

Transformation of Iran's Foreign Policy Post-Ebrahim Raisi: Analysis of Nuclear Strategy, International Relations, and Middle Eastern Geopolitics

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Abstract

In the midst of constantly changing global political dynamics, foreign policy becomes a primary reflection of how a country navigates international challenges and opportunities. Under Raisi's leadership, Iran was known for its hardline and confrontational approach towards the West, while strengthening its relationships with Eastern powers such as China and Russia. Raisi's approach also focused on increasing economic self-sufficiency through resistance to international sanctions. Following Raisi's death, Iran is at a critical juncture in determining the direction of its foreign policy. Therefore, this research aims to analyze Iran's foreign policy after Raisi's leadership to understand whether Iran will continue the hardline strategy implemented by Raisi or adopt more moderate foreign policy reforms. This study focuses on the implications for nuclear strategy, relations with Western countries, and geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. Using foreign policy theory and policy analysis approaches, this research is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the direction of Iran's foreign policy post-Raisi's leadership, as well as the potential adoption of more moderate strategies in facing international challenges and opportunities. The research reveals that under President Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's foreign policy blends pragmatism with traditional ideological principles. His administration is committed to alleviating economic pressures from Western sanctions through inclusive diplomacy and constructive dialogue, aiming to ease or remove these sanctions and revive the JCPOA to enhance economic stability. Regionally, Pezeshkian supports the Axis of Resistance, reinforcing Iran's influence in the Middle East by backing allied militias and fostering strategic alliances with global powers like Russia. Pezeshkian's approach balances military support for regional allies with economic diplomacy to secure Iran's strategic and economic interests.

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Introduction

Foreign policy plays a crucial role in determining a nation's sovereignty, security, and economy. Foreign policy has a crucial role in shaping a country's interactions with other nations and international organizations in a world that is becoming more interconnected. Foreign policy is of utmost importance to Iran as it serves to enhance its geopolitical standing and address the various problems and opportunities in the global stage (Hellmann & Urrestarazu, 2013). Iran's foreign policy has traditionally been influenced by a blend of ideological, geopolitical, and economic considerations. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has strategically positioned itself as a counterbalance to Western dominance in the Middle East, promoting a governmental system rooted in Islamic principles (Mottale, 2015).

The foreign policy strategy of a country varies depending on the government in power. Similarly, in Iran, under the guidance of Ebrahim Raisi, the country adopted a resolute and frequently aggressive stance in its dealings with other nations. This is seen in Iran's stance over its nuclear program, its backing of militant groups in the area, and its strained relations with Western nations. During Raisi's tenure, Iran's foreign policy was characterized as a pragmatic revolutionary approach focused on countering US dominance and seeking to remove US influence from the Middle East, especially Iraq. Iran also provided support to regional allies including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Syria (Rasanah, 2023).

Ebrahim Raisi's leadership has bolstered these stances, potentially resulting in a more assertive approach in Iran's international relations. This development may have substantial ramifications for regional stability and international diplomatic endeavors. Conversely, Iran's foreign policy, directed by the controversial Raisi administration, centers around its nuclear program. This program has prompted the United States to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and impose economic sanctions on Iran (Aclandea, 2018). Iran has been heavily sanctioned by Western countries due to its foreign policy, which frequently clashes with Western objectives. These sanctions have a significant impact on both Iran's economy and its domestic political and social stability (Donovan, et al, 2023).

Under Raisi's leadership, Iran's foreign policy has significantly impacted its relations with neighboring countries in the Middle East. The increased support provided by Iran to proxy groups and militias in the region has the potential to worsen the ongoing conflict and escalate tensions, thereby complicating diplomatic efforts to find resolutions. However, the international community also posed challenges to Raisi's leadership, resulting in the Raisi administration inheriting a feeble economy due to years of Western sanctions (Chamlou, 2022). The end of Raisi's leadership as a result of a helicopter crash on 19 May 2024 raises new questions related to whether Iran will continue the confrontational approach adopted by Ebrahim Raisi, or will there be a significant change in Iran's foreign policy under President Pezeshkian?

This study uses the concept of foreign policy to analyze Iran's foreign policy including nuclear strategy, relations with western countries and Middle Eastern geopolitics under the government of President Masoud Pezeshkian. Foreign policy formulation is shaped by multiple elements. Foreign policy refers to the deliberate approach taken by a government to handle its relations with other nations. It is intended to serve national objectives, protect national interests, and strengthen a country's standing in the international arena. It encompasses multiple aspects like as diplomacy, military engagement, economic strategy, and international treaties. , including the historical backdrop, geopolitical terrain, economic circumstances, internal political dynamics, and the governing regime's ideology. Foreign policy serves as a strategic framework that enables a nation to effectively negotiate the intricacies of international relations, assert its influence, mitigate external dangers, and foster collaboration (Morin & Paquin, 2018).

Related Work

As per Paper [16] Research by Middle East Council on Global Affairs with the title “Iran in The Middle East Bulding Bridges or Expanding Influence?” Analysis related to Ebrahim Raisi's foreign policy perspective is marked by a firm adherence to the Supreme Leader's instructions, with a primary emphasis on diminishing reliance on Western nations and bolstering relationships with surrounding and ally countries. The Raisi administration implemented a "Look to the East" policy, prioritizing enhanced diplomatic ties with China, Russia, and other countries in Asia (Akbarzadeh & Azizi, 2024).

As per paper [17] "Iran's Influence in The Middle East" by Philip Loft (Loft, 2024) . This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East from the time it transitioned into an Islamic Republic until the present day. It examines Iran's influence in the region as well as the sanctions imposed by Western nations in response to Iran's foreign policies that are perceived as conflicting with Western interests. This research specifically emphasizes Iran's overarching foreign policy, necessitating a more comprehensive and targeted elucidation of the government in concern.

Iranian foreign policy under the leadership of Ebrahim Raisi

Before Ebrahim Raisi being the presidency in August 2021, Iran was going through a difficult political phase under President Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani, who assumed office in 2013, is a moderate intellectual who aims to enhance Iran's global engagement and foster better relations with Western countries. An important accomplishment of Iran is the 2015 nuclear accord, commonly referred to as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Nevertheless, Rouhani's foreign policy encountered significant impediments when the United States, during President Donald Trump's administration, independently withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and reinstated severe sanctions on Iran (Aclandea, 2018)

The United States implemented sanctions once again, specifically targeting crucial sectors of the Iranian economy such as oil, gas, banking, and industry. Consequently, the Iranian economy saw a substantial contraction. The country experienced a significant decline in oil income, which serve as its primary source of foreign currency. Iran experienced significant inflation, a depreciation of its currency (the rial), and a decrease in its foreign exchange reserves. The Iranian society underwent significant economic adversity, characterized by escalating rates of unemployment and poverty (DW politics, 2018).

The deteriorating economic condition intensified societal unrest across. During the latter part of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, Iran experienced a surge of widespread demonstrations triggered by challenging economic circumstances, elevated unemployment rates, and governmental corruption. The scale of these protests was one of the largest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the government reacted by implementing a severe crackdown. There was ongoing social dissatisfaction, marked

by intermittent demonstrations in major urban areas throughout the years 2019 and 2020.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Iran's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—based on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP)—accounted for 1.86 percent of the world's GDP (PPP) in 1980. By 2021, its share had declined to 0.8 percent (Ibid).

Rouhani is confronted with domestic political hurdles alongside economic difficulties. The conservative factions and hardliners, who have significant power in state institutions like the Council of Governors and Markets (IRGC), frequently impede Rouhani's endeavors to enact his reform plan. The political schism in the Iranian government gives rise to a complex interplay, where policy decisions are frequently influenced by the competing factions of moderates and conservatives.

Iran is experiencing a growing sense of isolation on the global stage. Furthermore, the European nations that had previously endorsed the JCPOA had challenges in managing the conflicting demands of US sanctions and their economic relations with Iran. The isolation led Iran to forge deeper ties with non-Western powers like Russia and China, who provided economic and military support as a means to offset Western pressure.

Ebrahim Raisi assumed the presidency in June 2021 in a highly regulated election, with the fewest number of votes in the history of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, the regime has successfully accomplished its objective of establishing hardline dominance over all sectors of the nation. The Supreme Leader proclaimed the commencement of a new epoch known as the "Second Phase of the Revolution", which aims to finalize the outstanding tasks of attaining independence and revitalizing the social and cultural structure (Yee, 2021).

President Raisi assumed control of an economy that was limited by the mismanagement of the regime, external sanctions, and the impact of a global epidemic. Nevertheless, the previous administration managed to hand over control of the economy, resulting in a significant improvement. According to the World Bank, the economy has rebounded from a drop of -6.8 percent in 2019 to a growth of 3.1 percent in 2021. Nevertheless, the overall unemployment rate stands at 10 percent, with women experiencing significantly higher levels of unemployment despite a noticeable decrease in their involvement in the labor sector. (From 18 percent to 14 percent). The government debt surged to 33 percent of GDP, while inflation soared to 58 percent,

marking the greatest level since World War II, when Iran was invaded and occupied by the Allied forces from 1941 to 1945 (Ibid).

Nuclear Strategy of Iran under Raisi

During his presidential campaign, Ebrahim Raisi expressed his strong support for the JCPOA and even said that the JCPOA is a national document that Iran must comply with. Raisi also stated that opening new negotiations with the West is on the agenda, but it must be underlined that progress in nuclear negotiations will never happen if Western countries put pressure on Iranian politics. On September 21, 2021, President Raisi addressed the United Nations General Assembly, emphasizing that Iran considers nuclear weapons to be prohibited, but there must be certainty from Western countries regarding acts of oppression or sanctions against Iran (Lumsden, 2021).

As a hard-line leader, Raisi's views on the JCPOA do not provide benefits to Iran as the benefits of limiting the nuclear program promised by Western countries do not match their realization. On the other hand, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018 created a sentiment that the JCPOA did not provide economic benefits to Iran because the policies of Western countries changed according to their country's interests. In addition, the JCPOA threatens Iran's national sovereignty because it provides a lot of control over the nuclear program.

Raisi emphasized the need for stronger and more principled negotiations with the parties involved in the JCPOA. He wants to ensure that any new agreement or renewal of the JCPOA must benefit Iran in real terms and provide stronger guarantees for the fulfillment of economic promises by Western countries.

The endless sanctions from the western countries made Iran refuse to give up its right to enrich uranium but Iran chose to negotiate uranium activities that continue until 2030. Amid criticism and sanctions from the western countries, Iran still feels free to produce as much nuclear fuel as it wants even though it violates the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (Sanger, 2024).

The National Intelligence Directorate (DNI) of the United States reported in early June 2023 that uranium production has significantly exceeded the agreed threshold in the JCPOA. In March 2023, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that Iran has achieved an enrichment level of 83 percent. Uranium must be enriched to a level above 90 percent in order to be used as a raw material for bombs (Mada, 2023).

Further, despite Iran's nuclear development outside of the terms of the JCPOA, UN restrictions on Iran's trade of missile-related technology expired on October 18, 2023. This could allow for supplies and ballistic missile components to move more freely to and from Iran and no longer require approval by the UN Security Council. The United States, United Kingdom, EU, and others have issued new sanctions on Iran to continue the prohibitions on missile and UAV technology, but without the UN restrictions in place it will remain to be seen how countries like China and Russia respond (Donovan, 2023). However, during Raisi's administration, Iran was reluctant to reduce its nuclear development unless western countries were ready to negotiate regarding the easing of sanctions against Iran (Ibid).

A New Approach to Reducing the Economic Burden of Western Sanctions

Iran has faced extensive economic sanctions from Western countries, especially the United States, for decades. These sanctions, aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions and affecting its regional policies, have had a significant impact on Iran's economy. The internal conditions of Iran as a result of the harsh sanctions imposed by the Western countries have hit the Iranian economy hard. Where the economic impact of sanctions against Iran is very severe, with the country's gross domestic product (GDP) contracting by 6.8% in 2019 and continuing to decline in subsequent years. The World Bank reports that by 2021, Iran GDP growth was only 3.1%, hampered by the ongoing sanctions and the Covid-19 pandemic (Kakoti, 2024).

Iran's inflation has risen in 2018 since the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA agreement by imposing pressure on Iranian oil and international banking exports, which has altered the inflation boom by 40%, on the other hand the decline in the rial currency has also been increasingly drastic due to sanctions. Before America withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, the rial exchange rate was 32,000 to the dollar but after America unilaterally withdrew the dollar exchange rate against the rial reached 584,000. According to estimates from the International Monetary Fund, Iran's GDP in 2023 will be 4.7 whereas GDP growth in 2024 will be 3.3% (Khatinoglu, 2024).

Iran's foreign policy has changed significantly in recent years, reflecting both domestic issues and changing geopolitical factors. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has a long history of revolution and anti-Western sentiment, has been steadily reevaluating the goals of its foreign policy in an effort to keep up with changing local

and global conditions. The rise of the United States as an adversary has forced Iran to rethink its foreign policy. Iran seeking to diversify its relationships and reduce its reliance on the United States. Iran has been reaching out to China, Russia, and India in an effort to build new partnerships.

Ebrahim Raisi came to power in June 2021. His foreign policy is mostly focused on strengthening connections with his neighbours and developing relations with the Asian powers. Raisi's shift towards Asia was a key element of its foreign policy plan. This shift in emphasis towards Asian nations, especially China, India, and Russia, sought to broaden Iran's foreign relationships, bolster economic links, and boost diplomatic support in the face of geopolitical obstacles and international sanctions (Ibid).

Sanctions pressure and uncertainty from Western countries have led Raisi to boost domestic economic development and increased resistance to international sanctions by reducing dependence on oil exports. Raisi's perspective on Iran's economic issues does not focus on the elimination of sanctions, but rather on the expansion of the "resistance economy" policy, a strategy aimed at reducing Iran's vulnerability to external sanctions. This policy is a form of economic protectionism. The purpose is to enhance domestic production, achieve self-sufficiency, boost exports, and reduce imports in order to attain economic growth. "Although they will make efforts to lift sanctions, the Raisi administration will simultaneously work diligently to eliminate sanctions and reduce Iran's economic vulnerability through the expansion of the 'resistance economy' policy (Forough, 2021).

Raisi's shift to Asia is a key element of his foreign policy. A shift in emphasis on Asian nations, especially China, India, and Russia, is aimed at expanding Iran's foreign relations, strengthening economic ties, and increasing diplomatic support in the face of geopolitical obstacles and international sanctions.

Iran Turns to China

Under Raisi's leadership, Iran managed to forge diplomatic ties despite the challenging economic circumstances caused by sanctions imposed by several Western nations. Meanwhile, China's decision to engage with Iran was driven by its strategic focus on fostering relationships with Arab nations (Yun, 2024).

Iran trying to reduce its economic dependence on Western countries by establishing closer ties with China to gain access to large enough markets for oil and other commodities. The 25-year comprehensive strategic agreement between Iran and China, signed in March 2021, is one of the most prominent elements of Iran's transition to Asia. The agreement includes a range of cooperative initiatives, including those related to economic, political, and security issues. The alliance is seen by Iran as a strategy to mitigate the impact of international sanctions, in particular those dropped by the United States following its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 (Jamil, 2023).

The agreement aims to facilitate China investing billions of dollars in Iran's oil and gas sectors in exchange for a steady supply. During Raisi's tenure, China has emerged as Iran's largest trading partner, with investments amounting to \$162 million annually. Concurrently, Iran's exports to China have reached \$12.6 billion, while imports from China have amounted to \$12.7 billion (Syed, 2023).

Amid the ongoing turbulence in relations between Iran and the West, President Ebrahim Raisi and President Xi Jinping have committed to enhancing cooperation in both security and economic sectors. This commitment is underscored by the signing of twenty agreements encompassing areas such as trade, transportation, information technology, tourism, agriculture, and crisis response, with a combined value of several billion dollars. Notably, China will invest in collaborative projects, including the development of a high-speed rail system linking Tehran and Mashhad, as well as the renovation of Imam Khomeini Airport (Ibid).

The cooperation and agreements between China and Iran provide mutual benefits to both nations. China's collaboration with Iran creates opportunities for expanding its influence in the Middle East, which can impact the region's geopolitical dynamics. On the other hand, the partnership between Iran and China aims to counteract the increasingly significant policies of the United States on the global stage. China leverages the substantial opportunity for cooperation with Iran, particularly in light of Iran's economic constraints due to Western sanctions. This partnership offers China new economic advantages under its "peaceful rise policy" through investments in economic projects (Rasanah, 2021).

The deal with Iran makes China benefit from a million barrels per day of oil demand from Iran at affordable prices and low shipping costs if Iran builds oil deposits in China. Iran sells oil to China at a 25% discount. While non-migas trade reached \$15.8 billion by 2022, it was up 7% from 2021. China purchased goods, including building materials,

metals, and food, worth \$6.5 billion from Iran by 2022. The Islamic Republic, in turn, purchased items, including cars and industrial machinery, valued at \$8.3 billion (US Institute of Peace, 2023).

Then Iran's advantage in cooperation with China is that Iran has an influential ally in the international arena that can provide a balance in the midst of Iran's isolation. On the economic side, Iran also needs an economic partner in the next 10 years that will become Tehran's number one trading partner. By 2020, China imports a quarter of Iran's exports. By 2021, it imports 26% of Iran's total exports, while Iran's oil and petrochemical exports to China put Iran on the list of the largest echoes to China (Ibid).

Iran's Foreign Relations with Russia

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has sought strategic alliances beyond the Western bloc in order to diminish its reliance on certain global powers and bolster its standing in the international sphere. Russia, with its anti-Western stance, has emerged as a significant ally for Iran. Raisi, renowned for his conservative and uncompromising stance towards the Western world, has actively advocated for strengthening relations with Russia as a means to fight the pressure and sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union (Fukutomi, 2024).

Iran's foreign policy in 2022, under President Ebrahim Raisi, has a strategic focus on strengthening political ties with Russia. The bilateral agreement between Russia and Iran encompasses a substantial investment of \$40 billion by the state-owned conglomerate Gazprom into Iran's oil and gas industry. Additionally, Russia has committed to constructing a Rasht-Astara railway, which will serve as a complementary component to the North-South Transport Corridor, facilitating connectivity between Russia and the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, the agreement includes provisions for the establishment of a comprehensive free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia (ibid).

The consolidation of Iran-Russia relations can be attributed to the 2015 Russian participation in the Syrian civil war, during which both countries found themselves in agreement in their backing for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Their collaborative endeavor established the groundwork for the broader development of the military-to-military communication channel between Moscow and Tehran. This strengthened alliance proved crucial during Raisi's term, as Iran became a significant

provider of military weaponry to Russia for its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine (op.cit).

The most significant achievement is the establishment of military collaboration between the two nations. Following a comprehensive military invasion of Ukraine, Iran initiated the exportation of weaponry to Russia for the initial time. Additionally, Iranian instructors have provided training to Russian soldiers in contemporary fighting techniques. However, Iran has recently acquired military training aircraft and is expected to acquire many Su-35 fighters in the near future.

The primary issue persists with the economy. In 2022, after the onset of the war in Ukraine, the trade volume between Iran and Russia increased by 20 percent, reaching a historic high of \$4.9 billion (Smagin, 2024).

The extent of Russia's involvement in the initial phase of the search and rescue mission highlights the significance of Russian ties with Iran, which have been established since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022. Moscow depends on Iranian drones and weapons to sustain its military capabilities. In response to Western sanctions, Russia has turned to Iran for strategies and entry into the illicit market network to manage the economic turmoil. In addition to the pressing issue of the war in Ukraine, Russia and Iran have discovered a common ground in their attempts to quell domestic conflicts, which is a notable feature of Raisi's leadership (Ibid).

Iran Relations with India

Iran sought to reduce its dependence on Western markets and enhance its resilience against international sanctions by cultivating stronger relationships with Asian states. Asia's economies presented Iran with opportunities for trade, investment, and technological collaboration. Iran sought to obtain diplomatic support from non-Western nations by redirecting its attention towards Asia (Op.cit).

India and Iran have had amicable relations since the conclusion of the Cold War. The nation that shares a border with Pakistan is a significant participant in the West Asian region. Diplomatic ties between India and Iran were established in 1950. During Ebrahim Raisi's rule, Iran prioritized improving diplomatic ties with Asian nations, including India. Despite the stringent sanctions imposed on Iran, India maintains robust trading links with the country, despite being involved in different partnerships.

The bilateral relations between Iran and India have experienced substantial progress under the stewardship of President Ebrahim Raisi, commencing in August 2021. The bilateral cooperation encompasses various domains, such as energy, trade, and infrastructure (First Post, 2024).

India's bilateral trade with Iran reached \$2.33 billion by 2022-23. Despite a drop in New Delhi's trade with Tehran in recent years, there has been a significant gain of 21.77 percent in trade by the year 2022-23 following Raisi's assumption of office in 2021.

According to Foreign Policy, India and Iran have expressed shared concerns on the Taliban's Sunni radicalism and Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan. Despite the challenges posed by international sanctions on Iran, both countries have maintained a robust level of coordination in various domains. Given India's status as a major importer of Iranian oil, energy has played a crucial role in bilateral relationship. India's strategic development of Iran's Chabahar port is significant as it establishes a vital maritime pathway that circumvents Pakistan for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran and India have collaborated on matters pertaining to regional security in conjunction with their mutual economic interests. They have previously collaborated to promote peace and facilitate progress in the war-torn country. In order to enhance bilateral relationships, both countries have actively promoted intercultural and interpersonal encounters. The bilateral relationship between Iran and India is an integral component of their respective foreign policy, promoting regional connectivity and collaboration in South and Central Asia.

Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East

Under President Ebrahim Raisi, Iran has resumed its old policy of backing numerous ally factions throughout the Middle East. Iran's consistent foreign policy is driven by its strategic objective of increasing its influence and countering hostile groups in the area. The Raisi administration, similar to previous governments, regards this relationship as a crucial element of Iran's defense strategy and its ability to exert influence in the area. Iran seeks to strengthen its influence and establish a network of proxy powers by providing ongoing support to various groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shia militia in Iraq, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the Assad regime in Syria. This strategy allows Iran to advance its own interests and counter potential threats from rivals such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Iran's unwavering

strategy confirms its dedication to a foreign policy that places emphasis on asserting regional control and maintaining ideological unity with Shiite groups and other associated forces.

President Raisi's administration has significantly augmented military aid to Hezbollah, the influential Lebanese Shia paramilitary organization and political faction, since assuming office. This growing assistance encompasses the supply of sophisticated weaponry, military instruction, and strategic consulting. The augmented military assistance demonstrates Iran's strategic approach to guaranteeing the enduring strength of Hezbollah, enabling it to effectively deter Israeli aggression and safeguard Iranian interests in the Levant region. This rising military backing underscores Raisi's determination to boosting Iranian proxy powers to preserve a balance of power in the area and protect its vital assets.

In Iraq, President Raisi's administration has dramatically expanded financial assistance to the Shiite militias. These militias, who have played a major role in the war against ISIS and inuring security after the invasion, are critical to Iran's influence in Iraq. This enhanced financial support is aimed at boosting the operational capabilities of these militias and assuring their loyalty to Tehran amid escalating instability and the continuous presence of US forces. This financial backing helps these militia to maintain their activities, influence Iraqi politics, and balance US efforts to stabilize and influence the country. By bolstering these groups, the Raisi administration intends to strengthen Iran's influence in Iraq and defend its western wing against any threats.

In Syria, the Raisi government has vowed to help reconstruction efforts, which are rapidly reinforcing the long-term relationship between Tehran and Damascus. This assistance encompasses financial aid, investment in infrastructure endeavors, and support in reconstructing vital sectors of the Syrian economy that have been devastated by prolonged civil conflict. Iran's engagement in Syria extends beyond providing military assistance to President Bashar al-Assad. It also aims to secure lasting stability and economic revival through strategic alliances. The Raisi government intends to ensure Iran's strategic interests, preserve its access to Mediterranean ports, and reinforce the Iran-Syrian-Hezbollah nexus by actively supporting Syria's reconstruction. The commitment of Iran to its ally and its strategic vision of a strong and stable regional alliance network is reaffirmed by the pledge to assist in the reconstruction of Syria.

President Ebrahim Raisi's administration in Iran has demonstrated a steadfast dedication to maintaining consistent foreign policy, particularly in bolstering important

regional partners and proxy groups. The government has escalated military aid to Hezbollah, augmented financial support to the Shia militias in Iraq, intensified backing for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and committed to assisting in the reconstruction of Syria. Iran's actions demonstrate its strategic objective of augmenting its influence, combating adversaries, and establishing a robust network of allied forces across the Middle East. The Raisi administration consistently places high importance on this alliance as a crucial element of Iran's regional strategy, guaranteeing Iran's prominent role in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

Iran Foreign Policy under President Masoud Pezeshkian

Masoud Pezeshkian assumed the presidency of Iran on 28 July 2024, succeeding former president Ebrahim Raisi, who gained a reputation as a conservative leader following the plane tragedy on 19 May 2024. Masoud Pezeshkian embarked on his political journey by assuming the role of Deputy Health Minister under President Mohammad Khatami's tenure in 1997. Subsequently, he assumed the role of Minister of Health from 2001 to 2005 and has held multiple terms as a member of the Iranian parliament, representing Tabriz (Zeidan, 2024).

Iran has been compelled to reassess its foreign policy agenda due to the economic crisis triggered by Western sanctions. Pezeshkian is anticipated to devise a strategy to alleviate tensions with Western nations, potentially entailing efforts to remove the sanctions that have immobilized Iran's economy. The governments of the governing countries are compelled to adopt a new approach due to a concerning home situation. This approach may involve engaging in more inclusive diplomacy and constructive conversation with Western countries, with the goal of strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations (Tabrizi, 2024).

When examining the historical background and campaign of Masoud Pazeshkian for the presidential nomination, it becomes evident that his leadership style effectively merges a dedication to Iran's intellectual principles with a practical approach to tackling present-day difficulties. During his campaign, Masoud Pezeshkian asserted that Iran has the capacity to withstand economic pressure and sanctions imposed by Western nations. However, he emphasized that Iran's economy will not experience growth unless Western countries decrease the severity of the sanctions. This is evident during Ebrahim Raisi's administration, where Iran's foreign policy and economic revival did not rely on

the removal of sanctions by Western nations, leading to significant financial strain and inflation in recent times (Ibid).

Pezeshkian denounced the hardline faction in the campaign for their inability to resurrect the nuclear agreement and for resorting to expensive measures, such as selling oil at significantly reduced prices, in order to evade sanctions. Furthermore, he supported the implementation of global norms regarding money laundering in order to ease limitations on banking (Bozorgmehr, 2024).

Masoud Pezeshkian advocated for establishing "constructive relations" with both Washington and European nations in order to alleviate Iran's isolation. Iran stands out as the sole non-nuclear nation that has successfully enriched uranium to a level of 60 percent, which is in close proximity to the 90 percent threshold required for the production of a nuclear weapon. Furthermore, Iran has amassed significant quantities of enriched uranium (Agence France Presse, 2024).

Pezeshkian asserts that Iran should actively pursue a policy of global engagement and advocate for a reduction in tensions with Western nations in order to bring an end to economic sanctions. Pezeshkian advocates for Iran to engage in diplomatic relations with the majority of governments worldwide, excluding Israel. However, Iran also aims to decrease its reliance on alliances with countries like China and Russia in order to avoid perpetuating its global isolation.

President Masoud Pezeshkian's foreign policy objective is for Iran to uphold its nuclear strategy, focusing on building nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes, but also being receptive to international conversations. Pezeshkian is dedicated to ongoing negotiations with Western nations in order to restore the 2015 nuclear agreement (JCPOA) that was forsaken by the Trump administration in 2018. Pezeshkian thereafter endeavored to establish transparency and adherence to international regulations by collaborating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to substantiate that Iran's nuclear program is not intended for military objectives. However, his government maintained its dedication to Iran's entitlement to advance nuclear technologies, such as uranium enrichment, in accordance with global accords (US News Routers, 2024).

Pezeshkian aimed to enhance relations with Western nations by adopting a more transparent and practical approach to diplomacy. The government has announced its commitment to engage in ongoing discussions with the European Union and the United States, with a specific focus on the removal of sanctions and the restoration of regular

economic relations. The relocation is seen crucial for enhancing Iran's domestic economic condition, which has been severely impacted by global sanctions.

In spite of the persistent conflicts, particularly with human rights concerns and Iran's regional strategy, Pezeshkian aims to promote a more conciliatory and cooperative stance. Additionally, he pledged to decrease the anti-Western sentiments frequently expressed by his predecessors, with the aim of facilitating more productive collaboration in several domains, such as trade and technology.

Iran's foreign policy is currently being tested by challenges concerning its nuclear strategy and the threat of sanctions from Western countries, particularly the United States. The revival of the 2015 nuclear deal is a tense issue that requires diplomatic efforts with Western nations. Additionally, the candidacy of former President Donald J. Trump adds further complexity to the situation (Jakes, 2024).

Iran asserts that its nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes and guarantees that it will neither develop nor deploy nuclear weapons. Conversely, Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, maintains an unfriendly stance towards Western nations, particularly the United States, because to the prevalent anti-Western sentiment in Iran. Furthermore, Khamenei holds significant authority in determining both domestic and international policy decisions. However President Pezeshkian wants domestic reform but will never undertake radical reforms that challenge the system overseen by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (The Times of Israel, 2024).

Iran's Strategy Transformation in Middle East Geopolitics

As the newly appointed president, Pezeshkian poses an intriguing inquiry on his regional strategy in the Middle East, questioning whether any alterations will occur under his leadership. During his tenure as Iran's president, there will be a continuation of regional policies rather than a shift. Tehran will focus on strengthening its influence in the region by maintaining its tough stance against Israel and the position of the US in the Middle East.

Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East region, under President Pezeshkian, continues to align with its prior policy and the core policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This policy include ongoing support for resistance against the Israeli Zionist dictatorship in the region.

President Pezeshkian also reaffirmed his support for Palestine, asserting that backing regimes that advocate for Palestinian independence would hinder Israel from engaging in incitement and committing crimes against the oppressed Palestinian population. Hence, the backing of Iran's affiliated militias in the Middle East region remains constant regardless of any alterations in government or presidency (Fazeli, 2024).

In the Middle East, Iran's foreign policy led by Pezeshkian, continues to prioritize the enhancement of its influence and the provision of assistance to its allies. This support is particularly directed towards nations with a substantial Shia majority or population. Iran consistently backs groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shia militia in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. Pezeshkian regards this assistance as a crucial component of Iran's plan to fight the influence of rival nations like Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Furthermore, Pezeshkian reiterated Iran's dedication to providing military and economic assistance to the Assad administration in Syria. Iran is involved in multiple rehabilitation initiatives in Syria after the conflict, with the objective of securing a regime that is favorable to Iran and maintaining Iranian strategic presence in the Mediterranean. Pezeshkian aims to enhance regional relations with neighboring nations such as Iraq and Syria, and also intends to initiate discussions with Gulf countries to alleviate tensions and establish a more stable and secure collaboration in the region.

Pezeshkian's interactions with leaders of various parties and governments within Iran's Axis of Resistance highlight their pivotal position in Tehran's strategic efforts to oppose Israel, especially in light of Israel's potential invasion in Lebanon. This emphasizes the continuing importance of the enduring IRI regional policy. The Axis of Resistance serves as Iran's primary means of establishing regional supremacy and spreading influence over the Gulf and Levant regions. Its objectives include targeting nations such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and potentially Jordan.

Throughout the last 10 years, Iran has capitalized on the turmoil resulting from widespread revolts throughout the Middle East and North Africa to strengthen the Axis and broaden its control over important countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and, more recently, Yemen. Although the Axis is commonly seen as a loosely connected coalition of somewhat independent individuals, numerous organizations and militias from Iraq, as well as those fighting in Syria on behalf of Iran, owe their existence and position directly to the active participation of the IRGC. Tehran has intentionally organized and

guided this network to accomplish its regional goals. In Syria, Iran and its Axis allies have cooperated with major world powers such as Russia to contest the United States' influence in the region. There is no evidence to suggest that this approach will be altered under Pezeshkian's leadership, particularly considering Pezeshkian's emphasis on the significance of maintaining strong ties with Moscow and his unwavering support for the Axis (Salih, 2024).

The Axis of Resistance perceives a significant level of vulnerability due to the Abraham agreements and the possible alteration of regional security and geopolitics if these agreements broaden their scope to encompass nations such as Saudi Arabia. Tehran has modified its policy towards Gulf Arab governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, in response to this perceived threat. In addition to developing a militaristic infrastructure to exert influence through the Houthis in the south and Iraqi militias in the north, Iran has also actively pursued diplomatic engagement. Despite receiving assistance from Saudi Arabia's adversaries, the Raisi administration in 2023 entered into an agreement with Riyadh that was facilitated by China.

Pezeshkian has pledged to sustain this diplomatic involvement, specifically on economic collaboration and investment, due to Iran's requirement for other sources of income and foreign investment. The bilateral trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been consistently growing. During the initial quarter of 2023, Iran successfully shipped items valued at \$14 million to Saudi Arabia, which is almost equivalent to its exports during a span of seven months in 2022. Iranian officials are optimistic about achieving a trade volume of \$1 billion in the near future. In addition to promoting greater trade, Iran is relying on the Arab and Muslim opposition to the Gaza conflict to weaken the Abraham Accords and discourage Saudi Arabia from normalizing relations with Israel (Fazeli, 2024).

Iran's regional strategy under President Masoud Pezeshkian's leadership is confronted with several noteworthy problems. A key obstacle is to sustain and enhance the Resistance Corps in the face of escalating tensions with Israel and the Arab Gulf nations. Iran maintains its backing for affiliated organizations such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. Nevertheless, other influential regional nations, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia, have consistently opposed this endeavor, aiming to diminish Iran's influence in the region. In addition, Iran's participation in the Syrian crisis, although supporting the Assad administration, also depletes resources and triggers international condemnation.

Another issue arises from the endeavor to negotiate the geopolitical shift brought forth by the Abraham Agreement. This accord, which entails the establishment of normal relations between multiple Arab and Israeli nations, has the capacity to disrupt the power equations in the Middle East and further marginalize Iran. Pezeshkian must strike a balance between his militaristic attitude and diplomatic endeavors to preserve relations with the Gulf nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, in order to prevent complete isolation. Furthermore, Iran must confront the persistent economic sanctions imposed by Western nations, which curtail the country's capacity to fund its overseas endeavors. Pezeshkian should make efforts to attract international investment and enhance regional commerce in order to bolster home economies and guarantee long-term stability in the face of this intricate problem.

Research conclusions and suggestions

Under President Masoud Pezeshkian, Iran's foreign policy has been characterized by a blend of pragmatism and adherence to traditional ideological principles. Pezeshkian's administration has shown a commitment to alleviating economic pressures resulting from Western sanctions by engaging in more inclusive diplomacy and constructive dialogue with Western countries, with the aim of easing or removing these sanctions. This strategy marks a shift towards a more cooperative stance in international relations, particularly with the United States and European nations, in an effort to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and enhance economic stability.

Regionally, Pezeshkian's policy continues to support the Axis of Resistance, maintaining strong ties with groups and governments opposing Israel, and reinforcing Iran's influence in the Middle East. This includes backing for allied militias in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as fostering strategic alliances with global powers such as Russia to counterbalance US influence. Pezeshkian's approach also includes diplomatic engagements, particularly with Gulf Arab states, as evidenced by the China-brokered deal with Saudi Arabia. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, particularly regarding Iran's nuclear program and its geopolitical maneuvers amidst the evolving regional dynamics influenced by agreements like the Abraham Accords. Overall, Pezeshkian aims to balance military support for regional allies with economic diplomacy to secure Iran's strategic and economic interests.

Recommendations for further research, this research provides insights related to the direction of Iran's foreign policy during Pezeshkian's rule, but research is also limited because researchers are still waiting for the implementation of Iranian foreign policy both of the nuclear strategy, relations with the countries of the West and the geopolitical policy of Iran in the Middle East.

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