Iran's Foreign Policy

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Changing winds in Tehran:

With the death of Ebrahim Raisi on May 19th alongside his Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, the international community was hoping that Iranian aggression would subside. However, this is not the case as major decisions relating to foreign policy and defence are made by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, a hardliner distrusting the West. Moreover, the fact that Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian is now the Iranian President might try to push the notion of Iran rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). JCOPA is an agreement in which the permanent five plus the European Union agreed with Iran that in exchange for sanctions relief,

Tehran must limit its nuclear program. This blog will argue that despite this positive notion associated with the reformist image of the Iranian President, domestic and international factors will result in the prevalence of the status quo on the nuclear question and that Iran, who is very close to developing nuclear weapons, will enhance its presence in the region.

Domestic policy implications towards the Nuclear Programme:

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic leader Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shia cleric, chose the nation's foreign policy to be anti-Western and to be non-aligned to any bloc. Its nuclear programme is, therefore, necessary to assist in its broader geopolitical goal to spread its revolutionary aims and politicise the voice of Shias in the region. Within the Islamic religion, there are two branches, the Shias believe that Prophet Ali who's the grandson of Prophet Muhammed should have succeeded the Islamic Caliphate. Due to the threat posed by its Sunni neighbours, who seek to contain the expansion of Iran in the region and topple the Islamic regime.

This has resulted in public opinion favouring Tehran's nuclear enrichment program. About 56% of the respondents of a survey conducted by IranPoll, a research company based out of Canada, are of the opinion that the nuclear program should be developed for deterrence purposes. The public is not influenced only by religious sermons, government propaganda and legal norms. Thus, it is clear that although people are in favour of deterrence, they choose to side with what they interpret as national interest. Furthermore, the Iranian Government through its absolute control of society will implement the course of action that it sees best. Therefore, the threats stemming from the United States and its allies on its regime and the opportunities from Russia, China will allow Iran to focus on enhancing its nuclear programme. Here the priorities would be to secure the regime control of the nation and deter foreign actors like the United States to take on a regime change.

International Isolationism: Truth or Fallacy:

With a Trump presidency back and Israel-Saudi rapprochement by next year, Tehran is essentially encircled in the region as it has been unable to maintain what scholars call 'ontological exteriority.' It refers to a situation where the regime won't be able to detach economics and politics to expand national security interests. Furthermore, Iran would not sacrifice its nuclear program for economic aid. It will always look to further its regional interests, influenced by Iran's ideological and strategic struggles with Saudi Arabia and Israel. To spread its revolutionary means throughout the region, Iran wants to replace monarchies with theocracy. It has proxy groups all across the Middle East such as Ansar Allah in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq.

By enhancing its nuclear program, Iran is able to obtain two of its strategic goals in the region. These include countering Israeli expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and keeping the Gulf States in check. In a broader sense, the nuclear programme would help Iran attain strategic autonomy in the region, ensuring greater freedom of action with lesser accountability. Furthermore, there is no incentive for Tehran to align itself with the Western bloc, as China and Russia assist it militarily and economically. From a military perspective, Iran has been able to shield its UAV and missile programmes that are also being sold to Russia and other non-Western actors. Therefore, these programmes have helped the Iranians to gain more grip on the region. With the stakes benefitting Iran, it would be illogical to see the nuclear programme being scrapped and the nation returning to normalcy.

Bleak future towards the regional order of the Middle East:

Although the election of a reformist President in Iran may suggest otherwise, it is unlikely that Iran will return to the JCPOA or renounce its nuclear ambitions due to domestic and foreign factors. Public backing for the nuclear project, the tussle for power within the region, and Iran's aim of operational discretion all play a part in keeping it on steady ground in matters concerning atomic energy. With assistance from China and Russia as well as the support given by proxy groups, Iran appears determined to stick with its current path emphasising regional significance at the expense of global collaboration.