

Strategic Prioritization of Iran's Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Capacities under Sanctions: Application of Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) Techniques

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This study aimed to identify, evaluate, and strategically prioritize Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities under sanctions and to rank the resulting strategic alternatives using expert assessment, SWOT analysis, and the TOPSIS multi-criteria decision-making technique. This applied quantitative study employed a descriptive-survey design. The statistical population consisted of experts in geopolitics, geoeconomics, economics, foreign trade, regional relations, energy, transportation, technology, and policymaking. Using purposive sampling, 25 experts participated in the study. Data were collected through a researcher-developed 80-item questionnaire covering eight dimensions: geopolitical capacities, geoeconomic capacities, economic diplomacy and regional cooperation, alternative financial and trade mechanisms, economic resistance and resilience, emerging technologies and innovation, barriers and challenges, and macro-level strategies and foresight. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, the Friedman test, Kendall's coefficient of concordance, SWOT analysis, and TOPSIS were used for data analysis. The Friedman test showed a statistically significant difference among the rankings of the eight dimensions ($\chi^2 = 33.75$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.000019$). Kendall's coefficient of concordance was 0.2009, indicating low-to-moderate agreement among experts. In the TOPSIS analysis, the highest-priority strategy was development of regional cooperation through Iran's crossroads location (0.85), followed by strengthening transit corridors through the Makran coasts and southern ports (0.82), using Iran's geopolitical position to reduce sanctions vulnerability (0.80), and using economic resilience to counter sanctions-related threats (0.78). The findings indicate that effective utilization of Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities under sanctions requires an integrated strategy centered on economic resilience, institutional coordination, transit development, regional cooperation, governance reform, and technological adaptation. Combining domestic capabilities with external opportunities may enhance Iran's strategic flexibility and reduce vulnerability to sanctions.

Keywords: *Geopolitics; Geoeconomics; Economic Sanctions; Economic Resilience; SWOT; TOPSIS; Multi-Criteria Decision-Making; Iran*

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1. Introduction

The intensification of international sanctions as an instrument of statecraft has transformed the relationship between geopolitics, geoeconomics, and national economic resilience, particularly for countries whose strategic position, resource endowments, and regional connectivity place them at the intersection of competing political and economic networks. Economic sanctions are no longer limited to straightforward restrictions on trade or finance; rather, they increasingly operate through complex combinations of primary sanctions, secondary sanctions, financial exclusion, investment deterrence, restrictions on technology transfer, and indirect pressures on third-country firms and institutions. The evolution of sanctions policy toward Iran illustrates this transformation particularly clearly, as the sanctions regime has shifted over time from broad restrictions toward increasingly targeted, extraterritorial, and network-based forms of coercion (Nephew, 2023). Historical and comparative assessments of sanctions similarly show that their effectiveness depends on the structure of the target economy, the degree of international coordination, the availability of alternative trade and financial channels, and the capacity of the sanctioned state to absorb or circumvent external pressure (Hufbauer et al., 2019). From a political-economy perspective, sanctions operate not only through direct economic losses but also through domestic distributional effects, altered incentives among political and economic actors, and changes in the costs of policy adaptation (Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2018). In the case of Iran, sanctions have long formed an important component of U.S. foreign policy and have been employed to influence Tehran's strategic calculations across multiple domains (Eslami & Naghdi, 2016). More recent studies continue to emphasize the centrality of sanctions in shaping Iran's international relations and its position in global politics (Kenan, 2025). At the same time, public and political support within sanctioning states may itself be sensitive to how sanctions are framed, justified, and communicated, suggesting that sanctions are embedded in domestic political processes as well as international strategic competition (Kantorowicz & Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, 2026). These developments underscore the need to analyze sanctions not merely as external restrictions but as structural

conditions that reshape the strategic value of a country's geographical position, economic resources, regional partnerships, technological capacities, and institutional resilience.

A particularly important theoretical development in understanding modern sanctions concerns the strategic use of global economic interdependence. The concept of weaponized interdependence explains how states that occupy central positions in global financial, informational, and production networks can exploit those positions to monitor, constrain, or coerce other actors (Farrell & Newman, 2023). Under such conditions, access to international payment systems, banking networks, logistics chains, critical technologies, insurance services, and dominant markets may acquire direct geopolitical significance. The same interdependence that facilitates trade and economic growth can therefore become a source of strategic vulnerability when control over key nodes is concentrated in the hands of powerful states. This perspective is especially relevant to Iran, which has faced restrictions affecting access to international finance, oil markets, foreign investment, technology, shipping, and insurance. The experience of Iran also reinforces the broader realist argument that economic interdependence should not automatically be interpreted as a guarantee against geopolitical rivalry or strategic conflict (Mearsheimer, 2021). Instead, interdependence can produce both opportunities and asymmetric vulnerabilities, depending on the structure of economic relationships and the distribution of political power. For Iran, this creates a dual strategic challenge: reducing exposure to externally controlled networks while simultaneously expanding alternative forms of connectivity that can sustain trade, investment, transit, and regional economic interaction. This duality places geoeconomics at the center of sanctions resilience because a state's ability to withstand economic coercion depends not only on domestic adjustment but also on its capacity to reposition itself within regional and transregional networks.

The economic consequences of sanctions on Iran have been significant and multidimensional. Restrictions on oil exports, energy-sector investment, access to capital, and international transactions have directly affected some of the most important sources of national revenue and external economic engagement. Research examining

Iran's oil and gas sector demonstrates that sanctions have constrained production, investment, technology acquisition, and the international commercialization of energy resources (Dezhpasand et al., 2024). The welfare consequences of oil sanctions are also substantial, as changes in energy revenues transmit through production, consumption, employment, prices, public finance, and household welfare (Sadeghvand et al., 2025). Sanctions interact with domestic macroeconomic pressures as well, particularly exchange-rate volatility, import costs, and constraints on access to intermediate and capital goods. Evidence concerning Iranian imports indicates that sanctions and exchange-rate fluctuations jointly influence trade performance and the cost structure of the economy (Shokri & Farhadi, 2026). These economic effects are magnified by the extraterritorial reach of secondary sanctions, which can discourage even firms and institutions not directly subject to primary restrictions from engaging with the sanctioned economy. The withdrawal or reduced engagement of European firms in response to U.S. secondary sanctions illustrates how legal and financial risk can translate into private-sector disengagement even where political authorities may support continued economic interaction (Bagheri & Sabbaghian, 2024). The European Union's approach to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action likewise demonstrates how secondary sanctions can constrain the practical implementation of political commitments by raising compliance risks for firms, banks, and investors (Bahramipour et al., 2023). From a legal perspective, unilateral sanctions and United Nations Security Council sanctions also differ in their legal bases, legitimacy claims, enforcement mechanisms, and extraterritorial consequences, differences that are particularly important for understanding the international environment in which Iran must formulate adaptive strategies (Alavi et al., 2025). These conditions make it necessary to identify not simply the sectors harmed by sanctions, but the specific strategic capacities that can reduce dependence on vulnerable channels.

Iran nevertheless possesses a distinctive set of geopolitical assets that can potentially offset some of the constraints generated by sanctions. Its geographical position connects the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, while also placing the country close to major maritime routes and important energy-producing and energy-

consuming regions. This location gives Iran significant potential as a transit, logistics, energy, and commercial corridor. Classical geopolitical and geoeconomic analyses of regional energy routes have long recognized the importance of Iran's position in connecting major energy producers and consumers, including the strategic implications of proposed energy corridors such as the Iran-India gas pipeline (Ezzati & Veisi, 2006). Maritime geography is equally significant. The Sea of Oman and the Makran coast provide direct access to open waters and possess considerable strategic importance for port development, maritime trade, energy transportation, logistics, and Iran's broader maritime development strategy (Ahmadi & Badiei, 2022). The development of these coastal and transit capacities can potentially reduce overdependence on narrower commercial routes and enhance Iran's role in regional supply chains. Yet geographical advantage alone does not automatically translate into geoeconomic power. The effective utilization of corridors, ports, border markets, energy infrastructure, and regional trade opportunities depends on institutional coordination, investment, regulatory efficiency, diplomatic engagement, and the ability to create reliable commercial networks. Accordingly, the strategic value of geopolitical capacity is conditional upon the quality of domestic governance and the broader policy framework within which geographical resources are mobilized.

Existing research has identified a number of obstacles that limit Iran's ability to transform geopolitical advantages into sustained geoeconomic gains. Barriers include institutional fragmentation, bureaucratic inefficiency, infrastructural deficiencies, weak coordination among relevant agencies, inconsistent policy implementation, and the disruptive effects of sanctions themselves (Rezaei & Norouzi, 2024). Such limitations are especially important because sanctions place a premium on flexibility, coordination, and rapid adaptation. In a highly constrained external environment, fragmented decision-making can increase transaction costs, reduce investor confidence, weaken the efficiency of transit and trade policy, and prevent the country from exploiting emerging regional opportunities. The importance of economic governance therefore becomes inseparable from the question of geopolitical capacity. Similarly, strategic resilience requires more than crisis management; it requires

systematic identification of vulnerabilities, diversification of economic relations, strengthening of domestic productive capacities, and institutional mechanisms capable of maintaining essential economic functions under external pressure. Research on strategies for enhancing resilience against economic sanctions emphasizes the importance of coordinated economic, institutional, and foreign-policy responses rather than reliance on isolated policy measures (Zamanianfar et al., 2024). Earlier analyses of the resistance economy likewise underscore the potential contribution of domestic production, reduced external vulnerability, strategic self-sufficiency, and improved management of national resources in mitigating the effects of international sanctions (Azimi & Rezaei, 2020). These perspectives suggest that national resilience and geoeconomic engagement should not be treated as mutually exclusive strategies; rather, domestic resilience can provide the foundation for more effective regional and international economic interaction.

The expansion of regional and extra-regional partnerships has consequently become an increasingly important component of Iran's geoeconomic adaptation. Relations with neighboring countries and major non-Western powers offer opportunities for market diversification, investment, energy cooperation, transit development, and alternative financial arrangements. Iran-China economic relations are particularly significant in this respect, as U.S. sanctions have contributed to a reconfiguration of trade and investment incentives and have increased the strategic relevance of geoeconomic interaction with China (Ghasemi & Heydari, 2024). Regional and multilateral organizations may likewise provide institutional channels for expanding cooperation beyond sanction-dominated economic networks. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has been discussed as a framework through which Iran may strengthen regional economic and political linkages and reduce some of the effects of international sanctions (Safari & Mohammadi, 2023). Broader engagement with emerging multilateral groupings may also support diversification in trade, finance, energy, and diplomacy. Such diversification does not eliminate sanctions-related risks, but it can alter the distribution of those risks by reducing dependence on a narrow group of markets, currencies, financial institutions, or political partners. In this sense, regional

cooperation is not merely a diplomatic objective; it is a practical component of geoeconomic resilience.

The relationship between sanctions and diplomacy further demonstrates that coercion and negotiation frequently operate simultaneously. Sanctions may be designed to increase bargaining leverage, but their effects on negotiation outcomes depend on the strategic calculations of both sanctioning and sanctioned parties. Research on the interaction between international sanctions and multilateral negotiations in the context of Iran's nuclear program shows that sanctions are embedded in broader diplomatic processes and can influence both incentives and constraints surrounding negotiation (Isaac & Fouda, 2026). This relationship complicates any simple interpretation of sanctions as either successful or unsuccessful. Even when sanctions impose substantial costs, the political consequences of those costs may vary depending on domestic resilience, alternative partnerships, perceived legitimacy, and the availability of strategic substitutes. For this reason, the effectiveness of Iran's response cannot be assessed solely through aggregate economic indicators. It also depends on whether the country can convert geopolitical location, regional connectivity, energy resources, productive capacity, technological innovation, and diplomatic networks into a coherent set of strategic instruments.

Technology and alternative financial mechanisms also increasingly influence the ability of sanctioned economies to adapt. The growing importance of digital trade, financial technology, alternative settlement systems, local-currency arrangements, and new forms of logistics management creates opportunities to reduce some forms of dependence on conventional financial and commercial channels. Nevertheless, such mechanisms are not costless or risk-free. They may face technological, regulatory, legal, cybersecurity, and geopolitical constraints, and their effectiveness depends heavily on institutional capacity and international acceptance. The same is true of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, smart logistics, and digital infrastructure, which can improve trade facilitation, port efficiency, supply-chain monitoring, and resource management but require investment, technical expertise, regulatory coordination, and protection against cyber threats. This reinforces the need for strategic prioritization: Iran possesses multiple possible channels for improving

sanctions resilience, but these channels vary considerably in feasibility, cost, implementation time, sustainability, and geopolitical risk.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship on sanctions, resistance economy, regional organizations, energy, maritime geography, and external economic relations, an important analytical gap remains. Much of the literature examines individual dimensions in isolation, such as the legal structure of sanctions, the effects of oil restrictions, bilateral relations, maritime geography, or regional institutions. There is comparatively less integrated analysis that simultaneously evaluates Iran's geopolitical capacities, geoeconomic resources, economic diplomacy, alternative financial mechanisms, resilience capabilities, emerging technologies, institutional barriers, and strategic foresight within a unified prioritization framework. This gap is particularly consequential because policy decisions under sanctions are inherently multi-criteria decisions. A strategy that is highly effective may be financially costly; one that is feasible may carry greater geopolitical risk; another may produce short-term benefits but limited sustainability. Accordingly, strategic decision-making requires methods capable of comparing alternatives across multiple criteria rather than relying solely on descriptive analysis or single-dimensional rankings. Multi-Criteria Decision-Making techniques provide a suitable analytical framework for this purpose because they allow competing strategic alternatives to be assessed simultaneously in relation to effectiveness, feasibility, cost, time, sustainability, risk, and broader applicability.

The integration of expert assessment with statistical analysis, SWOT-based strategy formulation, and a technique such as TOPSIS therefore offers a structured way to move from the identification of capacities and constraints to the prioritization of actionable strategies. Such an approach is especially appropriate in a context characterized by uncertainty, heterogeneous expert judgments, competing national objectives, and multiple dimensions of external pressure. It also enables the analysis to capture the interaction between strengths and opportunities, such as Iran's crossroads location and regional market access, and weaknesses and threats, including governance deficiencies, infrastructural constraints, secondary sanctions, and geopolitical risks. By combining descriptive and inferential statistics with a multi-criteria ranking process, it becomes possible to

distinguish between capacities that experts regard as generally important and strategies that perform relatively well across several decision criteria. This provides a more policy-relevant basis for identifying strategic priorities than a purely narrative assessment of sanctions and geopolitical potential.

Accordingly, the aim of this study was to identify, evaluate, and strategically prioritize Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities under sanctions and to rank the resulting strategic alternatives using an integrated framework of expert assessment, SWOT analysis, and Multi-Criteria Decision-Making through the TOPSIS technique.

2. Methodology

This study employed an applied, quantitative, descriptive-survey research design to identify, evaluate, and strategically prioritize Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities under conditions of international sanctions. The applied orientation of the study was selected because its primary objective was not merely to describe Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic characteristics, but to generate an evidence-based framework for prioritizing capacities and strategic options that could contribute to economic resilience, regional integration, diversification of external economic relations, and more effective utilization of the country's geographical, economic, technological, and infrastructural advantages. The descriptive-survey design was considered appropriate because the principal empirical data were obtained directly from experts through a structured questionnaire and were subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics, nonparametric inferential procedures, and multi-criteria decision-making techniques. The dominant methodological approach was quantitative, as the main variables were operationalized through numerically scaled questionnaire items and analyzed using statistical indicators and ranking procedures. Nevertheless, the development of the research instrument incorporated a qualitative preparatory component in which relevant theoretical literature, policy documents, geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations, the conceptual requirements of the research problem, and expert judgments were examined to determine the principal dimensions and indicators to be included in the questionnaire. Thus, qualitative inputs were used

primarily for conceptualization and instrument development, whereas the empirical assessment and final prioritization were conducted quantitatively.

The statistical population consisted of experts possessing specialized knowledge or professional experience in fields directly related to the strategic geopolitical and geoeconomic position of Iran. The target expert community encompassed specialists in geopolitics, geoeconomics, economics, foreign trade, international and regional relations, energy, transportation and transit, emerging technologies, economic diplomacy, and public policy. Because the research question required informed judgments concerning complex and interconnected strategic issues rather than estimates representative of the general population, purposive expert sampling was employed. A total of 25 experts participated in the survey. Participants were selected according to predefined eligibility criteria intended to ensure the substantive credibility of their assessments. These criteria included possession of relevant academic qualifications, research or executive experience in one or more domains covered by the study, familiarity with Iran's geopolitical and economic circumstances and the implications of sanctions, and willingness to participate knowingly in the research process. The use of an expert-based sample was particularly appropriate because several constructs examined in the study, including geopolitical leverage, geoeconomic opportunities, alternative financial mechanisms, regional economic diplomacy, strategic resilience, and future-oriented policy priorities, require contextual and professional judgment that cannot be adequately captured through a general-population survey. Accordingly, the sample was designed to maximize the informational relevance and expertise of respondents rather than statistical representativeness in the conventional population-sampling sense.

The primary data collection instrument was a researcher-developed structured questionnaire comprising 80 items distributed across eight conceptually distinct but strategically interconnected dimensions. The questionnaire was developed through a systematic review of the conceptual and theoretical literature pertaining to geopolitics, geoeconomics, sanctions, regional cooperation, economic resilience, alternative financial mechanisms, emerging technologies, strategic policy, and future-oriented

planning. Relevant policy documents and the specific requirements of the research problem were additionally considered, and consultation with knowledgeable specialists was used to refine the conceptual coverage and wording of the items. The resulting instrument was intended to capture a comprehensive range of capacities, constraints, mechanisms, and strategic alternatives relevant to Iran's ability to employ its geopolitical and geoeconomic assets under restrictive external conditions.

The first dimension, geopolitical capacities (GP), contained 12 items examining Iran's geographical position, territorial and spatial advantages, accessibility, international and regional transit corridors, ports, coastlines, and other location-based strategic capabilities. The second dimension, geoeconomic capacities (GE), consisted of 12 items addressing economic resources, productive and industrial capacities, access to markets, strategic commodities, and the potential of the knowledge-based economy. Economic diplomacy and regional cooperation (ED) constituted the third dimension and included 12 items designed to assess opportunities for cooperation with regional and extra-regional states, economic organizations, and institutional arrangements capable of strengthening Iran's external economic relations. The fourth dimension, alternative financial and trade mechanisms (FM), consisted of 10 items relating to instruments such as digital currencies, bilateral or multilateral monetary arrangements, financial technologies, alternative settlement mechanisms, and electronic commerce. Economic resistance and resilience (ER) formed the fifth dimension and contained 10 items dealing with self-sufficiency, food security, economic productivity, domestic capacity development, energy management, and mechanisms capable of reducing economic vulnerability to external pressure.

The sixth dimension, emerging technologies and innovation (NT), comprised eight items examining the strategic utilization of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, cybersecurity technologies, smart logistics, and related technological innovations. The seventh dimension, barriers and challenges to capacity utilization (CH), consisted of eight items addressing governance deficiencies, interorganizational coordination problems, bureaucratic constraints, infrastructural limitations, and sanctions-related

obstacles that may restrict the effective exploitation of geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities. Finally, the eighth dimension, macro-level strategies and foresight (ST), contained eight items concerning strategic prioritization, policy integration, institutional coordination, foresight, innovation, and long-term strategic planning. Taken together, these eight domains were designed to represent both the endogenous capacities available to Iran and the institutional, technological, financial, diplomatic, and structural conditions affecting their strategic utilization.

All questionnaire items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating “strongly disagree,” to 5, indicating “strongly agree.” This scaling procedure enabled quantitative comparison of expert evaluations across individual items and broader dimensions while also allowing measures of central tendency, dispersion, consensus, and agreement to be calculated. Content validity was established through examination of the extent to which the questionnaire adequately covered the eight predefined conceptual domains and corresponded with the objectives and research questions of the study. The development of the items from the theoretical literature, documentary evidence, the substantive research problem, and expert consultation further supported the content relevance of the instrument.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. The coefficient for the complete 80-item questionnaire was 0.961, based on 24 complete valid cases, demonstrating excellent overall internal consistency. Reliability coefficients for most individual dimensions were also satisfactory to high. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.882 for geopolitical capacities, 0.866 for geoeconomic capacities, 0.885 for economic diplomacy and regional cooperation, 0.899 for alternative financial and trade mechanisms, 0.904 for economic resistance and resilience, 0.822 for emerging technologies and innovation, and 0.790 for macro-level strategies and foresight. The barriers and challenges dimension produced a comparatively lower alpha coefficient of 0.555. This coefficient was interpreted cautiously because the dimension intentionally incorporated heterogeneous categories of constraints, including governance problems, inadequate coordination, infrastructural deficiencies, bureaucracy, and sanctions. These barriers are conceptually related in terms of their

restrictive effects but do not necessarily constitute manifestations of a single highly homogeneous latent construct. Accordingly, the lower internal consistency of this dimension may partly reflect the multidimensional character of the barriers being assessed rather than solely an inadequacy of the instrument. The number of valid responses used in the dimension-specific reliability analyses ranged from 24 to 25 because of occasional missing responses.

Data analysis was conducted through a sequential procedure combining descriptive statistics, nonparametric inferential analysis, reliability assessment, strategic analysis, and multi-criteria decision-making. Initially, responses to the 80 questionnaire items were summarized using descriptive statistical indicators, including the mean, median, standard deviation, interquartile range (IQR), and percentage agreement. Percentage agreement was operationalized as the proportion of respondents selecting either 4 (“agree”) or 5 (“strongly agree”) on the five-point Likert scale. The mean was used to represent the overall level of expert endorsement for each item and dimension, while the median provided a robust measure of central tendency appropriate for ordinal expert-rating data. Standard deviation was calculated to determine the dispersion of expert judgments, and the IQR was used to evaluate the concentration or variability of responses around the median. The proportion of ratings at levels 4 and 5 provided an additional readily interpretable indicator of the extent to which experts supported each capacity, mechanism, challenge, or strategic proposition. Because the same group of experts evaluated multiple related dimensions and the resulting data were based on ordinal Likert-type ratings, nonparametric statistical procedures were employed for comparative analyses. The Friedman test was used to determine whether statistically significant differences existed among the relative rankings of the eight major dimensions of the research instrument. The test enabled comparison of repeated expert evaluations across geopolitical capacities, geoeconomic capacities, economic diplomacy and regional cooperation, alternative financial and trade mechanisms, economic resistance and resilience, emerging technologies and innovation, barriers and challenges, and macro-level strategies and foresight without requiring the normality assumptions associated with parametric repeated-measures procedures. Mean

ranks generated through the Friedman analysis were used to identify the relative position of each dimension according to the collective judgments of the participating experts.

Kendall's coefficient of concordance (Kendall's W) was employed to assess the degree of agreement among experts regarding the ranking of the dimensions and strategic priorities. Kendall's W ranges from 0, representing an absence of systematic agreement among raters, to 1, indicating complete concordance. Its application was particularly important because the validity of an expert-based prioritization framework depends not only on the average importance assigned to specific factors but also on the extent to which the participating experts demonstrate convergence in their assessments. Kendall's W was therefore interpreted alongside the Friedman test to distinguish differences in rankings from the strength of inter-expert consensus underlying those rankings. Internal consistency of the measurement instrument was assessed separately using Cronbach's alpha for the full questionnaire and each of its eight dimensions.

Following the statistical assessment of the geopolitical, geoeconomic, diplomatic, financial, technological, resilience-related, institutional, and strategic factors, the findings were synthesized within a SWOT framework to derive strategic alternatives based on the interaction among strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The SWOT stage served as the strategic formulation component of the analysis by translating the evaluated capacities and constraints into actionable strategic alternatives. Because conventional SWOT analysis does not by itself provide a sufficiently discriminating quantitative mechanism for establishing the relative priority of competing strategies, the Technique for Order Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution (TOPSIS), as a multi-criteria decision-making method, was applied for final strategy prioritization.

In the TOPSIS procedure, the strategic alternatives derived from the SWOT matrix were evaluated against the relevant decision criteria using the expert assessments. The decision matrix was first constructed from the evaluations assigned to the strategic alternatives across the selected criteria. Because criteria may differ in measurement magnitude and relative importance, the decision matrix was normalized to make criterion values comparable, after which criterion

weights were incorporated to obtain the weighted normalized decision matrix. Positive and negative ideal solutions were subsequently determined. The positive ideal solution represented the theoretically most desirable performance across the decision criteria, whereas the negative ideal solution represented the least desirable performance. The Euclidean distance of each strategic alternative from both the positive and negative ideal solutions was then calculated. A relative closeness coefficient was obtained by comparing each alternative's distance from the negative ideal solution with its combined distance from both ideal solutions. Strategies with higher closeness coefficients were interpreted as being nearer to the positive ideal solution and farther from the negative ideal solution and therefore received higher strategic priority. This integrated analytical procedure enabled the study to move beyond simple descriptive identification of geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities and to produce a systematic, expert-based, quantitatively supported prioritization of strategic alternatives for utilizing Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic potential under sanctions.

3. Findings

The descriptive analysis of the eight principal dimensions revealed generally high levels of expert agreement regarding the strategic importance of Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities under sanctions. As shown in Table 1, Economic Resistance and Resilience (ER) obtained the highest overall mean score of 4.445 and was therefore ranked first among the eight dimensions. Macro-Level Strategies and Foresight (ST) ranked second with a mean of 4.410, followed closely by Barriers and Challenges (CH) with a mean of 4.405 and Geopolitical Capacities (GP) with a mean of 4.403. Emerging Technologies and Innovation (NT) occupied the fifth position with a mean of 4.279, while Geoeconomic Capacities (GE) ranked sixth with a mean of 4.167. Economic Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation (ED) ranked seventh with a mean of 4.113. Alternative Financial and Trade Mechanisms (FM) received the lowest overall mean score of 3.888 and consequently occupied the eighth position. The results also indicated that the highest average percentage of ratings in the "agree" and "strongly agree" categories was observed for Macro-Level Strategies and Foresight at 91.50%, followed by Economic Resistance and Resilience at

90.75% and Barriers and Challenges at 90.50%. These findings indicate that the experts attached particular importance to economic resilience, strategic policy

integration, foresight, and the resolution of structural constraints affecting the utilization of Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities.

Table 1

Descriptive Indicators and Ranking of the Eight Main Dimensions

Dimension Code	Dimension	Mean	Mean Median	Mean IQR	Mean Agreement 4+5 (%)	Rank
GP	Geopolitical Capacities	4.403	4.583	0.833	89.33	4
GE	Geoeconomic Capacities	4.167	4.167	1.250	80.67	6
ED	Economic Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation	4.113	4.250	1.000	78.33	7
FM	Alternative Financial and Trade Mechanisms	3.888	4.000	1.000	73.20	8
ER	Economic Resistance and Resilience	4.445	4.600	0.900	90.75	1
NT	Emerging Technologies and Innovation	4.279	4.375	0.938	84.44	5
CH	Barriers and Challenges	4.405	4.625	0.875	90.50	3
ST	Macro-Level Strategies and Foresight	4.410	4.750	1.000	91.50	2

At the individual-item level, the ten highest-rated items among the 80 questionnaire items are presented in Table 2. The highest score was obtained for CH-02, "Weakness of Economic Governance," with a mean of 4.80 and complete agreement of 100%. Because the CH dimension represents barriers and challenges, the high score assigned to this item should be interpreted in a negative direction, indicating that experts perceived weak economic governance as a particularly severe obstacle to the effective utilization of Iran's strategic capacities. The second-highest rated item was GP-04, "Access to Open Waters," with a mean of 4.76 and 100% agreement, underscoring the strategic significance of Iran's maritime accessibility. ER-01, "Self-Sufficiency in Wheat Production," GP-06, "Makran Coasts," and CH-03, "Institutional Incoordination," each achieved a mean score of 4.68. The presence of both capacity-related and challenge-related indicators among the highest-rated

items suggests that experts simultaneously emphasized the strategic importance of major geographic and resilience assets and the seriousness of domestic institutional constraints.

Further high-ranking indicators included GP-02, "Iran's Crossroads Location," and ER-02, "Food Security," both with mean scores of 4.64. ED-09, relating to BRICS, received a mean of 4.60, demonstrating the perceived importance of participation in emerging regional and extra-regional economic arrangements. ST-04, "Strategy Prioritization," and ST-08, "Policy Integration," both obtained mean scores of 4.56, indicating strong expert support for coordinated, prioritized, and integrated strategic policymaking. Coefficients of variation for the highest-rated items remained relatively low, especially for weakness of economic governance and access to open waters, suggesting relatively strong convergence in expert assessments of these factors.

Table 2

Ten Items with the Highest Mean Scores

Rank	Item Code	Dimension	Indicator	N	Mean	Median	SD	IQR	Agreement (%)	4+5	CV (%)
1	CH-02	CH	Weakness of Economic Governance	25	4.80	5	0.408	0	100		8.51
2	GP-04	GP	Access to Open Waters	25	4.76	5	0.436	0	100		9.16
3	ER-01	ER	Self-Sufficiency in Wheat Production	25	4.68	5	0.852	0	96		18.21
3	GP-06	GP	Makran Coasts	25	4.68	5	0.557	1	96		11.90
3	CH-03	CH	Institutional Incoordination	25	4.68	5	0.557	1	96		11.90
6	GP-02	GP	Iran's Crossroads Location	25	4.64	5	0.569	1	96		12.25
6	ER-02	ER	Food Security	25	4.64	5	0.569	1	96		12.25
8	ED-09	ED	BRICS	25	4.60	5	0.764	0	84		16.60
9	ST-04	ST	Strategy Prioritization	25	4.56	5	0.651	1	92		14.27
9	ST-08	ST	Policy Integration	25	4.56	5	0.712	1	96		15.61

The inferential statistical analysis confirmed that the observed differences among the eight major dimensions were statistically significant. The Friedman test produced a chi-square statistic of 33.75 with seven degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.000019. Because this probability value was substantially below the conventional significance threshold of 0.05, the null hypothesis that the eight dimensions had identical rankings was rejected. Therefore, the eight domains differed significantly in terms of their relative importance or evaluation, providing a statistically justified basis for strategic prioritization.

Kendall's coefficient of concordance was also calculated to determine the extent of agreement among experts regarding the relative ranking of the eight dimensions.

The resulting coefficient was $W = 0.200896$, approximately 0.2009, indicating a low-to-moderate degree of concordance among expert judgments. The corresponding chi-square statistic was 33.75, with a p-value of 0.000019, confirming that the ranking pattern was statistically significant. Although the level of agreement was not high, this result is plausible given the multidimensional and expertise-dependent nature of geopolitical and geoeconomic assessment. The relatively moderate convergence of judgments further supports the use of a multi-criteria decision-making framework, since the strategic problem incorporates multiple competing considerations and does not lend itself to evaluation through a single criterion.

Table 3

Results of the Friedman Test and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance

Statistical Test / Indicator	Value	Interpretation
Number of Dimensions	8	Comparison of the eight principal domains
Experts Included	24	Complete cases used in the analysis
Friedman χ^2	33.75	Significant rank differences among dimensions
Degrees of Freedom	7	Based on eight compared dimensions
Friedman p-value	0.000019	Statistically significant
Kendall's W	0.2009	Low-to-moderate rank agreement
Corresponding χ^2	33.75	Significant ranking pattern

Kendall p-value 0.000019 Statistically significant

In the final stage of analysis, the statistical findings were integrated with the logic of the SWOT framework to develop and prioritize strategic alternatives. Ten leading strategies were evaluated using TOPSIS according to the decision criteria of effectiveness, feasibility, cost, implementation time, sustainability, geopolitical risk, and transferability. The resulting rankings are shown in Table 4. The highest-priority strategy was "Development of Regional Cooperation through Iran's Crossroads Location," which obtained a TOPSIS score of 0.85. This was followed by "Strengthening Transit Corridors through the Makran Coasts and Southern Ports," with a score of 0.82. Both of these were SO strategies, indicating an emphasis on using domestic strengths to exploit external opportunities.

The third-ranked strategy was "Using the Geopolitical Position to Reduce Sanctions Vulnerability," categorized as an ST strategy, with a TOPSIS score of 0.80. This was followed by "Using Economic Resilience to Counter

Sanctions-Related Threats" with a score of 0.78. The fifth-ranked strategy, "Exporting Petrochemical and Knowledge-Based Products through Regional Markets," received a score of 0.76. A WO strategy, "Using International Cooperation to Reform Economic Governance," ranked sixth with a score of 0.74, while the WT strategy "Reforming Economic Governance with a Sanctions-Resilience Approach" ranked seventh with a score of 0.72.

Technology-oriented and institutional diversification strategies occupied the remaining positions among the ten leading alternatives. "Development of Smart Logistics and Smart Ports" ranked eighth with a score of 0.70, followed by "Using Emerging Technologies to Counter Cyber Threats" with a score of 0.68. Finally, "Using BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to Diversify Foreign Relations" ranked tenth with a TOPSIS score of 0.66. Overall, the ranking pattern demonstrates that the most highly prioritized strategies were those that combined Iran's geographical location, transit potential, regional connectivity, and

economic resilience with opportunities for regional and international cooperation. At the same time, the presence of governance reform, technological innovation, and diversification of foreign relations

among the top strategies indicates that the experts considered internal institutional improvement and adaptive capacity to be essential complements to geopolitical and socioeconomic advantages.

Table 4

Top Ten Strategies Based on TOPSIS Prioritization

Rank	Strategy Type	Strategy	TOPSIS Score
1	SO	Development of Regional Cooperation through Iran's Crossroads Location	0.85
2	SO	Strengthening Transit Corridors through the Makran Coasts and Southern Ports	0.82
3	ST	Using the Geopolitical Position to Reduce Sanctions Vulnerability	0.80
4	ST	Using Economic Resilience to Counter Sanctions-Related Threats	0.78
5	SO	Exporting Petrochemical and Knowledge-Based Products through Regional Markets	0.76
6	WO	Using International Cooperation to Reform Economic Governance	0.74
7	WT	Reforming Economic Governance with a Sanctions-Resilience Approach	0.72
8	SO	Development of Smart Logistics and Smart Ports	0.70
9	ST	Using Emerging Technologies to Counter Cyber Threats	0.68
10	SO	Using BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to Diversify Foreign Relations	0.66

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study showed that the strategic utilization of Iran's geopolitical and socioeconomic capacities under sanctions is shaped by a combination of resilience, governance quality, geographic advantages, regional connectivity, technological adaptation, and strategic coordination. Among the eight principal dimensions, Economic Resistance and Resilience received the highest mean score of 4.445, followed by Macro-Level Strategies and Foresight with a mean of 4.410, Barriers and Challenges with a mean of 4.405, and Geopolitical Capacities with a mean of 4.403. Emerging Technologies and Innovation occupied the fifth position, followed by Socioeconomic Capacities and Economic Diplomacy and Regional Cooperation, while Alternative Financial and Trade Mechanisms received the lowest mean score. The overall pattern suggests that experts did not view sanctions primarily as a problem that could be addressed through isolated financial circumvention mechanisms; rather, they attached greater importance to strengthening the internal resilience of the economy, improving long-term strategic coordination, resolving structural and governance-related constraints, and exploiting Iran's geographic position. This result is consistent with the literature on economic resilience under sanctions, which emphasizes that the ability of a sanctioned economy to

absorb external shocks depends substantially on the strength of domestic productive capacity, diversification, institutional coordination, and reduced vulnerability to externally controlled channels (Azimi & Rezaei, 2020). Similarly, strategies designed to enhance resilience against economic sanctions have been shown to require coordinated action across economic, institutional, and foreign-policy domains rather than narrowly focused short-term responses (Zamanianfar et al., 2024).

The first-place ranking of Economic Resistance and Resilience is particularly significant because it suggests that experts considered domestic adaptive capacity to be the foundational condition for effective geopolitical and socioeconomic maneuvering. Within this dimension, self-sufficiency in wheat production and food security were among the highest-rated individual indicators, receiving mean scores of 4.68 and 4.64, respectively. These results indicate that resilience was interpreted not only in macroeconomic terms but also through the capacity to secure essential goods, maintain strategic autonomy, and reduce exposure to external disruption. This interpretation aligns with previous studies emphasizing that sanctions can produce substantial welfare losses through their effects on energy revenues, production, consumption, and household welfare (Sadeghvand et al., 2025). The importance assigned to food security and domestic production also corresponds with the broader resistance-economy literature, which emphasizes self-

sufficiency, productivity improvement, and reduced reliance on strategically vulnerable imports as key mechanisms of sanctions resilience (Azimi & Rezaei, 2020). The result is also understandable in light of evidence that sanctions and exchange-rate fluctuations jointly affect Iran's import performance and increase the economic costs of external dependence (Shokri & Farhadi, 2026). Consequently, the high ranking of resilience-related factors reflects the experts' recognition that geopolitical opportunities cannot be effectively exploited when basic economic and supply-side vulnerabilities remain unresolved.

Macro-Level Strategies and Foresight ranked second, and two of its items, strategy prioritization and policy integration, were among the ten highest-rated indicators. This result demonstrates that experts perceived the coordination and sequencing of policy interventions as nearly as important as the underlying economic and geographic capacities themselves. The significance of this finding lies in the fact that sanctions generate simultaneous pressures across trade, finance, investment, technology, energy, and diplomacy, making fragmented policymaking particularly costly. Existing research has emphasized that the successful management of sanctions requires coherent institutional responses and strategic alignment across different policy sectors (Zamanianfar et al., 2024). The current findings extend this argument by showing that foresight and policy integration are not secondary administrative concerns but central components of strategic prioritization. In a sanctions environment characterized by uncertainty and rapid shifts in international alignments, policy foresight can help identify emerging opportunities and risks, while integrated decision-making can reduce inconsistencies between economic, diplomatic, technological, and infrastructural strategies. This is particularly important given that sanctions regimes themselves evolve over time, moving from broad measures toward more sophisticated targeted and network-based forms of pressure (Nephew, 2023).

The third-ranked dimension, Barriers and Challenges, received a mean score of 4.405, while weakness of economic governance emerged as the single highest-rated item across all 80 indicators, with a mean of 4.80 and 100% expert agreement. Institutional incoordination also ranked among the highest-rated items, with a mean of 4.68. Because the direction of this

construct was negative, these high scores indicate that experts regarded governance weaknesses and institutional fragmentation as severe constraints on Iran's ability to capitalize on its strategic assets. This finding strongly corresponds with research identifying weak coordination, bureaucratic inefficiency, infrastructural shortcomings, and fragmented policymaking as major obstacles to utilizing Iran's geopolitical capacities under sanctions (Rezaei & Norouzi, 2024). The result is also consistent with the logic of weaponized interdependence, according to which vulnerability is not determined solely by the existence of external coercive networks but also by the target state's ability to restructure domestic and international economic relationships (Farrell & Newman, 2023). Where governance is weak, even favorable geography or substantial resource endowments may fail to generate strategic advantage. The findings therefore suggest that Iran's sanctions vulnerability is not exclusively externally imposed; it is partly mediated by domestic institutional capacity and the efficiency with which strategic assets are organized and governed.

Geopolitical Capacities ranked fourth overall, but several individual geopolitical indicators were among the highest-rated items in the study. Access to open waters received a mean of 4.76, the Makran coasts received 4.68, and Iran's crossroads location received 4.64. This pattern indicates that experts strongly recognized Iran's geographic position as a source of strategic leverage even though the broader geopolitical dimension ranked slightly below resilience, foresight, and governance-related factors. The result closely aligns with the literature emphasizing the strategic importance of the Sea of Oman and Makran coast for maritime development, port expansion, logistics, and international connectivity (Ahmadi & Badiie, 2022). It also corresponds with earlier geoeconomic assessments that highlighted Iran's potential role in connecting energy-producing and energy-consuming regions through transnational infrastructure and energy corridors (Ezzati & Veisi, 2006). The distinction between the high scores of specific geographic assets and the somewhat lower overall rank of the geopolitical dimension is analytically important. It suggests that experts did not question the strategic value of geography itself; rather, they appear to have recognized that geography must be

operationalized through infrastructure, diplomacy, institutional competence, and economic policy. In other words, geographical advantage is a necessary but insufficient condition for strategic effectiveness.

The inferential findings further demonstrated that the eight dimensions were not perceived as equally important. The Friedman test produced a statistically significant chi-square value of 33.75 with a p-value of 0.000019, confirming meaningful differences in the ranking of the dimensions. At the same time, Kendall's W was 0.2009, indicating only low-to-moderate concordance among the participating experts. This combination is substantively informative. It shows that experts agreed that priorities were not identical, but their precise ordering was not highly uniform. Such a pattern is expected in a complex geopolitical and geoeconomic decision environment in which specialists from different backgrounds may assign different weights to economic, institutional, diplomatic, and technological considerations. The multidimensional character of sanctions further contributes to this variation. Sanctions may influence target states through trade, finance, technology, investment, energy, and diplomacy simultaneously, and their consequences are conditioned by domestic political economy and international coordination (Kaempfer & Lowenberg, 2018). The moderate level of expert agreement therefore reinforces the methodological appropriateness of using a Multi-Criteria Decision-Making approach rather than relying on a single aggregate judgment.

The final TOPSIS prioritization offers further insight into how the experts translated general capacities into actionable strategies. The highest-ranked strategy was the development of regional cooperation by exploiting Iran's crossroads location, with a TOPSIS score of 0.85. The second-ranked strategy was the strengthening of transit corridors through the Makran coasts and southern ports, with a score of 0.82. These two SO strategies demonstrate that the highest priorities were assigned to strategies that combine internal geographic strengths with external regional opportunities. This finding is highly consistent with research emphasizing the strategic importance of Iran's maritime geography and regional connectivity (Ahmadi & Badiei, 2022). It also corresponds with studies suggesting that regional and multilateral organizations can provide Iran with additional economic and political channels under

sanctions. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for example, has been identified as a framework that may help reduce the effects of sanctions by expanding regional interaction and institutional cooperation (Safari & Mohammadi, 2023). Similarly, Iran-China geoeconomic relations have become increasingly significant under U.S. sanctions because they provide opportunities for trade, investment, and strategic diversification (Ghasemi & Heydari, 2024).

The third- and fourth-ranked TOPSIS strategies involved using Iran's geopolitical position and economic resilience to reduce sanctions vulnerability. These findings reinforce the close interaction between geography and domestic resilience. Iran's strategic position may generate opportunities for transit, energy exchange, and regional commerce, but those opportunities can contribute to sanctions mitigation only when supported by institutional capacity and economic stability. This interpretation is consistent with studies showing that sanctions affecting the oil and gas sector can constrain production, investment, technology acquisition, and market access (Dezhpasand et al., 2024). It also aligns with the broader sanctions literature, which demonstrates that the effectiveness of sanctions depends partly on the target state's access to alternative markets and its ability to reorganize trade and financial relationships (Hufbauer et al., 2019). The present results therefore support the view that sanctions resilience is produced through a combination of domestic adjustment and external strategic diversification rather than through either dimension in isolation.

The fifth-ranked strategy, exporting petrochemical and knowledge-based products through regional markets, further illustrates the importance of economic diversification. This strategy reflects an effort to reduce dependence on crude-energy exports while simultaneously using geographically accessible markets to sustain external economic engagement. Such diversification is particularly relevant because sanctions on the energy sector have historically generated substantial macroeconomic and fiscal pressures for Iran (Dezhpasand et al., 2024). It also addresses a core weakness of sanctions-sensitive economies: excessive concentration in a limited range of export products and markets. From the perspective of sanctions theory, greater diversification raises the costs of comprehensive economic isolation because it expands the number of

potential commercial channels available to the targeted state (Hufbauer et al., 2019). At the same time, the feasibility of this strategy remains dependent on payment mechanisms, logistics, standards, regional demand, and regulatory coordination.

The sixth- and seventh-ranked strategies focused directly on economic governance reform, one through international cooperation and the other through a sanctions-resilience approach. Their placement among the top ten confirms that governance deficiencies were not treated merely as background constraints but as strategic targets in their own right. This result is consistent with the very high score assigned to weakness of economic governance and with previous research identifying governance and institutional coordination as central barriers to exploiting Iran's geopolitical capacities (Rezaei & Norouzi, 2024). The ranking of these strategies also demonstrates that external partnerships alone cannot substitute for domestic institutional reform. Even where regional markets, alternative partners, or multilateral organizations are available, weak governance can increase transaction costs, reduce predictability, and constrain the implementation of otherwise promising strategies.

The eighth- and ninth-ranked strategies emphasized smart logistics, smart ports, and emerging technologies for countering cyber threats. Although Emerging Technologies and Innovation ranked fifth among the eight dimensions, its presence in the TOPSIS shortlist indicates that technological adaptation was regarded as an important enabling mechanism. This result is consistent with the broader transformation of sanctions into increasingly network-based forms of coercion. As global finance, logistics, communications, and trade become more digitized, technological capability becomes directly relevant to both economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy. Weaponized interdependence theory specifically highlights the importance of control over network nodes and information infrastructures in contemporary economic coercion (Farrell & Newman, 2023). Accordingly, smart logistics, cybersecurity, and digital infrastructure may help reduce inefficiencies and vulnerabilities, although they can also create new dependencies if key technologies remain externally controlled.

The tenth-ranked strategy involved using BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to diversify foreign

relations. This finding aligns closely with the relatively high rating assigned to BRICS among individual questionnaire items and supports the argument that institutional diversification can complement bilateral economic relations. Regional and extra-regional groupings can offer alternative diplomatic forums, trade relationships, and coordination mechanisms, particularly when secondary sanctions limit engagement with Western firms and financial institutions. The effects of U.S. secondary sanctions on European corporate behavior demonstrate how private actors may withdraw from sanctioned markets even where their home governments do not formally endorse full economic disengagement (Bagheri & Sabbaghian, 2024). Similar dynamics were observed in the European Union's response to the JCPOA, where secondary sanctions reduced the practical capacity of European actors to maintain economic relations with Iran (Bahramipour et al., 2023). The legal distinction between unilateral and UN-based sanctions further complicates this environment by producing different legitimacy claims and extraterritorial consequences (Alavi et al., 2025). In this context, diversification toward BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China, and other regional partners can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce exposure to sanction-sensitive channels rather than as a complete substitute for global economic integration.

The comparatively low ranking of Alternative Financial and Trade Mechanisms is also noteworthy. Although digital currencies, monetary agreements, fintech, and electronic commerce are often discussed as sanctions-circumvention instruments, experts assigned this dimension the lowest mean score of 3.888. This suggests a cautious assessment of their practical effectiveness relative to structural strategies such as resilience, governance reform, transit development, and regional cooperation. Such caution is consistent with the broader literature showing that sanctions adaptation is constrained by the structure of international networks and by the ability of sanctioning states to exert pressure on third parties (Nephew, 2023). Secondary sanctions can discourage firms and banks from participating even in nominally legal transactions, limiting the effectiveness of alternative payment systems when broader commercial relationships remain exposed to U.S. jurisdiction or market access concerns (Bagheri & Sabbaghian, 2024). The finding therefore indicates that

financial innovation should be considered a complementary rather than standalone response to sanctions.

More broadly, the results reinforce the view that sanctions are embedded in strategic bargaining and international negotiation rather than operating solely as economic restrictions. Research on Iran's nuclear negotiations has shown that sanctions and multilateral diplomacy interact dynamically, influencing bargaining leverage, incentives, and the costs of policy choices (Isaac & Fouda, 2026). The strategic response to sanctions therefore requires a balance between internal resilience and external engagement. This is consistent with research emphasizing the role of sanctions in global politics and their use as instruments of coercive diplomacy (Kenan, 2025). It also corresponds with the long-standing interpretation of sanctions as a major component of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran (Eslami & Naghdi, 2016). At the same time, the persistence of geopolitical competition despite extensive economic interdependence supports the argument that states cannot rely exclusively on economic connectivity to neutralize strategic conflict (Mearsheimer, 2021). The present findings extend this logic by suggesting that resilience, geographic leverage, governance quality, regional diversification, and technological adaptation must be integrated rather than pursued separately.

Another important implication concerns the political sustainability of sanctions themselves. While this study focused on Iran's strategic responses, the literature indicates that sanctions policies also depend on support within sanctioning societies and political systems. Experimental evidence suggests that information provision can affect public support for international sanctions, meaning that the durability of sanctions may partly depend on how their objectives and consequences are perceived (Kantorowicz & Kantorowicz-Reznichenko, 2026). This adds another layer of uncertainty to the strategic environment because sanctions regimes are not fixed; they may intensify, weaken, or change in design as domestic and international political conditions evolve. This reinforces the importance of the high ranking assigned to foresight and policy integration in the present study.

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study relied on a purposive sample of 25 experts, and although this approach was

appropriate for a specialized strategic assessment, the relatively small sample limits the statistical generalizability of the results beyond the selected expert community. Second, the findings reflect expert judgments and therefore remain partly dependent on professional backgrounds, institutional experiences, and individual interpretations of geopolitical and economic developments. Third, the lower internal consistency observed for the Barriers and Challenges dimension indicates that this construct includes heterogeneous elements that may not function as a fully homogeneous scale. Fourth, TOPSIS rankings are sensitive to the criteria, weighting structure, and strategic alternatives included in the decision matrix, and alternative MCDM techniques or weighting procedures could generate somewhat different priority orders. Finally, the study captures expert assessments within a particular strategic context, while sanctions regimes, regional alignments, technologies, and trade opportunities can change rapidly over time.

Future research should expand the expert sample and include more systematically differentiated groups such as policymakers, private-sector executives, logistics specialists, energy experts, financial professionals, technology specialists, and regional trade practitioners to examine whether strategic priorities vary across professional communities. Longitudinal studies could assess how the ranking of geopolitical and geoeconomic capacities changes in response to shifts in sanctions intensity, regional conflicts, diplomatic agreements, or changes in global trade patterns. Future studies could also compare the results generated by TOPSIS with other MCDM techniques such as AHP, ANP, VIKOR, DEMATEL, or PROMETHEE to test the robustness of strategic rankings. Additional research could disaggregate the barriers and challenges dimension into more homogeneous subconstructs, including governance, infrastructure, bureaucracy, financial restrictions, and external geopolitical risks. Scenario-based studies would also be useful for comparing strategic priorities under different assumptions regarding sanctions relief, sanctions intensification, regional integration, energy-market changes, and technological development.

From a practical perspective, strategic planning should prioritize coordinated resilience-building, governance reform, transit development, and regional economic integration rather than relying predominantly on short-

term sanctions-circumvention instruments. Policymakers should strengthen interinstitutional coordination so that trade, transport, energy, foreign policy, technology, and industrial strategies operate within a unified framework. Investment in southern ports, the Makran coast, and major transit corridors should be linked to customs modernization, smart logistics, digital infrastructure, and regional trade agreements. Domestic resilience policies should concentrate on food security, strategic production capacity, energy efficiency, and diversification of export products. Greater emphasis should also be placed on reducing administrative barriers and improving economic governance, since the study identified these as among the most serious impediments to effective utilization of national capacities. Finally, engagement with regional and multilateral partners should be pursued in a diversified manner so that no single market, currency, financial channel, or political relationship becomes a new source of strategic dependence.

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.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

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

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