

US' Pathway to Iran Has Thorny Shrubs

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It is painful to read the US reports commenting on the result of Iran's presidential election. The New York Times carried a blurb on Monday, “Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's ultraconservative president-elect, said that he would not meet with President Biden, and that Tehran's position on its ballistic missile program was “nonnegotiable.”

The [report](#) estimated that “The comments appeared to signal a hardening of Iranian policies as the conservative faction takes control of all branches of the government: Parliament, the judiciary and soon, the presidency.”

The Times report would cast a pall of gloom over the prospects for the US-Iran relationship for the foreseeable future. To be sure, thorny shrubs clutter the Biden administration's pathway.

However, the Biden administration has no dearth of sophisticated minds with discerning capacity to decode Iran's ‘Shia’ politics. Indeed, in the tricky period of transition that lies ahead when the frozen relationship holds a tantalising potential to become deliquescent, a misreading can prove very costly.

Typically, thorny bushes can be a challenge, but if the shrubs and their locations are chosen carefully, they can also be highly valuable in the home landscape design.

Such characterisation — “ultraconservative” — conjures up misleading notions. If it means that Raisi is profoundly committed to Iran's Velayat-e faqih, its Islamic jurist system of governance, yes, it is possibly so. But why should that perturb the White House — that is, assuming that the Biden administration is not aiming at a regime change in Iran?

Now, below that threshold comes a variety of concerns. In the economic sphere, does “ultraconservative” mean the North Korean or the erstwhile Soviet model of command economy? Certainly, that is not the case with Raisi who is an ardent votary of the market.

In fact, he kickstarted his election campaign at Tehran's Grand Bazaar. His agenda to rejuvenate Iran's economy places high importance to the private sector's role, participation and initiatives. Ironically, being “conservative” in Iran's context actually means somewhat “leftish” in regard of allocation of resources and industrial policy.

All indications are that Raisi will pursue an economic model that would approximate to what President Biden himself is aiming at — the government stepping in to moderate capitalist principles through selective intervention and by resorting to public investments on infrastructure with a view to create and sustain a welfare programme and, importantly, to foster job creation.

Like Biden, Raisi is also under compulsion to woo the lower middle class and the working class, which is an imperative need to arrest further erosion in the social base of the Islamic Revolution.

Raisi is unhappy that the infamous bonyads which are supposedly charity organisations, render scanty services to the poor and have become conglomerates at the hands of interest groups and fuelled the black market and spawned corruption.

As chief justice, Raisi has had first hand knowledge of the cancerous growth of corruption in Iran and he took his gloves off to confront that malaise, with the full backing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He can be called an “ultraconservative” in the intolerance he has shown toward corrupt syndicates.

But why should the US resent it if Raisi pilots an anti-corruption campaign in Iran with renewed vigour as president? Arguably, it will only create better business climate for investors from abroad.

There is absolutely no doubt that Raisi is intensely conscious of the imperative need to improve the living standards of the common people. He is not alone here. The entire top leadership has reason to feel worried.

The voter apathy in the recent election (50%) gives a stunning message to the political elite that Hassan Rouhani is leaving office as a discredited “reformist”.

Of course, Rouhani’s tragedy was that Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo made a lethal duo who, with an eye on the utility of the Israeli lobby and the evangelicals to help advance their political career, decided to give Iran hell. Period. But Biden is not a prisoner of wealthy Jews, nor does he need evangelics for pillow talk.

At his very first [press conference](#) in Tehran on Monday, Raisi said, “The world should know that our government’s foreign policy does not start by the nuclear deal and it will not be limited to the nuclear deal. We will pursue interaction with the whole world and all the world states under broad and balanced interaction in foreign policy, and only those negotiations which ensure national interests are definitely supported, but we will not tie economic situation and people’s conditions to the negotiations...We will continue contacts if they yield results for the people in line with lifting restrictions...”

Raisi added: “European countries and the US should look at what they have done towards the nuclear deal; the US violated the nuclear deal and the Europeans did not fulfil their undertakings. We tell the US that it is duty-bound to lift all sanctions and that it should return and implement its undertakings. The Europeans should not be influenced by the US pressure and should act upon what they have promised. This is the Iranian nation’s demand from them.”

What does it add up to? Plainly put, Raisi’s message is that Iran will not remain entrapped in

the bitterness of the JCPOA saga that Trump and Pompeo conspired to create in self-interest, but is instead keen to move on.

He has pledged to pursue “interaction with the whole world and all the world states under broad and balanced interaction in foreign policy” in the country’s national interests. It is crystal clear that Raisi will welcome western investments, trade, technology transfer and so on that will help ameliorate the “people’s conditions”.

Succinctly put, Raisi underscored that the European countries and the US would have an obligation toward his government by fulfilling, even if belatedly, their commitment to integrate Iran to the world economy.

The Biden administration should be well aware that the possibilities are almost seamless in economic cooperation with Iran. Iran is a fabulously rich country potentially and can generate an income level that can make it the last frontier for the post-pandemic economy recovery of the industrial world.

Wisdom and sagacity lies in leveraging the economic cooperation to enter into serious non-nuclear conversations with Iran’s leadership. “Footfalls echo in the memory/Down the passage which we did not take/Towards the door we never opened/Into the rose-garden.” TS Eliot’s words are most appropriate here.

This is not the moment to get frantic about Iran’s ballistic missiles programme, or its regional policies in general, which quintessentially relate to certain circumstances prevailing in that country’s external environment. The US played a big role in contriving to create those circumstances. And, herein lies the paradox: the US is also best placed to moderate those circumstances.

If the Biden administration does that, the regional states and the international community will only applaud it as its finest legacy in the politics of West Asia.

Successive administrations in the Beltway have experienced that unless the relations with Iran got normalised, the US’ policies would remain ineffectual and unproductive. Iran is one of those regional powers — such as India, for instance — that cannot be suppressed.

On the contrary, good relations with Iran would have positive fallouts on a number of fronts in the West Asian region as well as in surrounding regions — as far apart as Afghanistan and Yemen. That is why, a good beginning with Raisi becomes critically important.

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Featured image: Iran’s president-elect Ebrahim Raisi addresses his first press conference in Tehran, June 21, 2021 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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