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Japan's Perspective Towards Iran's Foreign Policy: The Gaza Crisis and Beyond

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Japan is traditionally aligned with the West in many areas. But it has also partnered with Iran at times, which places it in a unique position among G7 countries. It is, thus, important to understand how Japan perceives current Middle Eastern affairs. This paper aims to shed light on Japan's perspective towards Iran, with a particular focus on Iran's strategic intent, in the context of its relationship with the Gulf region and the wider Middle East, especially under the current ongoing crisis between Israel and Palestine.

After the October 7 attacks by Hamas against Israel, the situation surrounding Iran has been increasingly fluid. Among the key issues are the destabilizing activities conducted by the so-called Axis of Resistance, a loosely united network of non-state armed actors in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen. As of this writing, these groups, supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are intensifying their offensives against US and Israeli interests. Through these tactics, Iran claims that it is succeeding in its efforts to defame the US and Israel. Overall, the strategic circumstance in the Middle East seems to be moving in Iran's favor, as Iran and other Arab countries remain united against the Israeli operation to dismantle Hamas via the indiscriminate killing of countless civilians in the Gaza Strip.

The Recent Situation Surrounding Iran

The administration of the late Iranian President, Ibrahim Raisi, got off to an uneasy start in August 2021. During the Hassan Rouhani administration (2013-2021), the US unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and subsequently launched a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. This included severe restrictions on both financial and oil transactions. As a result, a series of sanctions culminated in severe economic losses to Iran. In addition, the Abraham Accords signed in September 2020 effectively isolated Iran in the region, as some Arab countries began to establish relations with Israel. Then, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022, Iranian-made drones being supplied to Russia further deteriorated the relationship between the West and Iran.¹

At the regional level, Iran's increase in uranium enrichment levels (said to be as high as 84% at one point) resulted in heightened tensions with both Israel and the West. At the domestic level, the outbreak of demonstrations throughout the country against the compulsory wearing of the *hijab* beginning in September 2022, and the subsequent police brutality against women and protesters further tarnished the reputation of Iran.²

¹ "Timeline: Iran-Russia Collaboration on Drones." The Iran Primer. *United States Institute of Peace*. August 10, 2023. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/mar/01/timeline-iran-russia-collaboration-drones>, accessed on May 14, 2024.

² Kenta Aoki. "Diversification of Iran's Foreign Policy." *Progress Report 2023: The Role of Japan's Diplomacy in the Middle East/Eurasia*. April 2024, pp.23-24, <https://www.meij.or.jp/content/files/Progress%20Report%202023.pdf>, accessed on May 14, 2024.



In response to these events, the Raisi administration began diversifying Iran's foreign policy. In March 2023, through Chinese mediation, it restored diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia for the first time in seven years. Subsequently, in July 2023, Iran announced that it would officially join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Further, in August 2023, the BRICS group of countries accredited Iran's participation, stating that Iran, along with five other countries, would officially join it in January 2024.

At the same time, Hamas's large-scale attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 stalled efforts to ease tensions in the region, while also unexpectedly working to break Iran further out of its isolation. The "Axis of Resistance" was activated across the region, causing considerable damage to American and Israeli assets. Hezbollah has continuously launched cross-border attacks in the north of Israel from Lebanon, while proxy groups in Syria and Iraq mount pressure on US bases.

In the Red Sea, the Houthis have re-ignited their efforts to interrupt the flow of commercial shipping, in part as a reaction to the ongoing operation by Israel in the Gaza Strip. Iran's call for a boycott of Israel has been readily accepted regionally where anti-Israeli sentiment remains strong. For Iran, this may contribute to the dissolution of the coalition-building against Iran that Israel has been trying to promote since the Abraham Accords.



Smoke rising over the village of Marwahin in southern Lebanon after an Israeli bombardment across its northern border.

Source: [The Guardian](#)



Iran has arguably seen a significant improvement in its strategic position, and it is likely to continue pushing the factions of the “Axis of Resistance” to engage in intermittent attacks against Israel while restraining them from escalating the tension too much to preserve the function of “forward deterrence.” For instance, it can be argued that Iran acted with restraint during their retaliatory attacks on Israel on April 13, 2024, by deliberately avoiding human casualties. In this sense, Iran’s strategic patience continues, even though they might have become more confident in their ability to mitigate risks and manage their military capabilities.³ At the same time, the continued disruption of the sea lanes is an area of acute, grave concern for Japan and the West. Hence, navigating an appropriate response to the Houthis is a top priority.

Japan’s Unique Position between the US and Iran

While most Western countries, including the US, UK, Germany, and France, have been highly critical of Iranian policies, Japan’s position is somewhat unique. Japan first sent diplomatic representation to Iran in August 1929, and Iran reciprocated by establishing diplomatic representation in Japan in July 1930.⁴ Bilateral relations between Japan and Iran have continued for more than 90 years. Although the two sides sometimes faced challenges, including during World War II, the Iran-Iraq War, and controversies over nuclear capabilities, both countries have continuously sought to maintain sustainable political and economic relations.⁵

³ Iran was reportedly behind the Houthi attack on Saudi Aramco oil facilities (September 2019). Nevertheless, Iran denied any involvement and was not held accountable by either the United States or Saudi Arabia. In January 2020, the IRGC retaliated against Israel for the killing of IRGC commander Qassim Sulaimani in Iraq with a surface-to-surface missile. In January 2024, the IRGC launched a ballistic missile attack on a building purported to be the headquarters of the Mossad in the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq in retaliation for the murder of a IRGC commander by Israel, and also fired ballistic missiles into Syrian and Pakistani territory in retaliation for terrorist attacks. In these instances, Iran succeeded in avoiding the deterioration of relations with Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan. These experiences have given the leadership of the Iranian regime a sense of confidence in its ability to carry out precision targeting attacks with the missile drones it has been developing for many years, and it can be assumed that confidence in its ability to end the war by avoiding responsibility has deepened.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. *Japan-Iran Relations (Basic Data)*. September 2012. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/iran/data.html, accessed on May 14, 2024.

⁵ Tomoyo Chisaka. “The Three Cycles of Rise and Fall in Iran-Japan Relations: From Energy Studies to Political Causal Analysis.” Satoru Nakamura and Steven Wright (eds.). *Japan and the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p.106.



Smoke billows across the horizon along the hills in southern Lebanon from Israeli bombardment on December 10, 2023.

Source: [Arab News](#)

The ties between Japan and Iran have been underscored by cooperation on energy, people-to-people ties, and mutual investment opportunities.⁶ The wider consensus dictates that Japan's engagement with Iran is largely driven by reliance on imports of Middle Eastern oil to maintain its energy security. In 2022, Japan depended on the Gulf states for 94.1% of its crude oil imports – 39.4% from Saudi Arabia, 37.6% from the UAE, 8.2% from Kuwait, and 7.3% from Qatar.⁷ Prior to the lifting of the sanction waiver on Iran in 2018, Japan imported more of its oil from Iran. Notably, Iranian oil played a huge role in Japan's economic growth, highlighting the significance of the fact that now Japan does not import crude oil from Iran at all.⁸ In addition, Iran holds strategic importance for Japan, since it possesses a certain level of control over the Strait of

⁶ Johathan Berkshire Miller. "Japan's Strategic Ties with Iran." *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*. February 18, 2016. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1454>, accessed on May 14, 2024.

⁷ Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry of Japan. *Japan's Energy 2023*. February 26, 2024. <https://www.enecho.meti.go.jp/about/pamphlet/energy2023/01.html>, accessed on May 14, 2024.

⁸ Koichiro Tanaka, "A Turning Point for Japan-Iran Relations," *Nippon*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00440/>, accessed on May 14, 2024.



Hormuz, one of the chokepoints of the global flow of goods and energy. Yet, despite Iran's plentiful energy resources and its position as the second-largest Middle East and North African economy, Japan has been left with no choice but to restrain its Iranian policy on account of Washington's volatile relations with Tehran.⁹

At times, Japan can possibly act in an intermediary role between the two sides. Some argue that Japan's activities in the Gulf are arguably shaped by hedging strategy.¹⁰ For example, in June 2019, Japan's then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Tehran to mediate between the US and Iran. The mediation did not yield any positive result as Iranian leader Khamenei declined to exchange messages with the US, even at the request of PM Abe.¹¹

In September 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian admitted that Japan had proposed an initiative to revive a stalled nuclear deal with Iran and six major powers, stating that "any initiative from Japan that aligns with Iran's interests would be viewed positively by Tehran."¹² Prior to this, when Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) units were deployed to the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Bab-al-Mandab Strait in January 2020, Japan assured the Iranian side that operations of those units were meant solely for information-gathering activities. In response, President Rouhani said: "Japan has announced it will not take part in the American plans for security in the (Gulf) region...which is something we welcome...Japan is sending a surveillance vessel but not to the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz." He also mentioned that both sides had presented new proposals for easing the sanctions applied to Iran.¹³

⁹ Luke Austin. "Iran and the (Relative) Calm After the Storm: Where Does Japan Stand?" *Human Security Centre*. July 1, 2022. <http://www.hscentre.org/asia-and-pacific/iran-relative-calm-storm-japan-stand/>, accessed on May 14, 2024.

¹⁰ Not taking sides is one pattern of hedging, which reflects Japan's consistent attempts over the years to adopt a more nuanced middle ground distinct from the Western powers. Yee-Kuang Heng. "Japan's Role in Gulf Security." Li-Chen Sim and Jonathan Fulton (eds.). *Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security*. Routledge, 2023, pp. 50-52.

¹¹ "Iran Spurns Japan's Efforts for Mediation with U.S." *Kyodo News*. June 13, 2019. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2019/06/b2a30117e0d9-japans-abe-to-meet-irans-supreme-leader-amid-tensions-with-us.html>, accessed on June 17, 2024.

¹² "Iran's FM: Japan Proposes Initiative to Revive Iran Nuclear Deal." *Nour News*. September 27, 2023. <https://nournews.ir/en/news/151867/Iran's-FM-Japan-proposes-initiative-to-revive-Iran-nuclear-deal>. accessed on May 14, 2024.

¹³ "Iran's Rouhani welcomes Japan opt-out of U.S.-led naval mission in Gulf," *Asahi Shimbun*, December 22, 2019, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13055903>, accessed on June 17, 2024.



Implications for the Gulf and Asia

Japan seems to be making efforts to strike a balance between Iran and Israel even amid heightened tensions. For example, immediately after Iran's large-scale retaliatory attack on Israel on April 13, 2024, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa called Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian and Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz separately on April 16. On May 10, Japan joined 142 nations at the UN General Assembly in approving a resolution calling on the Security Council to reconsider providing Palestine with full membership.¹⁴

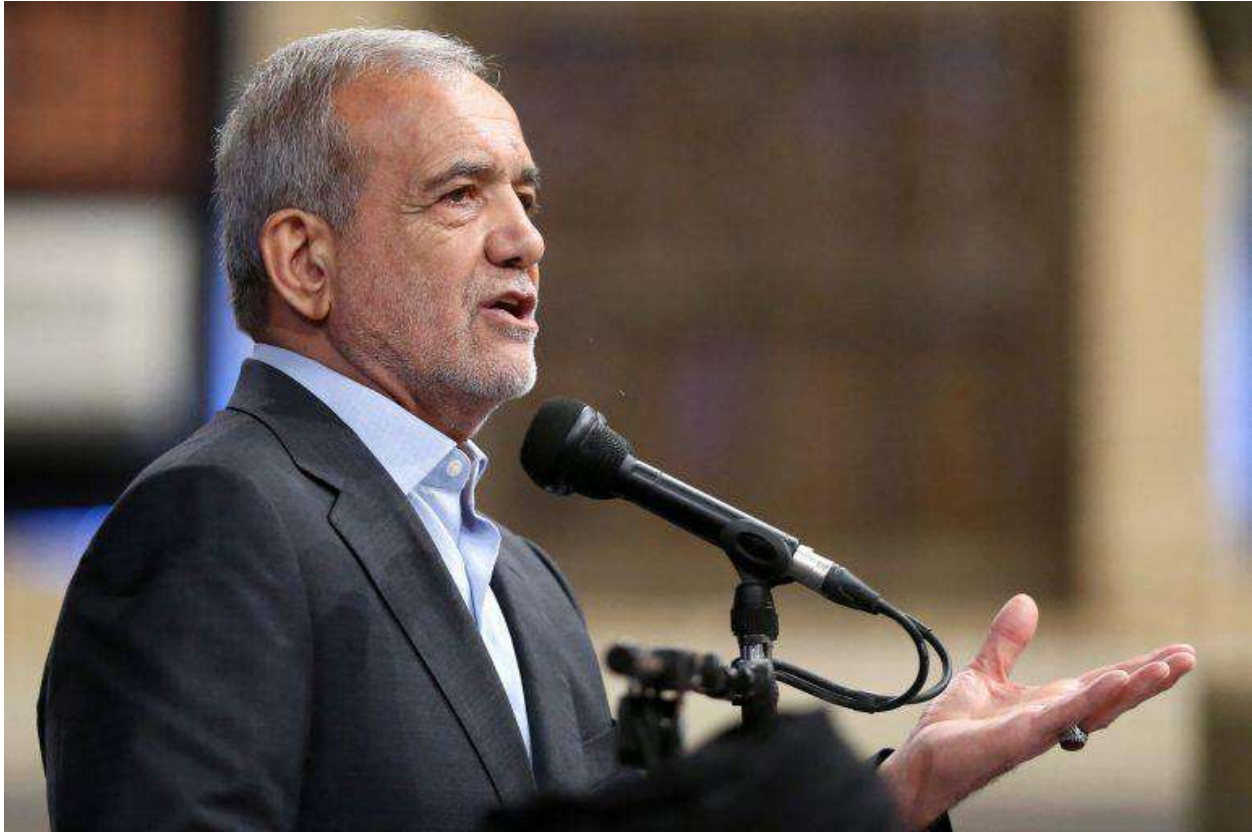
Additionally, during a phone call by Foreign Minister Kamikawa with his Israeli counterpart Katz on May 27, Kamikawa urged Israel to honor the International Court of Justice (ICJ) orders to stop the Rafah offensive.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Japan's Prime Minister Kishida, following the passing of Iran's President Raisi in May 2024, visited the Iranian Embassy in Tokyo to sign the condolence book,¹⁶ a move that is considered to be rare among Heads of State. Such pragmatic efforts seem to be ongoing although it has to be understood that in the shadow of the US, Japan has little room to maneuver its unique role with Iran.

For the time being, Iran and the Gulf states appear to be more in alignment than before. One of the reasons for this is the speculation that the US might withdraw from the region which is also pushing the Gulf countries to diversify their foreign relations. In this context, China is expanding its influence not only in the economic arena, but also in political and military areas as well. However, China's engagement with other parts of the world indicates a risk of "debt-trap" diplomacy, thus suggesting that a cautious approach is needed. Japan has historically maintained friendly relations with Iran and the Gulf, making it a natural partner. With the involvement of external powers fluctuating greatly, it remains to be seen whether the Iranian regime will continue to navigate down the same path following the presidential and power transition process of the June 28 presidential election.

¹⁴ "Japan backs U.N. move to grant full membership to Palestine." *The Asahi Shimbun*. May 11, 2024. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15263324>, accessed on May 15, 2024.

¹⁵ "Japan Foreign Minister Urges Israel to Honor ICJ's Order to Stop Rafah Offensive." *NHK*. May 27, 2024. https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20240528_02/, accessed on June 17, 2024.

¹⁶ "Visit to Offer Condolences Following the Passing of President Raisi of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Prime Minister's Office Japan. May 22, 2024. https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/actions/202405/22choumon.html, accessed on June 17, 2024.



President Masoud Pezeshkian delivers a speech during the official presidential endorsement ceremony by Iran's supreme leader.

Source: [Al Jazeera](#)

Reformist politician Masoud Pezeshkian was elected in a run-off election held on July 5 with 53.7% of the vote and inaugurated as the 9th Iranian President on July 30. During the electoral campaign, he constantly showed a willingness to resume nuclear talks with the West. While for many observers, the new government has been characterized as “Rouhani 2.0,” the presumption that the new government will soften its stance should be viewed cautiously given that the IRGC operates not under the direct command of the President, but the Supreme Leader. Thus, it would be fair to argue that President Pezeshkian has little authority on the Quds Force’s external operations. With little grip on conservative factions within the domestic politics in Iran, Pezeshkian will thus face numerous difficulties with the likely continuation of the hardliner policies similar to the Raisi administration. Overall, the Pezeshkian administration will be obliged to continue the “Look to the East” policy, while continuing to support resistance groups in the region as well. At the same time, and while it is difficult to have an optimistic outlook, it is still important to re-examine the relationship between the Gulf countries and Asia, including Japan, in the context of Iran and the changing global order.

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