

Daunting curveballs coming Pezeshkian's way

President-elect's challenges in foreign policy

By Reza Raadfar
Political analyst

PERSPECTIVE

Leaders of the world and their prospective replacements are being asked in debates, interviews, and press conferences how they would be dealing with the Reformist president-elect of Iran. First of all, that speaks volumes about Iran's central role in world politics. Secondly, how they will respond to that question largely depends on whether they perceive this new shift in Iran as a threat or as an opportunity. We can see the world hasn't really figured out who Masoud Pezeshkian will be as Iran's president and consequently, how they will approach him, but that won't last for so long.

Pezeshkian will only be thrown so many warm-up balls to reveal his moves before he is deemed ready to play in the big leagues, where the hits have to keep coming. Domestically, it would not be too different, either. While some Iranians may be willing to give the new president-elect of Iran some time to get a grasp of the game just because that is the standard practice, most other Iranians as well as foreign actors are impatient to see what his positions on a myriad of issues are.

In what follows, we aim to discuss some of the guaranteed challenges that Pezeshkian and his foreign policy team will have to tackle no less than a few months into his presidency.



Iran's President-elect Masoud Pezeshkian (L) and his daughter attend a rally at Heydarnia Stadium in Tehran on July 3, 2024, the day before polling stations open nationwide.
● ISNA

Appointing foreign minister

Pezeshkian's first challenge in the realm of foreign policy is, oddly enough, domestic and not even in relation to any one specific country. Far from being the only president-elect who has his worries when it comes to getting a vote of confidence for his top minister, he will probably still have more headaches than most in the following weeks.

It's not like we can't guess Javad Zarif, the former foreign minister of Iran, is his first choice if he gets to have his wish. But he is not about to get his wish, is he? Zarif, who made a giant comeback to the forefront of Iran's political scene as Pezeshkian's consultant on foreign policy during this presidential campaign, is famous across the world as the only Iranian FM in recent history that finalized a nuclear deal with Western powers, namely the US with its oc-

asionally antagonistic stance toward Iran.

However, this achievement did not come with its curses. As the United States under former Republican president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 Iran deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Zarif was bombarded with a series of harsh criticisms and accusations from the "perturbed" friends of the country and giddy political enemies alike that naturally demanded a strong, persuasive response about what had gone wrong and what Tehran will do afterwards. Long story short, Zarif did not pass the Herculean task of convincing the people of Iran and their political representatives and regaining their trust. So, for Pezeshkian to tap Zarif for the position of foreign minister is to get ready for an uphill battle where both will have to, first, concen-

trate on defending a checkered past.

Now, knowing Zarif, he is surely ready to throw down in the parliament with anyone who dares to question the specifics of the JCPOA, but to save everyone from the trouble of digging up grievances with the previous deal, Pezeshkian may opt to still have Zarif in the ministry but as a consultant or deputy — that is, of course, if Zarif is up for the job. However, that still leaves the big chair empty.

The name that is being dropped around as Pezeshkian's practically-sound choice for the foreign minister is Seyyed Abbas Araqchi. Araqchi was Iran's chief nuclear negotiator in talks with the P5+1, under Hassan Rouhani's government. So, he won't be getting out of the Iranian Parliament unscathed, but at least, he will be getting out mostly intact.

Since the Iranian Parliament is devoid

of reformists who will be accommodating Pezeshkian out of political partisanship, the president-elect is likely to make good on his unspecific campaign promise of bringing the two sides closer together and forming a unified front. It would still be unlikely that he will gamble with the position of foreign minister to achieve this aim. That kind of promised bipartisanship may be kept for tapping the heads of some of the less influential ministries.

Whatever the case may be, it's almost guaranteed that the Iranian lawmakers will put up a fight — at first, at least — but they will likely compromise with the president-elect, who has shown to be seemingly holding out an olive branch. After all, the people have spoken, and the people have voted for a candidate that stands for negotiating with the US to lift its unilateral sanctions.

Next US president, nuclear deal

The situation at the White House is as important to Pezeshkian's success as the situation at home, and the White House is up in the air, to say the least. The US presidential campaign has been going on for longer than Iran's and it has still a few more months to go, but it has just gotten interesting. President Biden's rambling appear-

ance, which was fraught with his dreaded "senior moments," in the first televised national debate has spiraled the Democrats down into the five stages of grief. Denial was no longer possible after watching the debate — and that says a lot about Biden's performance — and the subsequent anger was fruitless. So, the Dems are now bargaining with the

president to step down and let them have a chance against Trump, who has built a sizable base of unwavering followers.

Let's face it: Biden's performance in the debates will not get any better without the help of medications — and Trump is confessedly ready to pounce on that, too. If Biden gets to have his way and stays in denial that

he has a chance at beating Trump, he will frantically look around for a big win in foreign policy until November 5 to vouch for his competence at the height of his "senior moments". That is an opportunity that Pezeshkian should not miss.

If Pezeshkian manages to expedite the process of forming his government and sends his people to hold

a series of condensed talks with the Americans, both he and Biden may be able to score a partial win soon. The specifics of that partial win will likely be more favorable for Iran than the US because time is on Pezeshkian's side. To be sure, the Iranian president doesn't want to chance his success on Trump, who has already sabotaged a deal, but he still can.