

Iran Embraces Its Eurasian Future

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Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi was [sworn in](#) as the 8th president of Iran this Thursday at the Majlis (Parliament), two days after being [formally endorsed](#) by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei.

Representatives of the UN secretary-general; OPEC; the EU; the Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU); the Inter-Islamic Union; and quite a few heads of state and Foreign Ministers were at the Majlis, including Iraq President Barham Salih and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

The Islamic Republic of Iran now enters a new era in more ways than one. Khamenei himself outlined its contours in a [short, sharp speech](#), ‘*The Experience of Trusting the US*’.

Khamenei’s strategic analysis, conveyed even before the final result of the JCPOA negotiations in Vienna in 2015, which I covered in my Asia Times ebook [Persian Miniatures](#), turned out to be premonitory: “During the negotiations I repeatedly said they don’t uphold their promises.” So, in the end, “the experience tells us this is a deadly poison for us.” During the Rouhani administration, Khamenei adds, “it became clear that trusting the West doesn’t work”.

With perfect timing, a new, six-volume book, [Sealed Secret](#), co-written by outgoing Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and two top JCPOA negotiators, Ali Akbar Salehi and Seyyed Abbas Araghchi (who’s still involved in the current, stalled Vienna debate) will be published this week, for the moment only in Farsi.

Professor Mohammad Marandi of the University of Tehran summed up for me the road map ahead:

“Iran’s foreign policy decisions are pretty clear. Iran will be putting less emphasis on Western nations, especially European, and more emphasis on the Global South, the East, neighboring countries, and of course that will include China and Russia. That doesn’t mean the Iranians are going to ignore Europe altogether, if they decide to return to the JCPOA. The Iranians would accept if they abide by their obligations. So far, we have seen no sign of that whatsoever.”

Marandi could not help referring to Khamenei’s speech:

“It’s pretty clear; he’s saying, ‘we don’t trust the West, these last 8 years showed that’, he’s saying the next administration should learn from the experience of these 8 years.”

Yet the main challenge for Raisi will not be foreign policy, but the domestic framework, with sanctions still biting hard:

“With regard to economic policy, it will be tilting more towards social justice and turning away from neoliberalism, expanding the safety net for the disenfranchised and the vulnerable.”

It’s quite intriguing to compare Marandi with the views of a seasoned Iranian diplomat who prefers to remain anonymous, and very well positioned as an observer of the domestic conflict:

“During Rouhani’s 8 years, contrary to the Supreme Leader’s advice, the government spent lots of time on negotiations, and they have not been investing on internal potential. Anyhow the 8 years are now finished, and contrary to Rouhani’s promises we currently have Iran’s worst economic and financial record in 50 years.”

The diplomat is adamant on “the importance of paying attention to our internal capacities and abilities, while having powerful economic relations with our neighbors as well as Russia, China, Latin America, South Africa as well as maintaining mutual respectable ties with Europeans and the US government, if it changes its behavior and accepts Iran as it is and not always trying to overthrow the Iranian state and harm its people by any possible means.”

Iranians are heirs to a tradition of at least 2,500 years of fine diplomacy. So once again our interlocutor had to stress, “the Supreme Leader has never, ever said or believed we should cut our relations with Europeans. Quite the opposite: he deeply believes in the notion of ‘dynamic diplomacy’, even concerning the US; he said multiple times we have no problem with the US if they deal with us with respect.”

And now, let’s time travel

There are no illusions in Tehran that Iran under Raisi, much more than under Rouhani, will remain the target of multiple “maximum pressure” and/or Hybrid War tactics deployed by Washington, Tel Aviv and NATOstan, [crude false flags included](#), with the whole combo celebrated by US Think Tankland’s analyses penned by “experts” in Beltway cubicles.

All that is irrelevant in terms of what really matters ahead in the Southwest Asia chessboard.

The late, great René Grousset, in his 1951 classic *L’Empire des Steppes*, has pointed out “how Iran, renewing itself for fifty centuries”, has “always given proof of astonishing continuity.” It was because of this strength that Iranian civilization, as much as Chinese civilization, has assimilated all foreigners that conquered its soil, from Seljuks to Mongols: “Every time, because of the radiance of its culture, Iranism reappeared with renewed vitality, on the road to a new renaissance.”

The possibility of a “new renaissance”, now, implies a step beyond the “neither East or West” first conceptualized by Ayatollah Khomeini: it’s rather a back to the (Eurasian) roots, Iran reviving its past to tackle the new, multipolar, future.

The political heart of Iran lies in the sophisticated urban organization of the northern plateau, the result of a rolling, pluri-millennial process. All along Grousset's "fifty centuries", the plateau has been the house of Iranian culture and the stable heart of the state.

Around this central space there are plenty of territories historically and linguistically linked to Persia and Iran: in Eastern Anatolia, in Central Asia and Afghanistan, in the Caucasus, in Western Pakistan. Then there are Shi'ite territories of other ethnic groups, mostly Arab, in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon (Hezbollah), Yemen (the Zaidites) and the Persian Gulf (Bahrain, the Shi'ites in Hasa in Saudi Arabia).

This is the Shi'ite arc - evolving in a complex Iranization process that is foremost political and religious, and not cultural and linguistic. Outside of Iran, I have seen in my travels how Arab Shi'ites in Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf, Dari/Farsi Shi'ites in Afghanistan, those of Pakistan and India, and Turcophone Shi'ites in Azerbaijan look up towards political Iran.

So Iran's large zone of influence relies mostly on Shi'ism, and not on Islamic radicalism or the Persian language. It's Shi'ism that allows political power in Iran to keep a Eurasian dimension - from Lebanon to Afghanistan and Central Asia - and that reflects once again Grousset's "continuity" when he refers to Persian/Iranian history.

From Ancient History to the medieval era, it was always out of imperial projects, born in Southwest Asia and /or the Mediterranean basin, that came the drive to attempt the creation of a Eurasian territory.

The Persians, who were halfway between Mediterranean Europe and Central Asia, were the first who tried to build a Eurasian empire from Asia to the Mediterranean, but they were halted in their expansion towards Europe by the Greeks in the 5th century B.C.

Then it was up to Alexander The Great, in pure badass blitzkrieg mode, to venture all the way to Central Asia and India, de facto founding the first Eurasian empire. Which happened to materialize, to a large extent, the Persian empire.

Then something even more extraordinary happened: the simultaneous presence of the Parthian and Kushan empires between the Roman Empire and the Han Empire during the first two centuries of the first millennium.

It was this interaction that first allowed commercial and cultural trade and connectivity between the two extremities of Eurasia, between the Romans and the Han Chinese.

Yet the largest Eurasian territorial space, founded between the 7th and 10th centuries, following the Arab conquests, were the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates. Islam was at the heart of these Arab conquests, remixing previous imperial compositions, from Mesopotamia to the Persians, Greeks and Romans.

Historically, that was the first truly Eurasian economic, cultural and political arc, from the 8th to the 11th century, before Genghis Khan monopolized The Big Picture.

All that is very much alive in the collective unconscious of Iranians and Chinese. That's why the China-Iran strategic partnership deal is much more than a mere \$400 billion economic arrangement. It's a graphic manifestation of what the revival of the Silk Roads is aiming at. And it looks like Khamenei had already seen which way the (desert) wind was blowing years

before the fact.

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