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THE FUTURE OF IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS UNDER PEZESHKIAN'S PRESIDENCY

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Abstract

This research article analyzes the future of Iran-Russia relations after the election of “reformist” Masoud Pezeshkian as the Iranian president in July 2024. During the presidential term of the late President Ebrahim Raisi, the relationship between the two countries grew closer, but Pezeshkian has shown a keen interest in restoring relations with Western countries, reflecting a possible shift in Iran-Russia relations. This study examines the impact of the newly elected Iranian President Pezeshkian on Iran-Russia relations, comparing his policies with those of his “conservative” predecessor. It also explores the factors that are influencing Pezeshkian's reform agenda regarding Iranian foreign policy toward Russia and the constraints he faces in implementing them. Finally, it suggests potential scenarios for Iran-Russia relations under Pezeshkian, considering current internal, regional, and international developments.

Keywords: Russia, Iran, sanctions, nuclear program, Gaza war, Hezbollah, Houthis.

Introduction

The victory of Iran's "reformist" President Masoud Pezeshkian in the presidential election is a significant variable in Iran's political landscape. It will have implications for Iranian foreign policy, particularly the future of Iran-Russia relations. Under Raisi, these relations evolved significantly in all political, military, and economic fields. However, since Pezeshkian's election, he has made many remarks on his foreign orientation toward Western countries. He has called for defusing tensions and resuming the nuclear talks. These remarks alarmed Russia, signaling a potential downturn in Iran-Russia relations in the future.

Pezeshkian's victory raises many questions about the future of Iran-Russia relations including the factors and determinants that will influence Iran-Russia relations, their likely anticipated trajectories and scenarios, the limits of change, and the sustainability of relations between the two sides compared to what was witnessed under Raisi. This is all within the context of variables in the regional and international and regional environment.

Iran-Russia Relations Under Raisi

The 2021 election of Raisi marked the beginning of a new phase in Iran-Russia relations. Raisi's administration adopted a more conservative and hardline stance toward Western nations, prioritizing an eastward-looking policy. This policy is based on the belief that Eastern countries, particularly China and Russia, are more dependable partners for Iran than the West. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine, alongside the escalating global competition between the United States and Russia and China, bolstered this Iranian inclination. According to Raisi, this policy served as an effective means to counter the impact of US sanctions and to enhance Iran's long-term strategic positioning. This policy garnered support from "hardliner" factions associated with Raisi, who viewed it as a strategic choice rather than a tactical maneuver.⁽¹⁾

Raisi's "Look to the East" policy was influenced by various factors, particularly his failure to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and lift US sanctions. Simultaneously, the shifting geopolitical landscape in Eurasia and the Middle East, including the Russia-Ukraine war, offered new opportunities for the two countries' ties. Moreover, a growing wave of militancy swept the Iranian political landscape since the 2021 presidential election, in particular, the large-scale exclusion of all "moderate" and "reformist" candidates by the Guardian Council and the mounting widespread protests in Iran. The Raisi administration saw an increasing role for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) because its former commanders assumed high-level political positions. The IRGC-affiliated Quds Force played an increasingly prominent role in shaping and implementing foreign policy.⁽²⁾

Iran-Russia ties witnessed significant developments under the Raisi administration as the two countries coordinated their positions on several international issues, including the Iranian nuclear program, the war in Syria, the situation in

the Caspian Sea, political and security developments in Afghanistan and coordination in energy markets. Iran played a significant role in supplying weapons to Russia following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war. After 2022, Iran became an essential partner in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to circumvent sanctions, and accelerate bilateral economic relations.⁽³⁾

Russia and Iran converged in the political and military fields. Tehran and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union⁽⁴⁾ signed a free trade agreement. Iran-Russia military cooperation accelerated significantly since the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war. Iran started shipping hundreds of long-range surveillance and attack drones to Russia in August 2022 after Russia depleted its missile supply. These drones aided Russia in maintaining and increasing pressure on Ukrainian air defenses while working to expand its own production lines and modify its missile systems. Iran also helped Russia build a massive factory in Russia's southeastern Tatarstan region that is capable of producing thousands of drones.⁽⁵⁾

Russia allegedly provided advanced surveillance programs, financial support, and technical aid to Iran's rocket and space launch vehicle programs. This alleged Russian help is crucial for Iran as it could facilitate the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles that are capable of carrying nuclear warheads. On September 2, 2023, Russia delivered two Yak-130 training jets to Iran. Additionally, it was reported that Russia shared confiscated weapons from the United States and NATO with Iran to assist in their refurbishment and bolster their anti-weapon capabilities. There are also reports indicating that Iran sought Russia's help in obtaining additional nuclear materials for the production of nuclear fuel.⁽⁶⁾

This growing convergence prompted both countries to sign a comprehensive cooperation agreement. On June 25, 2024, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Andrey Rudenko stressed that his country anticipated signing a comprehensive cooperation agreement with Iran very shortly. Both countries agreed in 2020 to work on a new deal to replace the old document. The 2001 agreement called for cooperation in security and energy projects, including the peaceful use of nuclear energy and the construction of nuclear power, as well as technology plants.⁽⁷⁾ The death of Raisi likely impeded and delayed the signing of this new strategic agreement until after the election of a new Iranian president.

Their mutual understanding touched on many regional issues. Yet, their perspectives on regional issues varied, including the Russian position on Iran's occupation of the three UAE islands. In July 2023, the late Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian confirmed that his country did not tolerate any party that interfered on issues related to the territorial integrity of Iran. He signaled that Tehran received Russia's interpretation, but it was not good enough. This came after Iran sharply criticized Russia for supporting an Emirati request to end the three islands issue through peaceful solutions.⁽⁸⁾ The Iranian and Russian perspectives toward Syria vary for many reasons. They include primarily the Russian coordination with regional and international parties in Syria, especially the convergence of Turkish-Russian interests amid the collision of Iranian-Turkish ambitions and

their different sectarian affiliations, the Russian priority given to Israeli security considerations, and Russia's desire to reduce militias in Syria. However, Iran still strengthened its armed presence to manifest parity to Russia's military presence in Syria.⁽⁹⁾

Pezeshkian's Foreign Policy

When Raisi and Abdollahian died in a helicopter crash on May 19, 2024, the Iranian government did not show any sign that it had an intention to change its strategy: the engineering of the election to keep "conservative" control over the country's executive branch. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei publicly praised Raisi's policies and called for their continuation. This meant that the election of Pezeshkian as Iran's president was a surprise for many. He promised to revive diplomatic relations with the West and reinstate the nuclear deal. Pezeshkian said, "You can survive the sanctions, but you cannot move ahead." He also stressed the need to defuse tensions with the West, arguing, "We seek good relations with Europe based on mutual respect and equality. The lack of political relations with the United States should not lead to tensions and costly conflicts."⁽¹⁰⁾

Many analysts and observers of Iranian affairs believed that Pezeshkian's call during his election campaign for "dialogue and openness to the outside world" reflected a pragmatic approach to restore the balance between the ideological and pragmatic dimensions of Iran's foreign policy, and lift the economic sanctions to end the siege on the country; Pezeshkian viewed this step as an effective option to address internal issues that had fueled anti-government protests. According to Pezeshkian's vision, openness to the outside world contributes to creating a fertile environment for improving deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, enhancing economic growth, and averting the brain drain that is critical to rebuilding a new Iranian state.⁽¹¹⁾

Pezeshkian's speech during his first televised debate in the second round of the presidential election on July 1, 2024, signaled the need for compromise and engagement with opponents to resolve all outstanding differences. He stated, "We must sit down and compromise to solve our problem with the world," and further explained, "My foreign policy aims to benefit the people and encourage them to survive, build, grow economically, and develop. In his article "My Message to the New World," published on July 12, 2024, he identified the principle of interest as fundamental to his foreign policy orientation by saying that the principles of dignity, wisdom, and interest would guide his government's foreign policy. The close bond of the former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif with the new president before the election and after assuming his duties is significant evidence of the new president's pragmatic approach in foreign policy. This scenario mirrors the Rouhani-Zarif approach toward the United States and Europe.⁽¹²⁾ The most important aspects of Pezeshkian's foreign policy orientations are the following:

The Resumption of Dialogue With the United States and the West

Pezeshkian's statements during the election campaign signaled a different approach than Raisi's with an emphasis on returning to dialogue with the United States and the West. He believes isolation has hindered achieving the supreme leader's ultimate goal of transforming Iran into a leading regional power in all fields by 2025. Therefore, he argues that Raisi's policy of economic resistance in response to the sanctions was ineffective. It cannot alleviate the impact of sanctions and improve living conditions or reduce the widespread protests because it is based on the long term. However, Iran's current crises require immediate and rapid solutions. This necessitates the resumption of dialogue with the United States and the West to lift the sanctions and provide significant financial returns that improve Iran's economic and living standards. He believes reviving nuclear talks is an urgent priority to lift the sanctions that have imposed heavy burdens on the Iranian economy, curtailed Iran's capacity to export oil and fueled popular discontent. Therefore, Pezeshkian promised to review the law entitled "Strategic Action to Plan Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interests," which was approved by the Iranian Parliament in December 2020. The Iranian president also expressed his desire to engage in constructive dialogue with European countries to reset relations based on principles of mutual respect.⁽¹³⁾

Neutrality and Non-alignment Toward East and West

In the presidential debate held on July 1, 2024, Pezeshkian discussed the advantages of directing Iran's foreign policy toward the East, revealing his approach to achieving a balance in relations with the East and the West. Pezeshkian cited the slogan of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "neither East nor West," in addition, he defended the nuclear agreement and highlighted the need to restore Iran's traditional neutrality and non-alignment in foreign affairs. Thus, he indicated that he would pursue a different policy from his predecessor, which would re-engage Iran with the West.⁽¹⁴⁾ Although Pezeshkian has been aiming for openness toward the West, he has stressed the need to bolster relations with Russia and China, especially in the context of building a multipolar world. Strengthening ties with these countries would bolster Iran's power and negotiating position. "China and Russia have consistently stood by us in difficult days. We deeply value this friendship," Pezeshkian said. "Russia is a valued strategic ally and neighbor to Iran. My administration will remain committed to expanding and enhancing relations. I will continue prioritizing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Russia, particularly within the frameworks such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Eurasia Economic Union.⁽¹⁵⁾

On July 12, 2024, Pezeshkian identified the principles of his foreign policy in an article published in English by the *Tehran Times*, stressing that his administration "will pursue an opportunity-driven policy" aimed at "creating balance in relations with all countries." Pezeshkian referred to Russia as "a valuable strategic ally" and said "We Look forward to collaborating more extensively with Beijing .

Nevertheless, Pezeshkian's tone toward the West remains a familiar combination of warnings and typical historical grievances as expressed by Iranian officials. The article mentioned that any improvement in relations should start with the first step taken by the West. Some observers stated that the principles identified by Pezeshkian from prioritizing relations with neighbors to strengthening partnerships with Russia and China and active participation in the SCO and BRICS, mirror the principles pursued by Raisi over the past three years.⁽¹⁶⁾ Hamid Abutalebi, a political adviser to former President Hassan Rouhani, labeled Pezeshkian's article as "confused, non-prioritized, dreamy and incoherent with a group of generalities." Pezeshkian said, "European countries have reneged on all these commitments, yet unreasonably expect Iran to unilaterally fulfill all its obligations under the JCPOA." He later contradicts this statement, "Despite these missteps, I look forward to engaging in constructive dialogue with European countries." Mohammad Kazem Sadjadpour, a former Iranian diplomat, believes that the central message of Pezeshkian's article is "balance and balance." He believes that Pezeshkian's foreign policy will be "a combination of sustainability and change."⁽¹⁷⁾

The Catalyst for Change in Iran's Policy Toward Russia

Under Pezeshkian's presidency, Iran is confronted with various factors that could compel it to strike a balance in its approach to the East and West or, alternatively, to continue and advance the policy of Raisi. The reasons and motivations for Tehran's shift in policy toward Russia include the following:

Internal Political and Economic Pressures

President Pezeshkian faces immediate internal pressures, primarily a weak economy exacerbated by years of mismanagement and sanctions and deep-rooted social divisions after brutal crackdowns on protestors since 2022. Observers suggest that Khamenei and his inner circle, which approved the list of presidential candidates, confess that the recent unrest has dramatically undermined the legitimacy of Iran's ruling elite and that Pezeshkian's election to the presidential office reflects the overall failure of Raisi's "hardliner" policies regarding how to respond to internal economic and social issues.⁽¹⁸⁾

The relatively weak turnout in the presidential election revealed the extent of public despair with the political system dominated by the "conservatives," and the Iranian people were convinced that the government was unable to resolve the problems they face. The election was preceded by numerous protests that heightened in scale and intensity. This prompted Khamenei to engineer the election in search of a way out of the internal crisis. It is understood that internal problems mainly stem from banking and international sanctions. Therefore, it is believed that Khamenei could provide Pezeshkian with the opportunity to open channels of dialogue with the West, hoping that this may lead to sanctions relief to avert the eruption of a new wave of protests.⁽¹⁹⁾

Some observers believe that the eastward looking policy has provided only limited economic opportunities that have not been sufficient to offset the negative impact of sanctions. Iran has been subjected to a wide range of sanctions because of its nuclear program, support for terrorism, and human rights record. When the Trump administration reimposed many sanctions in 2018, the Iranian economy deteriorated rapidly, oil exports fell, and inflation rates soared to record levels, exceeding 40% in February 2024.⁽²⁰⁾

Internal Debate on the Benefit of Iran-Russia Relations

There is reportedly a growing debate within Iranian political circles regarding the trajectory of relations with Russia. There are two trends in this regard. The first, represented by the IRGC, its leadership, and some government officials, calls for supporting relations with Russia. The second trend, represented by “moderate” current figures such as Zarif, calls for being cautious about aligning with Russia and anti-Western countries. Observers suggest that Russia, in response to Tehran’s support in the Russia-Ukraine war, is capable of quickly achieving its highest level of cooperation with Iran. If, in the future, Russia reaches this peak and subsequently reduces its support for Iran, it could strengthen the position of the second trend among the Iranian elites, who appear to be bewildered by the unprecedented protests occurring at home.⁽²¹⁾

Pezeshkian’s election makes it evident that the Iranian people support efforts to lift sanctions which have contributed to their socioeconomic hardship. Western sanctions have increased Iranian motivations to promote trade and depend on Russia and China. The sanctions weakened Iran’s private sector and middle class. However, they enabled the political elite to reward its supporters with access to foreign currency and economic opportunities, increasing its strength in Iranian society.⁽²²⁾

However, Pezeshkian, like the “moderates” in Iran, opposes Tehran’s unilateral dependence on Russia. He believes that cooperation with Russia is not easy and states that the full potential of Iran-Russia relations will unfold only after sanctions relief and establishing a multidirectional policy. Many members of the “reformist” currently defend this approach. They believe that helping Moscow in the Russia-Ukraine war has only increased the burden of sanctions imposed on Iran.⁽²³⁾

Russia’s Cautious Position Toward Crises in the Middle East

Russia’s position toward the Middle East has not met the aspirations of a large segment of the Iranian elite who believe that Moscow still maintains a cautious position and when it comes to regional crises, there is only limited cooperation between Russia and Iran. Russia’s ties with Israel and the Gulf states present challenges in terms of its relations with Iran. Russia works to neutralize the Israeli role in the Russia-Ukraine war and prevent Israel from providing military support to Ukraine in this war. Israel is likely aware of this issue because of Israel-Russia understanding to avoid confrontation in Syria and other hotspots in the Middle East. Moscow is trying as much as possible to maintain a pragmatic and neutral

attitude toward the Iran-Israel conflict. At the same time, Moscow does not want to go too far in its relations with Tehran, as this would negatively impact its ties with the Gulf states.

Some believe that Moscow likely takes advantage of the escalation in the Middle East because US military support mainly focuses on protecting Israel and alleviating US and Western troubles when it comes to the Ukrainian battlefield. Perhaps the Russians are no longer in need of Iranian drones because they have managed to localize this industry. Although Russia has had communication with Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas for years, it has not resulted in Russian security assistance for these actors — but it has managed, through this communication, to keep the war within its desired limits.⁽²⁴⁾

Despite Iranian military support in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia has not returned the favor by providing Iran with the demanded military equipment. The Iranians have long wanted certain military equipment from the Russians but have not yet received this, such as the Sukhoi-35 fighter jets. Observers assess that Russia's reluctance to respond to Iran's shopping list is reflective of its unwillingness to provoke animosity, in particular, with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Moscow is concerned about its interests with these countries and coordination in OPEC + in the face of US pressure.⁽²⁵⁾

Europe's Desire to Persuade the "Moderate" President and Defuse Tensions in the Middle East

Observers believe that the Europeans desire for disengagement between the Iranian and Russian governments. The Europeans fear all-out war in the Middle East. They are concerned about the military cooperation between Iran and Russia in the nuclear field. Therefore, the victory of Pezeshkian in the Iranian election may be an appropriate opportunity for Western capitals to woo him, especially in light of Iranian signals and messages sent by the Iranian president and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi confirming Tehran's desire to return to the nuclear talks. Therefore, the European response to these Iranian messages may strengthen Europe's efforts to prevent further military escalation in the Middle East, neutralize Iran's role in the Russia-Ukraine war, encourage European countries to pressure Israel to accept a ceasefire in Gaza, and stop the conflict spiraling into a regional war.⁽²⁶⁾

Following the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah by Israel on September 27, 2024, and the intensification of Israeli strikes on southern Lebanon, some Western countries such as the United States, France and their allies issued a joint statement on September 25, 2024, calling on Israel and Hezbollah to agree to a 21-day ceasefire, during which negotiations would be held on a diplomatic solution to the crisis on the Israeli-Lebanese border.⁽²⁷⁾ Although Western politicians have been criticized for their support of Israel, some Western leaders, such as French President Emmanuel Macron, have called for a halt

on arms deliveries to Israel, sparking a wave of massive anger inside the Israeli government.⁽²⁸⁾

Factors Influencing the Endurance of Iran's Policy Toward Russia

Despite the catalyst for change that pushed Pezeshkian to pursue a policy different from his predecessor regarding ties with Russia and Western countries, the Iranian president faces constraints and challenges such as the following:

A Spike in US-Iran Tensions in the Middle East

The Middle East is overwhelmed by a state of tension and instability, and there was anticipation of an Israeli military strike in response to the Iranian strike that targeted military sites and bases in Israel on October 1, 2024. It was in response to Israel's assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh on July 31 and Israel's assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on September 27. This Iranian strike sparked further military escalation between Iran and Israel. Tel Aviv asserted its right to retaliate. Israel considered its options for delivering a solid blow to Iran. In this context, many observers expected that Tel Aviv would strike Iranian nuclear sites or oil platforms and refineries, and even the headquarters of the Iranian supreme leader. If this happened, the region would enter a vicious cycle of violence, military attacks, and counterattacks between Iran and Israel. Further escalation between the two forces would likely lead to US military intervention to protect Israel. The United States deployed more troops and assets and mobilized its regional troops in anticipation of Israel's response. The region is beset with crises, including tensions between Iran and the United States, the likelihood of further escalation between Israel and Iran, the ongoing Israeli military strikes on Hezbollah positions, the targeting of its leadership, and the continuation of Houthi attacks on commercial vessels and US responses to them. Consequently, these crises could spike tensions between Iran and the United States and diminish the chances of a return to dialogue.

Pezeshkian has identified some of his regional priorities in "supporting the resistance rooted in the established Iranian policy." He thanked the Houthis for "their support for the Palestinian people and praised their attacks on international shipping lines in the Red Sea as a courageous decision." Therefore, Pezeshkian's contact with Iran's "Axis of Resistance" not only confirm the centrality of these groups in Tehran's efforts to confront Israel, especially as the Israeli army attacks Lebanon, but also signals the long-term continuation of Iran's regional policy.⁽²⁹⁾

Analysts contend that the recent intensification of conflict in the Middle East can be attributed to Iran's engagement in the Russia-Ukraine war. They argue that, there is now an implicit risk that the conflict could encroach upon Iranian territory. A weapons factory in Isfahan was attacked by three drones on January 29, 2023, and marked the beginning of a new stage of confrontation with Iran. Although the attack was not the first against a strategic facility in Iran, Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolak's statement that "the logic of war is abhor-

rent and makes the perpetrators and accomplices pay the price” prompted Iran to doubt Ukraine’s involvement with Israel in the attacks, however, Iran accused Israel immediately of carrying out the attack. ⁽³⁰⁾

Iran Bets on Russia’s Role in Syria

Despite Russia’s limited support for the Iranian position in the Israel-Iran conflict, Tehran still depends on Russia’s role in maintaining the current equation inside Syria to serve Iran’s interests. There are severe repercussions for Russia if it emerges from the war in Ukraine defeated or at least exhausted in a long war it was not prepared for, inevitably affecting its strong presence inside Syria. This would make Iran vulnerable in the face of the Syrian armed opposition. Therefore, Tehran works to avoid incurring the cost of Russia’s defeat in the war and avert the repercussions of this defeat on its interests in Syria. ⁽³¹⁾

Russia still depends on Iranian military support in its war against Ukraine. Russian National Security Council Secretary Shoigu visited Tehran and described Haniyeh’s assassination as “tragic and something impossible to bypass” in talks with the Iranian government. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said in a separate statement that Moscow “calls on everyone to refrain from escalating the situation into a disaster for all regional players.” ⁽³²⁾ Russia’s Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia stressed that by killing Nasrallah, Israel deliberately escalated the conflict and bears all the blame for escalating tensions in the Middle East. ⁽³³⁾

At the level of the Russia-Ukraine war, recent developments have reinforced the approaches of the two countries to maintaining the current level of cooperation, especially after the incursion of Ukraine into Russia’s Kursk region on August 6, 2024. This was the most significant development since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Ukraine managed for the first time since the outbreak of the war to reverse the equation balance to its advantage on the ground, penetrating more than 1,000 kilometers into Russia’s territory. This pushed Russia to escalate further to expel Ukrainian troops from Kursk and to receive military support from allies such as Iran amid the growing Western military support provided to Ukraine. ⁽³⁴⁾

US Election: Approaches of Democratic and Republican Candidates

Observers believe that Iran’s policy options for strengthening relations with the United States will become more difficult following Trump’s electoral victory and the potential revival of his maximum pressure campaign against Iran. ⁽³⁵⁾ Therefore, Trump’s victory will limit the prospects of restoring the JCPOA. The Trump administration may demand, if it wants to maintain the nuclear agreement with Iran, to include some other files, such as Iran’s regional influence, which Tehran considers one of its red lines. ⁽³⁶⁾

IRGC and “Hardliner” Pressures

Many observers agree that Pezeshkian will have limited ability to change foreign policy toward Russia, especially as the “hardliners” dominate power inside the

country. Pezeshkian faces the difficult, perhaps impossible, task of mobilizing support from the Iranian supreme leader, who makes the final decision on most national security issues. In recent years, Khamenei's decisions on these issues have been primarily dominated by the directives of the IRGC and Iran's "hardliner" political factions.⁽³⁷⁾

The Iranian political system grants the supreme leader broad powers, especially in foreign policy. The official powers of the president are limited primarily to domestic policy, with the supreme leader retaining control over key foreign policy decisions. The April 2024 confrontation with Israel, which marked the first time the two countries attacked each other directly and openly despite the ongoing hostility for 35 years, indicated that the Iranian establishment is more confrontational than ever.⁽³⁸⁾

Therefore, expecting a significant or fundamental change in Iran's foreign policy under Pezeshkian is unrealistic, especially if the unelected centers of power show an unwillingness to change. Iran's structure and power flow allow unelected institutions to disrupt and thwart plans drawn up by elected bodies such as the government and Parliament. Pezeshkian and his foreign minister mainly execute official diplomatic functions in terms of interactions between governments. However, they do not act independently as the IRGC-affiliated Quds Force will continue to play a decisive role in implementing Iranian foreign policy.⁽³⁹⁾

Future Trajectories of Iran-Russia Relations

Pezeshkian's assumption of the Iranian presidency comes amid transformations in the regional and international geopolitical landscapes. At the international level, the world anticipates the impact of a second Trump administration. The Russia-Ukraine war continues to step up and cause repercussions on Russia's external moves. The regional environment witnessed a spike in tensions between Israel, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah after Israel assassinated Haniyeh, Hezbollah leader Fuad Shukur, and Nasrallah. The IRGC and Iranian supreme leader called for a strong response to Israel. This prompted the United States to mobilize its forces in the region in anticipation of an Iranian response to Israel. The Iranian president faces many internal challenges that require considered responses, especially the deteriorating socioeconomic situation due to Western sanctions on Iran and the state of internal divisions and disputes over a robust military strike against Israel. In this international, regional and Iranian context, three future scenarios regarding Iran-Russia relations can be expected:

Strategic Alliance

This scenario predicts that Pezeshkian's administration will work to strengthen relations with Moscow and raise them to the level of a strategic alliance by signing further security and defense agreements that ensure mutual support politically and militarily. Tehran will continue to provide military support to Moscow in the war against Ukraine, with Moscow providing Tehran political support in

the Middle East. Moscow will provide the weapons that Tehran unconditionally demands. This scenario suggests that regional tensions between Iran, Israel and the United States and the continued escalation of the Russia-Ukraine war will provide favorable opportunities to push the two countries toward this scenario and for Iran to proceed with its eastward looking policy. This is reinforced by Pezeshkian's announcement that Russia and Iran would sign a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement at the BRICS summit in October 2024.⁽⁴⁰⁾

This scenario seems unlikely for several reasons, most notably the reluctance of the Pezeshkian government to sign the strategic agreement with Russia, which was delayed as the Iranian president wanted to review and reconsider the agreement. This means that Tehran is reviewing its relations with Russia, and there is division in the Iranian political elite regarding ties with Moscow.

Observers mention that there are many factors that will make it difficult for Iran and Russia to enter a strategic alliance similar to the partnership between Russia and Belarus. The most significant factor is that each side has its different priorities. The Russia-Ukraine war is a priority for Russia, while Iran views the conflict in the Middle East as a priority. The two countries have poor historical trust; each side uses the other as a bargaining chip and a means of leverage with Western countries. Moscow has always impeded the signing of a nuclear deal between Iran and Western countries. There are also signs of tacit understanding between European countries and Iran that ballistic missiles will not be delivered to Moscow. Russia is still reluctant to provide Tehran with some weapons and defense systems, such as the S-300 system, in order not to stir up animosity between Israel and Tehran's adversaries in the Middle East, including some Gulf states. It is worth mentioning the profound differences between the two countries' moves in the Caucasus region, especially Russia's recent rapprochement efforts with Azerbaijan and support for the establishment of the Zangezur corridor and the damage that Iran sees as a result of these Russian moves for its vital interests in this region. Russia is reluctant to complete the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Moscow-Tehran disputes have not been fully resolved. We should not forget how Moscow ignores Israeli attacks against Iranian forces in Syria or how Iran prevented Russian fighters from using its military bases in Syria.⁽⁴¹⁾

Tactical Alliance

This scenario predicts that the two countries will maintain a temporary political and military alliance because of the necessity imposed by the Russia-Ukraine war, Western sanctions on Moscow, and the Iranian necessity because of tensions with Western countries in the context of its nuclear program, Western sanctions, and the Israeli escalation in the Middle East. Therefore, Russia and Iran will work to support each other temporarily within a specific geographical and military remit. A tactical alliance in the face of US pressure seems convenient but it may disappear if Moscow reaches a deal with Western countries to end the war in Ukraine or Tehran reaches a nuclear deal with Western countries.

This scenario assumes that Russia and Iran have reached the threshold of their cooperation and thus cannot continue supporting each other, neither can they reap strategic gains as they can from potential agreements with other actors. This scenario might materialize if Western countries reach an agreement with Putin to end the war in Ukraine or if they strike a deal with Iran to halt military support to Russia in its war in Ukraine.

This scenario is likely amid the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine and the diminishing possibility of US-Iran rapprochement. The Biden administration has not made specific promises or offered proposals to defuse tensions with Iran over its nuclear program. Tensions between Israel, Iran and the "Axis of Resistance" are ongoing despite the attempts made to de-escalate and reach a ceasefire agreement in Gaza. Further tensions in the Middle East are expected in light of expected reprisals from Tehran and Hezbollah against Israel in response to the assassination of Shukr and Haniyeh. This lends the tactical alliance scenario between Iran and Russia further credence.

Pragmatic Cooperation

This scenario projects that the two countries will maintain political cooperation while committing to neutrality and non-interference when supporting each other. This means that Iran will not lend further military support to Russia in the war against Ukraine. On the other hand, Moscow will not intervene to help Tehran in Syria and its war against Israel, nor agree to arms deals that will provoke Israel and Tehran's adversaries in the Middle East.

This scenario is consistent with the vision of Pezeshkian, who calls for maintaining a balance in relations with the East and the West. While Iran tends to keep calm and pragmatic relations with Russia, it is pursuing rapprochement with the United States and the revival of Iran's nuclear negotiations.

This scenario suggests that the Iranian supreme leader must be flexible regarding Pezeshkian's foreign policy orientations in order to lift sanctions, contain internal tensions, and open communication channels with Western countries to revive the nuclear agreement. It also assumes that a new US administration may consider it appropriate to open dialogue with Tehran to contain mounting tensions in the region.⁽⁴²⁾ However, Pezeshkian is unable to initiate the revival of the JCPOA without the approval of Khamenei and the IRGC.⁽⁴³⁾

The future of Iran-Russia ties will rest between the second and third scenarios. This will range between a tactical alliance to counter US pressure and a pragmatic rapprochement to ensure a balance of Iran's relations with the East without harming its relations with Western countries. This will also grant Russia freedom of movement in the Middle East while achieving a balance in its relations with Iran, Israel, and the Gulf states.

Conclusion

The Iran-Russia relationship under Raisi was largely tactical rather than strategic. It is unlikely to elevate to a strategic level under Pezeshkian. Despite progress in bilateral ties, political differences prevent the relationship from being labeled as a strategic alliance, similar to the relationship between Russia and Belarus. This dynamic is likely to continue, driven by pragmatic cooperation and influenced by regional and international contexts. The Russia-Ukraine war, escalating tensions in the Middle East, and pragmatic cooperation are steering the relationship toward pragmatic collaboration rather than the formation of a strategic alliance. While Russia maintains strategic ties with Iran without fully siding with Israel or the Gulf states, Iran is seeking a deal with Western countries to lift the sanctions. Therefore, the future of Iran-Russia cooperation is expected to be confined to a tactical alliance and pragmatic cooperation. The direction of the relationship will hinge on developments in the battlefields in Ukraine and the Middle East, the extent of US involvement, and the approach of the next US administration toward Russia and Iran. This approach may continue to isolate the two countries or lean toward engaging in dialogue with Iran. It also depends on the flexibility of the Iranian supreme leader and the influence of the IRGC and the “hardliners” on Pezeshkian.

Endnotes

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