

The Iran – Russia Nexus

Development of Bilateral Relations (2012-2017)



DOI-Kurzanalysen

Ausgabe April 2017

Deutsche Orient-Stiftung/German Orient-Foundation
-Deutsches Orient-Institut/German Orient-Institute-

gegründet / founded by NUMOV 1960

Summary

- Increased cooperation between Iran and Russia as two important, re-established and re-invented international players poses the questions of how, why and to what end this nexus is gaining momentum nowadays.

For Iran, the nexus with Moscow carries many potential risks and could also backfire through divergences on specific objectives. Many outstanding issues between Iran and Russia need further careful monitoring:

- 1) Iran and Russia will remain significant competitors on energy markets
- 2) Russia aims to remain the main gateway for the export of Central Asia's vast natural resources and in the light of Iran's post-JCPOA rapprochement with the West may start seeing Iran as a threat to this ambition
- 3) Russia will remain cautious and suspicious over Iran's post-revolutionary Islamic ideology, taking into consideration its already fragile set of challenges (i.e. the rise of Islamic extremism)
- 4) Russia will tread carefully with Iran and may be willing to compromise the nexus in order to broaden its cooperation with the United States, Gulf states or Israel, especially for the development of lucrative arms trade deals

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The process of forming the ongoing Iran – Russia nexus, which is gaining momentum, is important in an international setting, and has consequences that reverberate way beyond the contemporary Middle East. Increased cooperation between these two important, re-established and re-invented international players has prompted me to merge the current vectors of its rapprochement with an overview of historical events in order to prove that Iran and Russia are experiencing an unprecedented cordiality in their mutual relationship. Major events influencing both states and the up-to-date determining factors of their foreign policies must be outlined to provide the most recent perspective. Thus, in this brief, I will explain the formation and rationale of this strategic yet watchful partnership. Moreover, I will look at how, why and to what end this nexus is gaining momentum nowadays. For the past twenty years, the dynamics of the relationship between Russia and Iran have been rather unstable and, to a degree, unpredictable, especially for other main international players. For instance, when this issue is seen through the lenses of the Russian perspective, it is apparent that it would be difficult to single out a country other than Iran whose relations with Moscow have experienced so many twists and turns in such a short time span. This relationship has been often characterised by communication pauses and backlogs on the part of both governments as well as accusations of failing to meet earlier commitments, let alone to broker or keep promises. Finally, this analysis aims to put the Iran-Russia nexus in a more contemporary context of the unfolding Trump geopolitical reality, as well as in the context of the upcoming Iranian presidential election in May 2017. The latter has become particularly important in the context of the recent death of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the potential changes in the balance of power within the modern political establishment of the Islamic Republic.

I. Historical Implications of the Iran-Russia Nexus

It is important to point out that much of Iran and Russia's geopolitical dynamic was submerged during the Cold War. Such a setting has imposed a certain ideological veneer

over regional and geopolitical power politics. From this time onwards, consecutive Iranian governments have been characterised by a certain rejectionist agenda against the West. However, its radicalism alienated Russia. In recent years, we can observe a more traditional pattern emerging. Iran and Russia have returned to their imperial cores to pursue a way ahead together. Each is aware of the upcoming threats and opportunities in using this more cordial relationship as a way to use the regional geopolitics to advance national interests within the global agenda. It can be said that the historic pattern of cooperation, conflict and, effectively, manipulation has re-emerged. Hereby, it is crucial to pinpoint a timeframe of the major steps in the formation of the Iran-Russia détente. Its opening gambit is marked by the year 2012, which saw the start of Vladimir Putin's second term as president of the Russian Federation. Simultaneously, this was the penultimate year of the second-term presidency of Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadi-nejad. This timeframe extends to 14th July 2015 – the date marking the signing of the so-called 'Iran Deal'. Representing a success of international diplomatic efforts, it is also a proof and to some extent a result of the especially cordial relationship between Russia and Iran during this time. Lengthy multilateral negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 (UN Security Council Permanent Members and Germany) and the signing of the deal itself have largely contributed to strengthening the nexus of power between Iran and Russia. Effectively, it has given them both the necessary leverage and resilience to pursue larger political goals. It has also provided much-needed visibility and exposure, raising the profile of both states in an international setting. Both Iran and Russia have experienced damage to both their image and their relations with the outside world under the constraints of UN- and EU-imposed sanctions, and thus both were aiming to quickly capitalise on the thaw in this perception within the international community. The 'Iran Deal' signalled a new pattern of Iran-Russia rapprochement, and gave this new-born strategy perfect vantage against the backdrop of main international and regional players.

The ties had been developing at a higher-than-normal pace for about three years prior to the Vienna Agreement. Hassan Rouhani's coming to power in August 2013 made it more apparent that Iranian foreign policy vectors would change and that Rouhani's administration's ambition would be to gradually yet cautiously try to break away from its predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's foreign policy discourse. The form suggested in this analysis is of a sustainable and to some extent strategic détente, never seen before in the history of the two states' bilateral relations. It also appears that the relationship between the two countries is mainly driven by a set of step-by-step, single-case dynamics, both of which prompted the change in attitude towards each other. The question here is whether the current relationship between the two countries is indeed a promising alliance or merely a result of external interests that have at some point collided with their own strategic interests? If so, will the dichotomy between the priority level of interests prevail, or can divergent issues be overcome for a larger geostrategic goal? Taking into consideration an understanding of the history of Iran-Russia relations may prove useful in understanding potential future implications of the nexus.

II. Historical Backdrop of Iran-Russia Relations

The contemporary Iran-Russia nexus can be seen as an accident of the mutual past involvement of the two. It needs to be noted that the relationship between Iran and Russia extends for over a millennium and that prior to the 18th century Iran and Russia treated each other as equals, taking into consideration their sporadic diplomatic and trade contacts. According to Elena Andreeva, "During the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725), Russia started to pursue expansionist designs against Iran. According to the reports of some Arab geographers, contacts between Iran and Russia, at least in the area of trade, already existed in the ninth century."¹

Before we look at Iran-Russia relations in more modern times, it is important to reiterate the volatile nature of this relationship, which is deeply rooted in the history of first Russian expeditions to Persia and conflicts with Persian Empire. 1917's Bolshevik Revolution ended Russian colonial ambitions in Iran. By then, Russia's *Great Game* had come to a halt. It seems that there was a prevailing feeling of

utter bitterness at Russia's retreat and the failure of Bolshevik ideals to spread further to the entire Iranian population, or at least Russia's favoured province of Azerbaijan. The levels of mistrust and cautiousness have further developed on both sides since, resulting in new perceptions, which have sustained the vigilance of Iran against Russia's future ventures.

Since the *Great Game*, roughly two centuries ago, and up to modern times, one of the Iranian governing elites' main preoccupations has been to remain cautious in relations with the Russian Empire (and effectively the Soviet Union, on to modern Russia). During this period, we can observe that some basic patterns of economic and political interaction between the two countries have developed. Their essential features appear to have managed to withstand the changes in their respective regimes and ideologies, simultaneously managing to respond and to adapt to arising new circumstances. Thus, an analysis of present relations requires some prior knowledge of the traditional patterns of Russo-Iranian relations in order to understand more modern history and its deep-rooted perceptions. The main motive of Iran-Russia relations was laid bare during the time when the Persian Empire started to crumble, during the Safavids, adding to Iran's decline internationally. At the same time, the Russian Empire under Peter the Great was entering a new phase of expansion.

III. From Shah Pahlavi's "Great Civilization" to the Islamic Republic: Challenging Continuity in Russia-Iran Cooperation

The period between the two world wars brought changes in the further development of Soviet-Iranian relations, majorly influenced by changes in the power structures of the two states. Both gravitated towards dictatorships – all this paired with an encompassing worldwide economic crisis and the outbreak of World War II. In addition, the post-World War II period up to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran through the popular revolution of 1979 can be described as beneficial for both in terms of strengthening ties via tools such as economic diplomacy. 1979's Islamic Revolution was a game changer, at least for some years ahead. Nevertheless, the first signs of Iran's upcoming downgrading of relations with the USSR became imminent during the early days of the events of 1979 because of an asymmetrical balance of power between Moscow and

¹ Andreeva, *Russia and Iran in the Great Game. Travelogues and Orientalism*, 2007, 13.

Tehran, the former gaining more ground and leverage over Iran. Some contributing factors to the Iranian perception of Russia and to the downgrade in relations are directly linked to a lack of trust following the 1979 revolution, whereby Moscow was branded as a “little Satan” as compared to the “big Satan”, namely the US and to some extent the UK. The level of mistrust still engraved within the Iranian psyche through active memory of historical ambiguities in relations with Moscow has certainly played a role in such sustained cautiousness.

IV. Soviet Union Collapses – New Opportunities for Russia and Iran

The Iran-Russia relationship in the peak times of the Soviet Union can be characterised as cautious, but more appropriate, taking into consideration and notwithstanding significant United States’ involvement in the regions’ politics. Watchful attitudes on both sides therefore remained. After World War II was followed by an onset of the Cold War reality, power rivalry in its classical strategic and economic sense evolved into an existential battle between two different socio-economic and political systems, both of which aspired to determine and influence the future of the world. Moreover, crucial to understanding this new systemic situation is a reminder that Iran – by now a state with roughly a 2,500-kilometre border with the Soviet Union – had acquired much greater geopolitical significance.

Moving closer to the 1990s, the Russian Federation’s new foreign policy approach gained its legitimacy via a rejectionist policy towards its Soviet past. By then

„such a high premium was placed on cooperation with the West that Russia relinquished many of its historic partnerships. However, by mid-1993, the resolute turn to the West had been tempered by the move to a more reserved policy. One of the most noticeable aspects of this policy shift related to the diversification of Russia’s alignments. Russia began to develop and expand cooperation with a number of key states, which had previously been marginalised in Russian foreign policy, as they were seen to be less than fully integrated members of the international community. Consequently, far

more emphasis was placed on a policy of active alignment policies, as they constitute a defining feature of the Russian foreign policy shift.”²

One fine example of this was seen in Russia’s re-calibration of its relationship with Iran in order to be able to challenge the United States: peculiar to the Russian-Iranian relationship in the post-Cold War period has been the fact that these relations occurred almost entirely in the shadow of American interference. Russia has frequently examined its policy towards Iran through the lenses of American policy towards Iran. Hereby, the case of Iran clearly demonstrates how the American factor played into Russia aligning its foreign policy accordingly. Iran being seen as a ‘bargaining chip’ has played a role in the Russian-American relationship, and continues to do up to this day. The inevitable confirmation of Moscow’s new outlook, aiming at encompassing the West and the East, Iran included, became an indisputable feature of Vladimir Putin’s coming to power in early-2000. Russia’s newly-adopted foreign policy concept strongly supported the idea of world multi-polarity, as reflected in continued defiance of US hegemony. The Russian president reiterated his ambition during the 2007 Munich Security Conference. Hearing various statements of Iranian politicians from 2000 onwards, it is striking that Iran happens to promote a similar vision of foreign policy.

V. Nexus Formation: Vladimir Putin and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

The emergence of the Iran-Russia nexus is intrinsically linked to Vladimir Putin’s re-election and the commencement of his second presidential term in 2012. Not many analysts had predicted this accelerated rapprochement, taking into consideration that there has been history of twists and turns in the relationship of Moscow and Tehran since the 1990s and that this has been perceived as normal. At first it seemed that the initial intensification of contact between Iran and Russia in 2012 was yet another fluctuation in the dialogue. However, now in 2017 it appears that under certain conditions this rapprochement may have eventually led to a substantive and qualitative change in bilateral ties. The ongoing intensification of Moscow’s contact with Iran is unprecedented in Russia’s post-Soviet history. Therefore, it is necessary to succinctly

² Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran and Iraq in the Unipolar Era*, 2009, 1.

examine parallel events in Iranian history and their implications for the emergent nexus.

The idea for the consolidation of political efforts between the two states appears to have been paved by concrete initiatives which had begun under presidency of Mohammad Khatami, and especially during his second term. This period brought an expansion of economic relations with Russia, especially in the field of technology (military and nuclear). It was Russia's initiative to make nuclear and high-tech cooperation a key component of a broader relationship with Tehran. By the year 2000, Russia had pulled out of the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement (in which it was agreed to cease supplying Iran with weapons once existing contracts were filled in 1999), a significant step towards giving Russia's relations with Iran a boost. This very decision paved way for the Russian defence minister Igor Sergeev to visit Tehran in December 2000 to discuss the resumption of weapons sales. Arms sales valued at more than USD 3 billion over a ten-year period were agreed between Moscow and Tehran. Following Sergeev's visit to Iran, President Khatami accepted Putin's offer and reciprocated with an official visit to Moscow in March 2001. A desire to purchase more diesel-powered submarines was indicated, in an effort to boost the naval power of the Islamic Republic in the Persian Gulf.

It seems that the beneficial development of ties in the field of trade as well as the exchange of technology has helped to push the agenda forward, and these have effectively become essential trust-building measures between Moscow and Tehran. Additionally, the rapprochement was closely linked to their relations with Western powers at the time, particularly when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became Iran's president. According to Maaïke Warnaar,

“Ahmadinejad's presidency coincided with an emerging trend, in which United States' hegemony was cautiously challenged by emerging and aspiring powers. Western efforts to isolate Iran created opportunities for these powers to give shape to their autonomous course. Some of these powers criticized Western policies, while others explicitly defied Western attempts to isolate Iran, and sought friendly ties with the Islamic Republic as evidence of their inde-

pendence. This created limited, yet important international opportunities for the Islamic Republic.”³

Therefore, new possibilities were quickly snatched by both Moscow and Tehran.

Two formative factors of the nexus can be established from Russia's perspective, the first one being Russia's emphasis on the need for a more equal division of power between the West and Russia. The second factor was Moscow correctly and quickly forecasting how the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, stirring dismay in the West, would potentially bind and overarch internal political divisions at the same time. Russian officials spoke openly in support of peaceful Iranian nuclear development. Relations with Iran became a test and a symbol of Russia's strategic independence in its foreign policy. Rapprochement proved Moscow's long-anticipated ability to stand up to Western and other international pressures. During the presidency of Ahmadinejad, tensions with the West regarding its unwillingness to cooperate on the nuclear issue escalated and numerous new sanctions were imposed on the country, further contributing to economic deterioration. Iran was falling under greater pressure from the international community and quickly recognised, rightly so, that Russia's help, especially within the framework of its UN Security Council veto power, may be handy in bleaker times. Tehran has ventured on a path of avoiding provoking Russia, instead choosing to appease it. Crucial to answer was the question: can Iran really afford to antagonise a galvanised Russia by being seen to act against Moscow's interests? This issue was linked to the question of whether Iran could survive without Russia's support for its rearmament drive and its potential support in the UN Security Council.

Ahmadinejad's second term (2009-2013) marked a further decline in Iran's economy, and stands on a par with Russia's looming economic crisis due to falling oil and gas prices. The bilateral relationship between Moscow and Tehran at that time can be characterised as a 'vigilant partnership'. It seems that by 2012 the Russian authorities had pushed an unofficial diplomatic strategy which involved a balancing act between Iran and its political opponents, such as the United States, Israel and some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members. The main reservation of the Russian government was that any proclaimed

³ Warnaar, *Iranian Foreign Policy During Ahmadinejad. Ideology and Actions*, 2013, 64.

alliance or strategic partnership with Iran would inevitably worsen its relations with the world's leading countries. However, to surprise of many analysts, in 2012 the 'vigilant partnership' between Iran and Russia changed into something bolder. This can be attributed largely to a lack of decisive reaction from other international players to the then accelerated Moscow-Tehran entente, which has encouraged both, especially Moscow, to push their agendas further. Two main factors linked to Russia's vision of its foreign policy priorities contributed to a reset in Iran-Russia relations. The first one was Moscow's disenchantment with the state of US-Russia relations and Washington's rejection of attempts to improve them, while the second was heavily determined by fresh tensions with the West over the escalation of the civil war in Syria. Additionally, Moscow felt humiliated by the fact that its generally pro-Western position on the ongoing conflict in Libya received no positive feedback in Washington or elsewhere. The disappointment of Putin at the rejection of his attempts to bridge divisions in the Middle East region pushed Russia to deepen its relations with non-Western countries. However, the most crucial period in the forming of the ongoing Russia-Iran nexus is marked by Hassan Rouhani's presidential victory in 2013.

VI. Hassan Rouhani: Consolidation of the Iran-Russia Nexus

Hassan Rouhani's victory in the 2013 Iranian presidential election took many commentators by surprise, but the honeymoon period did not last long. Nevertheless, this may still be the most important election in the Islamic Republic's history, because it has reminded people that it is after all possible to express popular opinion through elections.⁴ Its importance in modern Iranian history is further reiterated by its most palpable result, delivered in July 2015 in Vienna – the JCPoA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). By signing the 'Iran Deal' with the P5+1, Rouhani has created a surplus of opportunities and challenges, and to large extent fulfilled a wish of his nation despite many outstanding issues – namely the speed with which Iran must improve its relationship with the outside world and repair crippling social inequalities. The signing of the deal was a milestone event, its success being favourable to the Iran-Russia nexus, by then already strong and visible to outside world.

The evolution of dialogue between Moscow and Tehran continued way into Rouhani's pre-

sidency; for instance, in September 2014 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called the Islamic Republic a natural ally of Russia in the struggle against religious extremists in the Middle East. This further demonstrated that Iran was something more than just a southern neighbour to Russia. Tackling the issue of settling Iran's nuclear programme has become a priority for Rouhani's administration, and considering Iran's dire economic situation action had to be taken quickly and effectively. Moreover, Rouhani's stance on Russia has had the full support of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Development of Iran-Russia relations has flourished. Putin and Rouhani met on the sidelines of the fourth summit of the Caspian Sea littoral states on 29th September 2014 in Astrakhan. They also held negotiations in Bishkek on the sidelines of the SCO summit in 2013, during the Conference on Interaction and Conference Building Measures in Asia (on 23rd May 2014 in Shanghai) and again at an SCO summit in Dushanbe (on 12th September 2014). The Bishkek visit was Rouhani's first foreign trip as president, and it was a sign of his government's interest in sustaining strategic ties with Russia and China. From then on, taking into consideration the gradual opening of the Iranian market for foreign investment and Russia desperately looking for new economic partnerships amidst its own crisis due to sanctions and low oil prices, Moscow ventured out to seek palpable economic benefits from the rapprochement. It also wanted to showcase any such achievements in a Russia hard hit by the economic sanctions. All in all, it has become apparent that Rouhani has put special effort into improving ties with Russia. Although Moscow and Tehran have never had very close strategic ties, regional and international developments have paved the way for this new relationship. It is crucial to look at the rationale behind this new rapprochement, pointing out some potential obstacles to the ongoing nexus.

VII. The Iran-Russia Nexus: Rationale, Constraints, Impediments

It is important to provide a final reasoning behind the Iran-Russia rapprochement. Some believe that for the Islamic Republic

“this new partnership is driven largely by internal political competition between Iran's moderate pragmatists and its hard-line conservatives. Iran's pragmatists have long pressed their country to follow what they call the

⁴ Farhi, *Why Rouhani*, 2013.

China model: liberalizing the economy and opening up diplomatically, while keeping the political space constricted. The China model took root during the administration of former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who initiated limited free-market-oriented economic reforms in the 1990s and also sought to reduce conflict with the United States. This line of thinking contributed to the nuclear negotiations and eventual deal by his protégé, President Hassan Rouhani.⁵

Therefore, new possibilities were quickly snatched by both Moscow and Tehran.

Such a statement can be nevertheless contested. At least up to 2017, no major decrease in Iranian diplomatic relations with Russia has been observed, or vice versa. However, the recent death of Iran's leading pragmatist Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani may complicate things in the future, as recent Russian leaders have preferred dealing with pragmatists than with hard-line conservatives. However, Moscow will choose to continue cooperation with any current form of government in Tehran, as long as it does not challenge its strategic grounds. Interestingly enough, the recent death of Rafsanjani (8th January 2017) brought up attempts to reclaim his legacy by Iran's conservatives. Usually critical of the deceased, Iran's state, conservative-controlled media outlets have since praised Rafsanjani as a great revolutionary and fallen silent on a plethora of issues they spent a couple of decades constantly criticising him for. Such attitudes may weaken the reformists in Iran, whose embodiment and symbolic defender was Rafsanjani. We may expect that Russia will feel uneasy faced with a potentially less pragmatic and more unpredictable Iranian foreign policy vision.

Moreover, amidst Iran's Supreme Leader's Iran-Russia rapprochement 'blessing', the biggest fear of the Iranian hardliners lies, or rather lay until the recent US presidential elections, in Rouhani's potential to try and somewhat normalise (or at least not to worsen) improved diplomatic ties with the US in the post-JCPoA era of re-engagement. So far Rouhani's government has been extremely cautious not to provoke some elements of the conservative establishment, such as the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), and it is also cautious of current Russian foreign policy

vectors. Russia has come across as a source of 'inspiration' for the conservatives as they have come, instead, to favour what they view as President Vladimir Putin's Russia model – that is, securitising the state and the economy to prevent a US-supported regime change. In Iran, the regime has introduced limited "privatisation" and "liberalisation", intended to largely benefit the regime's loyalists, while maintaining a solid anti-American stance. The current anti-Iranian attitude of the US President Donald Trump may eventually re-ignite anti-American sentiments among ordinary Iranians and add some new ones (i.e. Trump's executive order on entry restrictions to the US for various Middle Eastern nations, including Iran). Recent humiliating acts of detention of Iranian citizens either in US airports or them being barred from boarding US-bound flights have caused an uproar in most Iranian media outlets. Thus, a dramatic turn in American policy towards Iran may weaken reformists, embodied in Hassan Rouhani's presidential bid in 2017's elections. It may also prompt the question of how to seek reassurance from Russia, taking into consideration its own cordial welcoming of the newly-elected US president. Russia's silence on this issue so far does not sound promising for the ongoing Moscow-Tehran détente.

Other issues, such as the benefits promised on both sides of the economic rapprochement between Iran and Moscow, have not been significant enough. It appears the strategic nexus hasn't been followed by substantive investment like in the case of, for example, Iran's closest allies in the EU, Germany and Italy, or beyond, in countries such as China and South Korea.

VIII. Nexus 2017 Outlook: Syria, the US and Israel

Some rationale behind the Iran-Russia nexus lies in the currently most ubiquitous question – Syria. The uncertain future of the economic rationale behind the détente with Russia is one thing, but putting it into test during the still largely unresolved conflict in Syria is another. The Russian authorities are very keen to retain Iran within its sphere of influence and avoid Iran's too drastic drift westward. Without the ongoing Iranian backing of Russia's Syria policy goals, it would be difficult for Moscow to attain these ambitions. Russia needs Iran in its Syrian venture very much, and thus the nexus will stay substantial enough unless divergent points within the negotiations over Syria's immediate future come to play and resurface rapidly.

⁵ Tabaar, *Iran's Russian Turn. The Start of a New Alliance*, 2015.

The reasoning behind closer Iran-Russia cooperation in the military field is perhaps a way of examining why Russia would help Iran to keep Assad in power, as his fall from grace is considered by the conservatives in Tehran as a potential boost to the reformist camp. A combination of deeply-rooted Iranian intelligence in the field, committed elite army commandos and a larger geostrategic interest (wish for access to the Mediterranean Sea), paired with Russia's advanced military and army bases on Syria's soil, seems to have been reassuring enough so far, thus bolstering the *détente*. Predictions of how this might or not work out have been made acknowledging that the "Russian-Iranian relations in the military field have a long history. The two countries have similar positions concerning important regional issues: they support the Assad regime in Syria, they criticize air strikes against ISIL in Syria without coordination with the official powers of this country, and they are against the use of force in Yemen."⁶ Hereby, by playing the Syrian card, Russia is aiming at preventing too close a rapprochement of Tehran with Washington, partly through its close cooperation in Syria and protecting of the Assad regime. It can be also said that so far it is succeeding, at least partially, as Iran is trying hard to deliver its rapprochement message with Washington in giving the green light for increased economic ties, i.e. Boeing aircraft sales to Iran, and avoid direct declarations in the spotlight of the international community.

Within this complicated – especially more recently – new reality for the Iran-Russia nexus, it needs to be asked how the potential and looming rapprochement between the US and Russia would affect its relationship with Iran? Would Moscow and Tehran's entanglement in Syria eventually prevent further alliance, or is Russia ready to gamble the Iran nexus for the US initiatives on the table, such as Washington's probable re-assessment of sanctions policy against Russia? In theory, Russia capitalising on the already existing strategic *détente* with Iran and a revised relationship with the United States could act as a middle-man, thus in the longer perspective helping to prevent or delay the rise to power of the more unpredictable and expansive Iranian conservatives. This, though, is not prioritised over Moscow's broader regional agenda. Trump's calls for the revision of the JCPoA should remind Russia of certain prerogatives of its foreign policy – an Iran without a clandestine nuclear programme and an atomic

bomb lies in the strategic interest of Moscow. Thanks to the increased activities in bilateral relations between Iran and Russia, the nexus has gained legitimacy within the framework of their internal policies, and also abroad. Not free from potential constraints, its sustaining is in line with Russia's response to its shrinking post-2012 Arab Spring "political and economic presence in the region. Moscow considers Tehran one of its last footholds remaining in the Middle East and tries to secure its position there."⁷ However, being mindful of the amount of mistrust towards Russia, which has often treated Iran as an instrument for orchestrating its state and foreign policies, Moscow has to be ready – especially in the Trump and post-Rafsanjani era – to quickly provide Iran with concrete steps of reassurance and keep in mind the far-reaching regional consequences of Tehran's prospective rejection or a freeze in the strategic nexus with Moscow.

Both Moscow and Tehran must tread very carefully, taking into consideration regional and international contexts. To give an example, for the former it is important not to fall out with its still substantial ally in the Middle East – Israel. Some analysts argue that "Moscow will most likely harm relations with its 'silent partner' – whose position on the annexation of Crimea, on Western sanctions against Russia and on Russian air forces in Syria corresponds to Russian interests. Recent statements by Israeli officials demonstrated concerns about growing Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria and beyond. Previously, Israel tolerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran, as long as it was not considered as a threat to the national security of the country. However, "recent and concrete steps Iran has taken to reiterate its geostrategic aspirations of putting its stronghold by the Mediterranean Sea (lucrative contracts awarded to Iran's Revolutionary Guards'-related companies for re-construction and substantial investment in Syria's ports, or, equally important, telecommunications contracts also awarded to Iranians) will surely cause uneasiness in Israel."⁸ Nevertheless, so far it seems that both Tehran and Moscow are aware of the challenges. Both are trying to shift within limits of diplomatic balance and not fully exclude similar kind of cooperation with their major allies.

Predictions for the immediate future of the Iran-Russia nexus for 2017 contain some concern that despite outward political goodwill in many

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, 2015, 10.

⁸ Sharafedin and Francis, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Reap Economic Rewards in Syria*, 2017.

ways the Iran-Russia nexus will remain limited. There are a few reasons for which this cooperation may not yet reach a full-fledged strategic alliance. One is that neither Iran nor Russia would like to risk one, leaving alternative options on the table. Russia worries that too much cordiality with Shii'a Iran would antagonise its 17-million strong, largely Sunni Muslim population. On the other hand, "Tehran is also concerned about being involved in the wider Russian confrontation with the West while it seeks European technologies and money."⁹ Moreover, some Iranian politicians have voiced concerns over how Russia has hijacked Tehran's own successes in Syria, and thus how Russian military domination has overshadowed the Iranian assistance paramount to its success. Another interesting point shows Tehran's concerns over the future of Bashar El-Assad: "On 3 November 2016, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, said that Russia 'may not care if Assad stays in power as we do'."¹⁰ It seems that despite both various endeavours to further improve their alliance, they ought to first overcome numerous challenges and focus on the practical implementation of plans rather than overblown declarations.

IX. Conclusion

By providing a historical backdrop to Moscow and Tehran's peculiar relationship, the aim of this analysis was to signify that the nature of their current relationship is, despite its current important strategic dimension, not free from psycho-historic reservations prone to constant scrutiny, suspiciousness and vigilance. All things concerned, the significance with which external geopolitical factors have affected the nexus and will continue to do so is not to be underestimated, as "for all of Moscow and Tehran's lofty public pronouncements about friendship and cooperation, Russia's Iran policy is ultimately driven by its global interests: namely, reducing West's influence and raising Russia's, even at the expense of security. Iran's interests largely coincide with these goals, so cooperation with Tehran fits well with Moscow's agenda. Putin's repeated calls for a 'multipolar' approach, are one many means of achieving these aims, rather than a genuine interest in multilateralism."¹¹ What needs to be conclusively remembered is that for Iran the nexus with Moscow carries many potential risks and could also backfire through divergences on specific objectives.

Many outstanding issues between Iran and Russia need further careful monitoring: 1) Iran and Russia will remain significant competitors on energy markets; 2) Russia aims to remain the main gateway for the export of Central Asia's vast natural resources and in the light of Iran's post-JCPOA rapprochement with the West may start seeing Iran as a threat to this ambition; 3) Russia will remain cautious and suspicious over Iran's post-revolutionary Islamic ideology, taking into consideration its already fragile set of challenges (i.e. the rise of Islamic extremism); 4) Russia will tread carefully with Iran and may be willing to compromise the nexus in order to broaden its cooperation with the United States, Gulf states or Israel, especially for the development of lucrative arms trade deals.

So far it seems that a watchful yet fruitful partnership (i.e. Syria, JCPOA) benefits both better than fierce competition full of deterrent rhetoric. A reason for which Russia is increasingly interested in sustaining such intensity in bilateral contacts lies also, last but not least, in its realisation of China's growing influence in the region. In light of Beijing's One Belt One Road initiative, Moscow has started to feel at threat of being encompassed by China, from its Central Asia borders up to the South Caucasus. This region, in particular South Ossetia, bound to Tehran by its cultural and linguistic inclinations, may too become a source of potential glitches in the détente.

Descriptions by some analysts of Russia-Iran relations as a fool's bargain appear to be, although not without some sense, still quite premature, particularly in early-2017. Crucial to forming the nexus was an unequivocal support for the rapprochement process with Russia on both sides of the complex Iranian political establishment. The cordiality of the personal relationship of Vladimir Putin and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is one such proof. Moreover, Putin is now a more reliable partner than ever before to Khamenei, sharing a view of US-instigated and suspected 'colour revolutions'. An even more compelling argument lies in the fact that in terms of Iran's internal political dynamics the expanding partnership with Russia could possibly strengthen the IRGC's regional power, which often translates into more internal leverage. If Putin's partnership with Damascus can help Khamenei maintain the current balance of power in Tehran for the short term, Iran's hard-liners may have enough time

⁹ Kozhanov, *Understanding the Revitalization of Russian-Iranian Relations*, 2015, 12.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Borschchevskaya, *How Russia Views the Iran Nuclear Talks*, 2015.

to engineer the return of anti-Americanism. It seems that, at least for the time being, Moscow needs Tehran and vice versa. This detente has so far, amongst other things, been used as a measure of counterbalance against the other major international players.

Important in the sustainability of the Iran-Russia nexus are the similarities in terms of ideology, especially in its shared perceptions of the West (Iran and Russia's prominent position due to a belief in the messianic concept of Great Russia and Great Iran as well as their staunch anti-Americanism). Nevertheless, Iran should not forget that, just as in the post-Cold War era, Russia and the West were and are potentially willing to make various 'deals' at Iran's expense. There-

fore, the future of the Iran-Russia nexus will continue to depend on a set of external factors. Also, there are doubts as to whether building a lasting, strategic alliance will ever be possible. However, bearing in mind the different elements reflected in this paper, it can be said that at least for now Russia and Iran have already moved beyond the critical moment for defining the nexus. Moscow and Tehran have so far succeeded in sustaining it, even though Trump's US foreign policy chaos may have silenced it for the time being. The Iran-Russia nexus continues to benefit both players in broader global as well as regional contexts but may be prone to unexpected revision if the current Russian and US administrations do not abandon the ongoing flirt with returning the concept of unipolarity to the world order.

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All internet sources were accessed and verified on 31st March, 2017

Impressum

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