

NEW LEADERSHIP IN IRAN: POTENTIAL FOR INDIA-IRAN RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The first diplomatic visit of Indian External Affairs Minister Mr. S. Jaishankar to Iran after the recently held presidential elections there can be considered as rekindling of its relations with Iran under the new leadership of a hardliner Iranian President. This visit comes at a complicated time in Iran when there is a shift in the political leadership from a moderate-reformist President to a hardliner President. With the hope of reaching engagement to the level that it was in 2018 between India and Iran, this visit holds optimistic prospects for both India and Iran in terms of bilateral relations. This visit can also be termed significant in the context of the changes that have taken place in Iran and Afghanistan in the past few months post American withdrawal from Afghanistan. In this context this paper will discuss in detail the Iranian Presidential elections and the implications of the new hardliner leadership in Iran on its relations with India. The paper will also discuss in detail the political process in Iran.

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Iran held its 13th Presidential elections on June 18, 2021 and elected Ebrahim Raisi, the hardliner candidate as the next President of Iran to succeed Hassan Rouhani on August 3, 2021. These polls were crucial for Iran in a number of ways. The previous President of Iran Hassan Rouhani could not contest election for the third successive term constitutionally, eventually leaving Iran's regional role, nuclear deal negotiations with the West and the crumbling Iranian economy under the pressures of sanctions and COVID-19 pandemic. The much-awaited elections are happening after 2013 when moderate-reformists won the majority and formed the government. However, unlike the last two terms, this time the hardliners—also referred to as principalists or conservatives—won the elections to the Presidential office. In this context it becomes pertinent to discuss and understand the political structure of Iran as well as analyse the implications of the new President in Iran on India-Iran bilateral relations.

Iran's Guardian Council,¹ responsible for vetting the candidates for the Presidential elections on May 25, 2021, released the list of seven candidates from a list of total 592 candidates which included the names of Saeed Jalili, Ebrahim Raisi, Alireza Zakani, Amir Hossein Qazizadeh Hashemi, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, Mohsen Rezaei Mirgha'ed, and Abdol Naser Hemmati. The Guardian Council disqualified many candidates, including former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, current Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri and the former Parliament Speaker and key nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani. Many leaders along with the incumbent Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed disappointment over the selection process of the Guardian Council. The rejection of the candidatures of Eshaq Jahangiri and Ali Larijani was an unpredicted move of the Guardian Council.² It was suspected that at that time if Ali Larijani had contested elections, it could have tilted the support in favour of the moderate-reformist camp. However, this remains an obscure speculation. This could have led to him to emerge as one

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1. The Guardian Council also known as *Shūrā-ye Negahbān* is responsible to vet candidates and oversee elections in Iran. It is a 12-member council of jurists nominated by the Supreme Leader of Iran and the Supreme Judicial Council appointed by the Iranian Parliament or the *Majlis*.
 2. Maziar Motamedi, "Iran's Guardian Council Disqualifies Most Presidential Hopefuls", Al Jazeera, May 25, 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/irans-guardian-council-disqualifies-most-presidential-candidates>. Accessed on July 16, 2021.

of the main contenders against the now-elected President Ebrahim Raisi. The closed selection process of the Guardian Council has led to speculations that corruption could have been one of the reasons for the rejection of Ali Larijani's candidature in the 2021 Presidential elections in Iran. It is widely speculated that through these rejections the Guardian Council paved the way for the election of a hardliner candidate as the next President of Iran.³ A number of experts on Iranian affairs are of the view that the lack of detailed plans to tackle the issues related to nuclear negotiations and sanctions-related negotiations with the world powers along with increasing inflation, unemployment, water shortage and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic could be the reasons for the unwillingness of voters to come out and vote. In this context, the following section will briefly discuss the political structure of Iran and how it differs from other democratic forms of government prevalent globally.

POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF IRAN

The government structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on an Islamic theocracy comprised of the elements of a presidential democracy. However, different from any other form of a Presidential form of Democracy, in the case of Iran the ultimate authority is vested with the "Supreme Leader". The Supreme Leader in Iran is the head of state and also the highest ranking political and religious authority. Even though elections are held at regular intervals in Iran, due to this position and authority of the Supreme Leader it is often referred to as authoritarian form of government. The President in Iran is the second highest ranking official with decisions relating to economic policymaking vested in his authority. But the Supreme Leader commands all the matters of foreign and domestic security. Still, the power of the President is restricted by the Constitution of Iran which subordinates the entire executive branch to the Supreme Leader. The President is assisted by a cabinet of 22 ministers and this Council of Ministers is validated by the *Majlis* (Parliament).

3. Parisa Hafezi, "Khamenei Protégé Wins Iran Elections amidst Low Turn-out", Reuters, June 20, 2021, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/>. Accessed on July 17, 2021.

The significant aspect of Iranian political landscape is that it consists of three main ideological streams, i.e., the hardliners or conservatives or principalists, the moderates and the reformists. The hardliners, who are in favour of expanding its nuclear programme; moderates who are in favour of maintaining the status quo; and the reformists who largely want to transform the internal theocratic structure of Iran. The reformists have also assured the lessening of social restrictions, along with press freedom and accountability on human rights. Reformists also underline the fact that the Iranian state is the primary republic in which Islam acts both as the vanguard and a check on the traditional institutions of power. However, as against this the hardliners largely adhere to the rigid doctrine initiated after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In such a scenario, the new hardliner President in power in Iran could lead to its facing the rigid rules both in domestic as well as foreign affairs. The dichotomic political order in Iran often leads to both sections constantly conflicting with each other. One part of it is the institutions which function in the democratic system, i.e., the directly elected President, an elected national assembly and a government accountable to the assembly. The other part of this political order ardently defends the ideology and principles of the Islamic Revolution (1979) which eventually leads to the weakened democratic characters of this theocracy.

As mentioned above, there were seven candidates that were approved by the Guardian Council responsible for vetting the Presidential candidates for the 2021 elections. Out of these, the majority of candidates (five out of seven candidates) were the hardliners/conservatives, namely, Amir Hossein Qazizadeh, Saeed Jalili, Ebrahim Raisi, Alireza Zakani and Mohsen Rezaei Mirgha'ed, along with the approval of two other names, one a reformist candidate, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, and the other a moderate candidate, Abdol Naser Hemmati. However, it is being argued that a disciplined Iran led by a hardliner president can be more confident in dealing with the West, especially the US. But this seems like the beginning of another round of hostility in the already strained US-Iran relations. Furthermore, there has been fervent discussion that this win for the hardliners could also be related to the rising dissatisfaction quotient amongst the Iranian population due to various internal factors and

the inability of the Rouhani government to fulfil its promises after coming to power.

The winning of the hardliner candidate sends a clear signal to the West regarding Tehran's actual political purposes and stance in regional and global politics. This was made clear by the denial of the President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's refusal to hold talks with the US President Joe Biden. However, it was speculated that if the hardliners win, then at the domestic level there would be a single rule in Iran which could restrain the actions of various powerful institutions of the nation like the Revolutionary Guards and currently their struggle with the moderate-reformist government. Also, the Iranian military establishment is likely to kowtow to the policy changes made by the hardliners in the government. Moreover, the new hardliner President elected in Iran makes the situation a bit tough for the US to ease out the creases in its bilateral relations with Iran, while reining in Iran's nuclear ambitions. President Ebrahim Raisi himself is a hardliner cleric and has held several positions in Iran's judicial system. As mentioned above, the Supreme Leader is responsible for the foreign policy decision making, so the crucial role of the President remains to oversee the process as to how Iranian foreign policy plays out. President Raisi being the protégé of the Supreme Leader Khamenei plays in his favour. Even though the hardliners in Iran have voiced their criticism of the nuclear deal in the past, there are chances that the new hardliner government will support bringing the nuclear deal back on track. This is due to the general consensus in Iran that the nation could only stabilise economically through the benefits that come as part and parcel of the nuclear deal.⁴

The Iranian public feel that the Rouhani government has failed to provide the economic incentives, yet they remain indecisive of whether the hardliner President would be able to rectify the Iranian economy and serve the people. Plus, public dissatisfaction has also been simmering in Iran due to its increased pressure on dissenting voices and restrictions on political and social freedoms. In the current elections President Raisi swept more than 60 per cent of the 28.9 million votes even though the current elections witnessed the lowest

4. Kali Robinson, "What is the Iran Nuclear Deal?", *CFR*, June 29, 2021, at <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>. Accessed on July 21, 2021.

turnout in the history of Iran, clearly showing the rising discontent amongst the Iranian public.⁵ So, the new President Raisi is clearly faced with the issues related to jumpstarting the economy and easing the financial pressure being faced by the Iranian population. Though it cannot be ignored that a lot of it depends on Iran's negotiations with the West and especially the US related to the removal of sanctions which is required to sustain its economy. Furthermore, in his first interview after elections President Raisi had refused to negotiate with the American demands related to Tehran's missile programme and Tehran's support of regional militias.⁶ The following section will discuss briefly Iran's relations with the West and the major power play happening in Iran, including the roles of Russia, China and India as well as the effect of regional dynamics related to the violent situation unfolding in Afghanistan.

MAJOR POWER PLAY IN WEST ASIA

The geographical location of the West Asian region has always been a reason for the increased role of the major powers in this region. Added to this is the presence of huge hydrocarbon resources which has made this region the theatre of great power competition with major powers, such as the US, Russia, China and the European powers, vying for resources and influence in this region. The regional political scenario has also compelled these major powers to play a more pronounced role for their own interests or the interests of their allies in the region. Though the US is still a dominant military actor, China's expanding influence and Russia's renewed interest both pose challenges to US interests in the region. The US and Russia had been involved in the West Asian regional affairs for long but China—though heavily dependent on the energy resources of this region—is not an active player in West Asian politics. The nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1 countries also changed the regional dynamics of West Asia with a number of American allies becoming vocal on their resentment against this deal. Iran reached this nuclear agreement with P5+1 countries in 2015 which resulted in the removal

5. Parisa Hafezi, n. 3.

6. "Iran President Takes Hardline, Refuses to Meet Biden", *The Hindu*, June 21, 2021, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/iran-president-elect-takes-hard-line-refuses-to-meet-biden/article34898018.ece>. Accessed on July 17, 2021.

of sanctions from the already crippled Iranian economy. However, the situation again turned for the worse when the US withdrew from the deal in 2018.

With the new President coming to power in the US, there emerged the hope amongst the experts within Iran and around the world that there would be chances of revival of the nuclear deal. However, former US President Donald Trump backed out from this deal in 2018 bringing Iran and the US at loggerheads with tensions simmering in the region of a possible conflict between the US and Iran. In all of this, there emerged two major supporters for Iran, i.e., Russia and China, with both Russia and China aiming to increase their footprint and influence in the region as the American influence in the West Asian region seemed to be gradually fading. In such a scenario, various multimillion dollar deals between Iran and China have also made the US apprehensive. There are chances of a more active role of Russia in the West Asian region in the political and security fields; whereas an enhanced role of China can be seen in the fields of economy, trade and business. Nevertheless, Russia will also try to translate its role into the economic field apart from a more pronounced role in the political and security spheres to protect its growing economic interests. Both Russia and China have indicated their desire for a much deeper involvement in regional affairs by presenting their own regional security initiatives. With the aim of increasing its influence in the region the US had pushed for a more active engagement with the region which was visible in former US President Trump's initiative of normalising relations between Israel and the two Arab states, the UAE and Bahrain, through the signing of the Abraham Accords. In this scenario, the President-elect Raisi's comments of not negotiating on two terms proposed by the US for bringing the nuclear deal back on track provides a bleak picture of how Iran might deal with the wider world.

SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

The violent unfolding situation in Afghanistan due to the withdrawal of the American troops and the Taliban's desperate attempts to catch hold of the reins of power there has raised concerns both in India and Iran. The recent visits by Indian External Affairs Minister,

S. Jaishankar to Tehran clearly indicates New Delhi's strong desires and concerns related to Afghanistan and visualising a mutual ally in Iran in order to counter the emerging violent situation. These concerns have also been addressed by the Iranian President Raisi who stressed the significance of close cooperation and coordination between India and Iran in developing regional peace and stability. President Raisi insisted that "Iran and India can play a constructive and useful role in ensuring security in the region, especially Afghanistan, and Tehran welcomes New Delhi's role in the establishment of security in Afghanistan."⁷ Two visits by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar since July 2021 have been significant in giving fresh impetus to Indo-Iranian ties, especially at a time when the two nations have common interests in Afghanistan.

The geographic location of Afghanistan has always been an issue of concern and interest for both India and Iran. Dealing with the Taliban has been a point of divergence between New Delhi and Tehran which sees no convergence in the near future. In the case of Iran, the long border that it shares with Afghanistan pushes Tehran to keep the communication channels open between Tehran and the Taliban. On the other hand, for India, the lack of physical sharing of border provides New Delhi with a chance to contemplate the situation. At the same time, both New Delhi and Tehran have been in favour of establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan. In such a scenario, the current situation with the Taliban's power acquisition in Afghanistan becomes an issue of concern for both India and Iran, as both the nations have considerable stake in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative for both the countries to collaborate and cooperate against the Taliban's offensive.⁸

Iran might also have to grapple with the refugee flow from Afghanistan, being its immediate neighbour, following the Taliban's

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7. Rezaul H. Laskar, "Iran President Backs India's Role in Afghan Peace Process", *The Hindustan Times*, August 7, 2021, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/iran-president-backs-india-s-role-in-afghan-peace-process-101628272022609.html>. Accessed on August 12, 2021.
 8. "Delhi and Tehran", *The Indian Express*, July 26, 2021, at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/afghanistan-crisis-taliban-rule-india-iran-7421959/>. Accessed on August 12, 2021.

offensive. Also, it will have to counter the threat of terror attacks from across the border. In the case of India, the massive aid and investments amounting to approximately \$3 billion are at stake, which requires New Delhi to step up its actions. Iran's communication channels through its proxies in the region can become a wise bet for India, making it a strong regional player in Afghanistan. India has been sending cargo and wheat shipments to Afghanistan through Chabahar, and was joined in 2020 by Uzbekistan for the joint use of Chabahar port. With the Taliban seizing control of Afghanistan, India's engagement vis-à-vis Chabahar port is likely to face serious challenges. It is pertinent to mention here that from February 2019 to January 2021 Chabahar port has already handled 123 vessels and 18 lakh tons of cargo.⁹ According to MEA reports, it has processed more than 12 lakh tonnes of bulk cargo and 8,200 containers till November 2020.¹⁰ This clearly indicates the great significance of this port for both India and Iran. In addition, India's desires to include the Chabahar port complex in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) means enhancement of the interests of New Delhi. As the security situation in Afghanistan becomes increasingly uncertain, Iranian ports acquire greater geo-economic salience. All these aspects push India to reboot its ties with Iran. At the same time, the omnipresent faultlines in the region along with the emerging Afghan situation might require India to carefully tread its way while reconstructing bilateral ties with Iran.

INDIA AND IRAN

The new Iranian President welcomed the Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, which signifies the good relations both the nations have enjoyed in the past. However, what can be achieved in this bilateral relationship between India and Iran remains to be seen in the future. As discussed in the paper, there are a number of

9. "JNPT, Deendayal ports offer discounts on vessel, cargo charges to boost trade at Chabahar port", *The Economic Times*, March 1, 2021, at <https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/coal/jnpt-deendayal-ports-offer-discounts-on-vessel-cargo-charges-to-boost-trade-at-chabahar-port/81265314>. Accessed on August 13, 2021.

10. "Annual Report 2020-2021", Ministry of External Affairs, January 2021, at http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569_MEA_annual_Report.pdf. Accessed on July 17, 2021.

factors on which India and Iran require to converge. Much depends on factors that are both internal and external. India's relations with Iran improved after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and removal of sanctions. India-Iran oil trade also improved significantly with Iran becoming India's second largest oil trading partner. This partnership resulted in India developing the two terminals of the Chabahar port in Iran. Connectivity is an imperative that partly explains India's engagement with Iran. The complex political situation unfolding in Afghanistan makes Iran the significant option for India for trade and transit.

The stress in the relations between India and Iran follows former US President Trump's 'maximum pressure' strategy against Iran. It also forced India to reduce its oil trade with Iran to be almost negligible in the year 2019. Added to this, the repeated calls of Iranian Supreme Leader terming the terrorist acts in Kashmir as "freedom struggle" has strained this bilateral relationship. On the issue related to the stand-off between Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), New Delhi has always maintained that all JCPOA related issues should be resolved peacefully through dialogue and diplomacy. India has also extended the support to all such efforts which help in constructively addressing and resolving outstanding issues. It is further reiterated that all participants should adhere to their respective obligations under the resolution.¹¹

For India, Iran is an essential gateway to not only the Central Asian or the larger Eurasian region, but also Afghanistan. Therefore, for the sake of geostrategic significance, it is necessary for India to continue its positive engagement with Iran for its own interests. At the same time, New Delhi should keep an eye on the increasing Chinese influence in Iran and the West Asian region which could be detrimental to India's interests. Also, India's growing proximity with the Arab world and Israel has become an issue of concern for Iran. In such a scenario, even if Iran gets a new

11. "India Urges Iran to Continue to Cooperate with IAEA for Verification", *Business Standard*, July 1, 2021, at https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/india-urges-iran-to-continue-to-cooperate-with-iaea-for-verification-121070100250_1.html. Accessed on July 17, 2021.

hardliner President, there are chances that the strain in India-Iran relations will persist. For this there is a need for both the sides to work positively on the bilateral relationship. For this cooperation to run smoothly, including cheaper oil trade between India and Iran, it is necessary that the new Iranian President maintains a favourable position towards India, and balanced relations with the US.