

From the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which recognized the sovereignty of nation-states (except for a brief period), until World War I, the prevailing system in international relations was based on the balance of power. This system meant that power at the global level was distributed among European great powers, which formed and dissolved alliances to maintain equilibrium. This dynamic maintained a balance of power among states, thereby preventing any single state from dominating others (Mahmoudikia, 2018).

World War I, which began in 1914, was expected to lead to a significant transformation in the international order. However, it did not bring substantial changes to the global system (Tabatabai & Bahrami, 2018). The war marked the beginning of a transitional period in the international system, which ultimately took on a definitive structure with the end of World War II, replacing the previous multipolar order with a bipolar one (Zarif, 2016).

4.2. The Bipolar System and the Cold War

The bipolar system and the Cold War era began after World War II and lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this period, the international system was structured around the superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The world was divided into two blocs, each led by one of the superpowers, with smaller and weaker states aligning with one of these two camps (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015b).

The most defining characteristic of this period was the open and covert competition between the Western bloc, led by the United States, and the Eastern bloc, led by the Soviet Union, in political, economic, military, intelligence, and cultural arenas. During this time, global developments—including government stances, coups, revolutions, regime changes, and influence over other states—were significantly influenced by the rivalry between the two superpowers (Mohammadi, 2010).

4.3. The International System After the Cold War (1991–Present)

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War transformed the bipolar power structure into a historical model, leading international relations theorists to redefine global power configurations (Shouri, 2003).

With the onset of the post-Cold War era, some scholars argued that the world was witnessing the emergence of a new international system (Haji-Yousefi, 2005). The United States emerged as the sole superpower, and the world entered a unipolar moment where American power faced fewer constraints (Ikenberry, 2018). Consequently, this period provided an opportunity for the United States to pursue its strategic objectives as the remaining hegemon (Rezaei, 2010).

Despite various narratives about the post-Cold War era, it must be emphasized that after the collapse of the bipolar system, the international system entered a transitional phase with no clear dominant structure. Despite extensive efforts by the United States to establish a unipolar order and achieve hegemony, it has failed for multiple reasons. In reality, unlike previous eras, today's international order remains uncertain, with no new institutionalized system in place, and the global system remains in a state of transition (Tabatabai & Bahrami, 2018).

5. The Future of the International Order

Given global developments in the years following the end of the Cold War, various theories have emerged regarding the future of the international order. Researchers and scholars have used terms such as transition period, empire, hegemony, unipolarity, and uni-multipolarity to describe this evolving system (Ikenberry et al., 2009).

5.1. Transition Period

One of the most significant perspectives regarding the current international system is that it is in a transition period. This phase is temporary, during which an existing international order or structure has disappeared, but no new system or structure has yet replaced it. This process has no fixed duration, but it is not indefinite either (Mohammadi, 2010). Unlike the transition period between the two World Wars, the current transitional phase has been prolonged, beginning in 1991 and continuing to the present, with the possibility of extending even further (Tabatabai & Bahrami, 2018).

Each historical transition period has its distinct characteristics. Among the primary features of such a period are shifts in the power equation among key actors, regional states, and subnational forces across different geographical domains, as well as changes in norms, strategic power instruments, the status of actors in international politics, and how they engage in role-definition and identity formation (Poostinchi et al., 2015). Another hallmark of the international system during a transition period is the emergence of new actors, often referred to in international relations literature as pivotal powers, regional powers, middle powers, and emerging powers (Soleimanpour & Molaei, 2013).

5.2. Unipolarity

A unipolar system is one in which a single power surpasses all others in every dimension. In other words, in a unipolar system, one state possesses significantly greater capabilities than all others (Daheshiri & Bahrami, 2020). The dominant power in a unipolar order seeks to ensure that all other units recognize its superiority and has the capability to use various instruments to maintain order (Hosseini Matin, 2011). The extraordinary power of the superpower in a unipolar system serves as a major obstacle to the formation of any balancing coalition (Jamshidi, 2007).

Additionally, a unipolar power will strive to expand its core values and political system to other regions simply because it faces no major competitors to challenge it (Mearsheimer, 2019). It is important to distinguish unipolarity from hegemony and empire (Ikenberry et al., 2009). A unipolar system is solely based on the undisputed material superiority of one country, whereas a hegemonic system requires not only the dominance of a superior power but also cultural and ideological hegemony, which legitimizes its rule through the consent of other nations (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015a).

Some scholars, including Kenneth Waltz, argue that the modern world is unipolar, a situation unprecedented since the fall of the Roman Empire, with the defining characteristic of this unipolar world being the absence of balancing powers (Karami, 2006).

5.3. Hegemony

In international relations, hegemony refers to the leadership of a group of states (Karami, 2006, p. 2). It denotes a situation in which one power takes the initiative in shaping and managing the international system (Calleo, 1987, p. 14). To function as a hegemon, a state must possess various resources, including military power and control over major economic resources, as well as the means to project influence (Karami, 2006).

The key indicators of a hegemonic system and a dominant power include relative superiority over other international actors across various domains, the ability to assert its foreign interests effectively on the international stage, possession of necessary human and

economic resources that can be mobilized from the domestic sphere to the global arena while maintaining public and elite support, the capability and willingness to establish international laws, norms, and operational procedures, broad international acceptance, and the ability to create and sustain cooperative regimes and regulatory frameworks (Aminian, 2002).

In informal discourse, the term "empire" is often used interchangeably with "hegemony." Although the concepts of hegemony and empire are closely related, they are not identical (Faraji, 2021, p. 186; Jamshidi, 2007, p. 794).

A notable aspect of this international order is the potential for an anti-hegemonic alliance among major powers. Anti-hegemonic ideas are widely shared, and states that may have suffered from U.S. hegemony have remained in contact, increasing the possibility of forming a counterbalancing coalition (Wilkinson, 1999).

5.4. Multipolarity

A multipolar international system consists of several great powers that cooperate in various domains. This form of international order may include leading powers in different fields, such as the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, Japan, and some BRICS countries like India and Brazil, which collectively participate in global governance to shape the international order (Naeimi et al., 2019).

From the perspective of multipolarity advocates, major global issues are primarily resolved through international institutions and political and economic interactions among multiple great powers, rather than being dictated unilaterally by a single superpower (Karami, 2004). Consequently, if the international system transitions from bipolarity to multipolarity (or vice versa), or if the number of great powers in a multipolar system fluctuates, the great powers—regardless of their number—must continue competing for power and influence (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 17).

5.5. Uni-Multipolar System

A uni-multipolar system is characterized by the presence of a single superpower alongside multiple major powers. In this type of international order, the superpower must collaborate and coordinate with some of the great powers on international issues (Dehghani-Firouzabadi,

2015a, p. 143). This is because addressing major global challenges in a uni-multipolar system requires the superpower to act in conjunction with a coalition of major states (Huntington, 1999, p. 36).

The concept of a uni-multipolar system is rooted in the ideas of theorists who argue that while U.S. dominance will not decline in the near future and the international system will remain unipolar, this does not mean that other powers will remain passive. Many nations have experienced rapid economic growth in recent decades, leading to a diffusion of power away from a single center of control (Naeimi et al., 2019, p. 249).

6. The Discursive Elements of the Eleventh Government Regarding the International System

One of the most significant dimensions of the Eleventh Government's foreign policy and the discourse of moderation was its approach to the international order and system. The primary principles of the Eleventh Government's foreign policy discourse concerning the international system can be summarized as follows:

6.1. The Transitional Period of the International System

A recurring theme in the discourse of the Eleventh Government regarding the structure of the international system was the notion that it was undergoing a transitional phase. The concept of a transition period was the central signifier of the moderation discourse concerning the international system. This period, which began after the end of the Cold War, has not yet given way to a fully established new order. The moderation discourse views this phase as sensitive, complex, uncertain, fraught with dangers, yet also accompanied by opportunities.

"After the Cold War, a period began that, depending on the audience we address, we refer to as a transitional or intermediate period. No era has witnessed such intense and frequent transformations, nor such turbulence, risks, and fluctuations. The reason is quite clear: the world had designed, become accustomed to, and structured its relations around a particular order" (Zarif, 2017a). *"A fully established new order has not yet emerged. Like other transitional periods in the past, the current state of transition is complex, uncertain, and highly risky in international affairs. The complexities of previous transitional periods often stemmed from military rivalries*

*and even open warfare between major powers. Today's rivalries are equally intense, yet for various reasons—such as the radical shift in the global landscape, the transformation of power dynamics, and the diversity and proliferation of state and non-state actors—competition has largely taken a non-military form" (*Zarif, 2014a*).*

*"The current sensitive transitional period in international relations is fraught with risks but also presents unique opportunities. Any miscalculation of one's position or that of others can lead to historical setbacks, where even a single actor's mistake can have widespread negative consequences. Yet, a few actors still resort to outdated and deeply ineffective methods to maintain their former superiority and dominance" (*Rouhani, 2013b*).*

*"Interdependence is the logic of international interactions in the post-Cold War transitional space. Regional coalitions represent a collective response to global challenges" (*Rouhani, 2013a*).*

During a transition period, all global actors, regardless of their power, adopt revisionist perspectives on the status quo and seek to shape a more favorable order that ensures their position, secures a larger share of influence, and enhances their standing (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015b). Thus, the global transition phase raises critical questions for Iranian foreign policymakers regarding opportunities and constraints. These include: What policies can Iran adopt in response to the evolving international order? What factors and components can improve Iran's position? What tools and resources does Iran possess to preserve and enhance its status? (Abedi & Aslani, 2021).

The moderation discourse perceives the Islamic Republic of Iran as one of the key contributors to shaping the emerging international system, given its current and potential capabilities, and asserts that Iran can play a significant role in the transition phase of international relations.

*"In the current transitional period, Iran itself is one of the main actors and subjects in shaping the emerging international system… and holds a prominent role in international relations, particularly in normative, ethical, and ideological domains. Therefore, with accurate assessment and calculated engagement, Iran can institutionalize and exert its power" (*Zarif, 2014a*). "The Islamic Republic of Iran can actively contribute to establishing regional peace, security, and stability and*

*play a significant role in the ongoing transition phase of international relations" (*Zarif, 2014b*).*

6.1.1. The Post-Western Shift in International Relations

The entry of the world into a post-Western phase is one of the most prominent characteristics of the current transition period in the moderation discourse. This phase is marked by the rise and empowerment of non-Western actors, their gradual integration into the international system, and their increasing role in shaping the political, economic, and normative order of the 21st century (Zarif, 2016).

*"We believe the world has entered a post-Western phase, meaning that global developments are no longer exclusively determined in the West or by the West. This situation, influenced by transformations in both Europe and the United States, has created a highly complex reality that requires careful analysis. In this context, countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran have new perspectives to offer, particularly regarding regional developments" (*Zarif, 2017a*).*

The post-Western system is one in which the Western world no longer enjoys its former exclusive and undisputed dominance. Simultaneously, the non-Western world, in alignment with the shifting balance of power and the rise of emerging actors, gains new opportunities for agency and influence. The concept of a post-Western system does not imply an anti-Western or even non-Western world but rather represents an alternative narrative of a multipolar international order, the decentralization of global power from the West, and the end of Western exceptionalism in global politics (Zarif, 2016).

6.2. The End of the Era of Hegemony and Domination

Opposition to hegemonism has been a fundamental principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, adhered to by all administrations in shaping their relations with the international system (Mahmoudikia, 2018). This is because, at the meta-theoretical, structural, normative, and institutional levels, the Islamic Revolution perceives the existing order as being fundamentally at odds with its own principles and assumptions. Consequently, Iran has sought to challenge this order to undermine the dominance of global powers—particularly the United States—and the liberal

order, thereby asserting its own ideological stance (Dehghani-Firouzabadi & Zabihi, 2012, p. 87).

The Eleventh Government, following this principle, consistently rejected hegemonic aspirations in its foreign relations. Like other post-Revolutionary discourses, it emphasized the construction of an alternative identity and the rejection of hegemonic dominance in its engagement with the international system (Mahmoudikia, 2018). It also adhered to the belief that the era of hegemony and domination in the international system had come to an end.

*"The era of hegemony and dominance has ended. Global transformations in the post-Cold War era, particularly the multiplicity of global actors, have made it impossible for any major power to act as a hegemonic force… The fact that non-state actors have become significant and decisive players in global security is itself a strong indicator of the demise of hegemonic dominance" (*Zarif, 2017a*).*

However, the moderation discourse does not deny the existence of hegemonic ambitions and great power dominance in the contemporary international system. Instead, it acknowledges them as undeniable realities:

*"In today's global relations, hegemonic ambitions and domination are undeniable realities… The arms race, wars, intensified conflicts, rising violence, and interventions in the internal affairs of developing countries by powerful and wealthy states—whether overtly or covertly—are all behaviors that can only be interpreted through the lens of hegemonic dominance" (*Rouhani, 2016*).*

Moreover, this discourse attributes the end of hegemony to global post-Cold War developments, the proliferation of power sources and actors, and the fluidity of decision-making and perception:

*"Hegemony is impossible in an era characterized by the plurality of power sources and actors and the fluidity of decision-making and perception. Even the Americans themselves may wish to be perceived as a hegemon, but hegemony has ended and is no longer feasible. The U.S. engaged in numerous wars under the illusion of creating hegemony. They attempted to turn their temporary superiority into a permanent one, but this hegemonic illusion cost them billions of dollars with no tangible results… Our region must accept that hegemony has ended, and non-domination should be a foundational principle of the future regional order" (*Zarif, 2017b*).*

6.3. The End of the Unipolar Era

The moderation discourse views the unipolar order, which implies U.S. superiority, unilateralism, and comprehensive dominance over international politics, as a failed and concluded phenomenon. *"The idea of a new world order and unipolarity has failed" (Zarif, August 24, 2014),* and *"The world has moved away from economic unipolarity and political unilateralism" (Rouhani, July 8, 2015).*

After the Cold War, the United States sought to define the world according to its own interests, leveraging its unrivaled dominance across various domains. It used concepts such as the *unipolar moment, the end of history, and the victory of liberal democracy* to assert American power (Mousavi-Shafaei & Shapouri, 2015, p. 142). Many American and European circles have also emphasized the unipolar nature of the current order (Naeimi et al., 2020, p. 211). Furthermore, the structural interventions by the United States significantly increased after the Cold War, as it extensively leveraged its global position and military power in foreign policy (Hosseini-Matin, 2011, p. 120).

Since the collapse of the bipolar system, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently challenged the U.S. claim to a unipolar world (Shafiei-Far & Rahmati, 2010, p. 33) and has sought to construct an alternative identity in opposition to it. Additionally, some theorists and scholars have pointed to the decline of the unipolar system: *"The unipolar moment (U.S. dominance in global economic and military affairs) is coming to an end" (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 17),* and *"Today, U.S. unipolar power faces a legitimacy crisis" (Ikenberry, 2004, p. 623).*

This discourse opposes both unipolarity and unilateralism, linking them in a chain of equivalence by rejecting several American assumptions: the mistaken belief that the U.S. could create a unipolar world, the erroneous perception that the bipolar system had transitioned to a U.S.-led unipolar order, and the illusion that the United States could establish itself as the sole global hegemon. The moderation discourse argues that unilateral policies ultimately lead to failure:

*"The world is no longer moving towards separation and division but rather toward interconnectedness. Unlike in the past, the pursuit of unilateral policies by former dominant powers or emerging powers now leads to deadlock and paralysis" (*Zarif, 2014a*).*

6.4. The Multipolarization of the International System

One of the core elements of the moderation discourse is its opposition to a unipolar international order—a model that the United States has pursued in various forms since the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Given that this discourse considers the unipolar era to be over, it seeks to promote the concept of a multipolar international system and multilateralism, defined as alliances among multiple countries to achieve a shared objective (Ashtari et al., 2020), as an alternative to unipolarity.

With the collapse of the bipolar system, no new system has yet fully replaced it. Although the United States assumed that the bipolar order had transformed into a unipolar system under its leadership, global developments have proven this assumption false (Zarif, 2015). *"Today, we live in a world transitioning from a bipolar to a multipolar system, where power structures have become more diverse and complex"* (Zarif, 2015).

The emphasis on multipolarity in the international order has also been explicitly stated in bilateral agreements. *"The process of multipolarization in the international system and the globalization of the economy have significantly expanded... The parties (Strategic Partnership Statement between Iran and China) reaffirm their support for the trend of multipolarization in the international system and express their readiness to address global challenges and promote a world filled with peace and stability"* (Strategic Partnership Statement between Iran and China, 2016).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic of Iran, given its strained relationship with the United States, has consistently opposed the unipolarization of the international system and Washington's unilateral actions. This discourse also asserts that multilateralism will play a central role in Iran's foreign relations:

"Multilateralism will play a central role in Iran's foreign relations. Multilateralism, understood as a collective search for shared solutions to common challenges, has demonstrated its practical desirability and effectiveness at both regional and international levels. Even global powers, albeit reluctantly, have come to realize that they can no longer pursue their interests unilaterally or achieve their specific goals alone" (Zarif, 2014b).

7. Conclusion

The Eleventh Government, named after its overarching discourse of moderation, adopted a distinct semantic system concerning the structure of the international system. Unlike the justice-oriented principlist discourse of the Ninth and Tenth Governments (which viewed the international order as unilateral, unjust, illegitimate, and emblematic of injustice, inequality, discrimination, and dominance), the moderation discourse argued that the current international system is in a transition period. It further asserted that the world has entered a *post-Western* phase due to the rising power of non-Western states, which is the most significant characteristic of the ongoing transition.

This study, assuming a semantic shift in the Eleventh Government (moderation discourse), sought to answer the question: Given the discursive shift within the Eleventh Government, what was its semantic framework regarding the structure of the international order? It introduced the key signifiers and elements of this discourse concerning both the current and future international system.

The moderation discourse, in addition to viewing the international system as transitional, also considers the unipolar order and the era of hegemony and dominance—primarily referring to U.S. supremacy—to have ended. It promotes the multipolarization of the international system in the coming years as an alternative to unipolar and hegemonic structures.

In summary, the moderation discourse (as articulated by the Eleventh Government) perceives the international order as transitional, declares the unipolar and hegemonic era to be over, and argues that the future global system will be multipolar and multilateral.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Interest

Funding

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

References

Abedi, A., & Aslani, A. (2021). Iran and the Global Transition of Power: Perspectives and Viewpoints. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, *12*(1).

Ajili, H., & Afsharian, R. (2016). The discourse of moderation in the foreign policy of the eleventh government. *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Research in Politics*, *5*(19).

Aminian, B. (2002). Building a new global order: Explaining U.S. behavior after September 11. *Quarterly Journal of Foreign Policy*, *16*(3).

Ashtari, M., Pourghasemi Amiri, A., & Abouei, F. (2020). The confrontation of multilateralism and unilateralism in the global community. *Quarterly Journal of Political Sociology of Iran*, *3*(1).

Ataei, J., & Ghasemi, Z. (2016). *The impact of the international system on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the ninth and tenth governments*. Tehran: Farhang Noor.

Blouki, S., Khoshkhot, M., Keshavarz, B., & Jafari, F. (2018). Explaining the foreign policy of the moderation government from the perspective of discourse analysis. *Quarterly Journal of Political and International Studies*, *9*(37).

Blouki, S., Khoshkhot, M., & Keshavarz Qasemi Abadi, B. (2023). A comparative study of the foreign policy discourse of Rouhani and Ahmadinejad governments. *Quarterly Journal of Geopolitics*, *19*(3).

Daheshiri, M. R., & Bahrami, Z. (2020). *The international system in the intellectual framework of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution*. Qom: Maaref Publishing.

Dehghani Firouzabadi, S. J. (2015a). *Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: Samt Publishing.

Dehghani Firouzabadi, S. J. (2015b). *Principles and foundations of international relations*. Tehran: Samt Publishing.

Haji-Yousefi, A. M. (2005). *Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: Political and International Studies Office.

Haji-Yousefi, A. M. (2010). Iran's Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: From Confrontation to Accommodation.

Haqiqat, S., Hosseinizadeh, S. M. A., & Manoocheri, A. (2014). Discourse. In *Approach and method in political science*. Tehran: Samt Publishing.

Hosseini Matin, S. M. (2011). The structure of the unipolar system and its impact on foreign policy (with a focus on the role of the U.S. after the Cold War). *Quarterly Journal of Politics, Faculty of Law and Political Science*, *2*.

Hosseinizadeh, S. M. A. (2004). Discourse theory and political analysis. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *7*(28).

Howarth, D., & Soltani, A. A. (1998). Discourse theory. *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, *1*(2).

Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, *94*(1). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241

Ikenberry, G. J., Mastanduno, M., & Wohlforth, W. C. (2009). Introduction: Unipolarity, State Behavior, and Systemic Consequences. *World Politics*, *61*(1). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.0.0029

Jamshidi, M. (2007). Unipolar international systems: Unipolarity, hegemony, empire. *Quarterly Journal of Strategic Studies*, *10*(4).

Javdani Moghadam, M. (2014). The application of discourse approach in explaining the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran from the perspective of Imam Khomeini. *Quarterly Journal of Islamic Revolution Studies*, *11*(38).

Jørgensen, M., Phillips, L., & Jalili, H. (2018). *Theory and method in discourse analysis*. Tehran: Ney Publishing.

Karami, J. (2004). The new international system: Hegemony, multipolarity, or one-multipolarity? *Quarterly Journal of Defensive Politics*, *12*(48).

Karami, J. (2006). Hegemony in international politics: Conceptual framework, historical experience, and its future. *Political Science Research*, *3*.

Kasraei, M. S., & Poozesh Shirazi, A. (2009). Laclaue and Mouffe's discourse theory: An effective tool for understanding and explaining political phenomena. *Quarterly Journal of Politics, Faculty of Law and Political Science*, *3*.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Mahmoudikia, M. (2018). Logic and worldview of the foreign policy of Rouhani's government. *Quarterly Journal of Political and International Research*, *34*.

Mansouri Moghadam, J., & Esmaeili, A. (2011). An analysis of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency from the perspective of James Rosenau's continuity model. *Quarterly Journal of Politics, Faculty of Law and Political Science*, *41*(1).

Marsh, D., Stoker, G., & Haji-Yousefi, A. M. (1999). *Method and theory in political science*. Tehran: Strategic Studies Research Institute.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order. *International Security*, *43*(4). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342

Mohammadi, M. (2010). *The future of the international system and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: Ministry of Foreign Affairs Publishing.

Naeimi, A. A., Mir-Koushesh, A. H., & Mohammadzadeh, A. (2019). Scenario planning for the future international order in the years leading up to 2030. *Quarterly Journal of Political Studies*, *12*(45).

Poostinchi, Z., Ghorbani Sheikh Neshin, A., & Sabouri, Z. (2015). Transitional period and normative chaos in international politics. In e. st (Ed.), *The existing international system and the desired international system*. Tehran: Imam Sadiq University and Iranian Association of International Relations.

Qajari, H., & Nazari, J. (2013). *The application of discourse analysis in social research*. Tehran: Sociologists Publishing.

Rezaei, A. (2010). The Russian model of order in the post-Cold War international system (balance-oriented order). *Quarterly Journal of Political Studies*, 2(7).

Rezaei, A., & Torabi, Q. (2013). The foreign policy of Hassan Rouhani's government: Constructive interaction within the framework of a developmental government. *Quarterly Journal of Political and International Research*, 15.

Rouhani, H. (2013a, September 25). *Speech at the 68th United Nations General Assembly*. http://www.president.ir/fa/71572

Rouhani, H. (2013b, September 13). *Speech at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit*. http://www.president.ir/fa/71098

Rouhani, H. (2016, September 17). *Opening speech at the Non-Aligned Movement summit*. http://www.president.ir/fa/95178

Shouri, M. (2003). Hegemony and anti-hegemony. *Quarterly Journal of Strategy*, 27.

Soleimanpour, H., & Molaei, E. (2013). Emerging powers in the transitional period of the international system. *Quarterly Journal of Foreign Relations*, 5(1).

Soltani, S. A. (2005). *Power, discourse, and language: Mechanisms of power flow in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: Ney Publishing.

Strategic Partnership Statement between Iran and China. (2016, January 22). http://www.president.ir/fa/91433

Tabatabai, S. M., & Bahrami, Z. (2018). Continuation of the transitional period in the international system. *Quarterly Journal of Foreign Policy*, 32(2).

Wilkinson, D. (1999). Unipolarity without hegemony. *International Studies Review*, 1(2). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00158

Zarif, M. J. (2014a, September 2). *Interview on the special news program*. https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2355878

Zarif, M. J. (2014b). What Iran really wants: Iranian foreign policy in the Rouhani era. *Foreign Affairs*, 93, 1-11.

Zarif, M. J. (2015, August 17). *Speech at the Journalist Day ceremony*. https://www.irna.ir/news/81712014

Zarif, M. J. (2016, December 21). *Speech at the Tehran Security Conference*. https://www.mehrnews.com/news/3847288

Zarif, M. J. (2017a, February 30). *Interview on the sidelines of the 43rd Munich Security Conference*. http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/1967181/

Zarif, M. J. (2017b, April 22). *Publication of an article in Al-Rai newspaper titled "How to Combat the Roots of Terrorism and Extremism?"*. https://www.isna.ir/news/96020301513