



A CAUTIOUS PARTNERSHIP: PROSPECTS FOR IRANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE WAKE OF THE UKRAINE WAR

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Summary

- Russia and Iran have converging views concerning western powers. Putin considers that the West did not give Russia any consideration after the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor did it respect its interests and culture. Whereas Iran believes that the western threats it is facing are targeting its internal stability and external influence and aiming at deviating from the path of the Islamic Revolution.
- Tehran aims to counter the constraints and threats that hinder its role as a major regional power in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia through investing in its relationship with Russia, while the latter will benefit from cooperating with strong regional partners to counter the blockade that the West seeks to impose on it.
- Both Moscow and Tehran are willing to develop a multipolar international system to replace the current one, which they consider as a tool that serves the interests of the West and promotes the imposition of its values. Both countries support Syrian regime leader Bashar al-Assad and reject the expansion of NATO to the East. In addition, both countries considered the Arab Spring revolutions to be Western plots aimed at reshaping the Middle East to weaken Russian and Iranian influence.
- Russia and Iran have a long history of mistrust and competition over the hegemony of Central Asia. Also, their positions concerning “Israel”, the Arab Gulf states, and the future of Syria diverge. Finally, they compete over the export of gas and oil.
- Even though the two countries face common threats, their relations are not based on a comprehensive strategic vision or bilateral institutional cooperation and agreements. Furthermore, the two regimes do not share common values, and each draws its foreign policy independently. As such, their level of cooperation fluctuates based on the circumstances, their own interests, and the nature of their real-time relations with the West.
- The current relationship between Moscow and Tehran cannot be described as a strategic partnership. Hence, it is unlikely that Iran will further develop its involvement in the Ukraine war. Overall, Tehran’s support for Moscow in the war will remain limited, given that its priority is to reach a nuclear agreement with the West.
- The current nature of the relationship between the two parties is tactical. Nonetheless, it could potentially develop into a more strategic collaboration, considering the increase

in the common challenges faced. However, some factors might negatively reflect on the development of the partnership between Moscow and Tehran. For instance, any potential understanding between Russia and the West regarding Ukraine or between Iran and the West concerning the nuclear program will undermine the development of the partnership between Moscow and Tehran as each party will use its relationship with the other as a bargaining chip with the West, just like they both did during previous periods of rapprochement with Western countries.

Introduction

■ In the absence of a sweeping victory of the Russian army in Ukraine and the transformation of the conflict into a war of attrition, Tehran began supplying Moscow with drones. This information was revealed for the first time by U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, in July 2022. However, these planes were first used last September and forced Kyiv to strip the Iranian ambassador of his accreditation. At a later stage, in a meeting in Tehran in November 2022, Russian Security Council Secretary, Nikolai Patrushev, discussed with the Secretary-General of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, the transfer of short-range ballistic missiles to Russia to compensate for the shortage in its missile stockpile. In return, Iran asked Russia to facilitate its obtention of additional nuclear materials to speed up its nuclear project and requested the provision of advanced weapons - such as Sukhoi Su-35 aircrafts and the S-400 air defense systems.

■ High-level mutual visits and greater coordination in political positions became evident during the past year. For instance, Iranian President, Ibrahim Raisi, traveled to Moscow in January. Then, in July, Putin met in Tehran with the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who expressed his support of Russia against the West and its war against Ukraine.

■ Such developments unveil an improvement in the Iranian-Russian relationship. As such, Tehran stands with Moscow against the West, given the difficulty of standing unilaterally in the face of Western pressures, and proceeds further in its policy of finding allies in the East. Considering the mentioned, this paper discusses the prospects for Iranian-Russian cooperation and the likelihood of its transformation into a strategic partnership between the two countries.

Motives for cooperation between Moscow and Tehran

- Russia considers Iran a critical player and an essential country when it comes to the Middle East, the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia files that are of crucial importance for Moscow. Because of its strategic geographical location, Iran possesses one of the world's largest oil reserves (nearly 18%) and can control, to a certain extent, the navigation movement in the Strait of Hormuz, which is a shipping route for about 40% of the world's oil supplies. In addition, Tehran's regional project contradicts the interests of the West, especially the United States, which is in the interest of Russia.
- Due to Iran's geography, Iranian theorists believe that their country has suffered throughout its history from a geopolitical predicament. This has resulted in its inability to defend its vast borders, which have eroded over time. Also, the absence of a strategic ally among the 'Great Powers' made the country vulnerable in the face of its opponents and generated a constant feeling of insecurity. In contrast, Israel, for example, based its national security on its strategic alliance with the United States, while Turkey relied on the support of NATO.
- In 2018, during the Trump Era, the U.S. withdrew from the Iran Nuclear Deal, further reinforcing Iran's distrust of the West and prompting it to consolidate its relations with the East, especially China and Russia. Tehran wanted to break out of its international isolation, develop trade, and obtain advanced weapons and technology. It also aimed to strengthen its ties with the two permanent members of the Security Council to prevent the imposition of new sanctions by relying on their veto rights.

The motives for the development of cooperation between Iran and Russia are as follows:

First: Position towards the West and international sanctions

- When it comes to the position regarding the West, Russia and Iran, have converging views. Putin considers that the West did not give Russia any consideration after the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor did it respect its interests. On the contrary, it expanded NATO eastward, with the intention to include Ukraine and Georgia. Furthermore, it supported the Color Revolutions in the countries neighboring Russia and did not respect Russia as a superpower that bears a conservative Orthodox culture that rejects the Western liberal system - especially its values and culture.

- Iran is the heir of a prestigious Persian civilization. In its understanding, Western threats are targeting its existence and identity through the imposition of severe economic sanctions, inciting ethnic minorities on its territory - which threatens its unity - and supporting the Iranian opposition with the aim of changing the ruling regime. In addition, the imposition of Western cultural values as universal values threatens the core of the Iranian culture, which attracts adherents of the Shiite sect around the world.
- Due to international and U.S. sanctions, Iran has also been excluded for several years from the international financial and banking system (the Swift System). As a result, the economic and social situation of its citizens has been negatively affected, leading to the growth of internal problems and social discontent, which threaten the stability and survival of the ruling regime itself. Moscow is experiencing the same following the imposition of Western sanctions on Russia after it launched the war on Ukraine. All the mentioned are reasons that have prompted the two countries to enhance economic and trade cooperation in order to counter the sanctions imposed on them and to work on developing alternative mechanisms that are not subject to Western hegemony. China is also interested in such alternative mechanisms.

Second: Understanding of the Afghan issue

- Moscow and Tehran share a similar understanding of the Afghan issue, as they both fear the repercussions of the Taliban's hegemony of power. Even though Moscow and Afghanistan do not share common borders, Russia fears a potential religious awakening that may nurture the growth of armed Islamic groups in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, starting from Afghanistan. Therefore, it is working jointly with Iran and others within the Shanghai Organization's Counter-Terrorism Cooperation through exchanging information on parties that constitute a threat to the security in the region and maintaining Russian forces on the Tajik Afghan border.
- Iran fears that Baloch Sunni groups will grow stronger in Afghanistan and begin to operate in Balochistan in Iran. Not to mention Tehran's concern regarding the expansion of ISIS activities inside Iran. These concerns are cemented by events such as the attack on 26 October 2022, on the pilgrims of the "Shah Chirag" shrine in the city of Shiraz, in the Fars Governorate, which resulted in the killing of 14 people and the wounding of dozens, in addition to the ongoing attacks against the Hazara Shiite communities in Afghanistan.

- Concerning Afghanistan, Iran can rely on several tools, most importantly, its hosting of the most prominent leaders of the opposition to the Taliban, such as Ismail Khan. Additionally, more than a million and a half Afghan refugees live in the country, which maintains close relations with Afghan leaders of Tajik and Uzbek origins, whom it supported militarily - under Russian sponsorship - during the first era of the Taliban rule (1996-2001).

Third: Rejection of NATO's expansion

- Both Moscow and Tehran reject NATO's expansion to the East. Russia perceived Kyiv's request to join NATO as a direct threat to its national security, prompting it to launch the war on Ukraine. Iran fears the emergence of a new encirclement front at its borders through NATO's expansion into Georgia and the borders of Azerbaijan in the southern Caucasus, as it is currently surrounded by the Gulf front, in which Washington intends to build an integrated missile defense system, and Afghanistan, which is under the Taliban's rule.

Fourth: The position on the Arab Spring Revolutions and the Syrian Revolution

- Russia and Iran have similar positions regarding the Arab Spring Revolutions, which they both consider as Western conspiracies aimed at reshaping the region and weakening their influence by expelling Moscow from the eastern Mediterranean and Iran from the Levant. This position was sparked by the NATO intervention in Libya to support the revolutionaries against Gaddafi, who was close to Russia, and the demand of Washington and its European allies for Bashar al-Assad to step down.

- The Syrian issue prompted Tehran and Moscow to work closely and jointly in an unprecedented manner. As for the Ukraine war, it upgraded bilateral relations from the regional level to the global one. But does this mean that Russia and Iran will develop a strategic partnership?

A tactical, rather than strategic, rapprochement

- **Many aspects can determine the extent of two countries' strategic alliance**, the most prominent of which are: The absence of serious contentious issues between them, a high degree of mutual trust, the respect of mutual interests, a close coordination in drawing up foreign policies, broad economic cooperation, the sharing of common

values between the two systems of governance, and the existence of a deep and long-term relationship that is not affected by the change of leaders.

■ **Many of these criteria are not fulfilled when it comes to Iranian-Russian relations.** Each country has its own independent interests and policies, its different perception of threats, and its own values from which its political and social system derived. Added to that is the historical conflict between the Persian and Russian empires over centuries, which left a mutual popular aversion burdened with the past conflicts and the religious, cultural, and civilizational differences between the two people.

The following indicators show obstacles that hinder the development of the relationship between Russia and Iran to the stage of strategic partnership.

First: Historical disagreements and mistrust

■ In the 1940s, Russia occupied parts of northern Iran. Then, it stood with Iraq in its war against Iran (1980-1988). In 1995, a secret agreement was concluded between Washington and Russia through Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, which resulted in Russia freezing its military and technical cooperation with Tehran. This situation lasted until the year 2000. During the Putin era, the Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran regarding its nuclear program, which was approved by Russia six times. Under Medvedev, Russia enforced a complete weapons' embargo on Iran in compliance with the international position. Finally, the two countries are fighting over the demarcation of the Caspian Sea borders.

Second: Conflicting relations with the Gulf states

■ Russia is willing to strengthen and develop its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, Iran and the Gulf countries have colliding interests. Any potential strategic alliance between Iran and Russia will affect Moscow's relations with the Gulf states and will harm Russian interests on many issues, such as the management of the oil market, which is based on Moscow's coordination with Riyadh through OPEC Plus. Furthermore, Moscow might lose the investments of the wealthy Gulf countries. Finally, if such a rapprochement is perceived as an Orthodox-Shiite alliance against the Sunni world, it may trigger the uprising of Muslim communities in Russia and the neighboring countries.

Third: Conflicting relations with “Israel” and clashing views regarding the future of Syria

■ Russia maintains good relations with Israel, the opposite of Iran. In this context, if Russia provided state-of-the-art military equipment to Iran, its relations with “Israel” would suffer. Therefore, following a meeting between Medvedev and Obama in 2010, Moscow decided to freeze its sale of the S300 system to Tehran for several years, which made Iranians question the extent to which they could consider Moscow as an ally. In tandem, “Israel” declined the provision of military equipment to Ukraine, such as the Iron Dome missile defense, for the sake of preserving its relations with Moscow, despite being pressured by Ukrainian Jewish president Volodymyr Zelensky. This further encouraged Russia to preserve its good relations with “Israel”.

■ Iran and Russia have different strategic visions for the future of Syria. While both countries support the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Moscow prefers a secular state that preserves Russian interests in Syria and which is not necessarily ruled by Al-Assad if it can maintain its naval and air bases in Syria, which guarantee freedom of movement in the Mediterranean Sea and enables it to protect itself against Europe from its southern coast. At the same time, Tehran believes that the presence of Bashar al-Assad is crucial for preserving its control of the land route between Iran and Lebanon - which passes through Iraq and Syria - in particular, because he plays a major role in reinforcing the “Axis of Resistance” from the Iranian point of view. In other words, Syria should remain ideologically aligned with Tehran as it is a key member of this axis; otherwise, Iran’s influence in the Middle East might be jeopardized.

■ The disagreement concerning Syria between the two countries is translated into Russia enabling Israel to attack Iran-allied militias in Syria by coordinating through the Russian-Israeli military liaison committee concerned with Syrian affairs and without any intervention from the Russian air defense systems. In this context, Tel Aviv, killed last March in a bombing near Damascus, two colonels of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Ihsan Karbalai and Mortada Nejad. Later, in August, it assassinated the Brigadier General of the IRGC, Abu al-Fadl Alijani, who was working as a military advisor in Syria. Meanwhile, Israel launches continuous attacks on Iranian convoys and sites for storing and developing precision missiles inside Syria. In parallel, Russia abided by the Israeli demands and prevented the Iranian presence in the southern regions on the Golan borders.

Fourth: Competition in the energy sector

■ Russia and Iran are competing in the energy sector, particularly in the export of oil and gas. Meanwhile, Russian and Chinese companies are exploiting international sanctions on Iran by compelling it to trade oil and gas for low-quality goods. This has resulted in popular discontentment towards Moscow and Beijing, who are perceived as taking advantage of Iran's weak position and its inability to negotiate better deals.

■ In conclusion, despite strong political relations, military cooperation, identical positions on a few global issues, and a certain degree of collaboration on foreign policy, there is no strategic partnership between Iran and Russia because both countries are not jointly planning against the challenges they are facing. Their relationship can be considered a 'cautious partnership' and bilateral cooperation. The nature of the relationship between Iran and Russia has best been described by Nematollah Izadi, Iran's last ambassador to the Soviet Union and the first ambassador to Russia, who said, "We cannot have strategic relations. In some areas, our goals are conflicting. Yet, we can build good relations at the highest level."

Prospects for the future

■ Confronting common threats is what triggered the development of Iranian-Russian relations despite the history of conflict and the differences that characterize their relationship. Nonetheless, it is anticipated that the cooperation between the two countries will increase to serve the interests of each of them and to enable them to confront the common threats they are facing. Hence, the current tactical development of their relations could potentially develop into a strategic cooperation. By strengthening its ties with Moscow, Tehran aims to overcome the restrictions and threats that impede its role as a regional power in the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, while Moscow is looking for regional partners that would enable it to break through the western encirclement. Both countries are also willing to develop a multipolar international system to replace the current one, which they consider a tool that serves the interests of the West and promotes the imposition of its values.

■ Due to the fact that the war in Ukraine and the confrontation with the West has become an existential battle for Russia, Moscow is mobilizing most of its resources. As such, Russia reassigned some of its forces and equipment from Syria to Ukraine. This

may lead to strengthening Russian and Iranian coordination in Syria by relying on pro-Iranian forces to fill the vacuum that followed the Russian withdrawal. For instance, the strategic Mahin warehouses east of Homs, which lie on the supply line between Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, passing through Iraq, are now under Iranian control. In addition, the Iranian presence in Al-Hasakah and regions close to those controlled by the YPG/SDF in eastern Syria has increased in an attempt to pressure the American forces and encourage them to withdraw from Syria.

■ Iran's recent accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is expected to contribute to strengthening regional interdependence among member states, thus providing Tehran and Moscow with a platform for trade and economic relations that enables them to dodge Western sanctions imposed on them and supports their joint approach to using national currencies in inter-trade transactions instead of the dollar. Furthermore, since Iran has a long experience in dealing with western sanctions, it can support Russia in circumventing them. Despite the ideological barriers, the advanced level of economic and trade relations enhances trust and facilitates mutual understanding between the two countries.

■ Notwithstanding the foregoing, any potential understanding between Russia and the West regarding Ukraine or between Iran and the West concerning the nuclear program will undermine the development of the partnership between Moscow and Tehran as each party will use its relationship with the other as a bargaining chip with the West, just like they both did during previous periods of rapprochement with Western countries. That is because the two countries did not base their relations on a comprehensive strategic vision, bilateral institutional cooperation, and specific agreements and arrangements. Rather, their relations are momentary and linked to the self-interests of each country and the nature of its relations with the West.

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