

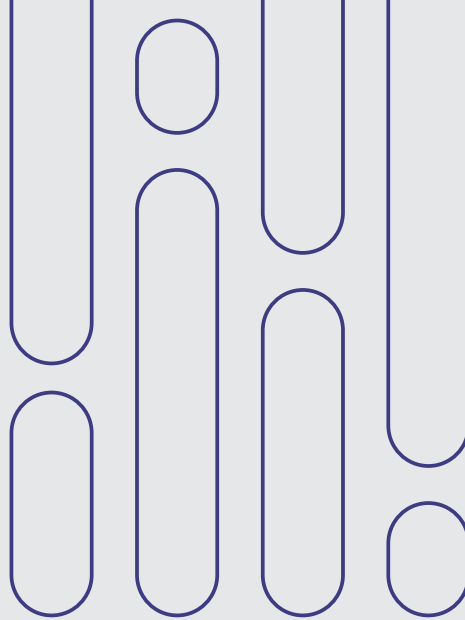
**Study**

# **Navigating Shifts: Change and Continuity in Iranian Foreign Policy Under Pezeshkian**

---

August 05, 2024

Dr. Abdelrouf Mustafa  
Dr. Yahia Bouzidi



## **Contents**

Introduction .....	03
Iran's Foreign Policy Dimensions Under President Pezeshkian .....	03
Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy Options.....	13
Factors Affecting Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy Outlook .....	17
The Limits of Transformation in Iran's Foreign Policy During Pezeshkian's Term .....	23
Conclusion.....	27

## **Introduction**

Iran has witnessed a significant political change with the election of the new “reformist” President Masoud Pezeshkian, following the death of former President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash in western Iran. Therefore, examining the contours of change in Iran’s foreign policy under the new president is crucial. Iran’s foreign policy holds greater salience as the country is an influential player in both regional and international affairs, possessing significant geopolitical weight and influence due to its geographical location, economic capabilities, and human resources. Furthermore, it is involved in numerous complex regional and international issues that impact its foreign relations.

The victory of the “reformist” president, following years of “conservative” dominance in the presidency, raises several questions: what is the extent of the president’s influence on various aspects of foreign policy including its substance, formulation, implementation and outcomes? What are the anticipated features, challenges, and opportunities for the new president’s foreign policy? Additionally, what new achievements can President Pezeshkian bring to the realm of foreign relations, particularly concerning the three main contentious issues: nuclear negotiations, the ballistic missile program, and support for loyalist groups? Finally, developments in Iran’s relations with the Gulf states and neighboring countries will be closely observed during this new period.

## **Iran’s Foreign Policy Dimensions Under President Pezeshkian**

Following the ascendance of a new political leader, a country’s foreign policy is determined by his proposals, campaign state-

ments, and electoral programs related to the outside world as well as remarks made after winning the presidency. In the case of the new Iranian president, the central feature of his foreign policy emphasizes “dialogue and openness to the outside world,” following a pragmatic approach that seeks to realign ideology with national interests. This shift aims to lift economic sanctions, which would help mitigate the severity of isolation and economic siege, providing a more effective option for addressing anti-regime protests in Iran.

According to President Pezeshkian’s vision,<sup>(1)</sup> openness to the outside world contributes to creating a favorable environment for improving deteriorating living and economic conditions, enhancing economic growth, and curbing migration as the nation seeks to rebuild. However, it is important to acknowledge that exceptions arise due to the nature of the presidential role in Iran, where the desires and orientations of the supreme leader significantly influence the president’s decisions and choices.

Pezeshkian’s speech during his first televised debate in the second round of the presidential elections on July 1, 2024, emphasized the need for compromise and engagement with opponents to resolve outstanding differences. He stated, “We must sit down and compromise to solve our problems with the world,” further explaining, “My foreign policy aims for the prosperity of the people and encourages them to survive, build, grow economically, and develop.”<sup>(2)</sup> In his article titled “My Message to the New World,” published in English on July 12, 2024, on the Tehran Times website, he identifies the principle of interest as a fundamental tenet of his foreign policy, asserting that his government’s approach will be guided by the principles of “dignity, wisdom, and interest.”<sup>(3)</sup>

The new president’s appointment of former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to head the Strategic Council respon-

sible for nominating officials and ministers for the president, along with the increasing likelihood of each of the following: Abbas Araghchi, the chief Iranian negotiator in the government of former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani; Ali Akbar Salehi, the former Iranian foreign minister, and Majid Takht-Ravanchi, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, assuming the duties of the Foreign Ministry portfolio, provides significant evidence of the new president's pragmatic approach to international relations, particularly regarding nuclear negotiations. This scenario mirrors the Rouhani-Zarif approach toward the Europeans and Americans. The following are the most prominent features of his anticipated foreign policy agenda:

### **Prioritizing Regional Relations**

The regional sphere is a key priority within the framework of the openness policy that President Pezeshkian has articulated. In his statements, debates and articles, he has identified the regional neighborhood as the first circle essential to improving Iran's foreign relations. Consequently, it is anticipated that the new administration will continue the regional policies of the late President Raisi regarding the enhancement of relations with neighboring countries. This continuation aligns with the directives of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who, in his message to the people on July 6, 2024, following President Pezeshkian's election victory, stated, "I recommend that Dr. Pezeshkian, the elected president, look to distant and bright horizons by trusting in God and continuing the path of the late Raisi."<sup>(4)</sup>

President Pezeshkian advocates for the establishment of a "regional framework" aimed at fostering dialogue, building confidence, promoting sustainable development, and ensuring peace through collaborative regional efforts. He envisions the

creation of a “strong region” governed by diplomacy rather than force, drawing on the shared values, peaceful Islamic traditions, and abundant resources present among the countries of the region. According to President Pezeshkian, this framework will enhance peaceful initiatives, restore calm and create a stable regional environment, promote sustainable development, and resolve conflicts that drain resources and squander wealth. Harnessing these resources will bolster regional capabilities and enable collective responses to common challenges and foreign interventions, allowing the region to exert significant influence in the emerging multipolar world.

In light of this vision, the following trends are expected:

### ***Continued Strengthening of Arab-Iranian Relations***

It is likely that Iranian efforts to bolster relations with Arab and Gulf countries, particularly with the Saudi Arabia, will continue. In his writings, Pezeshkian emphasized his ambition to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Iraq, aiming to enhance joint cooperation within regional organizations to deepen economic, trade, and investment relations.<sup>(5)</sup> This vision aligns with the supreme leader’s guidance to the new president to follow in the footsteps of the late Raisi regarding foreign relations. Furthermore, Pezeshkian has received congratulatory messages from leaders and presidents of most Arab and Gulf countries, reflecting their desire to collaborate with the new president.

### ***Continuity of Hostile Relations With Israel***

The new Iranian president’s perspective on Israel reflects a continuation of hostile relations, as he believes that the policy of openness will extend to all capitals of the world except Tel Aviv. In his article, he asserts that “Israel remains an apartheid regime to this day, now adding ‘genocide’ to a record already marred by occupation, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, settlement-building, nuclear weapons possession, illegal annex-

ation, and aggression against its neighbors.”<sup>(6)</sup>

In his article, the new president outlines several paths for action against Israel. The first is to collaborate with Arab countries to establish a permanent ceasefire in Gaza to halt the ongoing massacre and prevent the escalation of the conflict. The second is to work toward ending the Israeli occupation, which has devastated the lives of four generations of Palestinians; all countries have a binding duty under the 1948 Genocide Convention to take necessary measures to prevent genocide. The third is to urge countries to sever relations with Israel and avoid rewarding it by normalizing ties with Tel Aviv.

The ongoing hostile relations between Tehran and Tel Aviv signify the intractability of the conflict, with Israel persisting in its aggressive policies in the Middle East while Iran continues to support what it terms the “axis of resistance,” using the Palestinian cause to further its expansionist goals. Pezeshkian’s stance on the normalization issue places Iran in a dilemma, as it seeks to balance its desire to strengthen relations with Arab and Gulf states while rejecting normalization with Israel.

### **Iran’s Regional Project — an Immutable Red Line**

The new president understands that the Iranian expansionist project and its strategic lever, represented by the axis of resistance, falls within the ruling establishment’s red lines. Therefore, during his conversation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, as well as in his messages to both Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, he declared his commitment to providing unwavering support to the resistance fronts in the Middle East. For instance, his message to Nasrallah included, “Iran has always supported the resistance of the peoples of the region against the illegitimate Zionist entity. Support for the resistance is rooted in the established policies of the Iranian

regime, the ideals of Khomeini, and the directives of the supreme leader, and it will continue with force.”<sup>(7)</sup> Many observers view Pezeshkian’s stance on the axis of resistance as a realistic reflection of Khamenei’s instructions and an indicator of the seemingly positive relationship between the new president and Khamenei. This is evident not only from Khamenei’s praise for Pezeshkian, along with his recommendation to the Parliament on July 22, 2024, to approve the ministerial cabinet of Pezeshkian’s government, but also from Pezeshkian’s announcements during debates expressing his support for the supreme leader’s directives, describing Khamenei’s leadership as wise.

Furthermore, Pezeshkian appears to enjoy a strong rapport with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is illustrated by several key moments. The first was his public display of support for the IRGC following the death of IRGC Commander Qassem Soleimani in a US airstrike near Baghdad International Airport in early 2020, where he donned the IRGC uniform and wore his signature scarf around his neck. The second was his significant praise for Soleimani during his election debates, where he referred to him as a national hero, stating, “One of the reasons that prevents others from taking any action against Iran is the presence of the IRGC.”<sup>(8)</sup> Thirdly, he visited Soleimani’s family at their home, stating, “Soleimani was a national and popular figure for the Islamic world. He had a transcendent view of sectarianism and did not categorize people into specific groups. We must solve the country’s problems by following the path and example of martyr Soleimani.”<sup>(9)</sup> Lastly, the positive sentiments expressed by IRGC commanders<sup>(10)\*</sup> regarding Pezeshkian’s victory were reflected in the congratulatory meeting held on July 14, 2024, where IRGC Commander Hossein Salami stated, “The IRGC are ready to cooperate with Pezeshkian to implement Khamenei’s policies.”<sup>(11)</sup>

## **Return to Policies of Dialogue and Openness to the West**

According to the new president's proposals, he aims to return to the path of openness toward the West. He believes that the path of isolation has hindered the achievement of the ultimate goal set by the supreme leader: transforming Iran into the leading regional power in all fields by the year 2025.<sup>(12)</sup> Therefore, he argues that the political philosophy of economic resistance, adopted by the late President Raisi to render the sanctions ineffective, will not alleviate the impact of sanctions, improve living conditions, or reduce the popular protests, as it is a long-term strategy. Instead, the current crises in Iran require immediate and rapid solutions, which can only be achieved through the lifting of sanctions and the provision of substantial financial aid that contributes to improving the country's economic and living standards.

To achieve this goal, Pezeshkian is working on resuming talks with the West, as explained below.

### **Reviving Nuclear Talks**

The new president believes that reviving nuclear negotiations is an urgent priority aimed at lifting the sanctions that are burdening the Iranian economy. He argues that returning to the nuclear agreement would have a significantly positive impact on Iran, alleviating daily losses caused by the inability to increase oil exports amid growing popular discontent and tension. In Pezeshkian's view, this situation is what prompted the former US president to withdraw from the agreement in 2018.<sup>(13)</sup> Consequently, some of the most prominent promises made by Pezeshkian during his election campaign include:

- **Reviewing and amending “The Strategic Initiative to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Rights of the Iranian Nation:”** This legislation, which was approved by the Iranian Parliament in December 2020, is considered by Zarif to be the greatest obstacle preventing US President Joe Biden's admin-

istration from returning to the nuclear agreement.

▪ **Joining the Financial Action Task Force (FATF):** Iran's failure to join the FATF has hindered its integration into the global banking system, and the new president aims to rectify this.

Many observers believe that reviving the nuclear agreement, leading to the lifting of sanctions, has become a significant test for Pezeshkian — a key measure of his success. This is of particular salience given that his position, which diverges from the “conservative” stance toward the West and the nuclear agreement, played a positive role in his electoral chances. A majority of Iranians expressed relief following his victory as “hardliner” policies toward the West have only resulted in sharp economic deterioration. This is compounded by the fears voiced by a large segment of the electorate regarding a “conservative” victory, which would perpetuate the current dire situation — especially after Pezeshkian's “conservative” rival Saeed Jalili, stated during the debates with Pezeshkian that he would continue the “hardliner” approach of Raisi in international relations.

### ***Iranian-European Dialogue***

The new Iranian president has expressed a desire to engage in constructive dialogue with European capitals to put relations on the right track, based on principles of mutual respect and equality. He emphasized the importance of European countries acknowledging the mistake of not fulfilling their obligations toward Iran after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. These obligations include encouraging investment in Iran, effectively protecting companies from US sanctions, and ensuring smooth banking transactions. There are numerous opportunities to enhance Iranian-European cooperation, particularly in technological collaboration, energy security, transborder logistics projects, asylum issues, count-

er-terrorism and narcotics.

In his article, Pezeshkian addressed the European countries, stating that Iran's defense strategy does not involve seeking to possess a nuclear bomb. He explained that the reduction of nuclear obligations is a direct response to the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, the imposition of sanctions on Iran, and the assassination of Soleimani.<sup>(14)</sup>

However, Iran's support for Russia during what it terms its "special operations" in Ukraine has raised sensitivities and hardened Western attitudes toward Iran. This situation may complicate Pezeshkian's efforts to bridge the gap with Western countries.

### **Strengthening Iranian Relations with Revisionist Powers**

President Pezeshkian advocates for strengthening Iranian relations with revisionist powers that seek to establish a multipolar international system, aimed at diminishing the United States' sole hegemony. Key players in this global bloc include China and Russia, which represent the most prominent powers of the Eastern bloc. Strengthening ties with these nations would bolster Iran's power and negotiating position in future nuclear talks. He stated in this piece, "China and Russia have consistently stood by us during challenging times. We deeply value this friendship. Our 25-year roadmap with China represents a significant milestone towards establishing a mutually beneficial 'comprehensive strategic partnership.'" He further noted, "Russia is a valued strategic ally and neighbor to Iran and my administration will remain committed to expanding and enhancing our cooperation. We strive for peace for the people of Russia and Ukraine, and my government will stand prepared to actively support initiatives aimed at achieving this objective. I will continue to prioritize bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Russia, particularly within frame-

works such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasia Economic Union.”<sup>(15)</sup> The influence of “hardliners” over the state apparatus in Iran may result in the continued strengthening of military relations with the Eastern bloc, as evidenced by the ongoing supply of drones to Russia for its war against Ukraine, while also consolidating ties with both China and North Korea across various realms.

## **The New President’s Personality and Professional Background**

Compared to his predecessor, Pezeshkian is widely regarded as a low-profile figure in many aspects of his professional career. He does not belong to the rarified circles of leadership as his predecessor and is widely regarded as a pragmatist, particularly with regard to foreign policy. In contrast, President Raisi was known for his obdurate stance on foreign policy issues and was viewed negatively by the West due to his involvement in an extrajudicial death committee, which was accused of imposing the death penalty on tens of thousands of Iranian dissidents — most notably in the notorious execution cases of 1988. This history made dialogue between him and the outside world particularly challenging.

Overall, this context suggests that President Pezeshkian is more inclined to adopt a new pragmatic approach that seeks to combine pragmatic and “conservative-reformist” models in managing foreign relations. He is pragmatic in the international sphere, following in the footsteps of both Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Khatami, while maintaining a “conservative” stance in the regional context, echoing Raisi’s responses to the supreme leader’s orders. This dual approach aims to improve relations with neighboring countries and uphold the principle of economic diplomacy. Thus, Pezeshkian takes a less confrontational and more realistic position with regard to foreign policy.

## **Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy Options**

President Pezeshkian may capitalize on the array of opportunities to achieve foreign policy breakthroughs or, at the very least, secure some gains. These opportunities can be summarized as follows:

### **Khamenei's Flexibility Resulting from Internal Pressures**

The weak turnout in the first round of the presidential elections highlighted the extent of public despair with a political system dominated by “conservatives,” as well as the widespread belief that the leadership is unable to address their problems. This sentiment was preceded by numerous protests that escalated in both scale and intensity. The Iranian establishment sensed the gravity of the situation, a factor that may have prompted Khamenei to engineer the elections in search of exits from the crisis in multiple directions. It is understood that these problems primarily stem from the crushing economic sanctions.<sup>(16)</sup> Thus, the supreme leader could provide Pezeshkian with an opportunity to reach some settlements in foreign policy, hoping that such moves might lead to the lifting, or at least the easing, of sanctions to mitigate the ongoing deterioration of living conditions and to avoid the eruption of new protests. Additionally, establishing stable conditions for the post-Khamenei era is crucial, and having a figure affiliated with the “reformists” at the forefront of the political scene spares the supreme leader from bearing any responsibility for failures resulting from the intransigence of US and Western positions; instead, the president and foreign powers would shoulder that responsibility.

## **Western Desire to Support the “Reformists”**

International powers understand the extent of the supreme leader’s dominance over power in Iran and recognize that the role of the president remains limited. However, the new president’s ties to the “reformist” current and the impact of this alignment on voter participation may encourage some international powers to cooperate with the new president. This collaboration aims to mix the political cards inside Iran by marketing the “reformist” current to the Iranian public as capable of advancing their interests and facilitating their integration into the global system — unlike the “conservative” current, whose hostile policies toward the West are exacerbating the country’s predicament. From this perspective, some Western circles recommend that the United States should indirectly express its openness to collaborating with the new Iranian president, reassuring him that measures demonstrating his moderation will be met with reciprocal and substantial responses.<sup>(17)</sup>

## **International Efforts to Reduce Tensions in the Middle East**

There is an international and regional consensus on the risks of escalation and the potential transition to a regional war, as it would negatively affect all parties involved. This concern is heightened by the intertwining of economic interests and the region’s role as a significant energy supplier and a critical passage for international trade. The recent election of a “reformist” president in Iran serves to advance this trend, one that the supreme leader himself does not oppose. The first direct confrontation between Iran and Israel occurred during the tenure of the supreme leader and a “conservative” president; however, it was characterized by a notable degree of rationality, as Tehran confirmed its unwillingness to escalate at that time.

Thus, Pezeshkian, through his “reformist” tendencies, alleviates some of the pressures on the supreme leader regarding this issue.

On the other hand, it is in the interest of Western and international powers to maintain the current rules of engagement and avoid a comprehensive war. Some Western circles view the significant change in government in Iran as a much-needed opportunity for Western capitals to revisit diplomacy. The primary goal must be to persuade Iran to halt its nuclear program and subsequently retract its military ambitions to prevent further escalation in the Middle East.<sup>(18)</sup> Consequently, the newly elected president should be given every opportunity to succeed, as the potential gains for the United States and Israel would far outweigh the associated risks.<sup>(19)</sup>

## **Strengthening of Saudi-Iranian Relations**

Saudi Arabia possesses various tools to influence international policies in the region. In recent years, Saudi foreign policy has shifted toward reducing tensions while enhancing regional stability in line with Vision 2030. The Beijing-brokered rapprochement agreement is one of the most prominent achievements of this new approach. Continuing in this direction, Saudi Arabia is expected to play a supportive role in the efforts of the new Iranian president, not only in terms of bilateral relations but also within the broader regional and international contexts. This is as the Arabian Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, aspire to be among the leading economies of the world.

Against this backdrop, some Iranian experts advocate for a recognition of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states’ genuine concerns about Iran’s behavior. Although these concerns persist, their expression and management have evolved.<sup>(20)</sup> They urge the new government to transform its relations with Saudi Ara-

bia, the UAE, and the other Gulf countries into stable political alliances. This transformation will require direct meetings between the leaders of these countries and ongoing discussions to create a roadmap for cooperation in the economic, military and security dimensions, which could be a crucial area of focus in the coming months.<sup>(21)</sup>

## **Differences in “Reformist” and “Conservative” Orientations Toward the Eastern Bloc**

An examination of Iran’s relations with Russia and China reveals that their strategic alliance is not as ideal as the Iranian “conservative” faction often presents. On the contrary, it appears that both Russia and China are leveraging Iran’s crises with the West to serve their interests, often at the expense of Iranian interests. For instance, some opinions in Iran hold that exporting 1 million barrels of oil to China daily at prices lower than global rates cannot be considered a success, especially when it leads to the import of subpar goods rather than receiving capital in exchange for oil. China maintains relations with 15 neighboring countries, yet investment opportunities in Iran remain largely obstructed due to sanctions.

Therefore, Iran’s political and trade relations with China are heavily dependent on the lifting of these sanctions. If sanctions were not an issue and China viewed Iran as a viable partner, it would not have issued statements alongside Arab nations regarding the ownership of the three islands. The same holds true for relations with Russia; Tehran has suffered significantly due to its military support for Moscow without reaping any benefits in return. This reality may contribute to Russia’s apprehension that a “reformist” president could pivot more toward the West, casting a shadow over the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>(22)</sup>

“Reformists” highlight these imbalances and argue for the

need to recalibrate relations, emphasizing the deficiencies of the current eastward orientation policy. This sentiment was echoed by President Pezeshkian during his election campaign.

## **Factors Affecting Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy Outlook**

The realization of President Pezeshkian's foreign policy goals depends on various internal and external factors as elucidated below:

### **The Shadow of the Late President and the Burdensome Legacy of Crises**

The sudden death of former President Raisi in a helicopter crash casts a sympathetic lens on his presidency. The final judgment on his tenure remains pending due to his inability to complete either his first or potential second term, for which he had significant support. Thus, Raisi's legacy will always loom behind any steps taken by Pezeshkian, whether at the popular or official level. The supreme leader will be the first to draw comparisons, given the close bond he had with Raisi, who was notably obedient to him and whose stances on domestic and foreign issues aligned closely with his views. Khamenei praised Raisi on various occasions. During a meeting with acting President Mohammad Mokhber and Raisi's government ministers, the supreme leader highlighted the late president's most notable qualities, including his commitment to fostering positive interactions and "dignity" in foreign policy, strong belief in domestic capabilities to solve problems, clear religious and revolutionary positions while avoiding ambiguous and placatory statements, and a principled adherence to his expressed views. According to Khamenei, Raisi's approach of engaging

with other countries from a position of strength, prioritizing relations with neighboring nations, led some of the world's top leaders to describe him in their condolence messages as a prominent figure rather than an ordinary politician.<sup>(23)</sup> These attributes will undoubtedly play a role in the supreme leader's evaluation of his relationship with the new president, who is expected to continue along Raisi's path not only in his policy orientations but also in his dealings with the supreme leader. Conversely, Iran is still grappling with complex economic issues that have worsened living conditions and exacerbated social problems. Despite Raisi's efforts, he has left behind a burdensome legacy of economic and social challenges. Economists contend that Iran's current economic difficulties are more daunting than those experienced during the war, as the country did not face issues such as water shortages, a pension funds crisis, sanctions or inflation exceeding 40% during that time.<sup>(24)</sup> All of these problems require immediate attention and are linked to external issues that Pezeshkian must navigate.

### **Defying “Conservative” Views While Addressing “Reformist” Demands**

External and internal goals overlap in determining the positions of conservative forces concerning Pezeshkian's policy on Iran's international relations. Consequently, the new president will face two levels of challenges from this perspective. The first level involves the conflict of visions between him and the “conservatives” regarding outstanding issues, particularly the nuclear file and the relationship with the West. The president needs to reach compromises that satisfy the “conservatives” to gain their approval for his decisions. The second level pertains to the repercussions of the president's successes in the internal political process. Pezeshkian's achievements will bolster the “reformist” narrative at the popular level, thereby enhancing

the “reformist” faction’s chances in future elections. Therefore, it is likely that the “conservatives” will work to obstruct the president’s external efforts — not necessarily out of disagreement, although they will publicly argue otherwise — but to prevent the “reformist” current from regaining its popular status and momentum. The contours of this conflict have become evident through the significant criticism leveled by the “conservatives” at Pezeshkian, especially given Zarif’s reprisal of his prominent role in the political landscape. For instance, the fundamentalist Kayhan newspaper queried in its editorial whether Pezeshkian had “rented” the presidency to Zarif.<sup>(25)</sup>

The new president’s lack of experience in foreign policy may lead him to rely more heavily on Zarif and other experienced individuals, subjecting him to significant criticism.<sup>(26)</sup> In contrast, the “reformists,” both at elite and popular levels, expect President Pezeshkian to confront the “conservative” current and fulfill his promises related to foreign and domestic policy. During her meeting with the president-elect, Azar Mansouri, head of the Reform Front, insisted that his government should symbolize change and hope rather than perpetuate the status quo. She informed him that the Reform Front would be held increasingly accountable for the performance of his administration.<sup>(27)</sup> This sentiment was echoed by the “reformist” politician Alireza Alavi, who linked the success of Pezeshkian’s presidency to its espousal of change and development. He argued that if the government merely sustains the status quo, the “reformists” will suffer a significant decline in their electoral prospects in upcoming elections.<sup>(28)</sup> These “reformist” demands may sometimes clash with the supreme leader’s orientations, as well as the interests of the “conservative” current and the IRGC, compelling Pezeshkian to make concessions in domestic politics to pass decisions on foreign policy, or vice versa. In either scenario, he will likely face strong blowback

from the “reformists” who will demand that he adhere to all his promises, creating an additional challenge for a president seeking to maintain both his popularity and his relationship with the “reformists” to ensure reelection.

## **The Role of the IRGC and Militia Positions**

The IRGC and the Quds Force have been instrumental in consolidating Iran’s regional influence, making them central actors in Iranian foreign policy. Their activities have determined foreign policy decisions across various arenas, often serving as an alternative to formal diplomacy. The “conservatives” generally do not oppose the IRGC’s involvement in foreign policy due to their alignment on many issues. Still, debates often arise with the “reformists” who seek to exercise their powers within state institutions. In contrast, the IRGC adheres to its revolutionary approach, asserting its constitutional status.<sup>(29)</sup> IRGC activities are largely focused on consolidating relations with militias and other non-state actors, which are often disavowed by governments or create embarrassment for official diplomacy.

Regional and international decision-makers are cognizant of the Iranian establishment’s structure, including the IRGC’s influence and link to the supreme leader. Therefore, the real Iranian position is dictated by the actions of the IRGC, not the rhetoric of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For the new president to gain the trust of regional neighbors and the international community, he must reverse this dynamic. Pro-Iran militias in the Middle East possess some autonomy beyond the directives of the IRGC, as their actions are often intertwined with calculations regarding power struggles and influence within their respective countries. They may also harbor concerns about the potential return of the “reformists” and their perspectives on relations with the West, particularly a divergence from Raisi’s

approach. Such concerns could motivate these groups to adopt escalatory strategies that challenge the new government's diplomatic efforts, making it difficult, in some instances, for the IRGC to compel these actors to comply with any possible agreements reached with President Pezeshkian.<sup>(30)</sup>

### **Trump's Possible Return to the White House**

Former President Donald Trump's chances of winning the presidency are reportedly increasing, particularly following an assassination attempt against him. This contrasts with the crisis facing the Democratic Party due to President Biden's withdrawal from the electoral contest, prompted by party leaders' concerns about his performance in the initial election debate and his cognitive decline. As Trump draws closer to the presidency, it will become increasingly challenging for Pezeshkian to negotiate a nuclear agreement or reach satisfactory partial settlements for both parties, given Trump's hawkish stance toward Iran. During his first term, he not only withdrew from the nuclear agreement but also oversaw the assassination of Soleimani. References to Iran in the discussions surrounding Trump's assassination attempt underscore the potential for significant shifts in relations between the two countries if he returns to power, especially if he responds to calls for a resumption of his previous maximum pressure strategy before it reaches the nuclear threshold stage. This would likely involve reinstating a credible deterrence force and compelling Iran to make tangible compromises regarding its nuclear program and support for proxy groups.<sup>(31)</sup>

### **The Rise of the Far Right in Europe**

Iran often tries to balance its relationship with the West (the United States and the European Union (EU)) through Europe, whether collectively or within the framework of bilateral re-

lations, in an attempt to create divisions by exploiting the differences that sometimes emerge between the Americans and Europeans. However, the rise of the far right in the recent EU elections is not in Iran's interest due to underlying hostility. The European People's Party, the main component leading the European Commission, calls for abandoning the principle of consensus "in the field of European Union sanctions against totalitarian regimes around the world," referring to Russia and Iran. The far-right camp advocates for a more assertive policy toward Iran, focusing on its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, state sponsorship of terrorism, and hostage diplomacy. It urges the European Commission to fully include the IRGC, the Houthis and Hezbollah on the EU terrorism list. Therefore, it is expected that the EU will tighten its policy toward Iran in the future by expanding sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities, as well as on individuals and entities linked to Iran in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.<sup>(32)</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that the EU Council extended its sanctions against Iran due to the country's military support for Russia's war against Ukraine and for armed groups in the Middle East and the Red Sea region.<sup>(33)</sup>

## **Tensions With Israel in the Middle East**

Israel holds Iran largely responsible for the situation that has unfolded since Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, accusing it of supporting the group with funds, weapons, and training. Israel also alleges that Iran coordinates the activities of Shiite militias in Lebanon and Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen to support Hamas by launching various attacks against Israel.

Moreover, Iran has disrupted the deterrence equation by directly confronting Israel. As a result, Tel Aviv will spare no effort to prevent Iran from achieving any gains abroad, particularly concerning the nuclear issue. This will not only result

in heightened obstruction of the agreement but will also lead to a shift in US policy in the Middle East, which will likely take into account the security role that Israel increasingly plays in the region.<sup>(34)</sup>

## **The Limits of Transformation in Iran's Foreign Policy During Pezeshkian's Term**

Against the backdrop of the challenges and opportunities available to the new president, the limits of the transformation in Iran's foreign policy during Pezeshkian's term can be identified as follows:

### **The Enduring Parameters of Iran's Foreign Policy**

It is difficult for any Iranian president, whether "reformist" or "conservative," to change the broad lines of foreign policy determined by the supreme leader, particularly those related to the Iranian expansionist project, nuclear program, and ballistic missiles. These are considered red lines that cannot be crossed, given the nature of the current leadership and the constitutional provisions that grant the supreme leader the authority to determine the substance of the country's foreign policy.

The president's powers in this context are very limited; he is only responsible for implementing the broad lines set by Khamenei. Even in external implementation, the IRGC play a significant role since its authority is derived directly from the supreme leader. As a result, the IRGC remains wholly subservient to the supreme leader.

Many individuals affiliated with the IRGC also hold sensitive positions in security, defense, and foreign policy institutions. Since the announcement of the new president's victory,

Khamenei has outlined the guidelines he expects to see in the new government, urging a continuation of the approach of his late predecessor, Raisi, regarding economic diplomacy and strengthening relations with neighboring countries. President Pezeshkian has responded by adhering to and demonstrating loyalty to the supreme leader's instructions, even fostering a good relationship with the IRGC.

### **Continuity of Regional Projects and Policies**

According to Pezeshkian's statements before and after his electoral victory, no significant changes are expected regarding Iran's position on Israel and its ongoing assault on Gaza, and its regional project. Similarly, the unwavering support for the axis of resistance and the deployment of the IRGC in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Palestine will remain intact. Pezeshkian is poised to continue Raisi's efforts to improve relations with the Gulf states, particularly with Saudi Arabia, following Khamenei's positive statements on this issue. However, Pezeshkian will face the challenge of reconciling his support for field diplomacy, which often conflicts with Arab positions, with his commitment to dialogue and the continuity of relations with neighboring countries and the wider world.

Additionally, Iran's strategic interests in expanding its spheres of influence in the Arab region, along with its efforts to preserve the gains from this expansion, do not indicate major changes in Iranian foreign policy during Pezeshkian's term. Many observers believe that Pezeshkian's stance on the axis of resistance suggests a lack of change in Iran's policies regarding its expansionist ambitions.

Some may speculate about the possibility of a return to tensions between the Foreign Ministry and the IRGC, reminiscent of the conflicts that characterized the Rouhani-Zarif era due to the IRGC's interference in diplomatic affairs. However, the

dynamics seem to be different during Pezeshkian's presidency, thanks to what appears to be a positive relationship among Pezeshkian, Khamenei, and the IRGC.

## **The Expected Change Will Be Limited to Tools and Results**

While the avenues for altering foreign policy approaches are limited, the Iranian president can operate within the limited frameworks granted by the establishment concerning international relations. This typically involves the tools and outcomes of policy implementation, as well as the tone employed in dealings with the outside world. It is anticipated that Pezeshkian will adopt a pragmatic approach when engaging with the West, utilizing a moderate tone that contrasts with the “conservatives’” preference for isolationist and ideologically polarizing policies. Consequently, President Pezeshkian's victory may present an opportunity for Tehran to engage more effectively with the West.

Pezeshkian's pragmatic approach aligns with the establishment's strategy, which has increasingly been seen as the key to engaging with the West even prior to Trump's accession to power in the United States, given Iran's negative experiences during his administration. Pezeshkian, with his moderate views, flexible stance and approachable demeanor, may create an environment in which the establishment finds it easier to negotiate with the West. It is important to note that Raisi's government was already negotiating with the West through Oman and achieved some gains, such as increasing oil exports and recovering frozen funds, particularly during Biden's presidency. President Pezeshkian may have the ability to forge better channels and conduct direct negotiations with the West that could lead to a diplomatic breakthrough. However, if these negotiations prove prolonged —something that seems

likely — he could clash with Trump’s positions should he be reelected in November.

A potential diplomatic breakthrough regarding the nuclear agreement seems feasible, especially since the chief foreign policy advisor for Pezeshkian’s election campaign was Zarif, a key figure behind the 2015 nuclear agreement. However, his endeavors will be challenged by the fact that ultimate decision-making remains in the hands of the supreme leader and influential institutions.

## **Expectations Regarding the Revival of Nuclear Negotiations**

Although the prospect of a significant diplomatic breakthrough leading to the United States’ return to the nuclear agreement and the lifting of sanctions remains uncertain — due to the divergent positions between Iran and the United States, especially in light of the Iranian and upcoming US presidential elections — Pezeshkian’s government could possibly initiate certain steps in the nuclear realm. These may include agreeing to reduce production rates of highly enriched uranium, facilitating multiple visits by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to nuclear sites, in exchange for Washington easing restrictions on Iranian oil exports and collaborating with the International Monetary Fund to remove Iran from the blacklist that has hindered foreign investment and access to international banking networks. This is in addition to a European pledge against reimposing sanctions set to expire in October 2025.

Nevertheless, significant obstacles still confront the new president, including his limited powers, the ongoing domestic crises, the need to amend laws to reduce nuclear commitments amid “conservative” dominance across state institutions — especially the Parliament — the tense regional situation in which pro-Iran groups are heavily embroiled, and a mutual

trust deficit between the Iranian establishment and Washington. Therefore, we should not anticipate fundamental changes in Iran's foreign policy, as the president will likely be compelled to operate within the parameters specified by the supreme leader. Consequently, Pezeshkian's influence over Iranian foreign policy will be restricted to managing the pace of its implementation.

## **Conclusion**

Foreign policy issues, specifically the nuclear agreement and the lifting of sanctions, represent the most significant challenge for the newly elected "reformist" president. This challenge arises from his inability to alter the overarching strategies of Iranian policy determined by the supreme leader. As a result, the new president has quickly affirmed his complete alignment with Khamenei regarding the country's foreign policy orientations, which include Iran's nuclear rights, its stance on Israel, and regional schemes. However, Pezeshkian the pragmatist will seek to employ the mechanisms necessary to lift the sanctions that continue to blight the country's economic future.

Regardless of who assumes the role of foreign minister, the foreign policy decision-making process may encounter complications due to the presence of other institutions that are subordinate to the supreme leader and influenced by the "conservative" current. Pezeshkian has numerous opportunities, both domestically and internationally, that, if leveraged effectively, could enable him to neutralize the opposition within state institutions and secure concessions from regional and global powers. These concessions could contribute to advancing the "reformists'" position domestically while de-escalating tensions abroad.

However, the challenges that may hinder the new president from realizing the goals he set forth during his election campaign regarding foreign policy must also be acknowledged. This is particularly relevant as the initial months of his presidency coincide with the upcoming US presidential elections. Therefore, it is likely that Pezeshkian will achieve only limited gains and breakthroughs in the medium term concerning critical issues in Iran's international relations, mainly nuclear negotiations and the ballistic missile program.

## Endnotes

- (1) "In the First Debate of the Second Round of the Presidential Election, Masoud Pezeshkian: We Will Not Make Gasoline More Expensive," *Mehr News Agency*, July 1, 2024, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3xGA5YO>. [Persian].
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Iranian President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian, "My Message to the New World," *Tehran Times*, July 12, 2024, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://2u.pw/FZTODEIZ>.
- (4) "The Leader of the Revolution in a Message on the Occasion of the 14th Presidential Election: Competitive Behaviors During Elections Should Become Norms of Camaraderie," *Iranian Students' News Agency*, July 6, 2024, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3RWoB6P>. [Persian].
- (5) Pezeshkian, "My Message to the New World."
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) "Masoud Pezeshkian's Message to Hassan Nasrallah: Support for Resistance Continues With Strength," *Mehr News Agency*, July 8, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3xPPwNG>. [Persian].
- (8) "Greetings From Masoud Pezeshkian to Nasrallah; Iran to Continue Its Cooperation With Proxies," *Al-Arabiya Persian*, July 10, 2024, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://2u.pw/WRc7eSeB>. [Persian].
- (9) "In the Sincere Meeting of the President-elect of the Nation With the Family of Martyr Soleimani, Masoud Pezeshkian: We Should Solve the Country's Problems by Following the Path and Ideals of Martyr Soleimani," *IRNA News*, July 20, 2024, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3y6iMzS>. [Persian].
- (10) \* General Commander Brigadier General Hussein Salami, Commander of the Aerospace Forces Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, Commander of the Ground Forces Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour, Commander of the Naval Forces Rear Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri, Commander of the Quds Force Major General Ismail Qaani, Head of the Anti-Espionage Organization Brigadier General Majid Khademi, Commander of the Intelligence Agency Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi, Commander of the Basij Forces Brigadier General Gholam Reza Soleimani, Commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Forces Brigadier General Abdolreza Abed, Representative of the Supreme Leader Abdullah Haji Sadeghi.
- (11) "The Senior Commanders of the IRGC Met With the President-elect," *Iranian Students' News Agency*, July 14, 2024, accessed July 18, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4cQtWrg>. [Persian].
- (12) Mehr News Agency, "In the First Debate of the Second Round."
- (13) Pezeshkian, "My Message to the New World."
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) "Abdolreza Farji Rad in a Conversation With Fararu News Agency: Masoud Pezeshkian Has Heard the Alarm Bells of Foreign Policy," *Fararu News*, July 12, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4f2NydJ>. [Persian].
- (17) Alon Ben-Meir, "Cooperating With Iran's President-elect Pezeshkian Will Far Outweigh The Risks," *Jerusalem Post*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-810155>
- (18) Ellie Geranmayeh, "Managed Reform: What Iran's New President Means for European Diplomacy," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 10, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3S3brYM>.
- (19) Ben-Meir, "Cooperating With Iran's President-elect."
- (20) Saber Gul'anbari, "Lessons From the JCPOA Period and Regional Interactions; Masoud Pezeshkian and Interactive Foreign Policy Challenges," *Irdiplomacy*, July 10, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4czkqZH>. [Persian].
- (21) Kamran Karmi, "Iran and the Cooperation Council for Continuity and Change," *Donya-e-eqtasad Newspaper*, July 14, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3zD3Md3>. [Persian].
- (22) Fararu News, "Abdolreza Farji Rad in a Conversation With Fararu News Agency."
- (23) "Leader of the Revolution: The Government of Mr. Raisi Was the Government of Work, Hope and Movement," *Tasnim News Agency*, July 7, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4bxdLhp>. [Persian].

(24) Maryam Fakhri, "Masoud Pezeshkian's Administration Faces Major Energy Imbalance Challenge: Economists Warn of Potential 'Stagnation' in Iran/Tajik Economy Amid \$120 Billion in Energy Subsidies," *Khabar Online News Agency*, July 14, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/4cBZyRC>. [Persian].

(25) Ghaith Alao, "Iran Headline: A Question for Masoud Pezeshkian: Has Zarif Rented the Presidency From You?" *Aljadah Iran Media*, July 20, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://aljadah.media/archives/78490>. [Persian].

(26) Jason M. Brodsky, "Don't Fall for the Spin That Iran's New President, Masoud Pezeshkian, Is a Reformer," *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 8, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/45VhFj2>.

(27) "Azar Mansouri, Head of the Reform Front, Meets President-Elect: Advocates for Increased Accountability of the 14th Government," *Entekhab Newspaper*, July 15, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3y8Y1Dw>. [Persian].

(28) "Alireza Alavitabar Critiques Masoud Pezeshkian's Cabinet: 'A Continuation of the Status Quo Means We Have All Lost'," *Rouydad24 News Agency*, July 14, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Yoih4U>. [Persian].

(29) The assassination of Qasem Soleimani remains a significant event that highlights the complex relationship between the IRGC, the Iranian presidency, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his memoirs, Mohammad Javad Zarif revealed that the IRGC informed the United States through the Iraqi Prime Minister that they would respond to the assassination by symbolically targeting US military bases. This coordination took place while he was deliberately kept in the dark despite serving as the foreign minister. Interestingly, President Hassan Rouhani later confirmed Zarif's account. This occurred alongside statements from former US President Donald Trump, who indicated his agreement not to retaliate against Iran's prior warnings of their actions in response to Soleimani's killing.

(30) Gul'anbari, "Lessons From the JCPOA Period."

(31) Eli Diamond, "Prepare for a Nuclear Iran," *National Review*, July 14, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3zMA18M>.

(32) Gul'anbari, "Lessons From the JCPOA Period."

(33) "Extension of Unilateral European Sanctions on Iran," *Tasnim News Agency*, July 15, 2024, <https://bit.ly/3zHN64g>. [Persian].

(34) "Post Far-right Rise – Prospects for the EU Foreign Policy Toward the Middle East and the Gulf Region," *Emirates Policy Center*, June 19, 2024, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://2u.pw/9shg-7bWJ>. [Arabic].

