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## Russo-Iranian Relations: A Friendship Found Between Tactic and Strategic Partnership

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*In the last decade and a half, most analysts argue that the Russo-Iranian relation is primarily driven by external factors, particularly their desire to counter the US hegemony in the broader region, rather than the bilateral relations. Seen under the prism of a zero-sum game, the rapprochement of Tehran with the West brings many analysts to re-evaluate and question the Russian-Iranian ties. The arguments seem to lean towards Iran shunning Russia, disregarding multiple crucial factors related to the Iranian domestic political scene, their collaboration in Syria and even in the Caucasus. Despite the limitations and the 'watchfulness' between Moscow and the Islamic Republic, these factors will hinder any serious regression in their cooperation in the near future.*

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## The implications of the Post-Sanction era

Last month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran is complying with the agreement reached between Iran and the P5+1 (US, Russia, China, UK, France plus Germany) about Iran's nuclear program. Despite Russia's mediating role in the Nuclear Deal, experts are questioning the future of the Iran-Russia relations in the post-sanction era. The lifting of sanctions will empower Iran's position in the global energy market, allowing Europe to 'break' its dependency on Russia's natural gas supply and rendering Iran and Russia competitors. Even though, Iran is the fourth largest gas producer globally and the second largest economy after Saudi Arabia in the MENA region, it has a rather unexploited gas sector.<sup>1</sup> Thus, many multinational firms and Western investors are attracted to the Iranian economy, adding more competitors other than Russia and China. Furthermore, the rapprochement with the West, has led many experts such as Alexei Malashenko, Alexander Shumilin, Mark N. Katz and Abbas Milani to assume that the Nuclear Deal will overshadow and undermine Iran's relation with Russia,<sup>2</sup> as it straps off Russia's mediating diplomatic leverage over Iran, considering that Moscow and the Islamic Republic relations have been rather contentious in the past.

Indeed, the relations with Moscow have been 'tainted' in various instances since 1979, causing intense suspicion. Particularly, in the 1980s, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was rather vocal in opposing the Soviet Unions' communist ideology and naming Moscow the "Lesser Satan". The death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the end of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) when Moscow was providing weapons to both, the withdrawal of Moscow from Afghanistan, and finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a new era between the Islamic Republic and Moscow. From the 1990s until 2013, Moscow and Tehran alliance was viewed as a 'watchful partnership', as they were neither friends nor foes. On the one hand, Moscow sold weapons to Tehran and initiated cooperation over the unfinished Iranian Bushehr nuclear reactor, while Iran supported Russia in the war against the Chechen rebels. On the other hand, Russia's tendency to use Iran as a bargaining chip with the West, for its own agenda fostered a mistrustfulness. For instance, the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin to limit Russia's weaponry and nuclear know-how to Iran, or even a more recent example in 2010, when Russia agreed with the US on the former's halt of selling S-300 air defence missile systems to Iran, undermined the trust between them.<sup>3</sup> These precedent dynamics have convinced experts to assume that the rapprochement with the West in the post-sanction era, will re-arrange the balance between Moscow's and Tehran's partnership once again. Yet, since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013, the Russo-Iranian relations have meliorated significantly, as a result of Rouhani's approach of 'win-win scenarios for all players', as well as the new geopolitical parameters that align Moscow's and Tehran's interests.<sup>4</sup> By the same token, the post-sanction era presents economic and military opportunities of cooperation, which counter most of these arguments and possibly—if not surpass entirely their mutual distrust—mollify relations by proceeding with agreements that will enhance their bilateral relations, regardless of the rapprochement with the West.

Iran's foreign minister, along with other Iranian delegations, in various occasions have bustled to make a point that Russia will not be marginalised in this new era. If anything, the Iranians claim that the Nuclear Deal marks a new beginning in the bilateral relations with Russia. The two countries have already signed 'contracts on construction of thermal stations and a railroad worth \$2.2 billion'; Russia as well is willing to maintain fruitful economic ties and is making good use of its advantage with Iran.<sup>5</sup> Russia has 'opened a credit line of \$5 billion' and has agreed 'to build two new reactors at the Bushehr nuclear power plant'.<sup>6</sup> The post-sanction era has opened new opportunities for the two governments to proceed with business agreements. As Mehdi Sana'i, the ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Moscow, explains, in an interview for the reformist E'temad Iranian newspaper, that during the past two decades the economic and business ties 'did not go hand-in-hand with the political ones' as a result of the sanctions; namely, the former confronted difficulties in the settlement of bank accounts and lack of resources and problems, amongst others. Hence, the post-sanction era, will offer the opportunity to Tehran and Moscow to develop further economic ties, as well as enhance their cooperation in the

security sector.<sup>7</sup> To that end, Russia has also ‘concluded the \$800 million S-300 deal’ and has promised to ‘buy up to a half-million barrels of Iranian oil per day while Russian grains and other goods would flow toward Iran’, which shows Moscow is making an effort to demonstrate its clout on having more common interest with Iran than with the West.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the West-Iran rapprochement has many political obstacles, stemming from the Iranian political scene.

### **Iran’s Domestic Reality**

On the one hand, most Iranians have a positive outlook regarding the Nuclear Deal, given its positive economic implications. On the other hand, the rapprochement with the West, is received with suspicion among the conservatives in the Iranian political elite. Even some hardliners have claimed that the Nuclear Deal is against Iran’s national interests and security. President Hassan Rouhani had to struggle to attain approval of the Nuclear Deal in the Majlis (Iran’s Parliament), which was supported by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who expressed his distrust towards the West, and particularly the US, immediately after the Deal, warning that “some world powers are not to be trusted”.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Rouhani camp has been confronting many domestic obstacles. Although, the upcoming elections of the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts (a constitutional body) on February 26th, have gone gravely unnoticed, the elections are significant and their outcome will pave the way for both Iran’s domestic and foreign affairs in the future. The Assembly of Experts, which is responsible to elect, monitor, and remove the Supreme Leader, renders it one of the most important political bodies in Iran. More importantly, given Ayatollah Khamenei’s old age, the 88 ayatollahs who will be elected will have to appoint - sooner or later - the new Supreme Leader.

During the last months, the Guardian Council disqualified an unprecedented number of reformists, who were allegedly ‘not considered sufficiently loyal to the ruling system by the committee’ dominated by the conservatives and clerics appointed directly by Khamenei.<sup>10</sup> Conservatives view many reformists’ (including Rouhani’s) values of liberalism ranging from opening the market, freedom of the press to the role of women, as ‘pro-American plans lanes’.<sup>11</sup> The domination of conservatives in the Iranian political scene, automatically sets limitations to the extent of the development of the relationship with the West and, in particular, the US, far from marginalising Russia, at least for the US’s sake. Furthermore, as Mahan Abedin correctly argued, Rouhani himself ‘has neither the will nor the intention to confront the establishment’.<sup>12</sup> The speculations that the rapprochement with the West will overshadow the relations with Russia find no support in the anti-American Majlis and the Guardian Council in Iran. Even though the conservatives do not necessarily view Russia as a reliable partner, they are aware of their common interests, especially in their anti-American cause; namely, Ayatollah Khamenei, spoke approvingly of Russia’s military intervention in Syria, as opposed to the US and its plot to dominate the region.<sup>13</sup> The Iranian’s reservation vis-à-vis US intensions are gravely stronger than the ones of Russia, with whom cooperation has developed ominously in Syria and in the Caucasus.

### **Syria is not a problem yet**

The long-standing Syrian conflict has also raised concerns and questions regarding the durability of the Russia-Iran partnership, both in terms of their different geopolitical incentives and different long-term interests. A Bashar-backed regime in Syria is vital for Iran, and any other scenario would significantly shrink Iran’s influence in the region, leaving Tehran with only Iraq and Hezbollah. For Russia, Syria provides a vital access to the Mediterranean through the naval facility in Tartus. Putin’s decision to side with his ‘old friend’ Bashar al-Assad is two-fold; the prevention of possible western expansion in Syria but most importantly, it was an opportunity to reclaim his role in the international political scene as a great

power. However, Russian interests are not necessarily linked to Bashar al-Assad's survival per se, which is a contentious matter between Iran and Russia. On the other hand, the future prospects depend gravely on who stays or comes in power in Syria, with no apparent solution on the horizon. Until then, the relation will also be affected by the level and the extent of their cooperation, and in turn affect the way they will address contentious matters. In Syria, their cooperation is strengthened significantly. The cooperation has gone beyond information sharing. The Iranian armed forces have allowed Russian aircrafts to use not only the Iranian airspace, but also their airbase to operate in Syria.<sup>14</sup> This shows not only Russia's reliance on Iran in Syria, but also the exceedance on Iran's behalf of distrust. For now, their interest in Syria, and in the broader Middle East, coincide and, with time, the cooperation practices may establish a cemented partnership. These cooperation practices may come handy in more contentious issues such as the Caucasus and the division of the Caspian Sea.

## **Caucasus and the Caspian Sea**

As a result of the sanctions' lifting, Tehran is expected to increase its role in the Caucasus, which further strengthens the arguments of the decline of the Russo-Iranian relations, as both consider themselves regional powers. The small, but significant region, encapsulates deeply entrenched interests of other powers as well, not least of which are the US and Turkey. The balance of power of the five littoral states of the Caspian Sea - Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan and the latter's conflict with Armenia (backed militarily by Russia) in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict - is rather delicate. Russia is the dominant negotiator of the conflict, while Iran has attempted to get involved in mediating the conflict (although unsuccessfully) to deescalate tensions as Tehran is fearful of a spill over effect.

In the past, Iran's attempt to promote a pipeline that would exit the Mediterranean via Armenia were hindered by Russia, forcing Iran to seek cooperation with Azerbaijan.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the increasing cooperation of Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan beyond the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline threatens not only Russia, but also Iran. It is in similar situations that Russia and Iran have to find a balance in their competition; Iran could opt to Armenia, and allow Russia to have a share in the energy infrastructure. The cooperation between the two is actively demonstrated through; the signing of an agreement on electric transmission system with Armenia and Georgia; conducting joint naval exercises the Caspian Sea, disregarding the other littoral state; expanding rail and road projects around the Caspian Sea and via the Caucasus mountains; and, last but certainly not least, deterring the increasing political influence of Western presence in Georgia and Turkey's ambitions in the region.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the need to cooperate will probably keep the competition in check.

In the dawn of the post-sanctions era, there are a number of crucial issues that bring Moscow and Tehran closer that may overshadow the contentious issues. Even issues such as stance towards Israel seem to be put aside in favour of larger issues, such as countering the US both in Syria and in the Caucasus. Russia will hold on to its clout with Iran, in order to exert influence on the Ukrainian front with the West. Whether Iran's rapprochement with the US could shake Moscow's and Tehran's common interests will depend on the upcoming elections of the Assembly of Experts, which, hitherto, seem to favour a more conservative political arena. In either case, the cooperation between Iran and Russia is not unconditional. Iran has always been wary of 'putting all its eggs in Russia's basket', and cautious of Russia's desire to be a dominate power. By the same token, the relations stand on clear limitations, which in many instances have translated into a tactical cooperation. Yet, the increasingly aligned interest of Moscow and Tehran on strategic issues seems to have nurtured the relations enough to probably withstand minor regressions, at least in the near future.

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