

PEZESHKIAN AIMS TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONS WITH JAPAN IN ALL FIELDS

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Iran's view on Japan is correlated to the Masoud Pezeshkian government's view of the international order and its economic and political needs. The Pezeshkian administration has a post-polar view of the international order and strives for cooperation, collaboration and networking in various fields. In this regard, East Asia is important for the new government of Iran, wherein Japan has a prominent role. The Pezeshkian administration intends to strengthen relations between Tehran and Tokyo in all fields based on a "comprehensive roadmap" by taking advantage of extensive knowledge from Japan. It will also cooperate with Tokyo to jointly deal with regional crises. In general, Japan can provide Iran's technological needs in various fields and operate in the energy sector and play the role of a mediator in Iran-U.S. relations. Furthermore, Japan can be considered by Tehran as a balancer in Iran-China relations. This issue brief discusses how improved relations benefit both the countries.

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Finding Balance Amid a Post-Polar Outlook

Japan and Iran will benefit from deeper cooperation across a wide range of sectors, particularly energy, infrastructure, and diplomatic cooperation on security issues. Iran's strategic location makes it an attractive partner for Japan, acting as a trade conduit to neighboring regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia.

To examine Iran-Japan relations in the administration of Massoud Pezeshkian, the overall structure of his government's foreign policy and its view toward international system must be evaluated. Two perspectives can be drawn on the current structure of Iranian power towards the international system. One view believes that a 'shift power from West to East' has occurred, which is a result of the decline of American hegemony. Accordingly, Iran should approach new

international poles such as China and Russia and benefit from this new world order.¹

This view believes in the priority of “Look to the East” foreign policy, rather than “Look to the West”. Although reducing tensions with the West is pursued due to geopolitical imperatives, but the strategy in foreign relations is “Look to the East”.² Another view of the international order, despite believing that a “new world” has occurred, is that this order is not polar in nature. Pezeshkian’s view of the world order takes this approach.³ According to this view, a power shift has occurred from the West to the East and the hegemony of the United States has also declined, but the new poles have not been established. Based on this view, the world system has moved away from the rigid bipolar order that puts pressure on nations and is on the path to a new order and the formation of a transitional phase of the world system and the lack of understanding of the true characteristics of the new order can be dangerous for Iran’s national interests (Zarif, 2023).⁴

Pezeshkian also believes in a “post-polar” world, which is in line with the second view. The implicit meaning of the post-polar order could be to question the new poles in the new world order, or

even if he believes in the new poles, he does not see its logic like cold war. According to the second view, the logic of Iran’s foreign policy should be opportunity-driven by creating balance in relations with all countries, consistent with national interests, economic development, and requirements of regional and global peace and security. The meaning of “balance” in Pezeshkian’s foreign policy means using the capacities of the “new world” based on an opportunity-driven policy.⁵ Since the new order does not have an inflexible polar nature, excessive proximity to one power cannot serve Iran’s interests.

This means using all capacities and taking advantage of every opportunity to secure national interests. The pendulum policy is closer to the view that middle powers in the new international system avoid over-reliance on one power while maintaining relations with the major powers.⁶ Therefore, while paying attention to the new conditions that are manifested in the “new world,” attention should be paid to the capacities of the “global South” and this capacity should not be sacrificed to “Look to the West”. By creating “balance” in foreign relations, one should benefit from the capacities of a non-rigid order.⁷

Interactive foreign policy has also been emphasized in the views of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. In his opinion, foreign policy has three main missions: “ensuring national interests, preserving and increasing national wealth,” “consolidating national security and promoting power,” and “preserving and strengthening national dignity.” In his words, the foreign policy of the Pezeshkian government can be summarized as “laying the groundwork for increasing the wealth, power, and status of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Accordingly, the Pezeshkian government has prioritized “economic diplomacy.” Previously, with the change in the foreign policy apparatus, an independent deputy for “economic diplomacy” had been created, which indicates the importance of this issue in achieving national wealth.⁸

Therefore, the foreign policy apparatus, seeking

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to place foreign policy in the “orbit of economic progress,” will pay attention to “inward-looking” and “outward-looking” economic diplomacy. “Inward-looking” in this interpretation can refer to the domestic aspects of the economy, relying on the principle of “resistance economy”. “Outward-looking” can refer to “interaction with the world” and efforts to attract foreign investment and economic interactions. In this regard, the Pezeshkian government will pay attention to the enormous political and economic opportunities in the neighborhood, the Iranian cultural and civilizational sphere, and the “global south”.⁹

The foreign policy of the Pezeshkian administration at the international level will focus on the “Global South” and its international organizations. Regarding relations with the Western world, the foreign policy of the Pezeshkian government seeks to “manage the conflict with the United States, and confront the hostile policies of the United States and the Zionist regime”.¹⁰ Accordingly, in the current era—which has been termed as the “post-polar world”—Iran simultaneously cooperates, competes, and make networks in different fields. That is, if it has a disagreement with Western countries in one area, it does not necessarily mean that all Iranian state and non-state actors must also have tension and competition with the West in other areas. In such a context, the Pezeshkian government is committed to strengthening relations with China and Russia on the one hand, while on the other hand, it considers de-escalating tensions with the West as much as possible. The contradiction that may exist between these two policies in a ‘Cold War’ approach is not relevant in the Pezeshkian government’s philosophical approach to international relations.¹¹

For the Pezeshkian government, creating balance and equilibrium in Iran’s international relations is at the center of policymaking. According to this view, prevailing relations with allies can be maximally benefited when other options are always available. In this regard, East Asia also plays a pivotal role for

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the new Iranian government. From the perspective of the Pezeshkian government, Japan plays a prominent role.¹²

Araghchi, who was also Iran’s ambassador to Japan, gave his first interview to the Japanese media outlet *Kyodo News* after winning a vote of confidence from the Iranian parliament, symbolically recalling the importance of Japan in future relations. In this interview, he announced that he intends to strengthen relations between Tehran and Tokyo in all fields. He emphasized that this will be based on a comprehensive roadmap utilizing his extensive knowledge of Japan and promised to work with Tokyo to jointly address regional crises. Araghchi believes that Iran and Japan, with their distinct yet complementary capabilities, have great potential to create a beneficial and sustainable partnership across Asia.¹³

In contrast, the Japanese Foreign Minister, in his

message to Araghchi, said that he intends to work closely with Araghchi, who is a former ambassador to Japan and the most prominent Japanese scholar in Iran, based on the long-standing and friendly relations between Japan and Iran, to further develop relations between the two countries and to reduce tensions and establish stability in the Middle East.¹⁴

Energy Cooperation Vital for Japan?

Iran was one of Japan's two main sources of oil before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. After that, for more than three decades in the 20th century, Iran remained in third or fourth place. The Fukushima nuclear disaster deepened Japan's need for oil and natural gas. Before the 2011 crisis, 54 nuclear reactors provided about 30 percent of Japan's electricity. As of early 2013, safety concerns and public pressure kept all but two nuclear plants closed. In 2014, when about 80 percent of Japan's crude oil imports came from the Middle East, Iran accounted for 5 percent of that. This was though in 2003, Iran's share of Japan's oil imports was 16 percent. Before the sanctions on Iran in 2006, Japan relied on Iran as one of its main sources of foreign energy.¹⁵

Araghchi said in an interview with Kyodo News: "Japan can have a greater position in the energy, oil and economy sectors of Iran. Iran will welcome Japanese companies interested in operating in the oil and energy sectors. Japan can return to Iran's oil fields and help develop its oil production."

Even during the sanctions period, Japan's level of imports of Iranian oil remained significant—approximately 12 percent of total energy imports—until the Obama administration increased pressure on its allies to more strongly adhere to the sanctions' regime in 2012.¹⁶ However, Tokyo was able to convince some companies to continue their activities in Iran.¹⁷

Given the history of cooperation between the two countries, the new Iranian government is also seeking to use Japan's capacities in the energy sector. In this regard, Araghchi said in an interview with *Kyodo News*: "Japan can have a greater position in the energy, oil and economy sectors of Iran. Iran will welcome Japanese companies interested in operating in the oil and energy sectors. Japan can return to Iran's oil fields and help develop its oil production."¹⁸

On its part, Japan is keen to invest in Iranian ports to keep up with the competition from China and India. Iran is uniquely positioned at the intersection of vital regional corridors such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Iran has access to international waters and is increasingly connected to major ports in the Persian Gulf Arab states. Shahid Rajaei Port is located inside the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 18 million barrels of oil pass daily. Iran, one of the world's largest oil and gas producers, is likely to re-enter the petrochemical market after returning to the JCPOA, with its ports meeting its import and export needs.¹⁹

The two countries are also willing to cooperate in the field of transport infrastructure and advanced urban development technologies. On October 29, 2024, Farzaneh Sadeq, Minister of Transport and Urban Development of Iran, and Tamaki Tsukada, Ambassador of Japan to Tehran, held a meeting to explore avenues for strategic cooperation. Sadeq, referring to Iran's unique geographical location as a gateway connecting the East and the West, offered Japan a pathway to expand its influence and access

to Central Asia and the Caucasus. “This is in line with Iran’s vision to become a key transit hub and support economic integration across Asia”.²⁰

At this meeting, the two representatives also discussed the need to establish direct flights between Iran and Japan, an initiative seen as essential to strengthening connectivity and supporting future business exchanges. The Iranian minister proposed additional discussions among port officials to examine opportunities for enhancing cooperation in maritime transport and logistics. Ambassador Tsukada emphasized the extensive historical relationship between Japan and Iran, dating back over a thousand years. This longstanding connection, Tsukada argued, forms a solid foundation for collaboration not only in transport but also in knowledge exchange, resettlement initiatives, and the development of advanced earthquake-resistant infrastructure.²¹

As Japan depends heavily on oil from the Persian Gulf, the continuous U.S. security commitment to the region is extremely important for Japanese energy security. At the same time, Japan faces growing national security concerns due to China’s military expansion and increasingly assertive attitude in the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, Japan welcomes any additional redeployment of U.S. forces to the Asia-Pacific region, even if they come from the Persian Gulf. In other words, Japan has rather selfish and contradictory demands of the U.S. at present: Firstly, to keep the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region to protect Japanese oil imports, and secondly, to increase the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region to counter China’s aggressive military expansion and ensure peace and stability. There seems to be no clear-cut answer to this conundrum and some sort of compromise may be necessary. Finally, while Japan has maintained bilateral economic ties with Iran for decades in spite of U.S. displeasure, that seems to be less possible recently. This change reflects the growing seriousness of the security environment surrounding Japan. Tokyo now needs to rely on the

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U.S. security commitment more than ever and does not want to provoke the U.S. on issues where Japan can compromise—Iran being one such issue.²²

Japan as a Mediator in Iran-U.S. talks

Japan is a key ally of the United States and must manage delicate relations with Iran to ensure that it minimizes any criticism from Washington. This balance of interests has been a challenge for Japan-Iran relations in recent years. Following the JCPOA, this challenge has become less of a challenge for Japan. In fact, whenever the relationship between Iran and the United States is less tense, the relationship between Tokyo and Tehran is less of a hurdle. Tokyo cannot afford to cozy up to Tehran because of its close relationship with Washington, which is far more important politically, economically and for security. Japan still relies on the American military for its defense, and the United States is Japan’s second-largest trading partner, after China.²³

As Japan cannot secure its supply of oil with military force, Tokyo strives to develop mutual dependence in trade and investment. Japan, however, shares the international community’s concerns regarding Iran’s behavior. Tokyo has a ban on arms exports to Iran and strictly controls other exports which might help Tehran develop nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Japanese government officials continue to urge Iran to correct its behavior and to condemn terrorist incidents. If Tokyo were to end its dialogue

with Iran to further isolate Tehran, many in Japan believe this would force Iran to take more radical steps and, in the long run, would destabilize the entire Gulf region. Thus, the United States' policy of containment, according to Japanese officials, is not an effective approach to handling Iran.²⁴

In general, Japan's plans in the Iranian security environment are based on economic programs, investment, and energy imports from regional countries, and it continues its relations with all parties regardless of existing geopolitical tensions. However, Japan's efforts to become an "honest broker" have not enabled it to shape the evolving regional security architecture, especially with regard to Iran and the conflict in the Persian Gulf.²⁵ On the other hand, the foreign policy of the Pezeshkian government is based on distinguishing between the United States and Western Europe. Interestingly, the Raisi government's People's Document also separates Europe from the United States.

Ayatollah Khamenei has also recently said that we have no motive to oppose some European countries; "but they did not treat us well".²⁶ Pezeshkian has also expressed a desire to establish constructive dialogue with Europe. But he merely calls on the U.S. to change its behavior, and there is no mention of a willingness to talk.²⁷ Iran's stubborn approach to the West is particularly a result of the West's actions on issues where Tehran has cooperated but the West has acted in the opposite direction. Placing Iran in the "Axis of Evil" despite cooperation on the Afghanistan war and the nuclear deal are historical examples of the West's failure to respond appropriately to Iran's cooperative approach.²⁸ Araghchi is said to have played an important role when the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe traveled to Tehran in 2019 to mediate between the United States and Iran.²⁹

The Pezeshkian government is seeking to overcome the obstacles in Iran-Japan relations, including U.S. sanctions, and to have a constructive partnership with Tokyo. According to Araghchi, Iran and Japan

have forged a bond characterized by friendship, mutual understanding, respect, and trust: "The leadership of both nations appreciate this unshakable foundation. This enables Iran and Japan to jointly address global and regional challenges with a constructive spirit and shared optimism. I would say there is always room for collaboration in initiatives".³⁰

Security High on Regional Concerns

Japan is concerned about Iran's regional policies, particularly its destabilization of the Persian Gulf region. Transit security and maritime security in the Persian Gulf are among Japan's main concerns in the region. Japan's first national security strategy, released in December 2013, prioritizes stability in the Middle East as "inseparably linked to the stable supply of energy, and therefore Japan's very survival and prosperity".³¹ One of the issues that has clouded Iran-Japan relations in recent years has been Iran's nuclear program. Japan, itself a victim of the U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, places particular emphasis on nuclear non-proliferation.

Japan maintains its strict "Three Non-Nuclear Principles" of not possessing, producing or permitting the introduction of nuclear weapons.³² Based on this, since 2006, Tokyo has fully supported the four U.N. sanctions resolutions designed to prevent Iran from developing the world's deadliest weapon. Since 2012, it has also complied with new U.S. sanctions that penalize other countries that buy Iran's oil and gas.³³ However, Iranian officials have announced that they are following the Japanese model in their nuclear program. Since Japan is the only non-weapons state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty that has major fuel cycle facilities that could enable a bomb — the so-called "nuclear threshold." For years, Iranian officials have claimed they are pursuing the "Japan model" of nuclear development.³⁴

Iran has also chosen this model because having a nuclear bomb comes with many costs for Iran,

while being at the ‘nuclear threshold’ can be leverage for Iran against the West.³⁵ Of course, Tehran also believes that Iran, like Japan, was a victim of weapons of mass destruction during the war with Iraq.³⁶ Accordingly, Tehran considers opposition to the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction a common issue between the two countries.³⁷

With the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, Japan, like the five signatories to the nuclear agreement, officially expressed regret and immediately sent a delegation to Iran to examine how the two countries could cooperate under the new circumstances. In addition, Japan tried to reduce tensions between Iran and the United States during the first Trump presidency and mediate between them. This could be the role Tehran wants for Tokyo, namely, playing a role consistent with its peace-oriented approaches. In fact, Japan, with its international credibility, can be effective in accelerating the achievements of the JCPOA and nuclear negotiations. Currently, Japan has also

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presented a plan to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue and start nuclear negotiations.³⁸

It seems that this plan was a kind of mediation to revive the 5+1 format, which is clearly not what Iran wants at the moment. In addition, the differences between Iran and the U.S., Europe and Russia over Ukraine will not allow this format to be revived easily. The predictable format is the same Iran-U.S. negotiations with the presence of a mediator until the two sides reach a desirable roadmap at the right time.³⁹

The revival of these negotiations and the lifting of sanctions are among the priorities of the Pezeshkian government. Dialogue with the West to lift sanctions, and creating a balance between the West and the East in the field of foreign policy are of great importance. A nuclear Iran, which would ultimately lead to further instability in the Persian Gulf region, is a nightmare for Japan, as it threatens the stability of a region on which Japan is completely dependent for energy.

With Donald Trump winning the U.S. presidential election in 2024, some Iranian diplomats believe that Japan can help reduce tensions between the Trump administration and Iran. Ali Majedi, a former Iranian ambassador to Germany, says: “We can talk to Trump through various lobbies. For example, Japan has a good relationship with the Republicans, so we can come in and find a way to reduce tensions”.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The foreign policy of the Masoud Pezeshkian government is, on the one hand, a continuation of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and on the other hand, it pursues initiatives in line with structural and regional changes. The Pezeshkian administration has a post-polar view toward the international order and strives to move forward based on simultaneous cooperation, competition and networking in various fields. Economic needs resulting from U.S. sanctions,

international and regional isolation, and the need to improve the economic situation have turned the Iranian government towards Asian powers. Among them, Japan is an important and decisive country for this government.

While relations between Iran and European countries have become very tense, Japan can mediate between Iran and the U.S. and play a role in crucial issues such as nuclear negotiations. In addition, Tokyo pays special attention to cooperation with Iran in order to reduce tensions and establish stability in the Middle East and reduce China's influence. Japan can provide Iran's technological needs in various fields and operate in the energy sector and play the role of a mediator in Iran-U.S. relations. Furthermore, Japan can be considered by Tehran as a balancer in Iran-China relations.

Further, Iran has an important place in "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" to meet Japan's energy needs on the one hand and contain China on the other hand. Also, the North-South Corridor that connects India to Central Asia and Russia is important for Japan in curbing China's 'One Belt One Road'.

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