

Is there any chance for a de-escalation in the Middle East?

## Iran's new presidency

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In much of the west, the election in late July of Masoud Pezeshkian as president of Iran elicited sighs of relief. Pezeshkian is, in the international narrative, a “reformist” of a very different stripe than his predecessor Ibrahim Raisi, a “hardliner” in the American and European taxonomy of authoritarian regimes. Whereas Raisi had overseen a dramatic expansion of Iran’s nuclear activities, a tightening of Iran’s relations with China and Russia, and an aggressive new approach to Iran’s regional adversaries, western observers hoped Pezeshkian would seek de-escalation and detente, and perhaps even a new deal with Washington to replace the defunct 2015 nuclear accord.

### Resignation instead of relief

Iranians, in contrast, greeted Pezeshkian’s rise not with relief but with resignation. They have perhaps grown accustomed to a certain rhythm of Iranian politics – repression increases, protests break out and are smothered, and at a certain point the regime permits a “reformist” victory as a political and diplomatic pressure relief mechanism. There was no popular clamor for Pezeshkian, formerly a minor political figure with uncontroversial views; rather, he was elevated by the regime. He was permitted, along with five others, to run by Iran’s unelected Guardian Council, which disqualified seventy-four other aspirants. He defeated former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, whose zealous brand of ultra-conservatism represented a greater threat to Iran’s power brokers than Pezeshkian’s mild centrism. For many Iranians, the key question was not whether to vote for Jalili or Pezeshkian, but whether to vote at all and in doing so risk burnishing the legitimacy of what they regarded as a corrupt and hopeless process.

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Pezeshkian enters office not just with the weakest electoral mandate of any Iranian president since 1979, but with little apparent power to change the policies of most concern to the United States and Europe. He has pledged his fealty not only to the regime but to Iranian leader Ali Khamenei personally, and has offered little indication that he intends to pursue any change to Iran’s regional or nuclear policies. On the latter, he has indicated openness to negotiation with the west, but only providing that the United States abjure the use of pressure and Europe repent of its “self-arrogated moral supremacy” – a position not so different, at least rhetorically, from that of the Raisi administration.

### A more than complex situation

Pezeshkian arrives at a complex moment for the Iranian regime. It is ascendant – at the threshold of nuclear weapons, lashing out assertively in the region, and growing closer to China and Russia, the latter of which has even turned to Iran as an arms supplier. Yet the regime faces political and economic discontent at home, and cannot take further nuclear steps forward without risking military conflict. It is a moment to which a “reformist” may be well-suited – someone who will absorb the political cost of difficult domestic economic adjustments such as reductions in subsidies, while at the same time enticing the United States and Europe into a diplomatic accord that allows Iran to leverage its nuclear progress and regional aggression to obtain sanctions relief alongside de facto recognition of its “advances”.

### Judging Iran by its action

Policymakers in the United States and Europe would be wise to view Pezeshkian’s rise not as cause, but effect – not, in other words, as a development that will change Iran, but as a reflection of a regime that, however confident it may seem, faces trouble at home and abroad and has put a new face forward in an effort to stave it off. In the past, western officials have been quick to modify their policies in the vain hope of strengthening “reformists” in Iran, and may be tempted to do so again. However, like so many Iranians, the United States and Europe should make clear that they are holding out for real change – that sanctions relief will come not in response to a shuffling of personalities, but an end to Iranian policies that have roiled the Middle East and led it to the brink of nuclear proliferation and war. Neither eschewing or pinning their hopes on engagement, the west should judge Iran by its actions, not its elections. ■