

Pezeshkian's capital for constructive cooperation with world

Experts tell Iran Daily

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EXCLUSIVE

Constructive cooperation with the world is very much the focus of the Pezeshkian government's foreign policy. But what exactly are the features of this policy? What obstacles would the implementation of this policy in today's Iran face? And finally, what do Pezeshkian and his government need to do to be successful in implementing it?

Iran Daily asked these questions and more in an exclusive interview with Sasan Karimi and Afifeh Abedi. Sasan Karimi lectures at the University of Tehran's Faculty of World Studies and researches foreign policy issues. Afifeh Abedi is a researcher at the Center for Strategic Research and an expert in foreign policy matters.



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian form gestures triumphantly at a campaign event for the presidential election in Shiraz, southern Iran, on June 23, 2024.

● BORNA



Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (L) is greeted by President Masoud Pezeshkian during the latter's endorsement on July 28, 2024.

● khamenei.ir

IRAN DAILY: Constructive cooperation forms the main pillar of Masoud Pezeshkian's foreign policy. But what exactly are the conceptual features of this approach?

SASAN KARIMI: Iran's foreign policy operates within a general framework — the statement “neither Eastern nor Western” and the principles of “dignity, wisdom, and prudence”. Constructive cooperation is a concept that features in Iran's upstream documents, and all governments have given it at least lip service. However, putting this policy into practice takes courage and skilled stewards. Yet, we see some prominent figures who have shown such courage in their careers are always under fire and paying a price.

Are you referring to former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif?

KARIMI: Yes, Zarif, former president Hassan Rouhani, Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, and Ali Akbar Salehi once formed a team that has come under a lot of fire since. But you have to take it into consideration that the difficult job is not cooperating with your friends, but rather it is cooperating with countries with which you have tensions or, at the very least, do not enjoy warm diplomatic relations.

To keep up with West Asian countries alone which are on the path to development, Iran needs other countries to interact with it normally and without tension. So, Iran should set its foreign policy in a way that does not give excuses to ill-wishers and regional rivals. Constructive cooperation makes sense only when we can meet three goals — on which the foreign policy of Pezeshkian is interestingly based — namely, national interest, national security, and national dignity.

AFIFEH ABEDI: The plan for constructive cooperation in this new period comes in response to the previous government's East-facing policy. The goals and national interests of the country remain fixed, no matter which government or faction rules. As I see it, the policy of constructive cooperation was discussed in president Raisi's government as well, but international restrictions and pressures led to an emphasis on a “Look to the East” approach as the declared policy.

Iran shares interests with eastern powers for various reasons, including geographical determinism. Our security is interconnected, as evidenced by the fact that when Iran's security was recently threatened, we saw

China and Russia's supportive responses. For example, after the confrontation between Iran and Israel, China and Russia tried to lower the level of conflict and bolster Iran's security vis-à-vis Israel, siding with Tehran in the UN Security Council.

Does that mean you see the Pezeshkian government's approach to foreign policy as opposing the East-facing policy of the late president's government?

ABEDI: I see constructive cooperation as the extension of “Look to the East”, not setting itself against it. Both approaches fall under the fixed foreign policy strategy of the Islamic Republic. Depending on regional and international conditions, one of these approaches or a combination of the two will be used at any given time.

After decades of trial and error in Iran's foreign policy, we have arrived at a fixed strategic policy. What I mean is that we cannot have “complex” strategic relations with eastern powers, but we do have close relations and shared interests. We also share geographical necessities and security links, and we are members of important organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS.

“Look to the East” was once adopted to secure Iran's interests, and now, under the constructive cooperation approach, we need to pursue the same goal. This approach does not mean maintaining relations solely with the West and turning our backs on the East; nor does it overshadow Iran's principled policy of supporting the Axis of Resistance.

Mr. Karimi, you mentioned that we naturally have a tougher time enlisting the cooperation of countries with which we have problematic relations. There is clearly a deep mistrust between Iran and Europe, and between Iran and the US. How do you see Pezeshkian's government navigating the challenges of rebuilding that trust?

KARIMI: The key point of the new government's foreign policy, as Pezeshkian himself emphasized, will be to avoid imposing a limiting foreign policy on the country. Before, there was a perception of a strategic alliance from the East-facing approach — that is, the idea that China and Russia are Tehran's strategic allies against the West.

However, in today's post-polar world, the old East-West blocs have broken down. Today's world is not a world of inclusive alliances; it is a world of case-by-case alliances. That means you might align with one country on one case, but disagree with the same country on another. So, each issue needs to be looked at separately. For instance, Russia used to refuse to give Iran the S-300 defense system pre-JCPOA, but now it is giving the S-400 system to Turkey, a NATO member.

To avoid limiting your foreign policy to just one recourse, it must be balanced. That means you may have relations with major countries in Asia or the East as well as the West. Of course, contexts differ, and you have to de-escalate with some of them first. De-escalation does not equal Westernism, but because we have the most tension with Western countries, it usually gets high-

lighted in talk of constructive cooperation. A foreign policy that gives you a diverse portfolio of options requires maintaining current relations while developing new ones. De-escalation based on a balanced foreign policy has enemies both inside and outside the country: right-wing Republican radicals in the US, Israel, and some other regional countries, and radical tendencies within Iran itself.

Western countries, especially Europeans and Americans, did not react very clearly or warmly to the result of Iran's elections. Does this point to a continued lack of trust between the two sides?

ABEDI: The way the West responds to Iran's election results shows their acceptance of Iran's political identity and its strategic policy. They recognize that there is a stable pivot point in Iran's political system and its foreign policy, which conflicts with the West. We have an identity conflict with the West on multiple levels. The ideological and independent policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, since the beginning of its Islamic Revolution four decades ago, conflicts with the West's system of domination over the world. So, they know that this fixed identity does not change with changes of government in Iran and that decision-making on major political issues rests with the Establishment, not the government.

At the regional and international levels as well, Iran's interests and those of the West are at odds. Iran's role in the regional order involves forming the Axis of Re-



Abedi: I see constructive cooperation as the extension of “Look to the East” policy, not setting itself against it. Both approaches seek to secure Iran's interests and fall under the fixed foreign policy strategy of the Islamic Republic. Constructive cooperation does not mean maintaining relations solely with the West and turning our backs on the East; nor does it overshadow Iran's principled policy of supporting the Axis of Resistance.



Sasan Karimi (L) and Afifeh Abedi, experts on foreign policy issues, share their insights with Iran Daily on the diplomatic challenges facing the newly elected Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

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