

# Iran Has Elected a New President

## Its Impact on Azerbaijan and Beyond

*Ruslan Suleymanov*

The tragic death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a plane crash in May 2024 marked the beginning of a new stage in Iranian politics. A month and a half later, the election of Masud Pezeshkian, a reformist of ethnic-Azerbaijani origin, as the new president of the country gives many hopes for positive changes in the domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. However, given Iran's sophisticated political system, headed by the Supreme Leader (*Rahbar*, in Persian), rapid reforms cannot yet be expected.

Nevertheless, there is a great demand for change in Iranian society, both within the country and with regard to Tehran's relations with its foreign partners. The ethnic-Azerbaijani origin of Pezeshkian, who has a long public record of advocating for the expansion of minority rights in Iran, can also be regarded positively in Azerbaijan. The reopening of Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, almost immediately after the election of the new president, suggests that the Iranian authorities intend to continue the course of restoring full-fledged relations with Baku, which were relaunched shortly before the death of Raisi.

### *Newly Elected President with Old-Fashioned Powers*

On 19 May 2024, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev exchanged warm handshakes with his Iranian counterpart, Ebrahim Raisi: they were [taking part](#) in the launch ceremony of the "Khudaferin" and "Giz Galasi" hydroelectric complexes, built on the Araz River on the border of the two states. This event was supposed to mark the opening of a new page in relations between Baku and Tehran, which had deteriorated greatly over the past two years.

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Unfortunately, on the evening of the same day, Raisi died in a helicopter crash, together with the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and several other major officials.

After this unprecedented event for Iran, the country was plunged into a political transition associated with the election of a new president. Finally, a month and a half later, on 5 July 2024, 69-year-old Pezeshkian [gained](#) almost 54 percent of the votes cast and won a landslide victory in the second round.

At the same time, both in the second and especially in the first round the [turnout](#) was low. Officially, only 40 percent of people took part in the first round, and only 49 percent took part in the second. By comparison, in 1997, Mohammad Khatami received 70 percent of the vote in a presidential election in which 80 percent of eligible Iranians voted.

Many expect at least cosmetic changes from the new head of the Iranian government (in the constitutional framework of the Islamic Republic, the President heads the Cabinet of Ministers) in both domestic and foreign policy. Although, of course, one cannot ignore Pezeshkian's limited potential, over whom stands Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as well as the rigorist Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Suffice it to say that the conservative establishment led by Khamenei controls all centers of power in the country, including the security apparatus, the judiciary, the media, and much of the economy. He is also the ultimate decider on foreign policy.

During the election [campaign](#), Pezeshkian did not promise radical changes, focusing only on easing state control over the private lives of Iranians, especially women, and their public dress code. In addition, the new president promised to stabilize the country's economic situation, where, for example, the [inflation](#) rate over the past three years has risen officially from 8 percent to more than 40 percent, which has negatively impacted on the value of the national currency.

To solve these problems, Pezeshkian, in particular, promised to lead the country out of international isolation. In any case, the new government of Iran, which is going to be formed in August 2024, will prioritize internal problems, which at the end of 2022 caused the largest protests in the entire 43-year history of the Islamic Republic. Anyway, the victory of the only reformist candidate, who competed with five representatives from the conservative camp, indicates a serious demand for changes in Iran.

## *Foreign Policy as Part of the Domestic Agenda*

“For me, foreign policy means creating multiple links with all countries of the world in line with Iran's economic development and growth,” Pezeshkian [stated](#) during the election debate.

He [appeared](#) many times at campaign events alongside former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Mehdi Sanai, another senior diplomat. This symbolism emphasized the future president's commitment to a more balanced East-West policy. Zarif, it should be noted, studied in the U.S., is a former Iranian ambassador to the UN, and was the public face of the multiparty talks that produced the Iranian nuclear deal, formally called the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*; Sanai is a former Iranian ambassador to Russia.

On the one hand, in his [article](#) in the *Tehran Times*, published a week after the elections, Pezeshkian emphasized the desire to avoid new clashes with the West.

“I wish to emphasize that Iran's defense doctrine does not include nuclear weapons and urge the United States to learn from past miscalculations and adjust its policy accordingly,” he wrote.

In this regard, the Pezeshkian Administration will apparently be determined to reach a new deal with the West and revive the JCPOA, which ceased to operate after U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew America's signature from the agreement in May 2018.

All in all, Supreme Leader Khamenei has the upper hand in these matters, but observers [agree](#) that if President Pezeshkian were to present him with the prospect of a new agreement, he would be interested enough to allow talks to recommence, given the economic benefits Iran could reap from it. However, for this course of action to have any chance of being realized, it is quite preferable, from his perspective, for a Democratic administration to remain in power in Washington.

On the other hand, the newly elected Iranian President made it clear that he is eager to strengthen relations with Moscow and Beijing, claiming that “China and Russia have consistently stood by us during challenging times. We deeply value this friendship.”

Along with this, he expressed a desire for Iran to help achieve a speedy peace in the conflict over Ukraine, noting that his government “will stand prepared to actively support initiatives aimed at achieving this objective.” It is unclear what this means, concretely, given the many reports that Iran is contributing to the Russian war effort and the Western perception that such actions do not help in bringing about an end to the war.

In another [article](#), published in the Qatari newspaper *Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed*, Pezeshkian noted that he would build on Raisi's efforts to reconcile with Saudi Arabia and other neighboring states. “Iran's top foreign policy priority is to expand cooperation with its neighbors,” he noted.

Be that as it may, Pezeshkian will most likely conduct Iran's foreign affairs in strict coordination with the Supreme Leader—just as Raisi did, especially concerning the current situation in the Middle East.

“The era of strategic patience is over,” Raisi’s political deputy, Mohammad Jamshidi [wrote](#) on 14 April 2024, right after Iran has—for the first time in history—attacked Israel from its own territory with more than 300 drones and missiles.

There is no doubt that Pezeshkian has no intention of abandoning the extensive network of Iranian proxies in the region represented by the Shia militias (Al-Hashd Ash-Shaabi) in Iraq, the Houthi movement in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the government led by Bashar al-Assad in Syria. “Iran will continue to support the Resistance Front with strength. [...] Supporting the resistance has its roots in the fundamental policies of the Islamic Republic,” Pezeshkian wrote in a message to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, two days after his electoral victory.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that, in recent years, Iran’s policy in the Middle East has been dominated primarily by the IRGC, which seems to coordinate all Tehran’s proxies. And Pezeshkian, apparently, has neither the desire nor the ability to resist this dominance.

### *Is the Stage Being Set for Baku and Tehran to Open a New Page in their Relations?*

For about the past two years, relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have been going through quite difficult times. The manner in which Iran engaged with Armenia after the outcome of the Second Karabakh War was not adjusted sufficiently to the new geopolitical circumstances resulting from Azerbaijan’s victory—to put it euphemistically. Cooperation between the two countries was also marred by the attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran in January 2023, in which one security officer was killed. This was followed by the evacuation of the Azerbaijani diplomatic mission from the Iranian capital to Tabriz, as well as the mutual declaration of several diplomats as *persona non grata* and their expulsion.

According to the State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan Republic, at the end of 2023, [imports](#) from Iran to Azerbaijan decreased by 0.7 percent, and Azerbaijani exports to the Islamic Republic decreased by 52 percent. The land border between the two countries also remains closed.

However, even in the most difficult times, neither Baku nor Tehran have crossed the strategic red lines of the other. The reason for this is not just common geography and historical proximity, but also the presence of common economic interests.

Thus, both have taken economic advantage of the circumstances resulting from the war that began in February 2022 and the choice by the West to impose a sanctions regime against Russia by strengthening their respective economic partnerships with Russia. Among other things, alternative trade and transport routes are now vitally important for Moscow.

For example, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, which implies the uninterrupted supplies of goods and services from the Baltic Sea to the Indian Ocean, brings many benefits for Russia and all other participants. As a matter of fact, on 19 July 2024, Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Turkmenistan [signed](#) a roadmap for the synchronous development of the potential of the eastern route of the INSTC for 2024-2025. The implementation of this document by 2027 will increase the throughput of the corridor to 15 million tons per year, and by 2030 to 20 million tons.

At the moment, the Iranian side must complete the construction of its section on the Rasht-Astara railway, with a length of 162 km, to optimize the INSTC's western route, which flows through Azerbaijan. In May 2023, Russia and Iran [signed](#) a special agreement under which Moscow allocates an interstate loan worth 1.3 billion euros to Tehran for the implementation of the project. In June 2024, Iranian authorities [announced](#) the opening of the first section of this road (i.e., from the city of Rasht to the port of Caspian).

It is expected that the entire Rasht-Astara road will be built by 2027-2028. Russian authorities expect that the project could become an alternative to the Suez Canal, allowing for an end-to-end route for supplies both in transit to Europe and from Russia to the Persian Gulf. In this sense, as Moscow has repeatedly [emphasized](#), Azerbaijan, as a transit country, has a very important role to play. In recent meetings with both Russian and Iranian counterparts, Aliyev has referred to this role and Azerbaijan's interest in making it happen.

“In fact, this north-south axis would effectively revive what was known as the Persian Corridor during World War II—a road-and-rail route running north from Iran through Azerbaijan to Russia that supplied no less than half of the lend-lease aid that the United States provided the Soviet Union during the conflict. By a strange twist of fate, this same axis is now vital to Moscow in its current struggle against the United States and the West,” as Thomas de Waal has [noted](#).

Another important project that today connects Azerbaijan and Iran is the Araz corridor. The road, which will pass through Iranian territory and connect the territory of mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave of Nakhchivan, will, to a certain extent, become an alternative to the Zangezur Corridor project, which would have to pass through the territory of Armenia.

So, on 6 October 2023, Azerbaijan and Iran [signed](#) a Memorandum of Understanding to build a railway line that will connect the main part of the country with Nakhchivan through the territory of the Islamic Republic. This document became an addition to the memorandum of understanding on the establishment of new communication hubs passing through the territory of Iran, which was signed between Baku and Tehran in March 2022.

In January 2024, Aliyev [confirmed](#) that in the framework of the route through Iran, “the construction of the first bridge in the direction of Aghband has already started and a second bridge is planned in the direction of Ordubad.”

It is important to note that this is not a concession on the part of Baku, which never abandoned the Zangezur Corridor project, which was [outlined](#) in the trilateral statement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia on November 10, 2020. The problem is that at the moment, it cannot be realized due to the uncompromising position of Armenia.

Initially, Iran was opposed to the construction of this corridor, hinting at the so-called “Turkic threat” in the region. However, after Baku conducted its anti-terror operation in Karabakh in September 2023, Tehran changed its approach.

In fact, the Iranian side recognized the strength of Azerbaijan and the greater economic attractiveness of Baku in comparison with Yerevan, which also remains an important partner for Tehran, but is losing importance in an economic sense.

In addition, the active rapprochement of the Armenian leadership with the West, which by construction is resulting in a distancing from Russia, greatly alarms both Moscow and Tehran. Yerevan’s expressed desire to leave the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, and the strengthening of military cooperation with the United States (and France), has obviously caused concern in Iran (Tehran remains the main opponent of any external military presence in the region).

As a result, Armenia, which for many years was considered an outpost of Moscow and Tehran in the South Caucasus, is losing this position.

## *Not Yet Clear*

It is noteworthy that on 6 July 2024, the day after the second round of the Iranian presidential election, Aliyev [became](#) one of the first international leaders to congratulate Pezeshkian on his victory and invite him to visit Azerbaijan.

Already on 15 July 2024, the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran [resumed](#) work after a year and a half, which is certainly a positive signal, emphasizing the desire of both sides to develop contacts with each other.

It is also important to mention that Azerbaijan and Iran can become closer to each other on common international platforms. Thus, on 18 July 2024, Baku [submitted](#) an application to change its status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) from “dialogue partner” to “observer country”—Iran has been a member of the SCO since 2022. In addition, on 11 July 2024, the Chairman of the Milli Majlis of Azerbaijan,



Sahiba Gafarova, [announced](#) that Baku wants to become a full member of BRICS—and Tehran has been a member of the organization since January 2024.

To sum up, the election of a new president in Iran opens up new prospects for deeper cooperation between Baku and Tehran, despite all the challenges and difficulties faced by both sides and the increasingly complex and uncertain geopolitical and geoeconomic climate they each find themselves operating in.

Both countries will need to tread carefully in the time ahead, taking care to advance their respective national interests in a way that fully takes account of a rapidly changing regional and international environment.