

REPORT



**Islamabad
Policy Institute**
Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Iran's Foreign Policy Outlook under New Administration;

Thursday, August 5, 2021

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Introduction

President Raisi was elected President of Iran at a time when the region is experiencing new geopolitical developments. Iran hopes to focus on its political development by advancing its security, bolstering its dwindling economy, and enhancing regional multilateralism for mutual benefits. Iran's approach to foreign policy would not be hard-lined as expected, rather it would be based on progressive conservatism. US-Iran negotiations on the nuclear deal and the evolving situation in Afghanistan would have a considerable impact on Iran's foreign policy orientation. The cooperation with neighbouring countries, however, would remain a priority as its foreign policy would be oriented towards friendly relations with the East. China would also play an important role in enhancing Iran's geopolitical importance due to its landmark Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Evolving dynamics would also lead to enhanced cooperation between Iran and Pakistan vis-a-vis the situation in Afghanistan.

Prof. Sajjad Bokhari**Executive Director Islamabad Policy Institute**

- With President Raisi assuming office in Iran, the foreign policy priorities of his administration will have far-reaching consequences for regional peace and stability.
- Iran and the West are engaged in negotiations aimed at reviving the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), however, no significant progress has been made so far.
- Due to the hasty withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan, the country has plunged into turmoil, posing another immediate foreign policy challenge for the new government in Iran. Taliban forces have made huge territorial gains over the past three months, which have encouraged other insurgent groups to pose grave security threats to neighbouring states, including Iran, Pakistan, and China.
- The new Iranian administration will have to adapt to the new Middle East where numerous Arab states have established diplomatic relations with Israel, while some others are inclined to follow the course.
- Increasing engagement of China with the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can compel new Iranian leadership to re-evaluate its foreign policy approach towards other regional countries.
- The role of Pakistan in the evolving regional politics is also important which would be impacted by the developments taking place in Afghanistan and thus it is important to assess the repercussions of it on Iran-Pakistan relations.

Dr Kayhan Barzegar**Associate Professor of International Relations and Director at Center for Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran**

- Iran is facing challenges in both foreign and domestic policies. The government of President Ebrahim Raisi would not be a hardline, because President Raisi would react differently as a president as compared to he used to react when as the head of the judiciary.
- President Raisi cannot go towards a hard-line domestic policy. It would be important to establish political consensus inside the Iranian system for the beneficial conduct of its moderate foreign policy which would include active interaction with other states.
- Two elements would be important in politics i.e. accumulation of security and maximization of internal wealth production. Political reform may become a low priority.
- Iran's foreign policy approach will be based on active interaction, inclining towards progressive conservatism instead of traditional conservatism, which would not be influenced by national elements.
- For foreign policy three approaches are important:
 - combination of geopolitical and technological approaches would be inevitable to continue being an important regional power and maximize national security and wealth
 - the issue of JCPOA will define the status of Iranian relations with the West and regional countries. Iran would be more accommodative and constructive in regional issues when the sense of Iran's strategic insecurity is alleviated, which would enhance its geopolitical superiority.
 - Iran will focus on strengthening its relations with neighbouring countries in the context of economic integration and regional change of a commodity. Regional multilateralism will become a priority for development and prosperity.
- Relations with the West might stay tensed due to their strict actions, along with non-delivery to their commitments in the context of JCPOA. Due to this reason, the issues of the west and the economy are becoming irrelevant for the Iranian state, thus it would be important to expand diplomacy.
- Iran will follow a balanced foreign policy and tend more towards neighbourhood regions, particularly in its East. Iran's relations with Pakistan, China, India, Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and the countries of the Persian Gulf would be prioritized and enhanced.
- The approach towards policymaking would be active and different from its traditional policy of leaning towards the West. The effort would be made for the expansion of diplomacy to enhance friendship with other states of the West Asian region at the state level and political movements.
- In Afghanistan, the Islamic emirate is not a favourable option but the reality on the ground is different as all the countries are engaged in negotiations with the Taliban despite historical military invasion and offensive against them. The Taliban have government, population, territory, so all countries are trying to manage the relations with them.

- Iran's foreign policy with regards to Afghanistan would be to preserve its interests in the eastern borders especially the Herat zone. Iran realizes that the Taliban is nothing itself but since it is being considered instrumental by other powers, it is a challenge not to accept them.
- Iran's good relations with China are based on the strategic logic of expansion of diplomacy. Meanwhile, Iran's relations with India are based on a different orientation. However, Iran has historically engaged with both countries culturally, socially and most importantly geographically for developmental reasons.
- Iran would not directly engage with the US on the issue of Afghanistan's situation due to their political discrepancies and would rather engage with the neighbouring countries in a kind of regional multilateralism. Therefore, it is in the interest of Iran to first consider its national interest and follow an independent foreign policy with new initiatives towards Afghanistan.
- Regional countries should be more active in the management of regional affairs.
- Iran does not expect China to act on behalf of it against the USA; Iran and China are developing their bilateral relationship. China does not want to engage in confrontation with the US as it is China's trading partner and they both want to progress in economic relations.
- China has been supportive of Iran in nuclear deal negotiations and other issues with regards to its new strategy related to BRI of which even Iran can become a hub. China tries not to engage in a geopolitical confrontation with the US and prefers to focus on technological advancement.
- Iran recognizes and accepts Pakistan has a wider role in Afghanistan. Therefore, when it comes to Pakistan-India relations, Iran is careful not to intervene. Iran will try to follow positive neutrality in the context of preserving its national interest. There is a great deal of respect between Iran and Pakistan for each other for both being Muslim countries.
- Pakistan has always taken a balanced approach in foreign policy towards both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and it will not act against Iran for the benefit of a third party. Thus Pakistan-Iran relations will stay friendly based on historical determination and geographical attachment, and they should not let the Taliban issue become a challenge in this bilateral friendship.

IPI Findings:

- President Raisi is not a hard-line political actor as his attitude as a president would be different.
- Iran would move away from its traditionally conservative policies towards progressive conservatism.
- Iran's major focus is internal political and social development instead of political reforms.
- Iran would focus on regional multilateralism and intensify cooperation with neighbouring countries.
- Iran would have a balanced foreign policy, which would more likely be oriented towards the East rather than the West.
- In the context of the situation in Afghanistan, Iran would try to preserve its national interest as an overriding concern.

- Iran does not want confrontation with the Taliban but would not fear to take action in case of offensive actions on the Taliban's part which could threaten Iran's national security.
- Iran would play a more constructive role in the Gulf region if its strategic insecurities are placated instead of being exacerbated by the actions of the western countries.
- Iran does not expect China to confront the US on its behalf; it rather sees the partnership with China in the light of technological advancement.