After a Long Period in the Wilderness Things Are Looking Up for Iran

The recent Iranian presidential election saw the Conservative Ebrahim Raisi elected to power, albeit from a small turnout of Iranian voters of less than 50% of the eligible electorate. Raisi is more conservative than his predecessor Hassan Rouhani, but there is unlikely to be significant changes to Iranian government policy, both foreign and domestic.

There have been some significant changes externally that will affect Iranian foreign policy, and I wish to discuss some of those. The first was the election of Joe Biden as president of the United States. Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump, had unilaterally left the agreement carefully etched out by Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama and a group of key European nations.

At the same time, Trump had increased the pressure on Iran and by making difficulties in Iran’s export trade imposed enormous stress on the country. While he has not yet eased those restrictions, Biden is at least talking to the Iranians. Biden has also dropped Trump’s demands for more military concessions by Iran.

The second major change for Iran was the completion earlier this year of a major trading deal with China. In March of this year China and Iran signed a 25-year cooperation arrangement with China agreeing to invest at least $600 billion (US) into Iran over that period. Some analysts have suggested the deal to be worth as much as $800 billion over that time.

Iran is already a member of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and is an observer state of the Shanghai Corporation Organisation. It is significant that both of these developments occurred at a time when Iran was being heavily
sanctioned by the Americans.

Part of the reason for Trump’s antipathy to Iran was Iran’s consistent opposition to the state of Israel. Iran’s support for a number of states in the Middle East, including Iraq and Syria runs counter to Israeli policy. It is almost never mentioned in the western media, but Israel has occupied Syrian territory in the Golan Heights since the 1968 war between the two countries, and has consistently refused to even discuss, let alone give up, that unlawfully retained territory.

The Israelis have also carried out attacks on Iranian territory. They were at least partly responsible for the assassination of Iran’s general Qasem Solemani, killed in a drone attack at Baghdad airport in January 2020. The drone was an American owned device. Trump boasted about being responsible for this act of murder. It is part of the weakness of the international legal system that he has never been held legally accountable for that murder.

Another major component of Iran’s trading relationship is its ties to Russia. Russia has long had a strong relationship with Iran, and arms deals have been important to component of that relationship. The two countries have been in talks since July 2019 when a naval agreement was signed.

Following the signing of the agreement, the Iranian Navy participated in a military exercise with the Russian Navy. In April of this year Russia’s foreign affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Iran when the then president of Iran Hussan Rouhani expressed a desire to increase defence and regional cooperation with Russia.

The timing of the visit was important. In October 2020 the United Nations Security Council embargo on arms sales to Iran had expired. Russia is Iran’s most important source of new weapons. Russia is expected to supply Iran with a range of military equipment, including submarines, tanks, armoured vehicles and fighter jets. It will be an important upgrading of Iran’s military capability.

Such an upgrade is necessary. Although relations with Saudi Arabia have recently improved, Iran still faces potential threats from Israel. That country has made no secret of its disquiet both about the modernisation of Iran’s military capabilities, but also the efforts by President Biden to improve relationships between the United States and Iran.

Iran is unlikely to ever attack Israel, but the reverse has not been true. In addition, Israel regularly attacks Iranian positions in Syria as part of its undeclared (and illegal) war on that country.

The talks with Biden also hold out the promise of an improvement in United States-Iranian relations. Biden’s desire to immediately re-join the deal that Trump had unilaterally abandoned sent an important message to not only Iran, but also to the Israelis, with the latter country remaining bitterly opposed to any United States-Iran rapprochement.

These three major moves, the China trade deal, the close relationship to Russia and the improvement of relationships with the United States are all positive moves for the Islamic Republic. It is highly unlikely that the new Iranian president will do anything to jeopardise any of these developments.

The one great uncertainty in the Middle East is the future conduct of the Israelis. They have not hesitated in the past to seek to destabilise Iran by all possible measures and there is no reason to believe that the new Israeli government will be any better disposed toward Iran than its unlamented predecessor, the Benjamin Netanyahu government.

There are also signs that the Saudis are losing interest in their attacks on Yemen, another country that Iran has been supportive of. With the anticipated United States withdrawal from Syria, again a country for whom the Iranians have shown strong support, it is possible that a new era is dawning for Iran. After confronting decades of hostility, such a development is to be welcomed.

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