

IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE UKRAINE CRISIS: BUSINESS AS USUAL

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When Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Moscow in January to meet with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, he hoped to open a new chapter in Iran-Russia relations. After signing an agreement on “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” with China and then attaining full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Raisi and his conservative foreign policy team also sought to enhance relations with Moscow to the level of a strategic partnership. As such, no one would expect that just over a month later, Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine might put its relationship with Iran to the test.

Tehran, often known as Moscow’s “ally,” did not join the wave of international condemnation of the invasion, but it did not support the Russian move either. At the same time, Iranian public opinion, historically obsessed with Russia’s “imperialist and expansionist ambitions,” showed overwhelming sympathy for Ukraine. The risks of Russia’s military adventure in Ukraine for Iran’s interests became more apparent when Russia raised new demands in the nuclear deal talks, probably in a bid to gain concessions from the West. For now, the Islamic Republic seems to have succeeded in persuading Russia to resume cooperation in Vienna after virtually pushing the talks to the verge of collapse. In any case, recent developments showed that, regardless of the outcome of the Ukraine war or the Vienna talks, Tehran is unwilling to reconsider its close ties with Moscow. Although those developments are likely to further erode the social and public opinion bedrock of Iran-Russia relations, a fundamental change in the bilateral relationship seems unlikely, at least not any time soon.

Understanding Iran’s Position toward the Ukraine Crisis

The Islamic Republic has enough reasons not to condemn Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. Over the past decade, Tehran-Moscow relations have expanded on both bilateral and multilateral levels. According to official reports, the trade volume between Iran and Russia in 2021 set a „historical record“ and reached about \$ 4 billion, an 89.4% increase compared to the previous year. The Iranian side has stated that it intends to increase the figure to \$ 20 billion. In this vein, in 2019, Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) implemented an interim agreement to establish a free trade zone. The agreement was seen as a step toward Iran’s full membership in the union. Since the US’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 (officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA), Tehran has shown greater interest in developing relations with Russia and China in the context of its so-called “Look to the East” policy. At the regional level, close cooperation between Iran and Russia in supporting Bashar al-Assad’s government in Syria has contributed to closer ties between the two – despite their growing competition over influence in the Arab country. All these factors, especially Tehran’s growing reliance on Moscow and Beijing for international support,

prevented Iran from condemning the Russian invasion. Instead, Iranian leaders saw an opportunity to back some of Russia's claims and blame the West, specifically the United States and NATO, for the Ukraine Crisis. In doing so, they could kill two birds with one stone: keep their Russian friends satisfied and, at the same time, remind the "pro-Western" factions inside Iran that the West is unreliable, as it abandons its friends –Ukraine – when they are in dire need of help.

That said, Iran also has good reasons not to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The mixed ethnic composition of Iran's border provinces to the west and east has always raised concerns that hostile states may manipulate ethnic and sectarian gaps to undermine Iran's territorial integrity. When the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1979, one of his main justifications was to "liberate" the Arab lands in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province. Therefore, supporting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all states is a fundamental principle of Iran's foreign policy. These considerations led Iran to abstain from voting on a UN General Assembly resolution deploring the Russian invasion of Ukraine and refraining from supporting Russia.

Implications of the Ukraine Crisis for Iran's Interests

Iran's official response to the Russian invasion aside, the consequences of the Ukraine Crisis, particularly the rapid collapse of the post-Cold War status quo in Russia-West relations, could affect Iran's interests in different ways. At the international level, it is already clear that the more intense the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, the less willing Moscow becomes to cooperate with Western states on other issues, including the JCPOA. This became evident when Moscow, in an unexpected move, asked for guarantees that its economic and trade relations with Iran would not be affected by Ukraine-related sanctions. Moscow's demand pushed the Vienna talks between Iran and world powers to the brink of collapse. For now, it seems that Tehran has managed to soften Russia's stance and persuade the Russians to resume cooperation in the negotiations. That said, the week-long crisis over Russia's guarantee request showed how vulnerable the future of JCPOA is to changing great power politics.

Of course, the new international circumstances also provide Iran with potential opportunities. At a time when European states are determined to reduce their dependence on oil and gas imports from Russia, experts and economic activists in Iran stress the need for Tehran to

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seize the opportunity to improve its position in global energy markets. In the oil sector, Iran is expected to significantly increase its exports shortly after the resumption of the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions. In the gas sector, however, the situation is more complex, and any plan to export gas to Europe requires investment and the provision of the necessary infrastructure, which can take up to a decade or even longer. In any case, a more active role for Iran in both sectors requires the lifting of US sanctions. This might be one of the reasons why Moscow does not seem very happy with the revival of the JCPOA in the current situation, and by extension, with any normalization of Iran-West relations.

At the regional level, the Ukraine Crisis could also present a set of risks and opportunities for Tehran. Iran observes the developments in Russia's relations with Arab countries and Israel in the aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis with a mix of hope and concern. The concern is that Russia, in a bid to win the friendship of the Arabs and Israelis, may offer them concessions that could negatively affect Iran's position in the region. For example, in exchange for the UAE abstaining from a UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia, Moscow backed another resolution that extended sanctions against the Iran-Backed Yemeni Houthi rebels. The move irritated Tehran to the extent that a few days later, in explaining its abstention from a UNGA vote against Moscow, the Iranian delegation at the UN directly referred to the Yemen issue, criticizing the UNSC's "double standards." Many in Iran have also worried that Israel's somewhat cautious stance on the Ukraine Crisis and its attempts to mediate between Moscow and Kiev aims primarily to bring Russia on board in pressuring Iran in the region and beyond.

At the same time, Iranian leaders hope that Western pressure on Israel, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, and Turkey to separate themselves from Russia will ultimately prevent Moscow from choosing those states over Iran for regional partnership. Israel has already declared that it will abide by Western sanctions against Russia, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia appear to be ready to reconsider their positions in exchange for greater security guarantees and politico-military support from the US. If Russia eventually gets frustrated with those countries, Iran may feel greater freedom to pursue its regional ambitions. The Islamic Republic may, for instance, use Syria as a base for targeting Israel – something it has found very hard to do so far, primarily due to Moscow's interests in maintaining a balance between Iran and Israel in Syria. Tehran may also try to change Moscow's position on the Yemen war in favor of the Houthis.

Implications of the Ukraine Crisis for Iran-Russia Relations

Amid all potential challenges and opportunities, Iran's reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Moscow's JCPOA demand proved that the Islamic Republic does not want to reconsider its close relations with the Kremlin. Even when it became clear that Russia's request had halted the Vienna talks, Tehran refrained from publicizing its dissatisfaction with Moscow and instead, as usual, blamed "the US' excessive demands" for complicating the talks.

That being said, developments of the past few weeks have created a wide gap between the Iranian government and the people on the one hand, and between conservative and moderate political elites on the other, on how to manage the country's relations with Russia. Many former or independent political elites share public skepticism about Russia and call for reconsidering close ties with Moscow. Former President Mohammad Khatami condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as "an invasion of a free land by a foreign power." Another former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, took a similar stance. Ali Motahari, a former influential member of the Iranian parliament, criticized the state radio and television for covering the Ukraine war as if Iran were "a Russian colony." Veteran diplomat Javid Ghorban-oghli stresses that Iran should pursue an independent foreign policy and "not to bet on a losing horse," i.e. Russia.

By contrast, the conservative and hardline factions, which have completely dominated the Iranian government after the 2020 parliamentary elections and the 2021 presidential election, argue that Iran should build upon the current international situation to develop its ties with Russia, thereby enhancing its regional and global standing. Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Iranian Supreme Leader's top military adviser, sees the Ukraine crisis as a sign that the "power transition from the West to the East" has begun. "Iran is an Asian country that, through membership in the SCO and the EAEU, can have a stake in this Asian power," he states. According to him, this will help Iran "to become an important power in West Asia, and [even] one of the Asian powers." In the same vein, Hossein Shariatmadari, a hardline political figure close to the Supreme Leader, refers to Western sanctions against Iran, Russia, and China and proposes a "coalition of sanctioned countries." He believes that

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such a coalition could turn Iran into a major power in the region. Jalil Rahimi Jahanabadi, a member of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, also argues that Russia and China "have always been with us at the height of US sanctions" and, therefore, "Iran will not abandon its strategic partners under any circumstances."

These two [mis]perceptions, namely expecting an imminent power transition in the international system and viewing Russia as Iran's "strategic partner," make the Iranian policymakers deem any revision of relations with Moscow unnecessary or even destructive. But beyond perceptions, there are also objective reasons why the Islamic Republic is reluctant to de-prioritize Russia in its foreign policy.

First of all, the bitter memory of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA has left the Iranian leaders pessimistic about the future of any deal with Washington. In other words, although Iran has seriously engaged in the Vienna talks to remove the sanctions and improve its domestic economy, there are still concerns that the possible victory of a Republican figure in the 2024 or 2028 US presidential elections would once again change Washington's position on the nuclear deal. In fact, Republicans in Congress have made every effort to make it clear to Iran and the world that a future Republican president will not be committed to the JCPOA. In this case, Iran will once again need Russian and Chinese assistance to escape US pressure. In this sense, maintaining close relations with Russia is a contingency plan related to the future of the JCPOA.

Meanwhile, Iran is also aware that even if the JCPOA is restored and preserved, Western states will not be willing to cooperate with the Islamic Republic in sensitive areas such as military and defense. In fact, the international arms embargo against Iran officially ended in October 2020, but no country – except Russia – has shown interest in expanding military cooperation with Iran. Moscow, along with Beijing, was a major opponent of extending the arms embargo against Tehran. Cooperation with Russia, along with efforts to develop indigenous military technology, have been the two main pillars of Iran's strategy to upgrade its armed forces. Indeed, even Russia has so far refused to provide Iran with offensive systems, such as advanced fighter jets, apparently to avoid irritating the West and Iran's regional

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rivals. But Iranian leaders are probably hoping that the Russia-West confrontation over Ukraine will eventually convince the Russians to take military-defense relations with Tehran to the next level. In other words, Russia could potentially offer Iran what no other state would be willing to offer: an opportunity to develop advanced military capabilities.

Conclusion

Growing relations with Russia over the past several years, on the one hand, and the constant anti-Western feature of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy, on the other, have prevented Iran from condemning Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. Together with the Iranian leaders' specific perception of power transition in world politics and their need for military and defense cooperation with Moscow, these factors cause the Ukraine Crisis to not have a fundamental impact on Iran's overall foreign policy approach toward Russia. However, this does not mean that Iran's calculations regarding Russia will remain unchanged in all spheres. For example, the extensive Western sanctions against Russia, the effects of which are already being felt on the Russian economy, are expected to affect the potential for trade and economic relations between Tehran and Moscow. In this vein, Iran's goal of increasing trade with Russia to \$20 billion seems more unattainable than ever. Besides, the consequences of the Ukraine Crisis may reduce the EAEU's attractiveness to Iran as a forum for economic multilateralism. Limits of multilateral free trade in the union became particularly apparent when on March 10, Russia announced that it would suspend grain exports to the EAEU member-states until August 31 in order to ensure that domestic demand was met. Iranian policymakers may begin to wonder what actual benefit the membership in such a union may bring when it fails to support its members in times of crisis.

At the same time, there are speculations that a protracted crisis between Russia and Ukraine may make China's leaders think twice about using the Russia-Europe route as the main corridor to advance their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this case, and especially if the JCPOA talks succeed and anti-Iran sanctions are lifted, the Iranian route could be seen as a more reliable alternative for East-West trade and transit. This could boost economic cooperation between Iran and China, which has already been growing in recent years, entering Tehran-Beijing relations into a new phase. As such, perhaps the most

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crucial impact of the Ukraine Crisis on Iran's foreign policy and its relations with Russia would be the emergence of a compartmentalized "Look to the East," in which Russia is considered as Iran's main military-security partner and China as the main partner for economic cooperation. That said, one should not overlook the fact that the reaction of Iran's public opinion and independent political elites to Russia's military aggression indicates a growing rift between the Iranian government and the public over the extent and nature of relations with Russia. Although this factor is not expected to become a barrier to the Tehran-Moscow partnership in the short term, in the long run, and in the event of any fundamental political change in Iran, it may predispose the partnership to a fundamental change, if not a total collapse.

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