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Analyses

Iran's Foreign Policy under Raisi

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Raisi is suspicious of the West's intentions but has supported nuclear negotiations to revive the JCPOA.

Principlist Ebrahim Raisi was elected Iran's next president on 18 June 2021. He will succeed moderate President Hassan Rouhani in early August. Raisi will enter office at a crucial juncture as Iran and the West are engaged in ongoing technical negotiations aimed at reviving the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Raisi's landslide win in presidential elections will have important implications for Iran's relations with the outside world. Also, it will impact the strategic and political environment in the Middle East and beyond.

Iran's new president is trusted by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all state matters. It is widely predicted that the incoming Raisi administration will not be at odds with other institutions within Iran's ruling system since principlists will control all the three branches of power. That means there will be less internal political bickering or no internal infightings at all, allowing Raisi to focus on tackling pressing issues instead.

Like Khamenei, Raisi is suspicious of the West's intentions but has supported nuclear negotiations to revive the JCPOA. He has promised to create jobs and tackle unemployment. That is unlikely to happen, or at least difficult to achieve, without the lifting of draconian economic sanctions against Iran. Raisi knows well that sanctions need to be lifted to enable Iran to achieve economic growth. So, he is committed to the JCPOA and his election will not be an obstacle in the way of restoring the nuclear deal.

In short, Iran's tone toward the West would harden under Raisi, but he will very likely continue to push the United States to re-join the JCPOA and lift the sanctions.

This paper argues that Iran's strategic direction will remain unchanged under Raisi but its foreign policy will witness visible changes. There will also be changes in tactics, tone and priorities.

It also argues that what happens next will largely depend on the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden's political will to salvage the JCPOA by lifting the sanctions or cause it to die and force Iran to reconsider its strategic direction.

Iran's Foreign Policy under Raisi

Raisi has indicated that he will first seek to set the house in order. Primarily, he will look for solutions inside, rather than outside, the country. That means he will need to fight corruption and mismanagement, and utilise internal capacities, much more than the outgoing Rouhani administration did, and work to reactivate Iran's domestic capabilities to the maximum.

Rouhani and his camp were optimists. They pinned a lot of hope on the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions. But that was a humiliating experience. The unilateral withdrawal of the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump from the JCPOA in 2018 damaged diplomacy, harmed Iran's economy and discredited Rouhani. It also deepened the level of mistrust between Tehran and Washington.

Rouhani's foreign policy team had been influenced by the liberalism school of thought in international relations but Raisi's team is expected to be guided by a combination of realism and pragmatism.

The Raisi administration will not share Rouhani's optimism. On the contrary, it will be very sceptical of Washington's intentions. Raisi's inauguration will mark the start of a more assertive and uncompromising approach in Iran's foreign policy while the overall course of Iran's strategy will remain the same. That is because Iran's foreign policy objectives are usually decided by consensus at the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) where five of its ten members are represented by the president and his Cabinet members. Almost all decisions by the SNSC are approved by Khamenei. So, while the Raisi administration will choose its own tactics, it will operate within the goals, priorities and redlines set by the SNSC, Iran's highest security decision-making body.

There is no doubt that getting the sanctions lifted will be a priority of the Raisi administration, but it will not keep Iran waiting. Simultaneously, it is widely believed the Raisi administration will seek to defeat the sanctions first. So, the change of government will bring change in priorities. That means making the sanctions ineffective will be a more important priority than getting them lifted.

Thus, improving relations with Iran's neighbours and promoting non-oil exports will be at the forefront of Raisi's agenda.

President-elect Raisi said in his first press conference after winning the election that, "Our foreign policy will not be limited to the nuclear deal. We will have interaction with the world. We will not tie the Iranian people's interests to the nuclear deal ... We support the negotiations that guarantee our national interests. ... America should immediately return to the deal and fulfil its obligations under the deal." [\(1\)](#) In addition, he has promised to form a "strong" government that will be able to steer the talks in the "right direction".

Seyed Reza Mousavinia, Associate Professor of International Relations at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, says internal consensus will help Raisi pursue a stronger foreign policy based on "interaction and deterrence."

"Raisi's administration will follow the same strategic direction under Rouhani but with a new tone," he said. "In comparison to previous presidents, Raisi would enjoy a higher level of support from Ayatollah Khamenei. So, the higher level of coordination with the Supreme Leader's office would facilitate Raisi's foreign policy agenda." [\(2\)](#)

Moreover, Mousavinia argues that Rouhani reached out to the United States and reached a landmark deal with world powers, hoping to reap its economic benefits and enjoy the regional advantages the JCPOA would bring. But the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal as well as hostile policies enacted by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates seriously damaged this strategy. "JCPOA was a tree that Rouhani planted, hoping to pick its fruits. But it proved to be a disaster after the U.S. unilaterally pulled out of the deal. Europe's failure to keep its part of the deal also made things worse, forcing Tehran to reduce its commitments under the JCPOA in gradual steps," he said. "Learning from the promises broken by the U.S. and Europe, Raisi will seek to get the Vienna talks moving forward and, simultaneously, control tensions with Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional arch rival. He will try to create a balance in Iran's relations with its neighbours and world powers at the same time." [\(3\)](#)

Even back in 2017, a year before the United States pulled out of the JCPOA, Raisi had said during his first failed presidential campaign, "Any administration that comes to power should be committed to the JCPOA. The nuclear deal, despite its shortcomings, is a national document." [\(4\)](#)

Raisi has demonstrated his interest in containing tensions with Riyadh, saying Iran would have "no problem" with the reopening of the Saudi embassy in Tehran and that the "restoration of relations faces no barrier." "There are no obstacles from Iran's side to re-opening embassies ... there are no obstacles to ties with Saudi Arabia," he said recently. But Saudi officials have so far been cool, saying Riyadh would judge Raisi's government by "the reality on the ground." [\(5\)](#)

The failure of Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign and Saudi Arabia's adventurist foreign policy engineered by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman together with a unified approach from Tehran is expected to encourage Riyadh to change course from hostility to negotiation. Raisi has asserted that he would not meet Biden even if the opportunity arose and that Iran's ballistic missile programme and its backing of its allies in the Middle East were non-negotiable. [\(6\)](#)

Iran considers its missile programme and its influence in the Middle East as two pillars of its strategy of deterrence. Even a reformist-dominated administration would find it hard to negotiate over any of them. The JCPOA is restricted to the nuclear issue and raising non-nuclear issues would lead to stalled talks for years without agreement.

"Pivot to Asia", "Resistance Economy"

Raisi's allies have repeatedly argued that the Rouhani administration looked to the West to solve Iran's economic problems and achieve economic growth but instead got "broken promises" and "unprecedented sanctions." The Raisi administration, however, would explore opportunities for trade with the entire globe, not just the West.

“Foreign policy does not mean keeping the country waiting for (the decision of) a few states, but turning the potential of trade and cooperation opportunities with more than 200 countries into reality,” according to Saeed Jalili, a presidential candidate and an ally of Raisi. “We can make the enemy regret its sanctions.” [\(7\)](#)

Raisi is believed to be a big supporter of a 25-year framework agreement with China. The deal was signed in March 2021 and aims to chart the course of Iranian-Chinese relations for the next quarter of the 21st century. The agreement includes Chinese investments in sectors such as energy, petrochemicals and infrastructure as well as maritime projects to promote Iran’s role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative. So, it is expected that Raisi’s government will seek to improve Iran’s relations with Eurasia in general, China and Russia in particular.

“Liberal-minded, reformist-oriented and centrist moderate governments in Iran in the past looked to the West. Raisi wants to create a balance in Iran’s foreign relations. I expect the Raisi administration to pursue Iran’s new policy of ‘pivot to Asia’ with a stronger determination while seeking to maintain relations and manage tensions with the West. So, expanding trade relations with Iran’s immediate neighbours and boosting ties with Asian countries, specifically China, would stand high in its foreign trade strategy,” political analyst Emad Abshenas maintained. [\(8\)](#)

The views of Raisi are closely aligned with those of Khamenei in key domains. Raisi, like Khamenei, believes that the answer to Iran’s economic problems does not primarily lie in the removal of sanctions but in expanding the policy of “resistance economy,” a strategy aimed at reducing Iran’s vulnerability to external sanctions. This policy is one of economic protectionism. It seeks to boost domestic production, achieve relative self-sufficiency, increase exports and curtail imports in order to achieve economic growth. “While it will make efforts to get the sanctions lifted, the Raisi administration will simultaneously work hard to defeat the sanctions and reduce Iran’s economic vulnerability through expanding a policy of ‘resistance economy’ (supported by Khamenei). So, the Raisi administration will not leave the negotiating table, but will prioritise the nullification of sanctions over negotiations and the lifting of sanctions,” Abshenas said. [\(9\)](#)

To that end, it is likely that the Raisi administration will look at the unilateral inhuman U.S. sanctions as an opportunity to stop selling crude oil – which is easy to sanction – and export added-value commodities such as gasoline, engine oil, tar and other by-oil products that are on high demand and difficult to sanction.

In televised presidential election debates, Raisi vowed to give “economic diplomacy” a top priority with the goal of increasing Iran’s exports. He repeatedly pointed to Iran’s 15 neighbours and their market of 500 million people with which Iran should promote trade and of which Iran currently only has a tiny share.

Raisi has also promised to reduce taxes for producers, obtain taxes from wealthy businessmen evading taxation by creating a new smart taxation system, fight commodity smuggling, and make production attractive through economic reforms.

During his presidential campaign speeches, Raisi declared that he will look at coastal and ocean economy as a sustainable source of economic growth. Iran has more than 3,000 kilometres of sea borders; and he vowed that his administration would be determined to make the best use of this huge capacity to create jobs and eradicate poverty. How he is going to fulfil those promises has yet to be seen.

“A strong and economically powerful Iran can get the problems solved and create deterrence. But it doesn’t mean that the Raisi administration will shut the door to dialogue with the West,” Mousavinia said. “The 25-year cooperation agreement with China is one of Iran’s solutions to make U.S. sanctions useless.” [\(10\)](#)

A Golden Opportunity to Finalise Negotiations

The United States has a golden opportunity to re-join the JCPOA and lift the sanctions during the current interim period, before Raisi’s inauguration in early August. Abshenas believes that the six weeks, from the day of presidential elections to Raisi’s inauguration, is a unique window to save the JCPOA from collapse. He says both Biden and Rouhani have an interest in reaching a deal now, with 15 July, the 6th anniversary of the signing of the JCPOA, being a possible target date. “If technical talks in Vienna are finalised before Rouhani leaves office, Raisi would respect it. But if the opportunity is lost and sanctions are not lifted, it will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to reach a deal later because Iran’s negotiating team under Raisi will adopt a tougher approach,” he said. [\(11\)](#)

For now, the latest casualty is an interim agreement Iran had reached with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in February for three months and extended in May for one more month. The technical deal has expired, meaning that the IAEA will have no access to data collected by surveillance cameras inside Iran’s nuclear facilities. Iran has not extended the deal again, limiting IAEA’s eyes and ears.

What Happens Next?

Iranian strategists are convinced that America’s strategic direction towards Iran remains unchanged. Weakening Iran economically and preventing its prosperity and economic development has been a key goal of both Republican and Democratic administrations. Their calculation is that a weak country has to make concessions and finally toe America’s line. The JCPOA is the only win-win agreement in the bitter 42-year history of relations between Iran and the United States that could have shortened the wall of mistrust between the two foes. But Trump’s withdrawal from the deal further poisoned the relations. The Vienna talks are a test of America’s will to see whether Biden will remain loyal to his election campaign promises of re-joining the JCPOA and lifting the sanctions against Iran.

Barriers to salvaging the JCPOA are complicated but not insurmountable. If Washington agrees to lifting the sanctions, then Iran would likely return into full compliance with the deal. Without the lifting of sanctions, the JCPOA is going to die a permanent death. Biden could have issued executive orders to lift at least some of the sanctions against Iran the day he took office on 20 January. More than five months have passed and the United States has not re-joined the JCPOA. This has strengthened the suspicion in Tehran that Biden’s goal is to create consensus against Iran and that the White House is not in a hurry to lift the sanctions. This opportunistic approach would make it difficult to salvage the deal if the talks are not finalised before Raisi’s inauguration.

“I don’t think that the U.S. will lift all the sanctions. It wants to maintain the architecture of the sanctions while offering to lift some of [them]. Washington uses sanctions as a tool to achieve its foreign policy goals. It will not give away its most important pressure tool,” Abshenas said. [\(12\)](#)

Iran cannot buy the idea of easing some of the sanctions. At best, a partial lifting of sanctions can be met by Iran's partial return to the nuclear deal.

It is clear that the Biden administration cannot keep Trump's "maximum pressure" policy against Iran and save the JCPOA at the same time. It cannot have it both ways. Biden's failure to lift the sanctions is already creating a consensus in Iran that Tehran has to go its own way. "What happens next will primarily depend on what the Biden administration will do because it is the U.S. that pulled out of the JCPOA, not Iran. U.S. practices will determine the future course of Iranian-U.S. ties," Hossein Mousavian, Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy Specialist at Princeton University, stated. [\(13\)](#)

Iranian leaders had calculated that uranium enrichment technology would create "virtual deterrence." That means Iran would possess nuclear fuel cycle technology and take its nuclear programme to an advanced stage short of weaponisation. It would be a "virtual nuclear power" without building an atomic bomb and without violating Iran's obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). They concluded that it would be better and wiser for the Islamic Republic to offer nuclear concessions in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. They chose to accept unprecedented restrictions on Iran's nuclear programme to become integrated into the global economic system and enjoy life without sanctions. The JCPOA was the result.

That is exactly why Iran gave up all its stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium and 97 percent of its stockpile of low-enriched (3.6 percent) uranium. That is also why Iran stopped using its advanced centrifuges, poured cement into its Arak heavy water reactor, and accepted many other restrictions, including the unprecedented monitoring of its nuclear facilities.

All of these restrictions, unprecedented for any nation in history, were just for one reason: a life without sanctions. If the United States fails to lift the sanctions, then why should Iran set any redlines for its nuclear programme?

The fact that Iran insists that the United States re-join the JCPOA and lift the sanctions means the Islamic Republic prefers to be part of the global economy. It also means that Iran has no intention or political will to weaponise its nuclear programme.

So, what happens next will largely depend on the Biden administration. Lifting sanctions will help cool tensions and get Iran back to the JCPOA fully. But U.S. failure to remove the sanctions is likely to prompt Iranian leaders to reconsider their strategic direction.

Iranian Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi should have been taken seriously when he warned that Iran could be forced to build a nuclear weapon if sanctions are not lifted. He said in February, "If you corner a cat it might behave differently than a cat roaming free. If they push Iran in that direction, it would not be Iran's fault but the fault of those who pushed Iran." [\(14\)](#)

If that happens, it would be a direct consequence of the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the United States' stubborn refusal to lift the inhuman sanctions. Denying Iran of the benefits of the JCPOA would prompt Iranian strategists to conclude that Iran, a country of 83 million people, will be under sanctions under any circumstances no matter what it does and regardless of whether it complies fully with the JCPOA. It is not wise to push Iran in that direction.

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