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## The Russian-Iran Partnership in a Multipolar World

Clément THERME

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# ***Russie.NEI.Reports***

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# Executive Summary

The strengthening of the partnership between Russia and Iran depends on overlapping security interests; bilaterally, regionally and on the world stage. Tehran has pursued a regional policy program that is largely in line with Russia's interests, whether these relate to Syria (from 2011), the Caucasus, Central Asia or Afghanistan (since 1991).

This security dimension was already one of the foundations of the bilateral relationship in the post-Cold War-period. It has now appeared in regional dealings between Tehran and Moscow. In addition, the decline of US international predominance, which has been apparent since the 2000s, has allowed Russia and Iran to develop a shared ideological discourse in opposition to "Western values".

Beyond this shared ideological foundation, Tehran has developed a true "Realpolitik" whereby it relies on Russian foreign policy to relieve US pressure on Iran that is aimed at regime change or, at the very least, a change in the behavior of the Islamic Republic. In other words, in seeking to preserve intact the main ideological tenets of its regime, Tehran has added a new dimension to its relationship with Moscow.

Since 1991, this relationship has become a matter of survival for a regime that faces both popular opposition at home and external pressure from Washington: pressure that increased during the Trump administration of 2017-2021.

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# Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War in 1991, relations between Tehran and Moscow have been analyzed through a variety of different lenses. Some analysts stress the ideological affinity between Russia and Iran in order to highlight how dangerous their technological cooperation is, particularly in the fields of security, nuclear, space and military technology.<sup>1</sup> Others, on the other hand, point to the fragility of that relationship and forecast that, even if an imminent fallout is unlikely, mutual distrust will remain deep-rooted.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the official propaganda from both sides insists that they are good neighbors and even talk of a “strategic partnership”, while underlining that this new, supposedly “natural”, alliance is directed against terrorism and religious extremism<sup>3</sup> in the Middle East. This willingness to give the relationship an ideological dimension is also a way of minimising disagreements between Moscow and Tehran, such as over how to divide up the Caspian Sea.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, when it comes to ideology and/or strategy, depending on the point of view you take,<sup>5</sup> there are differences of substance between Moscow’s policy towards Iran and Tehran’s policy towards Russia. Anti-Americanism, for instance, has been more ideological and consistent in Iran’s foreign policy since 1979 than in Russia’s since 1991. Furthermore, Moscow has often prioritised its relations with Washington over those with its Iranian partner, at least until 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea [from Ukraine]. Since then, we have witnessed a deterioration in Russia’s relations with the West and a rebalancing of Russian diplomacy towards

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1. C. Therme, “Iran and Russia in the Middle East: Towards a Regional Alliance?”, *The Middle East Journal*, autumn 2018, pp. 549-562; B. C. Feldman and D. Rakov, “Iran-Russia Relations: Continued Partnership Alongside Conflicting Interests”, *INSS Insight*, No. 1504, August 4, 2021, available at: [www.inss.org.il](http://www.inss.org.il).

2. D. Galeeva, “Iran’s Relations with Russia to Be Tested Under Raisi”, *Arab News*, June 29, 2021, available at: [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com).

3. Statement by Sergey Lavrov cited by N. Kozhanov, “Iran and Russia: Between Pragmatism and Possibilities of a Strategic Alliance” in: L. Zaccara (ed.), *Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani’s First Term (2013-2017)*, Springer, Singapore Pte. Limited, 2020, p. 132. Meanwhile, Nansi Paulraj described the Russia-Iran relationship as an “open-ended alliance”. See N. Paulraj, “The JCPOA and Changing Dimensions of the Russia-Iran Relations”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2016, p. 107.

4. See C. Therme, « L’accord ‘historique’ sur la mer Caspienne, symbol d’un recul iranien ? » [The ‘historic’ agreement on the Caspian Sea, symbol of Iranian retreat?], *Diplomatie*, January-February 2019, available at: [www.arenion24.news](http://www.arenion24.news).

5. Bilateral relations will be defined as strategic if hostility towards Washington is conceived of simply as a foreign policy stance. ‘Ideological’ refers to analysis which sees the anti-American prism as a permanent feature of Iranian politics.

non-Western regional powers.<sup>6</sup> Talk of a multipolar world, which dates back to Yevgeny Primakov,<sup>7</sup> was given a new lease of life in 2014. Russia's strategy is based on promoting a vision of the international system that gives prominence to the emergence of "new centers of power" such as China, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations states, Brazil, South Africa, India and Iran.<sup>8</sup> Relations with non-Western states have therefore become a priority for Moscow and the new currents in Russian-Iranian relations since 2014 should be viewed in this light.

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6. For a list of non-Western powers, see S. Charap *et al.*, "Russian Grand Strategy. Rhetoric and Reality", Rand Corporation, 2021, p. 156. (Chapter titled "Strategy Element: Rebalance Away from the West"), available at: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

7. Former Russian Foreign Minister (1996-1998) and Prime Minister (1998-1999). See I. Mandraud, "Décès d'Evgueni Primakov, ancien ministre russe" [The Death of Yevgeny Primakov, former Russian minister], *Le Monde*, June 29, 2015.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

# Relations with Russia: a matter of Iranian domestic policy

Two scandals have shaped public debate in Iran and called into question Tehran's rapprochement with Moscow.

The first scandal entered the national political debate when a leaked recording of Foreign Minister Javad Zarif dating from March 2021 came to light. It confirmed that the administration of Hassan Rouhani (August 2013 – August 2021) believed that the Iranian nuclear program was a priority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and that it had the potential to undermine the interests of the Iranian state. In the recording<sup>9</sup>, Zarif even accused the IRGC of collaborating with Russia to sabotage his diplomatic efforts on the nuclear issue. According to Zarif, the Russians feared at the time that a non-proliferation agreement could bring Iran closer to the United States. A meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Qasem Soleimani<sup>10</sup> in December 2015, ostensibly held to discuss the Syrian conflict several months after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), was interpreted by Zarif as designed to prevent a normalisation of relations between Iran and the USA. From his point of view, Russia may even have sought to keep Iran fighting in Syria with the aim of prolonging the conflict between Tehran and Washington.<sup>11</sup> Such meetings between the Iranian "deep state" and Russian politicians, as well as later covert action – including the raid on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the seizing of ships in the Persian Gulf – were allegedly designed to prevent the JCPOA from being implemented.<sup>12</sup> This reading appears, however, to be a misinterpretation since Russia signed the nuclear accord in 2015<sup>13</sup> and its constructive role in this respect was recognised by seasoned veterans in the Obama Administration.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, leaving aside any Russian factor, Iranian diplomats would never have been able to achieve a normalisation of relations with Washington given the revolutionary and deeply anti-

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9. "Exclusive: Zarif Claims Soleimani Intervened in Diplomacy, Russia Wanted to Destroy JCPOA", *Iran International*, April 25, 2021, available at: <https://iranintl.com>.

10. The Commander of the Quds Force, an elite unit of the IRGC.

11. *Ibid.*

12. M. A. Tabaar, "Iran's War Within. Ebrahim Raisi and the Triumph of the Hard-Liners", *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2021, available at: [www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com).

13. M. N. Katz, "Russia Secretly Feared the Iran Nuclear Deal. Here's Why", *Atlantic Council*, April 28, 2021, available at: [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

14. John Kerry explains in his memoirs that "Putin and Russia were constructive partners on the Iran and on Afghanistan among many issues, and yet they were calculated and ruthless on others, from standing with Assad in Syria to assaulting our democracy at home in 2016". J. Kerry, *Every Day Is Extra*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.



American character of the Islamic Republic. Russia would certainly not have wished to see a new pro-American regime installed in Tehran; however, since this was unlikely to happen in the short term, Zarif's statements do not point to a secret Russian plan, but rather confirm the power of Iran's parallel state, in the form of its security services, and the weaknesses of the official state – at the time represented by the government of President Rouhani.<sup>15</sup>

A second scandal, this time of a historic nature, emerged in August 2021. The Iranian Foreign Ministry called in the Russian Ambassador to Tehran, Levan Dzhagaryan, to explain a photo posted to Twitter on 11 August 2021.<sup>16</sup> It showed the Russian ambassador posing with his British counterpart on the stairs where the Tehran conference was held in 1943.<sup>17</sup>

In his meeting with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, the Russian Ambassador insisted that the sole aim of the post was to commemorate the alliance between the Soviet Union and Great Britain against Nazi Germany during World War Two and that it had no anti-Iranian undertones.<sup>18</sup> He also emphasized the strategic nature of relations between Tehran and Moscow and regretted that the image had been negatively received by the Iranian population.<sup>19</sup> For their part, the Iranian authorities declared that in spite of the strategic and friendly relationship between Iran and Russia, publication of this photograph was unacceptable.<sup>20</sup> Such tension between the two countries has been unusual since 1991. The summoning of the Russian and British ambassadors by the Iranian foreign ministry<sup>21</sup> reveals the sensitivities that are still attached to the records of these two Imperial powers in Iran, from the Great Game in the nineteenth century to the overthrow of the Mosaddegh government in 1953. This distrust remains a factor that constrains any possibility of a true Russo-Iranian alliance.

Historical baggage, mutual incomprehension and a lack of economic complementarity, which extends to competition in the field of energy<sup>22</sup>, are the main sources of tension between Russia and Iran.<sup>23</sup> Tehran is in no

15. K. Sadjapour, "How to Win the Cold War With Iran", *The Atlantic*, March 25, 2021, available at: [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com).

16. See the tweet posted by the Russian Embassy in Iran on August 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com>.

17. This was the first meeting to bring together Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin.

18. A. Shahbâzi, "Conferense Tehrân va iâdâvari-ye safirân" [The Tehran Conference and the question of memory viewed by the ambassadors], *Ensaf News*, August 19, 2021, available at: [www.ensafnews.com](http://www.ensafnews.com).

19. "Russian Ambassador Invited to Foreign Ministry Over Controversial Photo", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, August 12, 2021, available at: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir>.

20. *Ibid.*

21. "Iran Summons Russian and British Envoys Over Tehran Conference Tweet", *Reuters*, August 12, 2021. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

22. It is notable that both countries are exporters of oil and gas. The reduction in Iranian oil exports and Iran's inability to become a significant gas exporter are seen positively in Moscow. See "Râvabet irân va rusie eshq iek taraf?" [Iranian-Russian relations, one-sided love?], *Radio Farda*, February 12, 2021, available at: [www.radiofarda.com](http://www.radiofarda.com).

23. "The problem of trust between the people of Russia and Iran remains unresolved, if only because they have very poor knowledge of each other. What they do know is often 'hearsay' received primarily from Western sources, which are not always objective, to say the least. Besides,

position to gain the upper hand in a relationship that has remained tilted in Russia's favor, even after the collapse of the Soviet super-power in 1991. So, far from apologising for the photograph, the Russian ambassador limited himself to expressing regret for a misunderstanding. In the wake of this scandal, a former deputy (Ali Motahari) in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the national legislative body of Iran, accused Russia of having infiltrated the system (*nezam*) of the Islamic Republic. According to Motahari, the Iranian regime had become too favorable to Russia and Chinese interests and excessively hostile to Western interests.<sup>24</sup> He argued that by posting the photo, Russia intended to send a diplomatic message that it controlled Iran.<sup>25</sup> Like former Foreign Minister Zarif, moreover, he believed that Russia sought to sabotage the international negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program in order to prevent an agreement being reached between Iran and the West.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Motahari and Zarif criticised the Eastern tilt in Iran's foreign policy since 2005, recalling that Russia and China harboured ambitions that were just as hegemonic as those of Western states.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the recurrent debate among Iranian elites and wider society about the merits of Iran's pro-Russian and pro-Chinese bent, Iranian "moderates" have not succeeded in changing their country's foreign policy. In 2013, along with Rouhani's reformist supporters, they attempted to rebalance Iran's foreign policy in favor of the West in general and European states in particular. However, the failure of the economic rapprochement that was undertaken between Iran and Europe after the Nuclear Deal of 2015 revealed how little room for manoeuvre these "moderates" enjoyed in international affairs.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the eight years of Rouhani's government were marked by a rapprochement between Iran and Russia. The Iranian President has visited Russia four times since 2013, while his Foreign Minister has been there on no fewer than thirty-three occasions.<sup>29</sup> There appears to be no real alternative to the regime's strategy which, in sum, is to rely on the UN Security Council's non-western powers – Russia and China – in order to resist US pressure.

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the history of Russia-Iran bilateral relations has various pages, and it probably would be wrong to claim that old grievances, stereotypes, and biases that have formed over centuries have no influence on the public mood." See : A. Kortunov, "Russia and Iran: How Far From a Strategic Partnership?", *RIAC*, May 6, 2021, available at: <https://russiancouncil.ru>.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. "Conservative Ex-parliamentarian Says Russia Has 'Infiltrated' Iran", *Iran International*, August 19, 2021, available at: <https://iranintl.com>.

27. "Ravâbet irân bâ rusie-o tchin lâzem hast amâ farâmouch nakonim ke in do keshvar ham solte-talab hastand" [Iran's relations with Russia and China are necessary but let's not forget that they are also two hegemonic powers], *Khabar online*, February 17, 2021, available at: [www.khabaronline.ir](http://www.khabaronline.ir).

28. See C. Therme, "Les relations Iran-Europe au défi de l'administration Trump" [Iran-Europe in the face of the Trump Administration challenge], *Telos*, December 17, 2018, disponible sur : [www.telos-eu.com](http://www.telos-eu.com).

29. H. Azizi, "What Raisi's Presidency Will Mean for Iran-Russia Relations", *Amwaj Media*, July 9, 2021, available at: <https://amwaj.media>.

# After the election of Ebrahim Raisi: the Russo-Iranian rapprochement strengthens further

Iranian foreign policy reached an impasse principally because the Iranian system, that-is the political regime, refused to seriously contemplate a normalisation of diplomatic relations with Washington. The presidency of Ebrahim Raisi, who took power in August 2021, nonetheless brought some changes to the implementation of Iranian diplomacy, the outlines of which have been determined by Supreme Leader Khamenei since 1989. The following are among the most important changes to be expected in Iran's foreign strategy: firstly, the regime's approach will become more securitised, with a greater role for the military. This is a positive factor for regional cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, in Afghanistan post-2021, Syria, the Caucasus<sup>30</sup> or Central Asia. The Syrian case shows how difficult it is to turn the act of fighting side-by-side into a genuine military alliance. Tehran and Moscow have continually jostled for influence over military reconstruction in Syria: Russia is intent on restoring the Syrian armed forces' control over the whole of Syrian territory, while Iran cares more about the pro-Iranian militias in southern Syria, close to the border with Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, after the failure of the Nuclear Deal, Tehran's new approach is to strengthen economic links at a regional level, but also with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. According to President Raisi, this is about "increasing the volume of trade with Russia [...] and finalising the comprehensive document of Iran-Russia cooperation as soon as possible".<sup>32</sup> In other words, Iran has de-prioritised trade with European countries in favor of greater regional trade and the development of its trading relationship with China. Thirdly, Iran's perceptions of the threats and opportunities arising from great-power rivalries<sup>33</sup> – Russia-

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30. E. Mamedov, "Perspectives. What to Expect From the New Iranian President – A View From the Caucasus", *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2021, available at: <https://eurasianet.org>.

31. A. B. Haim, "Rebuilding the Syrian Military: Significance for Israel", *INSS Insight*, No. 1519, September 15, 2021, available at: [www.inss.org.il](http://www.inss.org.il).

32. "Ayatollah Raisi in a Phone Call With the President of Russia: Cementing Ties With Russia a Key Priority in Iran's Foreign Policy", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, August 18, 2021, available at: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir>.

33. M. Dorraj, N. Entessar, "Iran's Northern Exposure: Foreign Policy Challenges in Eurasia", *CIRS Occasional Papers*, 2013, p. 43, available at: <https://papers.ssrn.com>.

United States but also and, above all, China-United States – is critical to how it defines its foreign policy in Eurasia.

Lastly, it is about extending the cooperation that Iran has developed with Russia in Syria towards Taleban-controlled Afghanistan. Raisi holds that “the establishment of security and peace in Afghanistan has always been emphasised by the Islamic Republic” and that “all active Afghan groups should work together to establish stability in the country as soon as possible, and turn the US withdrawal into a turning point for lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. [...] The successful experience of Iran-Russia cooperation in the fight against takfiri<sup>34</sup> terrorism in Syria has opened new windows for the two sides to increase Tehran-Moscow interaction”.<sup>35</sup> However, despite Iranian conservatives’ insistence that the US withdrawal represents a victory for their ideology, the Taleban’s ascendancy poses a challenge for Russo-Iranian security cooperation in the region. In effect, talk of a triumph of ideology and criticism of US failure have quickly given way to concern for the stability of the country and worry that new terrorist hotspots could develop and drug trafficking increase.

In April 2019, while Washington was designating the IRGC a “terrorist entity”, Moscow took a different tack: it stressed the Revolutionary Guards’ usefulness in maintaining stability in Iran<sup>36</sup> and recognised its role in defining that country’s national, regional and international policies. The IRGC is at the heart of the bilateral relationship with Russia because the areas in which cooperation is most intensive – civil nuclear, space and the military – are all ones in which the IRGC is extremely active. Moreover, it is the Supreme Leader who nominates the Iranian Ambassador to Russia, not the Foreign Ministry. The Revolutionary Guards are at the heart of Iranian decision-making when it comes to relations with Russia.<sup>37</sup> The war in Syria has meant that the IRGC, already unusually powerful in shaping relations with Russia compared to those with other counterparts, such as the Europeans, have become still more over-represented. In this respect, Soleimani’s visit to

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34. Fundamentalist movements advocating the use of violence. See S. S. Shahza, “Une idéologie messianique, le takfirisme” [Takfirism: a messianic ideology], *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2007, p. 13.

35. “Ayatollah Raisi in a Phone Call With the President of Russia: Cementing Ties With Russia a Key Priority in Iran’s Foreign Policy”, *op. cit.*

36. “Russian Parliament Against US Choice on IRGC”, *IRNA*, April 10, 2019, available at: <https://en.irna.ir>.

37. Contrary to what is stated in a 2019 RAND Corporation report: “The IRGC and the executive branch have the most sway over specific national security issues; the IRGC largely dominates decision-making on regional portfolios, while the executive branch has more sway over the country’s approach to international powers, such as European nations, Russia, and China.” A. M. Tabatabai, “Iran’s National Security Debate Implications for Future U.S.-Iran Negotiations”, RAND Corporation, October 2019, p. 3, available at: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

Russia in 2015, which may have been decisive in Moscow's decision to engage militarily in the Syrian conflict, is revealing.<sup>38</sup>

The objective of cooperating with Moscow to fight “takfiri” terrorism, as expounded by ultra-conservatives in Iran, has few Iranian opponents, even if “moderates” and radicals differ about tactics. President Rouhani nevertheless failed to carry out his diplomatic program of rebalancing Iran's international relations by pursuing a rapprochement with Europe and negotiations with Washington. During the Trump presidency, in fact, all Iranian factions supported closer relations with Russia and China. This unity crowned the victory of an approach developed by the Supreme Leader and the IRGC from the early 2000s, an approach which was strengthened following the “Green Movement” of 2009 and the war in Syria from 2012.

The new generation of political radicals in Iran is opposed to any form of relationship with the West. They have encapsulated Iran's “Look to the East” policy, which includes Russia and is supported by the Supreme Leader, in a new slogan, “More East than West”, which is meant to replace the “Neither East, nor West” of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>39</sup> These elites criticise older conservatives for having supported the Nuclear Deal in 2015. They consider Vladimir Putin to be a member of the “Axis of Resistance”<sup>40</sup> to the West who is receptive to the revolutionary policies of the Islamic Republic.<sup>41</sup>

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38. See L. Bassam and T. Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow”, *Reuters*, October 6, 2015, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com); and, more broadly, on the role of General Soleimani in Iranian-Russian cooperation in Syria: N. Kozhanov, “Russian-Iranian Relations Through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (autumn 2017), p. 109.

39. “Khamenei Instructs Iranian Scholars to Look Eastward”, *Al-Monitor* (Lebanon), October 18, 2018, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

40. “Tcherâ Putin dar moqâbel-e Netanyâhu az mehvar-e moqâvemat hemâyat-e had-e askari kard ?” [Why does Putin support the Axis of Resistance against Netanyahu?], *Mashregh News*, August 26, 2017, available at: [www.mashreghnews.ir](http://www.mashreghnews.ir).

41. R. Faghihi, “Meet the New Generation of Iranian Hard-Liners”, *Al-Monitor*, July 18, 2018, available at: [www.al-monitor.com](http://www.al-monitor.com).

# Towards a partnership centered on security

Russia and Iran have recently signalled a willingness to strengthen their political relationship, as well as to deepen their economic relations.<sup>42</sup> On 11 October 2021, Tehran announced that the two sides intended to sign a strategic partnership which would include a 20-year development agreement.<sup>43</sup><sup>44</sup> Moscow's priority remains, however, to pursue a "situational partnership" with Raisi's Iran<sup>45</sup> in which Tehran remains an important but not exclusive partner of Moscow. Iran's strategy of relying less on European countries risks increasing its dependence on its Russian and Chinese partners.

Iran's attempts to develop an independent space program have failed, forcing it to resort to Russian technology in this domain. Russian-Iranian space cooperation dates back to 1998 and the development of a prototype of the Iranian Mesbah satellite project.<sup>46</sup> Such cooperation worries Western countries because it could eventually allow Iran to improve its surveillance of military targets in the Middle East. The IRGC's control over the space program in general, and over cooperation with Russia in particular, is another source of concern for the West. If Tehran ended up acquiring the Russian Kanopus-V satellite, it would be better able to conduct surveillance of oil installations in the Persian Gulf, US military bases in Iraq and Israeli military activities. The satellite could be launched from Russian soil but managed by an Iranian team trained in Russia and based in the province of Alborz, close to Tehran. Although Moscow does not acknowledge all of its support to the Iranian space program, security cooperation and the transfer of sensitive technologies have constituted one of the pillars of bilateral relations since 1991.<sup>47</sup>

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42. "Ambassador: Iran-Russia Ties Will Become Stronger During Raisi Administration", *Tehran Times*, July 30, 2021, available at: [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com).

43. "Moscow, Tehran Deny Claim Of Deal To Block Iran Extracting Caspian Gas", *Iran International*, November 4, 2021, [www.iranintl.com](http://www.iranintl.com).

44. See "L'Iran et la Russie vont signer un partenariat stratégique selon Téhéran" [According to Tehran, Iran and Russian to sign a strategic partnership], AFP, October 11, 2021, available at: [www.lorientlejour.com](http://www.lorientlejour.com).

45. S. Ramani, "Russian-Iranian Relations Under Raisi and Possible Post-Khamenei Scenarios", *Policy Analysis*, Middle East Institute, July 7, 2021, available at: [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

46. "Russia: Security Concerns About Iran's Space Program Growing (U//FOUO)", FAS, November 16, 2010, available at: <https://fas.org>.

47. J. Warrick, "Russia Is Preparing to Supply Iran With an Advanced Satellite System That Will Boost Tehran's Ability to Surveil Military Targets, Officials Say", *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2021, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

In the military domain, there has also been an increase in joint exercises. The participation of the Iranian Destroyer *Sahand* and support vessel *Makran* in the Russian naval parade in the port of St Petersburg on 26 July 2021 was hailed as a “historic event” by the Commander of the Iranian navy, Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi.<sup>48</sup> New trilateral Iranian-Russian-Chinese military exercises are also planned for the end of 2021 or the beginning of 2022 in the Persian Gulf. They will be devoted to maritime security and the fight against maritime piracy.<sup>49</sup> According to the Russian Ambassador to Iran, “following the lifting of the UN arms embargo on Iran, Iran and Russia are now discussing Iranian purchases of Russian military materiel”.

In addition, a military agreement was signed in January 2015 by Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and his then-Iranian counterpart, general Hossein Dehqan. A delegation from the Russian Ministry of Defense, headed by General Ossipov, arrived in Iran on 24 December 2018 to work on the implementation of a military cooperation agreement and to strengthen military cooperation in Syria and the Caucasus.<sup>50</sup>

Beyond strengthening bilateral military cooperation, Moscow seeks to further integrate Iran into its strategy for the Former Soviet Union (FSU), in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Russian Ambassador has reaffirmed Moscow’s support for Iran’s full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO<sup>51</sup>) and it was announced in Dushanbe in autumn 2021 that the process for admitting Iran to the SCO had been launched. Nevertheless, success depends on Iran being removed from the Financial Action Task Force’s (FATF<sup>52</sup>) blacklist and on the course of negotiations in Vienna on the Iranian nuclear program. Tehran must avoid international economic sanctions being reimposed. Not only would these hinder the development of Russo-Iranian trade in sensitive domains, they could also reduce Iran’s ability to join the SCO.

In January 2021, Iran also signed a cooperation agreement with Russia on “information security”, which the Iranian Foreign Minister described as a “turning point” on cyber-security issues.<sup>53</sup> It builds on a preliminary agreement signed in 2015 to collaborate on cyber-defense. Although the cooperation described in the document could help to improve Iran’s offensive cyber capabilities, the agreement is largely defensive in nature and

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48. “Iranian Navy Vessels to Attend Russia’s Navy Day Parades”, *IRNA*, July 19, 2021, available at: <https://en.irna.ir>.

49. “Russia, Iran and China to Hold Joint Drills in Gulf-RIA”, *Reuters*, August 23, 2021, available at: [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

50. “Iran/Russia: Iran, Russia Vow to Expand Cooperation in Caucasus”, *Asia News Monitor*, January 21, 2019.

51. Iranian press from August 24, 2021.

52. B. O’Toole “FATF Blacklists Iran, but Does It Matter?”, *Atlantic Council*, February 24, 2020, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>.

53. “Iran, Russia Ink Cybersecurity Cooperation Pact”, *Pars Today*, January 26, 2021, available at: <https://parstoday.com>.

animated by a common hostility towards the United States.<sup>54</sup> Russia could choose to help Iran acquire more capable cyber defense systems. Indeed, the 2020 *National Cyber Power Index*, published by Harvard's Belfer Center, ranks Iran bottom for its cyber-defense capabilities and places Russia in the middle of the rankings.<sup>55</sup> If Tehran can plug the gaps in its defenses with the help of Russian technology and training, it will become more difficult and costly for Washington to target the country's infrastructure. In the security sphere, Tehran and Moscow are also developing joint projects that focus on intelligence sharing, countering common threats and coordinating defense policies.

Domestically, the two states have introduced numerous restrictions on digital freedoms. Russia and Iran are particularly worried about the use of the Telegram network. Iran accuses Telegram of "spreading moral decadence" and cites Russia's criticism of the network for supposedly facilitating acts of terrorism, through the anonymity and data protection it gives to its users. Such criticisms of Telegram in these two authoritarian political systems are designed to stifle, limit, discourage and, ultimately, eradicate speech which threatens their stability.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Iran, Russia does not engage in systematic take-downs of online platforms, although it is increasingly restricting digital freedoms. Since 2012, for instance, it has been possible to close down websites by a simple political decision. As in the case of Iran's "Green Movement" in 2009, it was the anti-government protests of 2011-2012 which alerted the Russian government to the ability of these new tools to mobilise the population. In both Russia and Iran, we are witnessing both a filtering of the Internet and a growing tendency towards full digital sovereignty.

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54. "The Iran-Russia Cyber Agreement and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East", *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 15, 2021, available at: [www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org).

55. The ranking can be found here: [www.belfercenter.org](http://www.belfercenter.org).

56. A. Akbari and R. Gabdulhakov, "Platform Surveillance and Resistance in Iran and Russia: The Case of Telegram", *Surveillance & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 1/2, 2019, available at: <https://ojs.library.queensu.ca>.



# A favorable commercial dynamic

The willingness of Russia and Iran's leaders to deepen economic cooperation since 2014 might suggest solidarity between two states that are subject to US and European sanctions.<sup>57</sup> Russian officials and businessmen criticised the USA's decision to reinstate sanctions against Tehran in 2018. This criticism was derived above all from a negative view of sanctions as an instrument of political pressure and is informed by Moscow's own experience as a target of such sanctions. The two sides have also diversified their economic relationship by cooperating more in areas such as energy, infrastructure (rail) and aviation. However, these economic links could be weakened by US economic sanctions.

Tehran runs a trade deficit with Moscow which it is trying to limit by increasing non-oil-exports to Russia.<sup>58</sup> Foodstuffs, for instance, now represent 70% of Iranian exports to the Russian market. Metal, cement, chemical products and minerals also feature among the goods that Iran sells to Russia. Although it may be growing<sup>59</sup>, however, Russo-Iranian trade is small compared to Iran's trade with China. China remains Iran's largest trading partner, measured by both imports and exports. Bilateral trade was worth \$3.8 billion in year 1399 of the Iranian calendar (March 2019 – March 2020) and consisted of \$1.9 billion in Chinese exports to Iran (constituting 25% of Iran's total imports) and \$1.8 billion of Iranian exports to China, or 29% of Iran's total exports. Over the same period, Russia declined to fifth position among the top exporters to Iran, with its exports of \$421 million (5.5% of Iranian imports) placing it neck-and-neck with Germany.<sup>60</sup> Iran's aim is to speed up negotiations with the Eurasian Economic Union with a view to signing a free trade agreement.<sup>61</sup> Iran is thus seeking to increase its non-oil-exports by targeting the whole post-Soviet region, not just the Russian market.<sup>62</sup> As for economic projects,

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57. See the graphic "Value of Russian Trade in Goods (Export, Import, and Trade Balance) With Iran From 2005 to 2020 (in million U.S. Dollars)", *Statista*, available at: [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com).

58. *Ibid.*

59. "Iran's Trade With Russia Surpasses \$800 Million in Four Months", *Financial Tribune*, October 19, 2021, available at: <https://financialtribune.com>.

60. "Le commerce extérieur de l'Iran en 2019/2020" [Iran's foreign trade in 2019/2020], Directorate General of the Treasury, Tehran's Economic Service, 2021, p. 3, available at: [www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr](http://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr).

61. T. Hatami, A. Zargar and A. Amini, "Iran and Eurasian Economic Union", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 1, winter-spring 2020, pp. 277-301, available at: <http://irfajournal.csr.ir>.

62. "Iran-EAEU Trade Up 96% In 5 Months Yr/Yr", *Tehran Times*, September 24, 2021, available at: [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com).

Russia and Iran are constructing new nuclear reactors at Bushehr and attempting to solve various financial issues in order to deepen cooperation in the civil nuclear industry.<sup>63</sup> Tehran is also intent on finishing construction of four 1400 MW thermal power plants at Bandar Abbas and electrifying the Garmsar – Inche Boroun railway line. In the words of the Russian Foreign Minister, there are “no limitations” on the development of technical and defense relations between the two countries.<sup>64</sup>

With respect to civil aviation, despite past failures such as the repeated crashes of Tupolev aircraft during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s first term as President<sup>65</sup>, Tehran is determined to complete its acquisition of 40 Sukhoi Superjets, for a total cost of \$2 billion. Initially, since more than 10% (22% according to the Russian state information) of the Superjet’s components were manufactured in the United States, it fell foul of US Treasury sanctions. As a result, Sukhoi’s parent company, United Aircraft Corporation, has set itself the task of “russifying” the Superjet in order to facilitate exports.<sup>66</sup> This objective may be achieved by the end of 2023 and Iran has reportedly already registered its interest in this new version of the Russian jet.

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63. Iran’s nuclear energy agency agreed to pay a debt of €500 million to allow joint nuclear projects to be pursued. See: “Iran Nuclear Chief Reports Agreement With Russia Over Outstanding Debts”, *Iran International*, September 29, 2021, disponible sur : [www.iranintl.com](http://www.iranintl.com).

64. M. Motamedi, “Iran and Russia Discuss Ties, the Middle East, and Nuclear Deal”, *Al Jazeera*, April 13, 2021, available at: [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

65. At the time, reformist newspapers used the Tupolev accidents to criticise President Ahmadinejad for his closeness to Russia. The “reformist papers *Mardomslari* has published a cartoon on its front page of a plane shaped like an angel of death plummeting to earth, marked ‘made in Russia’. [...] The Tupolev is considered to be the least reliable aircraft in the world and does not have the right to fly in Europe and the United States [...] but most Iranian companies use Tupolev-154s”, stated the reformist paper. See “Iran: les Tupolev dans le collimateur” [Iran: Tupolevs in the firing line], AFP, July 16, 2009, available at: [www.liberation.fr](http://www.liberation.fr). Also see: D., “Iran : entre crash et crise” [Iran: between crash and crisis], Blog, 16 July 2009, available at: <https://blog.lefigaro.fr>.

66. C. Charpentreau, “Russia Signs Deal With Iran in Bid to Boost Aircraft Sales”, *Aerotime Hub*, September 7, 2021, available at: [www.aerotime.aero](http://www.aerotime.aero).

# Sputnik V: a jab of contention?

In July 2021, against the backdrop of a slow vaccination campaign in Iran, came reports that the production chain for Sputnik V in Iran, which was due to come on-line in autumn 2021, might be used for exports to foreign markets (to the detriment of Iran's domestic market). This sparked a new furor. The Iranian Deputy Health Minister, Alireza Raisi, stated that this future Russian production line in Iran would not be "useful". Russia had first to deliver between 60 and 62 million doses of Sputnik V to Iran before the end of 2021. As of August 2021, however, Tehran had only received 1-2 million doses. This storm around Russia's health diplomacy threatens to reinforce the Iranian public's distrust of Russia.<sup>67</sup>

This distrust is not reflected, however, in a poll taken by the Center for International and Security Studies in Maryland, and IranPoll. It found that Russia was the only country in 2020 to be viewed favorably by a clear majority of Iranians.<sup>68</sup> 56% of respondents said that they had a favorable opinion of Russia, of whom 13% were very favorable, down 3% on 2019. As for China, it enjoyed positive views among a majority of Iranians until the beginning of the pandemic. By October 2020, however, only 40% of Iranians had a favorable opinion of China, while 57% had an unfavorable opinion. The rather sunny picture (for Moscow) reflected in this poll may be due to the reluctance of respondents to express their views about such a sensitive subject as Iran's policy towards Russia.

Moscow enjoys a relatively good reputation among Iranian state institutions. Iranian anti-imperialists stress the negative aspects of past experience with Britain in Iran, while ignoring Russian interference in northern Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This selective memory stokes continued distrust between Iran and Britain, the former imperial power, and favors relative state amnesia about Russia's past in Iran.<sup>69</sup> Mutual misunderstanding persists, moreover, due to the dearth of Russian speakers within the Iranian political elite and the lack of Persian language teaching in Russia. There are reportedly just twenty or so Persian language centers in Russia, with each one teaching about ten students on average.

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67. "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Turns Into Double-Edged Sword in Iran", *Amwaj.media*, July 21, 2021, available at: <https://amwaj.media>.

68. N. Gallagher, E. Mohseni and C. Ramsay, "Iranian Public Opinion, At the Start of the Biden Administration. A Public Opinion Study", *The Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) / IranPoll*, February 2021, p. 33, available at: <https://ciissm.umd.edu>.

69. R. Matthee and E. Andreeva (eds), *Russians in Iran. Diplomacy and Power in the Qajar Era and Beyond*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

# Iran and Russia: the Syrian question

In view of the military inter-dependence between Iran and Russia in Syria<sup>70</sup>, it is highly unlikely that Moscow seeks to curtail Iran's presence in the region, as demonstrated by the protection Russia has afforded Iranian vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean. In December 2015, despite US sanctions intended to prevent him travelling outside Iran, Soleimani flew to Moscow, apparently on a commercial flight, to meet President Putin and Sergey Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defense. Moscow has denied that this meeting took place.<sup>71</sup> Several weeks later, Soleimani was back in Syria carrying out a coordinated offensive against rebel groups and jihadists, backed up by Russian air power. Since 2015, there have reportedly been 700-3,000 IRGC fighters in Syria, with numbers fluctuating at different times.<sup>72</sup> They have supported the Russian air force, in particular by identifying "terrorist" targets on the ground. The regular Iranian army (Artesh) has also played a growing role in Syria, under IRGC command. It has innovated by operating small units on the "mosaic model" of the IRGC and by pursuing economic ventures in Syria through the company Karargah-e Sazandegi-ye Qa'em. The IRGC has nonetheless retained command and continues to enjoy more resources.

Economic competition between Iran and Russia in Syria has the potential to weaken the cooperation between the IRGC and the Russian armed forces. The Iranian government is disappointed by how few reconstruction contracts have been awarded to Iranian companies compared to Russian ones. They argue that Syria has sidelined Iranian companies and products, in spite of the huge support that the Iranian government and non-state military personnel have given Damascus since 2014. In return, Iran hoped to become a major economic partner of Syria as the country was rebuilt. According to the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Iran and Russia are at the center of an international network that supplies oil to Syria illegally. In exchange, the

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70. I. Delanoë, "Russie-Iran : après la victoire militaire en Syrie, quel partenariat ?" [Russia-Iran: after the military victory in Syria, what sort of partnership], *Confluences Méditerranée*, No. 113, 2020/2, pp. 137-150.

71. "'No,' Says Kremlin After Putin-Soleimani Meeting Report", *The Times of Israel*, December 16, 2015, available at: [www.timesofisrael.com](http://www.timesofisrael.com).

72. A. Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy", *CTCSENTINEL*, Vol. 11, No. 10, November 2018, available at: <https://ctc.usma.edu>.

IRGC is supposedly using Syria as a financial center to transfer hundreds of millions of dollars [to Hamas and Hizballah].<sup>73</sup>

When one comes to consider the relative economic weight of Iran and Russia in Syria, there are several differing accounts: according to the Iranian press,<sup>74</sup> the competition between Iran and Russia works to Iran's disadvantage; from the US point of view, the Iranian-Russian axis finances Iran's nefarious activities, such as support to "terrorism". On the diplomatic front, Tehran and Moscow participate in the Astana process, an alternative to the Geneva peace conferences organised by the Western powers. The announcement in March 2021 that Russia, Turkey and Qatar had established a new political framework on Syria was poorly received in Tehran. From Iran's viewpoint, this new negotiation format is a competitor to the Astana (Iran-Russia-Turkey) process. Lastly, Russia's growing closeness with the Gulf States and Israel – and, in particular, Russia's tolerance of Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in Syria – is thought to run counter to Iran's military interests.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, Tehran and Moscow maintain a dialogue concerning Israeli strikes on pro-Iranian military forces in Syria.<sup>76</sup> Like Turkey, Iran is striving to maintain a balance between remaining independent of Russia, on the one hand, and preserving a partnership that it can exploit in its confrontation with Washington, on the other.<sup>77</sup>

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73. See: "Treasury Designates Illicit Russia-Iran Oil Network Supporting the Assad Regime, Hizballah, and HAMAS", *U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia*, November 20, 2018, available at: <https://ru.usembassy.gov>.

74. "Iran Spent Billions in Syria and Iraq, Others Reaped Economic Benefits", *Track Persia*, September 18, 2021, available at: [www.trackpersia.com](http://www.trackpersia.com).

75. B. C. Feldman and D. Rakov, "Iran-Russia Relations: Continued Partnership alongside Conflicting Interests", *op. cit.*

76. "Report: Russia Warned Iran Ahead of Israel's Extensive Strikes in Syria", *Haaretz*, May 13, 2018, available at: [www.haaretz.com](http://www.haaretz.com).

77. E. Avdaliani, "Iran, Russia, and Turkey: A Eurasionist Model of Foreign Relations", *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, No. 2,078, June 22, 2021. <https://besacenter.org>.

# The Afghan Challenge

Even though Iran and Russia foresaw the Taleban's victory in Afghanistan, their supposed "success" on this issue<sup>78</sup> risks being undermined by the security problems that the new regime poses for the region. Iran finds itself having to find a balance between its fervent anti-Americanism and the need to guarantee the security of its eastern flank. The tensions between *Realpolitik* and the regime's ideology complicate the task of formulating a coherent policy towards Afghanistan. Iran is currently seeking to draw Afghanistan into its sphere of influence, both through Shia political movements and by trying to win over Sunni Islamists with its extreme anti-Americanism. At a regional level, the retreat of the American military could lead to the emergence of an "anti-hegemonic" alliance in Centra Asia, sponsored by Beijing, Moscow and Tehran.

The key aspects of Iran's policy on Afghanistan are controlled by the IRGC, since it is the IRGC who manage Iran's eastern border. Iranian policy is largely rooted in an ideological rejection of the USA's military presence [in Afghanistan]. Some analysts have argued that Tehran's rhetorical support for the stabilisation of Afghanistan since 2001 was just a diplomatic ruse, designed to distract attention from its real goal of challenging NATO and imposing "pain" on Western armed forces deployed in regions bordering Iran.<sup>79</sup> This perception is particularly marked among Pashtun politicians and academics. The US retreat has changed this twin-track strategy of supporting the central government and maintaining links with Taleban armed groups. Now, support for the Taleban can be justified by the struggle against Daesh in Afghanistan and by the desire to pursue a policy that matches the reality on the ground. The Taleban's hostility towards minorities could nonetheless place Tehran in an awkward position with certain communities, particularly the Hazaras, a Shia minority group that is being persecuted by the new government in Kabul.

Since the emergence of the Afghan branch of Daesh in Khorasan province in 2015, Tehran and Moscow are in agreement that the Taleban are now less dangerous than Daesh. Whereas the Taleban is an Islamic nationalist movement, the Islamic State is made up of transnational jihadist forces. In essence, the Central Asian states share this interpretation, even

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78. S. J. Frantzman, "Afghanistan's Winners: Qatar, Russia, China, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran", *The Jerusalem Post*, August 16, 2021, available at: [www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com), and P. Wintour, "Iran and Russia Move to Fill Diplomatic Vacuum in Afghanistan", *The Guardian*, July 9 2021, available at: [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

79. Author's interviews with Western diplomats in Kabul, August 2014.

Tajikistan, a Persian-speaking state that is unique in Central Asia in having no dialogue with the new Taliban government.

Russia does not consider itself to be a major player in the conflict in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, it has an undoubted interest in regional stability. Its primary security concern is to secure the border between the Central Asian states and Afghanistan in order to prevent Afghan instability from spreading towards the post-Soviet region. To achieve this objective, Russia has undertaken three novel initiatives since the 2010s: it has 1) put in place a diplomatic process directed by Moscow; 2) opened channels of dialogue with the Taliban; 3) and drawn closer to Pakistan. In the view of Afghan elites and the Afghan press at the time, Moscow was seeking above all to use Afghanistan as a local theatre in its global confrontation with Washington. To this end, Russia was supposedly supporting the Taliban covertly. Russia's ultimate aim was the failure of the Afghan state, since it was perceived to be a puppet of the West.

The opportunistic alignment between Russia and Iran and the Taliban government aims to counter the spread of Daesh in Afghanistan and to prevent Afghan instability from spreading towards Central Asia (Moscow) or Iranian territory (Tehran). Russia and Iran have also started to draw closer to Pakistan, a key partner of the current Afghan regime. This policy marks a break with the 1990s, when the Russia-Iran-India axis openly supported Afghan opposition to the Taliban in the form of the Northern Alliance.

Beyond the issue of Russian and Iranian support for the Taliban, the outlines are visible of a new Russian strategy encompassing Pakistan, which is experiencing a sharp deterioration of its relationship with the United States. The rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan should therefore be understood in the light of tensions between Islamabad and Washington. The US policy, which aims to make Pakistan responsible for the security situation in Afghanistan reinforces US-Pakistani tensions in 2021-2022. The fact that Pakistan is now embedded within China's sphere of influence also favors this rapprochement, whose aim is to reduce US influence in South Asia, settle the Afghan conflict and combat terrorism.

Tehran has its place within this new geopolitical equation, even if the ideological battle between Khomeini's brand of Islamism and that of the Taliban risks upending its "Afghan bet". Ultimately, the issues of minorities and of preserving Iranian economic interests in Afghanistan will be decisive in shaping the future of Iran-Afghanistan relations. Lastly, Russia's Afghan policy aims to avoid the creation of regional migrant flows and prevent a renewed upsurge in the opium and heroin trade, aims which coincide with those of Iran.<sup>80</sup>

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80. K. Krivosheev, "Russia May Live to Regret Betting on the Taliban in Afghanistan", Carnegie, Moscow, August 18, 2021, available at: <https://carnegie.ru>.

# Iran and Russia in the South Caucasus

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the opening of Iran's northern border (which was closed traffic during the Cold War) has not translated into an increase in Iran's influence in the former Soviet space. Despite pursuing more pragmatic policies than in the Middle East, Tehran has not managed to develop a strategy that is truly independent of Moscow, nor to win the trust of its neighbors by shedding its image as a revolutionary theocracy.<sup>81</sup> Other factors have acted as a brake on Iran's ambitions across the region. Firstly, Tehran is extremely careful not to offend Moscow by intervening in its "Near Abroad". Secondly, Iran's fervent anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism have impelled the United States and, to a lesser extent, Israel, to transform the South Caucasus into an observation post overlooking Iran.

Geographically, however, Iran is very favorably placed as a pivot state between the Caspian region and the Persian Gulf. Logically, hydrocarbons from the Caspian Sea should have transited through Iran, alongside goods from the newly-independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Geographically and economically, the North-South corridor makes more sense than the East-West route ultimately adopted by Baku for political reasons. Iran does play a crucial role in supplying Armenia, and as part of a barter system with Azerbaijan. However, political obstacles, particularly Washington's hostility towards relations between Iran and the Caucasus states, go a long way to explaining why the economic potential of these relationships has not been realised. At the outbreak of war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, therefore, Iran suffered serious economic problems due to US economic sanctions and the Covid crisis, deepening its dependence on its wealthiest neighbors, such as Azerbaijan.

Moreover, the Iranian population's distrust of the political regime of the Islamic Republic has led the Supreme Leader, himself of Azeri origin, to adopt a more pro-Azerbaijani position for fear that cultural demands made by Turkish-speaking Iranians<sup>82</sup> could call into question the regime's legitimacy. Iranian diplomats also struck a new tone during the conflict in

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81. This revolutionary Islamist dimension explains Iranian conservatives' inability to build a true alliance with Moscow and Beijing. See: N. Song, "How Cooperation Among China, Russia and Iran Will Be Updated Under Raisi Era", *The Global Times*, June 27, 2021, available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn>.

82. M. Grebennikov, "The Puzzle of a Loyal Minority: Why Do Azeris Support the Iranian State?", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Winter 2013, pp. 64-76.



2020 for opportunistic reasons: the correlation of military force was skewed heavily in Azerbaijan's favor.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, Russia, which helps to shape Iran's position on this issue, had itself adopted a less pro-Armenian position.

In Tehran's view, however, its new economic relationship with Baku emerged in a fraught political context due to cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel on security and military affairs.<sup>84</sup> For its part, Azerbaijan railed against Iranian supplies to Armenia, which remains under embargo. Iran's new strategy during the war of November 2020 turned out to be short-lived: the victory of the conservative Raisi in the Presidential elections the following year led Iran to concentrate on Israeli activities emanating from Azerbaijani territory. Iran sought to bounce back after the victory of the Israel-Azerbaijan-Turkey axis.<sup>85</sup>

Iran claims that in 2018, Israeli intelligence used Azerbaijani territory to launch an operation into Iran, stealing a slew of sensitive nuclear reports. This secret operation humiliated Iran's politicians and intelligence services.<sup>86</sup> The resulting tension helps to explain military exercises conducted by Iran on its North-West border in autumn 2021, the largest such exercises since the end of the Cold War. The Iranian government was putting Azerbaijan on notice about Israel's presence on Iran's borders. Tehran also justified the exercises as a means of guaranteeing safe passage for Iranian trucks travelling from Azerbaijan towards Iran, from Iran towards Turkey and from Iran towards Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The most worrying development for Iran and Russia, beyond Azerbaijan's military victory, is Turkey's new involvement in a region that was not part of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey's actions should therefore be seen, not as a Neo-Ottoman streak in Turkish foreign policy, but as the articulation of a pan-Turkic ideology. Turkey's new presence in the South Caucasus also raises the possibility that "mercenaries" could be transferred from the Syrian theatre to the Caucasus. If pro-Turkish forces were to establish a lasting presence, this could push Tehran and Moscow towards closer security cooperation in order to prevent this network of fighters from spreading into other parts of the Post-Soviet Space, or even towards Iran itself. Turkey's training of the Azerbaijani armed forces and deployment of

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83. M. Goya, "Les enseignements opérationnels de la guerre du Haut-Karabagh", *La voie de l'épée*, December 1, 2020, available at: <https://lavoiedelepee.blogspot.com>.

84. A. Vatanka, "Azerbaijan and Israel's Encirclement of Iran", *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2021, available at: [www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu).

85. It was also an Iranian response to military to exercises between Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan held in September 2021. See "The Iran-Azerbaijan Escalation: Motives, Consequences and Future Scenarios", *Rsanah*, October 25, 2021, available at: <https://rsanah-iiis.org>.

86. A. Vatanka, "Azerbaijan and Israel's encirclement of Iran", *op. cit.*

1500-2000 Syrian mercenaries were decisive in reversing the correlation of forces in Nagorno Karabakh.<sup>87</sup>

Whatever the future holds for this pro-Turkish military presence, the emergence of a crisis zone on Iran's northern border represents a new security challenge for Tehran and adds to the challenges posed by the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021) and the Baluchestan insurgency.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, Iran's Western border has been destabilised by the Iraq War and the Kurdish insurgency. The risk that instability might spread South across Iran's Northern border has also been accompanied by an Iranian strategic retreat. Turkey's growing influence in the region has made it an indispensable partner for Beijing in implementing its "New Silk Road" project.<sup>89</sup> Lastly, changes in the borders between Iran and its Caucasian neighbors to the benefit of pro-Turkish forces, as well as plans for a land corridor to supply the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, may bring negative consequences for Iran. It therefore appears that the weakening of its Armenian ally represents a defeat for Iranian policy in the region: Iran's importance as a transit state has been diluted<sup>90</sup>, if not eliminated<sup>91</sup>, and part of its border with Armenia is now controlled, albeit indirectly, by a geopolitical rival, Turkey.

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87. Report prepared on behalf of the Commission of foreign affairs, defence and the armed forces on "Haut-Karabagh : dix enseignements d'un conflit qui nous concerne" [Nagorno-Karabakh: ten lessons from a conflict that affects us], by M. O. Cigolotti et Mme M.-A. Carlotti, Senators, July 7, 2021, available at: [www.senat.fr](http://www.senat.fr).

88. The Baluch are an Iranian people who mostly live in Pakistan.

89. M. Tanchum, "Has Turkey Outfoxed China in Azerbaijan to Become a Rising Eurasian Power", *Turkish Policy*, January 21, 2021, available at: <http://turkishpolicy.com>.

90. V. Kaleji, "Iran and South Caucasus Railway Connections After the Nagorno-Karabagh War", *The CACI Analyst*, July 8, 2021, available at: [www.cacianalyst.org](http://www.cacianalyst.org).

91. "Iran, Armenia Confer on Establishing New Transit Routes", *Tehran Times*, October 8, 2021, available at: [www.tehrantimes.com](http://www.tehrantimes.com).

# Iran's Entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

In addition to the growing trilateral military cooperation between Tehran, Moscow and Beijing<sup>92</sup>, the SCO's decision on 18 September 2021 to start the process of Iranian accession to the bloc marks a new stage in Iran's entry into the Russia-China axis.<sup>93</sup> Iran has been an observer in the SCO since 2005 and in 2008, under the Ahmadinejad government, it applied for full membership. Officially, the process of admitting Iran could not begin until UN economic sanctions against Iran had been lifted.<sup>94</sup> As long as the JCPOA will remain suspended, the economic benefits of membership should not be exaggerated.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless, the moment chosen by the SCO is symbolically important, coming as it does in the wake of the US military's hasty retreat from Afghanistan. For the SCO, Iran's territory will act as a strategic transmission belt between Eurasia and West Asia.<sup>96</sup> For Iran, membership represents its first-ever involvement in a multilateral, supra-national organisation that focuses on collective security.

Few within the Iranian foreign policy community doubt Russia's importance to Iran given their common advocacy of a multipolar world order and Moscow's support for Iranian membership of Eurasian multilateral institution, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).<sup>97</sup> Be that as it may, any hope that Iran could sidestep international sanctions by joining regional organisations dominated by Moscow or Beijing is probably an illusion. In fact, Iran's eagerness to participate in this forum, far from increasing the country's economic independence, will only accentuate the asymmetry in its bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing.

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92. C. P. Clarke and W. Courtney, "Can America Weaken the Russia-Iran Axis?", July 31, 2020, available at: [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

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# Conclusion

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's strategy of pursuing a strategic alignment with Moscow in the security domain has been welcomed by various factions in Iran, even if it continues to arouse misgivings among the Iranian public. Repeated scandals surrounding Russian influence in Iran are proof of that.

In both countries, advocates of the Iran-Russia rapprochement stress the two countries' common opposition to US policies.<sup>98</sup> In addition, officials on both sides present bilateral security cooperation as part of their common fight against terrorism.

The operational and technical benefits that the IRGC derives from the new cooperation with Russia are significant. Russia's contribution goes beyond developing Iran's missile and space industries. We are now witnessing coordination, on foreign soil, between Iranian military advisers, Shia militants mobilised by Iran in Syria, the Russian armed forces and the regular Syrian military. As a result, and thanks to Russian air support, Iran has greatly improved its ability to project land forces far from its national borders.

In Syria, Russia benefits from Iran's ability to recruit and mobilise [fighters]. The Iranian army's intervention in Syria, under the command of the IRGC, also appears to have brought the Russian and Iranian security establishments closer together. Viewed from Tehran, the regional cooperation between the IRGC and Russia shows that, now more than ever, Russia is an essential partner for the survival of the Islamic Republic.

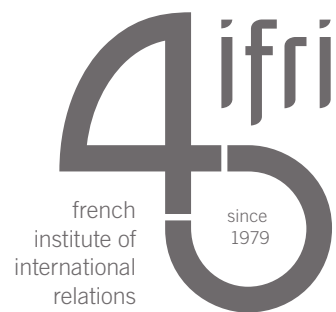
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